

Second-World Competition in Vietnam: Analyzing the Implications of the Vietnam War
on Sino-Soviet Relations

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ABSTRACT

This project examines how the Soviet Union and China competed for global influence during and after the Vietnam War, despite both backing communist North Vietnam. This thesis examines the Vietnam War's effects on the ideological split in Sino-Soviet relations both during and after the Vietnam war, from the polemical attacks between the two to the creation of Interkit, a Soviet-established multinational organization created to constrain China's international influence, and the Sino-Soviet border battle on the Ussuri River. Through an analysis of Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam, this project will examine how the three "superpowers" – the United States, the Soviet Union, and China – intersected in Vietnam, transforming Sino-Soviet relations. This research predominantly draws upon primary-source documents, including meeting notes, memorandums, and international communications, from a variety of historical and national security archives. This project argues that China sought to use the Vietnam War to turn their militantly anti-imperialist agenda from rhetoric to action, which conflicted with the Soviet Union's less aggressive stance of "peaceful coexistence." These competing viewpoints, from the countries the North Vietnamese internally referred to as their "two big brothers," played not only an important role in North Vietnam's military strategy in the early 1960s, but also in the Soviet Union and China's policies and attitudes towards one other.

INTRODUCTION

China sought to use the Vietnam War to turn its militantly anti-imperialist agenda from rhetoric to action, which conflicted with the Soviet Union's less aggressive stance of "peaceful coexistence." These competing viewpoints, from the countries the North Vietnamese internally referred to as their "two big brothers," played not only an important role in North Vietnam's military strategy in the early 1960s but also in the Soviet Union and China's policies and attitudes towards one other. This project examines the Vietnam War's effects on Sino-Soviet relations both during and after the Vietnam war, from the polemical attacks between the two to the creation of Interkit, a Soviet-established multinational organization created to constrain China's international influence, to the 1969 Sino-Soviet border war on the Ussuri River. Through an analysis of Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam, this project will examine how the three "superpowers" – the United States, the Soviet Union, and China – intersected in Vietnam, transforming Sino-Soviet relations.

This thesis argues that rather than boost the Soviet Union or China's status with a communist victory, the Vietnam War propped up the Chinese in their struggles with the Soviets. The Vietnam War forced the Soviets to confront a young and energetic adversary in China, which threatened their hegemony in Europe and Asia. This thesis will begin with a brief analysis of the divergence between Soviet and Chinese conceptions of Marxism-Leninism, arguing that this divergence manifested itself in each country's respective attitudes and policies regarding the Vietnam War. In analyzing the Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam, this project will also introduce Interkit, an understudied organization whose existence legitimated the Soviet Union's concerns over China's rise

to international prominence. Lastly, the paper will analyze the Sino-Soviet (1969) and Sino-Vietnamese (1979) border conflicts and makes the argument that the Chinese application of their doctrine of revolutionary warfare, in which they promoted guerilla warfare to win over the people and defeat a more powerful group, failed in post-war Vietnam, as it was not apt to foster peacetime development.

The thesis is organized into five thematic, chronological sections (with overlap between multiple major events): the roots of Chinese and Soviet ideologies (1917-1956), the Vietnam War (1957-1975), Interkit (1966-1985), the Sino-Soviet border conflict (1969), and post-war Vietnam (1975-1979). With the section on ideology serving as a preface to the core chapters on the Vietnam War, the scope of this paper spans from 1957 to 1979, from shortly after the initiation of the Vietnam War (the Second Indochina War) to just after its end.

In 1950, shortly after the Communist Party of China defeated the Nationalist Chinese government in the Chinese Civil War, the Soviet Union and China signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. In this treaty, the Soviets formally recognized the new leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC). While articles one and two of the treaty discussed mutual defense against potential attacks from Japan (given that the treaty was only five years removed from World War II), the remaining articles discussed broad requirements and goals to form a strong bond between the Soviet Union and China. They stated that neither country was permitted to make any alliance threatening to the other country and that they were to consult each other on "all international problems affecting the common interests of China and the Soviet Union." The signatories promised to respect each other's borders and internal

affairs and maintain a strong, mutually beneficial economic relationship, concluding with a statement that the treaty would be valid for 30 years (until 1980).¹

This treaty of alliance gave the perception of a united communist front between the USSR and China, but whatever ties bound these countries together came apart in the early 1960s with the Sino-Soviet ideological split. Nikita Khrushchev came to power in 1953, denounced Stalinism in 1956, and adopted a less aggressive policy of peaceful coexistence towards the West. Because of this shift, in 1961, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) publicly denounced the Soviets as “revisionist traitors.”² Mao and other CCP officials, as well as Chinese allies, used this term to attack the Soviets frequently through the 1960s. For example, Enver Hoxha, who led Albania from 1944 to 1985, also called the Soviets “revisionist traitors” in 1967, including them in the same group as imperialists and describing them as “enemies and traitors of Marxism-Leninism.”³ By repeatedly deploying the “revisionist” line of attack, China, supported by Romania and Albania, was suggesting that the Soviet Union had watered down or abandoned true Marxist-Leninist ideology. In particular, they were accusing the Soviets as having abandoned the core Marxist belief of anti-imperialism.

A note on footnotes: all URLs to digital sources are included in the Works Cited.

¹ “The Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance Between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union.” CIA Library, 30 Aug. 2000. pp. 2-3.

¹ “The Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance Between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union.” CIA Library, 30 Aug. 2000. pp. 2-3.

² Carey, Elaine. *Protests in the Streets: 1968 across the Globe*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016. p. 4.

³ “Memorandum of Conversation between comrade Enver Hoxha and a Delegation of Chinese Red Guards,” July 08, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AQSH, F. 14/AP, M-PKK, V. 1967, Dos. 43, Fl. 1-18.

In July 1960, as China continued to denounce the Soviet Union as revisionists to Marxism-Leninism, Khrushchev announced the withdrawal of all 1500 Soviet specialists working in China, stating that the specialists were unable to “endure this environment of distrust and suspicion,” and it was therefore the case that “the further presence of the Soviet specialists in the PRC is in practical terms impossible.”⁴ Austin Jersild, in *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History*, explains that this withdrawal caused the Chinese to increase efforts to improve relations with East Germany and other central European countries, but the Eastern bloc countries were not going to “choose China over the Soviet Union, and the Chinese-Central European relationship quickly deteriorated.”⁵ After Leonid Brezhnev took power from Khrushchev in 1964, both he and Mao were hopeful that they could improve Sino-Soviet relations. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai led a delegation to Moscow in November 1964, but the Chinese, Jersild notes, “were well past the point of compromise” and could not find common ground on the issue of imperialism.⁶ Thus, despite both countries supporting the Vietnamese communists, the Sino-Soviet relationship was deeply fractured as the war intensified.

A fatal flaw of U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam, about which significant literature exists, was that policymakers were stuck in a Cold War mindset. Many U.S. policymakers, given the commonality of policymakers’ belief in the “domino theory,” could only conceive of the conflict in Vietnam as a binary clash of capitalism versus

⁴ “Letter, Khrushchev to the Central Committee of The Socialist Unity Party of Germany, regarding Soviet Specialists in China,” July 18, 1960, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, SAPMO DY 30/3605/25-27. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by Austin Jersild.

⁵ Jersild, Austin. *Sino-Soviet Alliance: an International History*. Univ Of North Carolina Pr, 2016. pp. 165-166.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 173-174.

communism. Under this logic, it might seem intuitive to believe that the Vietnam War, in which the United States was unable to achieve its aims, was therefore a Soviet and Chinese victory. For example, Ilya Gaiduk, senior research fellow at the Institute of World History at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, argued that because the Soviet Union supported North Vietnam (Officially the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the DRV) with a barrage of military and economic aid, “Moscow improved its image as a vigilant champion of the national liberation movements and proved its credibility in the eyes of allies and clients.”⁷

However, while the Vietnam War did provide a platform for both the Soviet Union and China to boast a victory for communism against capitalism and imperialism, those are not sufficient grounds to declare the war a success for either. Supporting the winning side in the Vietnam War did not inherently give power to anyone except the North Vietnamese themselves. Rather, it provided both the Soviet Union and China a sort of symbolic capital to spend achieve their goals of increased global power, and the security, trade, and cultural benefits that came with this power.

An examination of China, the Soviet Union, and the Vietnam War should not end when the war ends but should also include analysis of how the Soviets and Chinese moved forward after the North Vietnamese victory. Particularly in viewing the Vietnam War within the larger context of the Cold War, it is important to follow the story beyond the fall of Saigon. A post-war analysis requires discussion of Soviet and Chinese goals in Vietnam and analysis of to what extent each met these goals. Leaders from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and CCP frequently stated that their main

⁷ Gaiduk, Ilya V. *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (1996). p. 248.

objective was to defend North Vietnam from “U.S. imperialist aggression.”⁸ Less directly, however, the Soviet Union and China competed in Vietnam for the title of leader of the world communist movement. Jeremy Friedman, in *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*, argues that the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China competed internationally – in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – for the “leadership of the world revolution.”⁹ This begs the question: What were the tangible benefits to carrying this title of leader of the world communist movement?

For both the Soviet Union and China, achieving the reputation of the top communist nation entailed shifting the balance of power within the global communist countries to favor their own respective country. In understanding this in the context of Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam, I will use Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi’s definition of power, which reads:

The means by which a state or other actor wields or can assert actual or potential influence or coercion relative to other states and non-state actors because of the political, geographic, economic and financial, technological, military, social, cultural, or other capabilities it possesses.¹⁰

⁸ An example of the Soviets using this rhetoric from a CPSU Central Committee Report: “Information No. 098 by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee to the Socialist Unity Party Central Committee [Excerpts],” February 24, 1965, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/3667, 146-156.

An example of the Chinese using this rhetoric from Mao Zedong, in which Mao emphasizes the need to resist “U.S. imperialist aggression, control, intervention or bullying:” Mao, Zedong. *People of the World, Unite and Defeat the U.S. Aggressors and All Their Lackeys; Statements Supporting the Afro-Americans and the Peoples of Southern Vietnam, Panama, Japan, the Congo (L.) and the Dominican Republic in Their Just Struggle against U. S. Imperialism*. Foreign Languages Press, 1967.

⁹ Friedman, Jeremy Scott. *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Split and the Third World*. University of North Carolina Press, 2015. p. 14.

¹⁰ Viotti, Paul R, and Mark V Kauppi. *International Relations and World Politics*. 5th ed., Pearson, 2013.

Although the Soviet Union and China's public statements implied strictly defensive goals to stop American imperialism, they each had aims to increase their power, and therefore their respective spheres of influence, both in Southeast Asia and in the world communist movement. This tangibly meant bolstering their political, economic, and military capabilities.¹¹ Thus, the phrase "competing for influence" in Vietnam refers to the Soviet Union and China's battling for power with each other, using Vietnam as their platform.

The extent to which gaining a strong socialist ally in Southeast Asia would increase either country's sphere of influence, if at all, is impossible to quantify. In its use of the term "sphere of influence," this thesis will rely on the Oxford English Dictionary definition, which states: "A country or area in which another country has power to affect developments though it has no formal authority."¹² Regardless of what the actual potential impact of the Vietnam War on China or the USSR's spheres of influence was, there was a strong perception that extending one's system of beliefs to other countries around the world bolstered one's sphere of influence. This, in turn, would bolster a country's reputation, as well as their political, economic, and military power. The United States and Soviet Union's competition and attempted partition of the rest of the world throughout the Cold War reflects this idea of the power associated with one's sphere of influence.

Not only did the Soviet Union and China perceive an opportunity to extend their spheres of influence into Southeast Asia by way of Vietnam, but the Vietnam War also

¹¹ Radchenko, Sergey. "Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967." *Stanford University Press*, 2009. p. 126.

¹² "Definition of Sphere in English by Oxford Dictionaries." *Oxford Dictionaries | English*. Web.

carried particular strategic implications for China (compared to the Soviet Union), as they shared a 1,306-kilometer border with Vietnam. The result of the Vietnam War had an additional security ramification for China, as it would determine their relations with whatever government was to come out of the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER I: ROOTS OF CHINESE AND SOVIET IDEOLOGIES

Analyzing Sino-Soviet relations during the Cold War demands a discussion of the two countries' most obvious commonality: Communism as the ideological foundation of their political, economic, and social systems. Although the West lumped the Soviet Union and China together as "Second World" countries based on their communist beliefs, the ideological differences in Soviet Communism and Chinese Communism were significant and manifested themselves during the Vietnam War.

Communism is a system of governance inspired by Marxist ideology. This phrasing is important, as it distinguishes the difference between the two. Marxism is the theory of economics and a view of history that argues class struggle to be the root cause of social change in human history. How a ruling party interprets Marxist theory will manifest itself in that state's implementation of Communism.

Lenin's most significant divergence from Marxist theory was his belief in a "revolutionary vanguard," which allowed for a system of governance in which a central, communist party would oversee the revolution and state. Lenin disagreed with Marx on how the communist revolution ought to develop, arguing, "Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from...outside of the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers."¹³ This view signified that Lenin believed revolutionary politicians like himself, although they were not in the working class, had a leadership role to play in the revolutions.

Not only did Lenin argue for a role for communist leaders in the revolution, but Lenin also argued for the revolutionary capability of the peasantry. Similar to the

¹³ Lenin, Vladimir. *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*. International Publishers, 1929.

Georgian Socialists, Lenin and the Bolsheviks promoted the idea that underdeveloped, agrarian countries, like Russia and China (at the time of their respective revolutions) were well-suited for Communism. The Georgian Socialists, in the early 20th century, argued that the peasantry in an agrarian state was capable of a socialist revolution.

Mao drew inspiration from this same model and attributed the possibility for his revolution and others to the October Revolution, praising it for enabling “a new front of revolutions against world imperialism.”¹⁴ Mao lectured at an anti-Japanese university from 1937 to 1938 and reportedly read much of Lenin’s writing. Additionally, Mao reportedly also studied China’s history with imperialism in depth, arguing that the turning point in their history was the 1840 Opium War, in which the “penetration by foreign capitalism” began its attack on China.¹⁵ Quickly after the CCP victory in 1950, China became heavily involved in the Korean War, which Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai describe as “the natural result of gradually developed animosity between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and what it regarded as the foreign imperialist powers, especially the United States, and of the fear of a threat from the latter.”¹⁶

It is crucial to understand that Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism were not three distinct ideologies, but rather variations of Marxism. Leninism and Maoism were the means by which the Soviets and Chinese shaped Marxism to their own respective countries. Each held the majority of Marxist theory to be sacred. Further, given Lenin’s

¹⁴ Zedong, Mao. *Revolutionary Forces of the World Unite, Fight against Imperialist Aggression!* 1968.

¹⁵ Deckers, Wolfgang. “Imperialism’ and ‘Anti-Imperialism’ in Mao Zedong: Origins and Development of a Revolutionary Strategy.” *The London School of Economics and Political Science*, 1 Jan. 1997. pp. 168, 178.

¹⁶ Yufan, Hao, and Zhai Zhihai. “China’s Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisted.” *The China Quarterly*, vol. 121, 1990, p. 94.

revolutionary role as the preeminent believer that countries like Russia and China could successfully implement Communism via a revolution, he and his ideas were revered by not only the Soviet leaders post-Stalin, but also by Mao. In particular, both governments employed the crux of Lenin's argument in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in which Lenin argued that capitalism naturally leads to a struggle for the "division of the world" amongst capitalist powers.¹⁷ Given this connection, Lenin notably associated capitalism with imperialism, frequently criticizing both. Thus, these core anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist principles of Marxism-Leninism became inviolable to future Soviet and Chinese leaders.

The Soviet Union, in its initial years from 1919-1956, was strongly anti-imperialist. Shortly after taking power, the Bolsheviks signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) in March 1918, which ended Soviet Russia's involvement in World War I. One day prior to this treaty, the Comintern (also referred to as Communist International or the Third International) held its first congress, with the mission to "struggle by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and the creation of the international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the state."¹⁸ The Soviet Union initially held a policy of "nativization" toward their republics (including, after World War II, the Baltic states), in which they supported the country's native language, creating a national intelligentsia and political elite and institutionalizing ethnicity into law. Through the 1920s, the Soviet Union encouraged countries across

¹⁷ Lenin, Vladimir. "Division of the World Among Capitalist Associations." *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, 1916. 246–253.

¹⁸ Fisher, Harold H. *The Communist Revolution: an Outline of Strategy and Tactics*. Stanford Univ. Pr., 1985.

Europe and Central Asia to resist imperialist, capitalist influence and stage communist revolutions.¹⁹

Soviet anti-imperialism, however, was tempered by the Soviet Union's newfound status in the bipolar international system after World War II and by Stalin's death and Khrushchev's ascendance to power in 1953. The Soviet victory in World War II signified that they were no longer a new power trying to find their way into the great power geopolitics, but rather in an established position as a world leader. While they never abandoned their anti-imperialist beliefs, they recognized the need to coexist with western countries despite ideological differences. Even before the end of the war in 1943, Stalin dissolved the Comintern in order to avoid agitating the United States and Great Britain. In 1956, Khrushchev formally announced the policy known as "peaceful coexistence." Citing the "tremendous changes that have taken place in the world" Khrushchev, in his 1959 essay *On Peaceful Coexistence*, laid out his argument for peacefully coexisting with the United States in simple terms:

You may like your neighbor or dislike him. You are not obliged to be friends with him or visit him. But you live side by side, and what can you do if neither you nor he has any desire to quit the old home and move to another town? All the more so in relations between states. It would be unreasonable to assume that you can make it so hot for your undesirable neighbor that he will decide to move to Mars or Venus.²⁰

More specifically, Khrushchev defined peaceful coexistence as a "commitment to non-aggression" and "an obligation on the part of all states to desist from violating each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty in any form and under any pretexts

¹⁹ Suny, Ronald Grigor. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford Univ. Press, 2004. p. 102.

²⁰ Khrushchev, Nikita S. "On Peaceful Coexistence." *Foreign Affairs*, 19 June 2017. p. 1.

whatsoever.”²¹ Inherent in this view, Khrushchev states, is a rejection of the idea that the Soviet Union should “overthrow Capitalism in other countries by means of ‘exporting’ revolution,” calling this argument “absolutely unfounded.”²²

The shift to peaceful coexistence in 1950s Soviet policy was in stark contrast to China’s ideology. Friedman attributes these disparate priorities to each country’s respective experiences, explaining that China’s prior struggles with imperialist oppression (with a particular emphasis on the racism associated with their experiences with imperialism) pushed them towards a “militant anti-imperialism.”²³ This strong devotion to anti-imperialism was not simply a position China held, but it was the position that helped them rise to global prominence as quickly as they did.

As the Soviets withdrew into a less aggressive stance of peaceful coexistence, the PRC leadership broadcasted to the world the seriousness of their anti-imperialism and their willingness to actively fight against it. Prior to the Vietnam War, Mao not only preached this revolutionary rhetoric, but the Chinese also backed it up by encouraging revolution in a number of third-world countries. For example, the Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) unsuccessfully appealed to Moscow and East Berlin for aid to help in their struggle, but the Chinese took them seriously and provided economic and military aid once the FNLA began discussing Marxism and guerrilla warfare in 1963 and 1964. In some respects, the situation in Angola illustrates just how intense China’s devotion to anti-imperialism was. Not only did China demonstrate their aggressiveness in taking such a big leap by supplying aid to an unproven group, but Jeremy Friedman also noted that

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 3.

²² *Ibid.* p. 5.

²³ Friedman, Jeremy Scott. *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Split and the Third World.* University of North Carolina Press, 2015. p. 14.

China continued to support the FNLA despite their simultaneous clear ties to the United States.²⁴ In overlooking these relations with the U.S., Friedman argues that the Chinese sent a clear message that they prioritized anti-imperialism above anti-capitalism in the third world.²⁵

The Chinese revolutionary rhetoric, or “Maoist doctrine for revolutionary warfare,” was based largely off of Mao’s writings on foreign policy and military strategy in the 1930s and 1940s. Mao argued that “the seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war is the central task and highest form of revolution.”²⁶ Mao later stated, “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”²⁷

China’s militant anti-imperialism, in combination with the Soviet Union’s softening stances on imperialism, caused the Chinese to keep a close eye on the Soviet Union’s affairs around the world. The PRC was eager to capitalize on the USSR’s relatively less aggressive policies against imperialism and contrast these perceived weaker stances with their own. For example, the Chinese took serious issue with Khrushchev’s conciliatory actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis, issuing a strong statement condemning the Soviet retreat, calling them “revisionists” and arguing that this behavior was a slap in the face to not only Cubans, but all who had fought against imperialism. Beijing argued that the Soviets had abandoned the core Marxist-Leninist belief of anti-imperialism in order to selfishly reconcile with the United States. The Chinese Embassy in Moscow attacked Khrushchev for backing down from, and therefore emboldening, the United States, arguing:

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 121-122.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 122.

²⁶ "Mao Zedong, *Selected Military Writings*, p. 267.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 272.

The reason why Khrushchev squandered the favorable situation of anti-imperialism, even at the expense of revolutionary interests, was his fear of war blackmail from American imperialists. He miscalculated the situation, [thinking] that the world had already slipped to the verge of a nuclear war, and unless concessions were made, all [countries] would perish together.²⁸

The Chinese Embassy warned that Khrushchev's conciliatory actions in Cuba would "feed the arrogance of American imperialism" and that President Kennedy's prestige had been enhanced and would enable him to "demand more concessions in future bargains." The cable concluded with a vilification of the impact of Khrushchev's actions on the Cuban people, arguing that Khrushchev's actions were "a bowl of cold water, poured right over the Cuban people who have been fighting on the front line of the battle against the Americans" and that the Soviet "revisionists can by no means be counted on."²⁹

Given the USSR and China's mutual veneration of Marxism-Leninism, China's decision to call the Soviets *revisionist* was a serious castigation, attacking not only the Soviets' actions in Latin America, but also accusing them of abandoning their core beliefs. In 1967, when Polish politician Zenon Kliszko encouraged CCP Secretary Liu Ningyi to coordinate aid with other socialist countries to Vietnam, Liu Ningyi berated this idea, stating:

The CCP did not want anything to do with a revisionist clique of the Soviet Union's leadership and its lackeys who provide a hypocritical support for the Vietnamese nation in its just struggle to save the nation against American imperialism, and in fact are betraying it, and who falsely come out against the American imperialism [*sic*], and in fact fulfill the role of its ardent helper and supporter. What kind of unity are we then talking about here?³⁰

²⁸ "Cable from the Chinese Embassy in Moscow, 'Khrushchev's Reconciliation with the United States on the Question of the Cuban Missile Crisis,'" October 31, 1962, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 111-00342-12, pp. 1-3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ "Note from the Conversation between Comrade Zenon Kliszko and CC CCP Secretary Liu Ningyi," June 16, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Polish Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN), KC PZPR, V/84 and XIA/23.

These types of anti-Soviet polemics from CCP officials were encouraged throughout the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution, lasting from May 1966 until Mao's death in 1976, was a violent and radical time in Chinese history. Seeking to impose his status as a strong leader on all adversaries, Mao turned to writers, students, and any active supporter of Maoism to help him bolster his power. Local officials and the military became radically Maoist, with the most active supporters, known as the Red Guards, working to purge those who disagreed with Mao and educate those in the countryside. The initial fervor of the Cultural Revolution intensified China's nationalism and internationalist rhetoric, portraying China as a "center for world revolution." This rhetoric featured frequent attacks against "Soviet revisionism," attacking Soviet leaders for having abandoned the international communist revolution.³¹

As the Vietnam War began to escalate in 1964, with increased American involvement after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, these conflicting policy shifts began to fully manifest themselves on a global stage through China and the Soviet Union's contrasting attitudes and approaches to supporting the North Vietnamese.

³¹ Much of the background in this paragraph comes from: Kraus, Richard Curt. *The Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

CHAPTER II: THE VIETNAM WAR

Now the spirit of anti-imperialism is very strong across the whole world, and among these anti-imperialist forces, the most powerful is still that of China.³²

-- Le Duan, 1970

The split between the Soviet Union and China over the intensity of their anti-imperialist beliefs manifested itself in their respective attitudes and policies toward the Vietnam War. Primary source evidence reveals that Soviet leadership, throughout the course of the war, were less eager to support an aggressive and offensive North Vietnamese military strategy than their Chinese counterparts. The Soviet Union and China competed in Vietnam with large sums of economic aid and by giving the DRV disparate strategic advice. The PRC also took concrete actions, such as blocking the transportation of Soviet aid. This chapter will elucidate how China emerged as a second antagonist to the Soviet Union in Vietnam as a result of their geographical advantage, their growing influence in Southeast Asia and initial friendship with North Vietnam, and their energetic anti-imperialist militancy.

Conflict in Vietnam formally began in 1945 with Vietnam declaring independence from French colonial rule. Lasting until the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, this decade-long conflict is known as the French-Indochina War. While the United States provided France with economic and military aid, it played a peripheral role in the conflict. The Soviet Union played a slightly larger part, providing both military aid and limited military training to the Vietnamese communists. The Chinese, however,

³² Accessed on "Discussion between Mao Zedong and Le Duan," May 11, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CWIHP Working Paper 22, "77 Conversations." Translated by Anna Beth Keim.

played a more involved and aggressive role, sending two artillery battalions to fight at the eventual decisive communist victory at Dien Bien Phu.³³

After a brief period of an uncertain peace following the communist victory, civil war erupted in 1957 between the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), along with their communist allies in South Vietnam, known as the Vietcong, and the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). Aid from the United States, Soviet Union, and China increased in each year to follow, inching each country closer to active participation in the conflict.

Prior to the American military escalation in 1964, China had supported the DRV with more aid than the USSR. China was the first country to recognize the Ho Chi Minh government in the DRV diplomatically in 1950, and Mao played a key role in convincing Stalin to do the same.³⁴ Lorenz Lüthi, in *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, explains that China's aid to North Vietnam was of great importance in recovering from the damage it took in fighting France. Lüthi states that much of China's aid consisted of bulk shipments of food, assistance to repair damaged agricultural, economic, and transportation infrastructure, and technical specialists.³⁵

As the conflict intensified, so did the Sino-Soviet ideological rift. In the early 1960s, the Chinese began to frequently criticize Khrushchev's policies of non-

³³ Chinese General Hoang Minh Thao and Colonel Hoang Minh Phuong quoted by Pierre Journoud, researcher at the Defense History Studies (CHED), Paris University Pantheon-Sorbonne, in Paris Hanoi Beijing published in *Communisme* magazine and the Pierre Renouvin Institute of Paris, July 20, 2004.

³⁴ Lawrence, *Assuming*, 260. Gaiduk, *Confronting*, 4-5. Westad, *Decisive*, 317. As cited in: Lüthi, Lorenz M. *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*. Princeton University Press, 2008. p. 304.

³⁵ Lüthi, Lorenz M. *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*. Princeton University Press, 2008. p. 304.

engagement and peaceful coexistence as over-cautious, even naïve.³⁶ Some scholars, like Ilya Gaiduk, blame Khrushchev for the fact that the North Vietnamese, in 1963, initially allied much more closely with the Chinese than the Soviets.

Further, Gaiduk stated that the Soviets certainly would have loved to embarrass the United States on an international scale, but they perceived Vietnam to be the wrong stage to try that on. They perceived too much uncertainty with both the region and with North Vietnamese cooperation and, particularly after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, were wary of the conflict in Vietnam escalating into direct confrontation with the United States.³⁷ Khrushchev, in a 1964 letter to President Johnson following the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, warned of “those quarters and persons who do not conceal their desire to inflame passions, to pour oil on the flame.”³⁸ The Soviet Union even agreed with the United States’ call to take the issue of Vietnam to the United Nations in 1964, to attempt to foster diplomatic negotiations between the U.S. and Vietnam.³⁹

The Soviets’ lack of enthusiasm for full-scale war in Vietnam was best illustrated by a conversation between three Polish delegates at the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi in September 1964, in which they stated that the “Soviet comrades in general do not share the optimism of the Poles [regarding North Vietnam’s chances of success].” The note explained that the Soviets were concerned with the National Liberation Front’s (later called the Vietcong) shortage of military technology and lack of structured leadership and their perception that the U.S. was typically in a position to settle military conflicts to their

³⁶ Wolff, David. “Interkit: Soviet Sinology and the Sino-Soviet Rift.” p. 439.

³⁷ Gaiduk, Ilya V. *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (1996), p. 13.

³⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1978, Volume 1, Vietnam, 1964, Document 295.*

³⁹ Gittings, John. *Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute: a Commentary and Extracts from the Recent Polemics 1963-1967.* 1968.

advantage. The Soviets even predicted that escalation of the war “might lead the U.S. to use tactical nuclear weapons,” as “Americans currently need firing ranges for their weapons.”⁴⁰

Although the Soviets did not and could not publicly admit this, as it would have threatened their anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist reputation, the USSR often acted as an arbitrator between the North Vietnamese and the United States. In 1966, for example, the Soviet embassy in Hanoi affirmed its optimism regarding the potential success of a negotiated settlement, stating that the DRV should intensify its efforts “to lead the matter to a settling of the conflict,” continuing that “all our efforts must be put forth to this end.”⁴¹ In particular, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin tried multiple initiatives to promote talks between the DRV and the United States, as a way for the North Vietnamese to consolidate their control over their territory and for the United States to leave Vietnam without a total loss.

Over the subsequent two decades, there were numerous occurrences where the Soviets actively pushed both the United States and the North Vietnamese government to make compromises to end the war peacefully. In addition to the Soviet Union advocating for the Vietnam issue to be discussed in the United Nations Security Council, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin aided in planning, albeit behind-the-scenes, in Operation Mayflower in 1965, in which the U.S. ceased bombing in order to attempt negotiations.⁴² In 1966, Kosygin appealed to Charles de Gaulle to spearhead efforts for an international

⁴⁰ “Note on a Conversation by Tarka, Jurgas and Milc at the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi [Excerpts],” September 10, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.

⁴¹ Political Report of the USSR Embassy in the DRV for 1966. SCCD, f. 5, op. 58, d. 263, p. 259, as quoted in: Gaiduk, pp. 96-97.

⁴² Gaiduk, p. 42.

conference to resolve the conflict, but the United States rejected this proposal.⁴³ In 1967, through Operation Sunflower, the U.S. approached the North Vietnamese via the DRV embassy in Moscow as Kosygin and British Prime Minister Harold Wilson worked to bring about negotiations.⁴⁴

Conversely, the Chinese continually sought to block these Soviet efforts toward a negotiated settlement and ensure that the fighting continue until a DRV victory. After several foreign policy difficulties in Asia and Africa, Friedman argues that Vietnam took on a special significance for the Chinese, as it was their largest (and possibly last, if they failed) platform to back up their anti-imperialist rhetoric with successful action.⁴⁵ A 1968 telegram from French diplomat Geoffroy Chodron de Courcel confirmed that the Chinese knew that the longer and more intense the conflict in Vietnam ran, the risk of Soviet-American relations collapsing increased. In fact, this telegram went as far to argue that the USSR was the “number one enemy” for Mao, which was reflected not only in Chinese efforts to minimize Soviet influence in Vietnam, but also in the building tension on the border between the “two communist giants.”⁴⁶ This tension ultimately culminated in the 1969 border conflict at Damansky/Zhenbao island, which this thesis analyzes in “Chapter IV: Conflict on the Ussuri River.”

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident served as the catalyst for the Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam to shift the balance of power in the communist world. On August 2 and

⁴³ Luthi, p. 315.

⁴⁴ Gaiduk, p. 96.

⁴⁵ Friedman, Jeremy Scott. *Shadow Cold War: the Sino-Soviet Split and the Third World*. p. 165.

⁴⁶ "Telegram Number 5186/92, 'Chinese Foreign Policy'," October 29, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France.

August 4, 1964, the USS Maddox was performing a routine signals intelligence operation when the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) allegedly attacked the ship.⁴⁷ The Gulf of Tonkin incident justified the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which granted President Johnson broad, unilateral power to escalate U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident and subsequent resolution also affected Soviet and Chinese policy towards Vietnam, and toward each other, in two significant ways. First, the North Vietnamese did not have the money nor the war materiel to fight the South Vietnamese as long as the latter were backed by the United States, just as the South Vietnamese did not have the resources to fight the North as long as the USSR and China supplied them. The DRV relied on the USSR, most notably for heavy weaponry, as the Soviet Union provided almost eighty percent of all military equipment to the DRV from 1965-1968, including cutting-edge surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft guns, radar, and fighter aircraft, including MiG-21's.⁴⁸ While China provided significant quantities of light weaponry, infrastructure repair experts, and agriculture experts, without China's rice shipments to North Vietnam, Stephen Morris argues, "the civilian population that undertook Hanoi's logistical and economic support work would have been physically handicapped in its activities and probably its morale."⁴⁹

Economic competition in aid to the DRV increased, both through the Soviets and Chinese increasing aid to Vietnam in an effort to keep up with or surpass that of the

⁴⁷ The accuracy of each of the two reports of attack remain uncertain as a result of the darkness, the weather, questions as to the Maddox's true mission, and ongoing uncertainty as to who fired first.

⁴⁸ "The Effect of the Vietnam War on the Economies of the Communist Countries." Issue brief no. 70. 1998.

⁴⁹ Morris, Stephen J. *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*. Stanford University Press, 1999. p. 155.

Americans, but also in competition with one another. Below is the data from a 1968 C.I.A. report, which detailed Soviet and Chinese spending from 1954-1967. Although the data does not continue after 1967 and does not include the United States' spending, it is useful in that it provides records from both the USSR and China using the same standards. The report divides aid to Vietnam into two categories:

1. Military aid: Includes the costs of sending men and military materials (Roughly half of which was ammunition, along with surface-to-air missiles, artillery, aircraft, radar, armor, motor vehicles, small weapons, and infantry weapons)
2. Economic aid: Includes grants to North Vietnam that were not intended to be repaid, as well as all "non-military goods" (Including, but not limited to, petroleum, trucks and various other automobiles, cotton and silk textiles, and food)

For comparison, the CQ Almanac reported that the Pentagon estimated the U.S. military expenditures⁵⁰ in Vietnam totaled \$138.9 billion from 1964 to 1975.⁵¹

⁵⁰ The Pentagon did not provide a definition on what they considered "military expenditures."

⁵¹ "Vietnam Statistics - War Costs: Complete Picture Impossible." *CQ Almanac Online Edition*, Web.

“The Effect of the Vietnam War on the Economies of the Communist Countries”

CIA Estimates on USSR and China Aid to North Vietnam

*(in millions of U.S. dollars in the value of 1968)

**Percentages in parentheses indicate the change from the previous year

Military Aid to North Vietnam

	Soviet Union	China	Total
1954-1964	70	70	140
1965	210	60	270
1966	360 (+71.4%)	95 (+58.3%)	455
1967	515 (+43.1%)	145 (+52.6%)	660
Total	1,155	370	1,525

Economic Aid to North Vietnam

	Soviet Union	China	Total
1954-1964	365	455	820
1965	85	50	135
1966	150 (+76.5%)	75 (+50%)	225
1967	200 (+33.3%)	80 (+6.7%)	280
Total	800	660	1,460

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⁵² “The Effect of the Vietnam War on the Economies of the Communist Countries.” Issue brief no. 70. 1998.

This data suggests that when China began to establish itself as a legitimate adversary to the Soviet Union, the latter was forced to dramatically increase its aid. Not only were both countries competing with the United States with their economic aid to Vietnam, but they were also competing with one another. It is clear that not only did Soviet and Chinese military and economic aid both increase at the same time, but the Soviets actually increased their aid at a higher rate from year to year despite having less enthusiasm for continuing the conflict than the Chinese. Both sides increased their military and economic aid to the DRV in 1965 after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, as well as in 1966 and 1967 when the NVA and Vietcong expanded their offensives and a North Vietnamese victory appeared more and more possible. These steep spending increases illustrate the extent to which the Soviets viewed the Chinese as a threat to their primary leadership of the world communist movement. Although the CIA data stops at 1967, Gaiduk estimates that the Soviets, in addition to the large sum of aid the above table shows, gave \$500 million (in the value of 1968 dollars) to the North Vietnamese in 1969 alone.⁵³

Most sources note these direct costs when examining the impact of the aid on the Soviet economy, but the CIA report explained that there were additional substantial indirect costs to the Soviet economy as well. First, the report stated that the Soviet economy was damaged by the trade restrictions with the United States. In 1948, the United States enacted economic sanctions against the Soviet Union and its allies, hoping to hinder their ability to fund weapons programs. The U.S. threatened to strengthen these sanctions significantly in 1951 after the outbreak of the Korean War, but ultimately

⁵³ Gaiduk, p. 215.

backed down. The U.S. eventually eased these sanctions in the 1970s during the détente period between the USSR and the United States.⁵⁴ The argument from the CIA report, therefore, was that U.S. trade with NATO countries increased by 14 percent from 1965 to 1967 while trade with Eastern Europe remained constant, and the conflict in Vietnam may have had some unmeasured cost to the Soviet Union and their Eastern European allies by delaying the lifting of the sanctions and preventing an increase in trade during these years.⁵⁵

The report also cited the indirect costs that came with the military diverting much-needed resources from the Soviet citizens, claiming that Soviet military spending increased by 11 percent between 1965 and 1967, even though the country desperately needed more money put into industry, agriculture, and a number of other domestic sectors. That is, while every country must balance its military and non-military expenditures, the Soviet Union was spending a significantly higher portion of their gross national product (GNP) on military expenditures than the United States: between fifteen and twenty percent of GNP) from 1950 to 1990⁵⁶, while the U.S. spent 7.6 percent of its GNP on military expenditures from 1948 to 1986.⁵⁷ The 1968 CIA review explained that it is impossible to quantify in dollars how much this indirect aid was, but the continuing

⁵⁴ “New American Nation.” *Encyclopedia of the New American Nation*. Web.

⁵⁵ *The Effect of the Vietnam War on the Economies of the Communist Countries*. Issue brief no. 70. 1998.

⁵⁶ *Soviet GNP and Defense Outlays, 1950-1990*. CIA Library. Web.

⁵⁷ Higgs, Robert. “U.S. Military Spending in the Cold War Era: Opportunity Costs, Foreign Crises, and Domestic Constraints.” *Cato Institute*, 30 Nov. 1988. Web.

trade restrictions with the United States and the preemption of money and resources by the military were almost certainly more substantial than the direct costs.⁵⁸

In noting the significance of the battle for influence in Southeast Asia with the Chinese and its financial consequences for the Soviet Union, it is also important to consider the Soviets' reluctance and pessimism associated with this military aid. A staple of Khrushchev's foreign policy doctrine, in line with peaceful coexistence, was that it was preferable to extend the Soviet sphere of influence domestically, through propping up a nation's socialist party and providing the resources needed to achieve power and steer their country on a path towards socialism and an alliance with the USSR.

Khrushchev's threefold increase of Soviet economic aid to developing third-world countries from 1958 to 1961 demonstrated that he preferred this more peaceful view to spreading Soviet influence through revolutionary violence. In 1961, the Soviets spent \$2.64 billion towards building many developing countries' economies, such as India, Afghanistan, Egypt, the United Arab Republic, Iraq, Guinea, Ghana, Indonesia, Cuba, and Ethiopia, in an attempt to push them towards a "socialist path" of development.⁵⁹

The crux of this view was that Khrushchev believed, if given the choice, people in newly developed independent states would choose socialism. At a 1959 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Khrushchev touted his policy, stating:

Let's compete peacefully and let the peoples judge which system is better, which offers greater scope for the development of the productive forces,

⁵⁸ "The Effect of the Vietnam War on the Economies of the Communist Countries." Issue brief no. 70. 1998.

⁵⁹ Friedman, Jeremy Scott. *Shadow Cold War: the Sino-Soviet Split and the Third World*. p. 30.

which provides better for man's well being. We must respect the choice of the peoples. We must respect their right to live as they choose.⁶⁰

Under this line of thinking, Khrushchev was confident, from the onset of conflict in Vietnam up until 1967, that he could help get the United States out of Vietnam through negotiations, rather than force, under the pledge that the communists would not invade the South. Khrushchev believed, probably correctly so, that if he could successfully negotiate America's exit from Vietnam, the Vietnamese themselves would choose socialism. A 1963 Soviet memorandum that analyzed a meeting between U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith and two Polish officials regarding goals for peace in Vietnam argued in favor of this strategy, predicting that the Americans would agree to a negotiated settlement for a divided Vietnam, thinking capitalism would prevail in the south in an election. This memorandum stated, "One must assume that the Americans themselves are so shortsighted" to think that a deal would change the communist attitudes of the Vietnamese, North and South alike.⁶¹

Soviet leaders believed that if conditions were peaceful in Vietnam, they could get the citizens themselves to choose communism over capitalism. From the meeting between Galbraith and the Polish officials, the USSR concluded that the U.S. was "searching for a way out of the military and political dead-end into which it was led by an aggressive policy in Vietnam." A negotiated U.S. exit, the memorandum argued, would

⁶⁰ "Speech by Mr. Khrushchev, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, at the 869th Plenary Meeting of the 15th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," September 23, 1960.

⁶¹ "Soviet Memorandum on the Polish Peace Initiative on Vietnam," February, 1963, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of Modern Records (AAN), Warsaw, obtained by L.W. Gluchowski, translated from Russian by Artemy Kalinovsky. Published in CWIHP Working Paper No. 45.

lead to a socialist Vietnam, as the USSR's "Vietnamese friends have already created a flexible program for the gradual unification of the country in stages." While the memorandum does not mention China directly, it concludes by stating, "there is no reason to doubt that such a step would lead to the relaxation of international tensions."⁶²

That same Soviet memorandum broadly detailed their vision of what would happen after successful negotiations would drive the Americans out of Vietnam, describing how the economic ideals, trade, science, technology, and culture of North Vietnam would spill over into South Vietnam, ultimately causing them to go communist too. Once that was complete, the memorandum states that a situation would arise that "would allow for the strengthening of DRV influence on South Vietnam and pour additional energy into the Vietnamese people's movement to unite their motherland."⁶³ Thus, it was evident that the Soviets had a clearly preferred strategy to spread communism to Vietnam and all of Southeast Asia: peaceful economic and cultural penetration. Spending over \$1 billion on war materiel, largely for reputational purposes, was not in that plan.

More than just igniting a spending battle between the Soviet Union and China, the escalation of the Vietnam War spurred a battle for influence. Both the Soviet Union and China stood to benefit economically and militarily from having a communist ally in Southeast Asia. From the American perspective at the time, it seemed Ho Chi Minh was not just a devout believer in Communism, but that was significantly influenced from Moscow. There was some truth to this view, as Ho Chi Minh, prior to 1963, sought to keep the war minimal as to avoid escalation with the Americans. This view, while

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

consistent with that of the Soviets, was not imposed on him by the Soviets, but rather Ho had made it clear that he fought for Vietnamese independence as his primary motivation, rather than spreading world communism. Ho drew inspiration from Woodrow Wilson's discussions of independence, national self-determination, and territorial integrity, even for small states. In addition, Ho repeatedly attempted to reach out to American officials after the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945 to 1948. In this period, Ho wrote several letters to President Truman and Secretary of State James Byrnes requesting their support in Vietnam's struggle for independence with France.⁶⁴ Ho sought an independent, unified Vietnam, and believed avoiding serious escalation with the United States was the best way to achieve that.

However, Ho's opinion was one side of a contested debate within the Workers' Party of Vietnam (WPV). The other side, headed by Party Secretary Le Duan, believed in an aggressive strategy of escalating the war; they were less reluctant to accept the increase in violence this strategy required. As the leadership of the WPV became younger in the 1960s, there existed a significant sect of the party that believed that an aggressive and offensive military posture could deter the U.S. and reduce the ARVN's will to fight, leading to a DRV victory and reunification of Vietnam under their rule. Le Duan took more inspiration and guidance from Mao than Khrushchev, to the point where he was not afraid to criticize Ho's relatively less aggressive stance. Le Duan did not mince words, famously stating, "Uncle Ho wavers...but when I left South Vietnam I had already prepared everything. I have only one goal – just final victory."⁶⁵ Not only did the United States not know of this divide within the party, but President Johnson did not even know

⁶⁴ "Messages to America: The Letters of Ho Chi Minh." *History Is a Weapon*. Web.

⁶⁵ Duiker, William J. *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*. Hyperion, 2002.

who Le Duan was until 1966, after learning from British professor P.J. Honey that someone other than Ho Chi Minh may have been pulling the strings in the WPV.⁶⁶

Although neither Ho Chi Minh nor Le Duan's main objectives in the conflict were to please the Soviet Union or China, the disparate strategy advice of the two communist superpowers was reflected in this divide in North Vietnamese politics. At the Ninth Party Plenum in Hanoi on November 22, 1963, the WPV held a vote on whether to carry out Ho Chi Minh's or Le Duan's preferred strategy. Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, in their new docuseries *The Vietnam War*, explain that after two weeks of bitter debate, Le Duan and the younger, more energetically revolutionary leadership group of the WPV won out. Ho ultimately abstained from the vote, as he correctly predicted that the party would vote to follow Le Duan's more aggressive strategy.⁶⁷ Although it remains unknown whether or not the Soviets and Chinese were even aware of this vote at the time, this was an early victory for the Chinese in their battle for influence in Southeast Asia against the Soviet Union.

It became apparent to the Soviets that China had a great deal of influence over the North Vietnamese war strategy. The same 1964 conversation between Polish delegates in Hanoi discussed earlier to show the Soviet's skepticism regarding the military situation in Vietnam also revealed that the Soviets were "convinced that the initiators of the [Gulf of Tonkin] incident were the Chinese."⁶⁸ By making such a confident and bold claim without providing any evidence, the Soviets revealed not only the extent to which they

⁶⁶ "Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara," January 17, 1966, Foreign Relations of the United States. pp. 74-81.

⁶⁷ Burns, Ken, and Lynn Novick. "The River Styx (January 1964-December 1965)." *The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick*, episode 3, PBS.

⁶⁸ "Note on a Conversation by Tarka, Jurgas, and Milc at the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi [Excerpts]," September 10, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.

viewed the Chinese as overly aggressive, but also the influence they believed China had with North Vietnam to carry out such an act.

While the note did not explain what the Soviets specifically meant in accusing the Chinese of “instigating” the Gulf of Tonkin incident, it is noteworthy that they were not the only group who believed that China played a role. There is a still unsettled debate in Vietnam regarding who gave the order for the North Vietnamese to attack the USS Maddox. Ho Chi Minh was reportedly shocked to hear that his small navy fired at American ships at the Gulf of Tonkin and demanded that the officer in charge be reprimanded for impulsiveness. The North Vietnamese never determined who gave the official order to fire, but Huy Duc, a Vietnamese journalist and veteran, expressed the belief that Le Duan gave the order, in accordance with his Chinese-backed desire to pursue victory through a series of aggressive offensives, rather than a negotiated settlement.⁶⁹ Regardless of who actually gave the order to fire, it was clear from the very beginning of the escalation of the Vietnam War that the Soviets believed China had a dangerously aggressive agenda and a disturbingly high amount of influence to enact said agenda.

The most direct example of this battle for influence occurred within a year of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, with the Chinese strategically blocking and delaying Soviet supplies. A declassified conversation involving an unnamed representative working in the International Department of the CPSU accused the Chinese of intentionally blocking Soviet weapons and personnel from getting into Vietnam to limit Soviet influence in Southeast Asia. The CPSU representative argued that China had no desire to resolve the

⁶⁹ Burns, Ken, and Lynn Novick. “The River Styx (January 1964-December 1965).” *The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick*, episode 3, PBS.

Vietnam War diplomatically, and was thus limiting Soviet access as both a propaganda effort and an effort to prevent political negotiations. The unnamed CPSU representative explained that despite the Soviet Union sending “the most modern jet fighter aircraft, missiles, and anti-aircraft guns [to Vietnam]... Chinese ‘advisers’ to the general staff of the Vietnamese army and to the ministry of defense subvert[ed] the use of Soviet weapons.” The representative later accused these Chinese advisers of having the weapons “deposited somewhere... or being only partially used for the establishment of Hanoi’s defense system.” The representative added that “the U.S., the Soviet Union, and also the Vietnamese themselves would move forward toward negotiations, even if [they have] different positions and different approaches,” but China’s resistance to negotiation served as a roadblock. Regarding China’s blocking of Soviet materiel, the representative concluded, “The hands of the Soviet Union are tied to a very great degree. It cannot unmask the pernicious policy of the Chinese leadership [of blocking Soviet weapons], because Vietnam would suffer most from it, since the Chinese are in a position, and are probably willing, to create even bigger difficulties for the Vietnamese.”⁷⁰

If they were unable to ship materiel through China, the Soviet Union’s only other option to supply resources to Vietnam would be by sea, which was a dangerous option. The United States’ Seventh Fleet patrolled the coast of both North Vietnam and South Vietnam, frequently engaging in combat operations through air strikes, gunfire support, amphibious operations, reconnaissance operations, and mine warfare.⁷¹ The U.S. also

⁷⁰ “Note on a Conversation with an Unnamed Representative of the International Department of the CPSU CC on the Situation in Vietnam [Excerpts],” July 09, 1965, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.

⁷¹ “History.” *Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet*. Web.

frequently bombed North Vietnamese ports, increasing the risk of transporting materiel by sea. The Seventh Fleet had also effectively blockaded the entire coast of South Vietnam, as they quickly discovered that the North Vietnamese were supplying the Vietcong in the South via cargo ships along the coast. This blockade forced the North Vietnamese to transport troops and resources by land. The result was the creation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (called Route 559 by the North Vietnamese), which connected North and South Vietnam by way of Laos and Cambodia.

Not only did the U.S. blockade lead to the creation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but it also placed China in a geographical position of power. Passage through China was relatively safe from the United States, which was unwilling to provoke China into a larger war. If the Soviets were to go by sea, however, confrontation with the United States was almost guaranteed, given the heavy American naval presence throughout the region. By holding up Soviet military aid and personnel, the Soviets believed that the Chinese were hoping to minimize the USSR's influence in Southeast Asia, which would in turn increase China's influence.

China's commitment to convincing the North Vietnamese, along with the entire communist world, that the Soviets were not fully committed to the communist effort in Vietnam, therefore threatening their status as the singular communist superpower, is seen in other examples. A 1965 note from the East German Embassy in Hanoi on a conversation with various ambassadors of socialist countries revealed, "the [Chinese] propaganda apparatus is still completely in control of the pro-Chinese forces, which intensify their activities and at the moment spread rumors that the Soviet Union is delivering outdated weapons."⁷³ As a part of this goal to increase its influence in Southeast Asia, China sought to ensure that the North Vietnamese would not cease fighting, as they knew that the Soviets desperately desired a negotiated settlement. The Chinese leadership recognized that as the war waged on, the prospect of Soviet-American relations improving became slimmer.

⁷³ "Note by the East German Embassy in Hanoi on a Joint Conversation with the Ambassadors from other Socialist Countries in the Hungarian Embassy on 4 May 1965," May 12, 1965, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.

It is also clear that the North Vietnamese were listening to the Chinese on this point. Nguyen Van Vinh, a North Vietnamese general who was also head of the WPV Party Committee on Unification, stated in 1966, “What would it mean for us to hold talks now? It would mean losing everything, and, *first of all, friendship with China which is utterly opposed to negotiations.*”⁷⁴

This view persisted throughout the war, seen later in a 1967 report from the Soviet embassy in North Vietnam that revealed that the North Vietnamese would only be willing to negotiate a settlement under certain strict conditions:

1. If they were convinced that the military struggle took a serious turn for the worse for them, and their internal situation would not allow them to continue.
2. If the United States were to give in and agree to satisfy the main demands of [North] Vietnam.
3. If the Chinese, for some reason, were to change their attitude toward the Vietnam War.
4. If soc[ialist] countries were to declare that they could no longer bear the ever growing burden of the Vietnam War for internal reasons or owing to dangers involved in the protracted and expanded war.⁷⁵

Most notable is the third condition, which demonstrated the weight the CCP’s opposition to a negotiated settlement carried for the North Vietnamese.

Beijing’s influence on the North Vietnamese was also seen in a meeting in April 1967 between Chinese and North Vietnamese leaders, at which the Chinese expressed concern about their perception that the Vietnamese were caving in towards a settlement,

⁷⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Soviet chargé P. Privalov-Nguyen Van Ving, August 23, 1966. SCCD, f. 5, op. 58, d. 264, pp. 173-174, as quoted in Gaiduk, p. 80. Italics added by Gaiduk, not in the original memorandum.

⁷⁵ Political Letter of the Soviet Embassy in the DRV, “The Soviet-Vietnamese talks of April 1967 and the Following Policy of the WPV Toward Settlement of the Vietnamese Problem,” August 1967. SCCD, f. 5, op. 59, d. 327, pp. 257, 258, as quoted in Gaiduk, pp. 110-111.

given the peace talks encouraged by the Soviets between 1965 and 1967. The Chinese demanded the Vietnamese make a “solemn promise” to continue the war, at least until 1968, and the DRV amped up military activity shortly after.⁷⁶ In doing so, Le Duan remarked that the DRV still sought to end the war with “maximal advantages for itself,” rather than settle in negotiations.⁷⁷ This statement indicates that both Le Duan and the CCP leadership believed, in 1967, that continued fighting was the best option in order to achieve their respective aims in Vietnam.

At the same time, even though the United States intensified bombing in 1967 and negotiations seemed impossible, the Soviet Union did not falter in its desire for a diplomatic end to the war. In March 1967, for example, even after U.S. military escalation, Soviet diplomat N. P. Kulebiakin continued to suggest to the U.S. Department of State “that the time was appropriate for talks between the United States and North Vietnam” and that he could help establish a direct line of communication to North Vietnam.⁷⁸ However, the CPSU’s desire for a negotiated settlement seemed to change in its motivation. As a North Vietnamese victory began to appear more and more likely, the Soviets developed a fear of being left out from the spoils of a DRV victory. In a conversation between the Soviet deputy foreign minister and the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, the Soviet official maintained a deep paranoia that the Chinese and the Americans would negotiate a secret settlement that would leave them and their interests out.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Gaiduk, pp. 109-110.

⁷⁷ Counselor Podolskii to Moscow, December 26, 1966, SCCD, f. 5, op. 59, d. 327, p. 18, as quoted in Gaiduk, p. 109.

⁷⁸ Gaiduk, p. 113.

⁷⁹ Gaiduk, pp. 111-112.

China had emerged as a legitimate adversary to the Soviet Union in Vietnam as a result of their geographical advantage as it pertained to transportation of materiel, their increased strategic influence in North Vietnam, and their energetic anti-imperialist militancy. Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam went as the war went. Once the Americans began a serious withdrawal of troops and de-escalation of military activity in the early 1970s and a North Vietnamese victory seemed not a question of *if*, but rather one of *when*, there was not as much room for China and the Soviet Union to directly influence strategic decisions. However, Vietnam was in very difficult circumstances after the war. The country was depleted economically and torn apart physically. An entire generation had experienced war, with an estimated 1.3 million North and South Vietnamese soldiers and two million civilians dead.⁸⁰ In order for the Vietnamese to recover from this devastation, they required heavy support from their “big brothers,” but no longer in a military sense. Given this continued need for support, the Sino-Soviet competition for influence in Vietnam was not over with the end of the war. The stakes and nature of the competition continued, now predicated on which power was best suited to aid Vietnam in recovery, and which power the newly independent Socialist Republic of Vietnam more closely aligned with.

⁸⁰ Spector, Ronald H. “Vietnam War.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Inc., 8 May 2017.

CHAPTER III: INTERKIT (1966-1985)

Interkit, a shortened version of the Russian *Интернациональное Китаеведение*, or “International China study,” was a highly secretive organization of heads and deputy heads of their respective International Departments, along with China experts from the USSR, the Warsaw Pact, and several other allies.⁸¹ The subsequent analysis, through use of Interkit’s meeting notes and other relevant conversations, will focus on the following question: What purpose did the Soviet Union seek for Interkit to have? Essentially, what end was gathering China experts from a number of countries supposed to achieve?

In 1966, while the Vietnam War was still escalating, the Soviets recognized China as a developing threat to their global influence. Looking more big-picture than just Vietnam, the Soviets sought to address this China problem through funding studies of China’s political and social systems, so as to better understand (and therefore critique) their leaders as well as to develop effective propaganda to mitigate China’s rise to power. Essentially, in 1966, the Soviets made the decision that the threat China posed to them had become significant enough that they could no longer continue to simply react to China’s aggressive actions, but rather they needed to act preemptively.

A key tenet of the Soviet Union’s more active policy towards China was collaboration with other socialist countries around the world in an effort to ensure continued influence. In 1943, the Soviet Union established the International Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The International Department’s chief function was to oversee the USSR’s relations with communist governments and parties

⁸¹ Romania was the only Warsaw Pact country not to participate in Interkit; Mongolia, Cuba, and Vietnam joined the organization despite not being a part of the Warsaw Pact.

around the world.⁸² Two decades later, in 1966, the Soviet Union established the Institute of the Far East as a part of the Russian Academy of Sciences, designed to study “social and economic development” in China, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea with a focus on how those developments would affect relations with the Soviet republics.⁸³ These organizations were not secret – that is, they were like the U.S. Department of State, in the sense that a portion of their work was classified, but their existences were not hidden from the general public.

In 1967, the Soviets combined leaders from the International Department and the Institute of the Far East to create Interkit.⁸⁴ The representatives discussed political, economic, ideological, cultural, and any other concerns regarding China with the stated intention to spread anti-Chinese propaganda targeted specifically against East Asian countries.⁸⁵ Newly translated documents from the Wilson Center Digital Archive that detail Interkit’s meetings shed light on the Vietnam War’s negative impact on Sino-Soviet relations from 1967 onward, as they reveal the Soviet strategy of Eastern bloc countries in dealing with the “China question.” In addition, the documents show that a main goal of Soviet and Eastern-bloc anti-China propaganda was to attempt to keep them economically isolated to hinder their status as an adversary to the USSR.

⁸² Ebon, Martin. *The Soviet Propaganda Machine*. New York, McGraw-Hill. 1987. p. 88

⁸³ *Institute of Far Eastern Studies Russian Academy of Sciences (IFES)*.

⁸⁴ There is no available document or order stating the formal creation of Interkit. Hershberg et. al., in *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship*, p. 12, state that it is possible that the idea for Interkit may have come about from Polish-Soviet conversations at unknown times.

⁸⁵ Hershberg, James, et al. *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship*. The Cold War International History Project: Working Paper Series, Feb. 2AD.

The existing English-language sources regarding Interkit are limited. Neither the Soviet nor the Chinese governments wanted to publicize the details of their contentious relations. Both countries' current governments have been reluctant to open their archives.⁸⁶ For example, the Kremlin announced in 2014 that a series of Soviet security archives would remain concealed for an additional thirty years,⁸⁷ laying out an extensive number of broad security-related reasons for these restrictions. Some scholars of Russia have critiqued this lack of transparency, claiming the Kremlin is trying to “compose a more innocent version of history.”⁸⁸

Given the perceived U.S. hegemony that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the modern-day Russians and Chinese have sought to find common ground, both to form a stable alliance against a perceived U.S. threat and for their own economic benefit. Russia and China signed various agreements in the 1990s, as well as agreements in 2001 and 2014 that outlined plans for a peaceful alliance and productive economic cooperation. It is possible that the Russians are concerned that releasing the history of Sino-Soviet tensions could damage this relationship.

Thus, knowledge of Interkit was unavailable to the public until Poland released meeting minutes and relevant conversations related to the organization. Poland was likely inclined to release these documents for a variety of reasons. The post-Cold War Polish government not only carried a disdain for their years in the Soviet bloc, but also a sense

⁸⁶ An example of the difficulties of conducting archival research in China is summarized in: Cunningham, Maura. “Denying Historians: China’s Archives Increasingly Off-Bounds.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 Aug. 2014.

⁸⁷ *О Продлении Сроков Засекречивания Сведений, Составляющих Государственную Тайну, Засекреченных ВЧК-КГБ СССР в 1917-1991 Годах*. Межведомственная Комиссия По защите Государственной Тайны, 12 Mar. 2014. Web.

⁸⁸ Soldatov, Andrei, and Irina Borogan. *The New Nobility: Essays on the History of the FSB*. Alpha Business Books/United Press, 2010.

that it was an imposed past, not its own. Additionally, Poland, along with East Germany, had some of the most well-kept and protected records of all of the Warsaw Pact countries, enabling them to release such information. These two countries provided the bulk of the records from the almost-annual Interkit meetings from 1967-1985.

In February 2011, James Hershberg, Sergey Radchenko, Peter Vamos, and David Wolff published the most comprehensive English-language examination of Interkit. While the intent of their working paper was to introduce Interkit in a broad sense, as they state that it has “received scant scholarly attention,” my thesis will focus on one of their working paper’s central questions: “Did [Interkit] actually influence or even shape Kremlin policy toward China and perceptions of what was happening there?”⁸⁹

Interkit’s method of operation was scholarly analysis, both from the state officials and China experts present, of Chinese actions and policies. Released meeting notes show that these discussions were Soviet-dominated. An East German report on the 1971 Interkit meeting in Sofia notes this characteristic:

The CPSU delegation contributed the bulk of efforts for preparation and performance of the meeting. Its contributions and material demonstrated high expert knowledge. They analyzed developments scientific-theoretically and carved out relevant patterns and trends of current Chinese policy.⁹⁰

Thus, although notes from several meetings mention delegations other than the Soviets giving presentations, there was no debate or disagreement on any points. Rather than being a collaborative effort to create substantive policy to attempt to solve the “China

⁸⁹ Hershberg, James, et al. *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship*. The Cold War International History Project: Working Paper Series, Feb. 2AD. pp. 3-5.

⁹⁰ “East German Report on the Fourth Interkit Meeting in Sofia, February 1971,” February 24, 1971, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR in the Federal Archives.

question,” Interkit meetings more often resembled lectures given by the Soviet delegation, in which they harped on all of the negative qualities of China and the CCP.

The first Interkit meeting was held December 14-21, 1967. Representatives from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Mongolia, and Poland joined the USSR in Moscow for what was largely an introductory gathering, consisting mainly of discussing the Soviets’ top concerns with China. These Soviet concerns were: (1) Chinese build-ups along the Sino-Soviet border, (2) Chinese-produced anti-Soviet propaganda, and (3) Soviet concerns over what they described as Mao’s belligerent nature. The Soviets framed the need to keep China’s aggressiveness in check as synonymous with the “defense of Marxism-Leninism, the unity of the communist world movement, and cooperation with the national-revolutionary liberation movement”⁹¹ Although the meeting notes did not explicitly mention Vietnam, the timing of this third concern over Mao’s aggressiveness coincides with the Soviet’s frustrations with China’s influence in preventing negotiations and increasing the bellicosity of the North Vietnamese.

In a 1966 conversation in Moscow, de-facto Polish leader Władysław Gomułka and Brezhnev discussed “the war in Vietnam, as well as the whole situation in China and the CCP’s position (Gomułka’s words).” Gomułka expressed concern over the Soviets’ stated perception that China strongly influenced North Vietnam. He was especially worried that “Mao’s idea of the guerilla army is currently being implemented and carried out in Vietnam.” Brezhnev agreed, stating:

⁹¹ “East German Report on First Interkit Meeting in Moscow, December 1967,” December 27, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR in the Federal Archives (SAPMO-BA) DY 30, IV A 2/20/1150.

We fully agree with your opinion that we need to know the real position and aims of the policy conducted by the Vietnamese Workers' Party. However, so far we have not been able to achieve anything on this end. We see the reflection of their dependence on the Chinese. We have done a lot to persuade the Vietnamese to sensible negotiations.⁹²

Brezhnev concluded the conversation by declaring that “the Chinese problem must be investigated,” as neither the Soviet nor Polish leadership knew of the CCP’s internal political stability, nor of the extent to which they influenced the DRV.⁹³ In this regard, Chinese influence in North Vietnam played a motivating role in the establishment of Interkit.

Each meeting describes detailed conversations on how the threats from China were changing, but much of the notes are devoid of any action. For example, in Sofia in 1971, the East German meeting notes revealed that Interkit critiqued the Chinese policy known as “differentiation,” which Interkit defined as “support for any forces working toward the overthrow of the existing order in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.”⁹⁴ A Polish note from a 1978 meeting between the International Departments of eight socialist countries in Budapest provided some examples of Chinese “differentiation”:

They are using a growing number of methods such as: economic intrigues and an intensified policy of differentiation toward socialist countries. They are giving economic credits to Korea, Romania, and Yugoslavia, while conducting an intensive differentiation policy toward Vietnam, instigating Cambodia, and posing territorial claims to Vietnam. Therefore, this is a

⁹² “Polish-Soviet Talks in Moscow,” October 10-15, 1966. Andrzej Paczkowski, ed. *Tajne Dokumenty Biura Politycznego PRL-ZSRR, 1956-1970* (London: Aneks Publishers, 1998), doc. 28 (pp. 364-432), as cited in: Hershberg, James, et al. *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship*. The Cold War International History Project: Working Paper Series, Feb. 2AD. p. 37.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 37.

⁹⁴ “East German Report on the Fourth Interkit Meeting in Sofia, February 1971,” February 24, 1971, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR in the Federal Archives.

selective approach [in their relations with] socialist countries, an approach based on the Maoist theory of “the Third World.” By doing all of the above, Beijing aims to eliminate the Comecon and the Warsaw Pact – two organizations which it views as the tools of “the Soviet reign.”⁹⁵

At the same time that the Chinese were blocking the transportation of Soviet weapons to Vietnam and slandering Soviet policies to their North Vietnamese allies in an attempt to weaken the USSR’s relationship (and therefore their influence) with North Vietnam, China had a similar goal to the USSR’s Eastern bloc allies. Through this policy known as “differentiation,” China sought to exploit any potential point of contention between the USSR and any of their allies, in an attempt to lessen Soviet influence throughout the world. This policy was the focus of multiple Interkit meetings, demonstrating the level of seriousness with which the Soviets took the threat of this Chinese policy.

In attempting to analyze the main objective and outcomes of Interkit, it is crucial to examine the most influential member of the organization, Oleg Rakhmanin. Rakhmanin was the Deputy Director of the International Department for Relations with Fraternal Countries and the head of the Soviet delegation to Interkit. His personal influence was significant, and he adamantly believed that China was an immediate threat to the Soviet Union that must be dealt with seriously. For example, in a June 1974 meeting Rakhmanin led, he spoke to eight Eastern bloc delegations, describing the situation with China as “dangerous,” warning the group of the Chinese troops on the Sino-Soviet border and even claiming the existence of a “Chinese community in the

⁹⁵ “Informational Note from the Eight Parties’ Meeting in Budapest,” March 06, 1978, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of Modern Records, Warsaw (ANN), KC PZPR, LXXVI – 1027.

USSR which acts on behalf of Maoist China.”⁹⁶ As a further illustration of the extent of Rakhmanin’s distrust of the Chinese, when Sino-Soviet relations were improving in 1980, Rakhmanin was not at all convinced, claiming that the Chinese were only pretending to sympathize with the Soviet Union over the Solidarity crisis in Poland in order to take advantage of them.⁹⁷

As Sino-Soviet relations improved in the 1980s, Rakhmanin’s distrust never wavered. On March 24, 1982, Brezhnev gave a speech in Tashkent, in which he recalled a time when “the Soviet Union and People’s China were united by bonds of friendship and comradely co-operation.” After clarifying multiple times that the Soviet Union never considered hostility against the Chinese, Brezhnev continued: “We are prepared to come to terms, without any preliminary conditions, on measures acceptable to both sides to improve Soviet-Chinese relations.”⁹⁸ The working paper on Interkit described Rakhmanin as “distracted” upon hearing that the Soviets were attempting to mend their relationship with the Chinese.⁹⁹ Rakhmanin continued his efforts to warn both Eastern bloc nations and the Soviet Union about the seriousness of the Chinese threat, writing an “exceptionally hard-line” anti-China article in *Pravda* in 1985 without permission, which earned him an internal investigation with the Politburo and the loss of any power he still

⁹⁶ “Note from the Eighth Meeting of the Deputy Heads of the CC International Departments of Eight Parties in Ulaanbaatar devoted to the Struggle with Maoism,” June, 1974, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of Modern Records.

⁹⁷ “Secret Telegram No. 3638/IV - From Moscow to Warsaw,” December 18, 1980, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of Modern Records.

⁹⁸ Brezhnev, Leonid. “President Brezhnev’s Speech, Tashkent 24 March 1982 (Excerpts).” Tashkent.

⁹⁹ Hershberg, James, et al. *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship*. The Cold War International History Project: Working Paper Series, Feb. 2AD. p. 26.

had. In 1986, the East Germans and Poles began discussions of economic agreements with the Chinese, thus rendering Interkit useless.¹⁰⁰

This analysis suggests two related points. First, Interkit's method of operation was to perform scholarly analyses on China. Meetings operated as more of a Soviet-led discussion of these analyses, rather than concrete plans for action. Second, especially after the Vietnam War, there was a clear disconnect between the Interkit leadership and the Soviet government, evidenced by Oleg Rakhmanin's being kept out of the loop regarding Brezhnev's shift in policy towards China and Rakhmanin's polemical critique of China in the face of the new Soviet policy. These two conclusions, in combination with each other, suggest that Interkit was not designed to have a significant impact on Soviet policy. While there was some coordinated propaganda efforts conducted through Interkit, it was not the case that other delegations presented their findings on China to be reflected in Soviet policy towards China.

Rather, Interkit gave the Soviet delegation, led by Oleg Rakhmanin, whom the Soviet government knew was steadfastly anti-China, a platform to disseminate these anti-Chinese beliefs to dissuade countries in Interkit from doing any sort of business with China, as doing so would not only aid the Chinese economically, but also increase their international influence. Hershberg and his colleagues revealed that in 1973, the Soviet delegation to Interkit initiated a coordinated bloc-wide economic-trade policy towards China, with the intent to "prevent the PRC from gaining advantages from individual countries."¹⁰¹ Especially after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the Soviets used Interkit to continue to "keep a tab on what other socialist countries were doing in relations with

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 29.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 22.

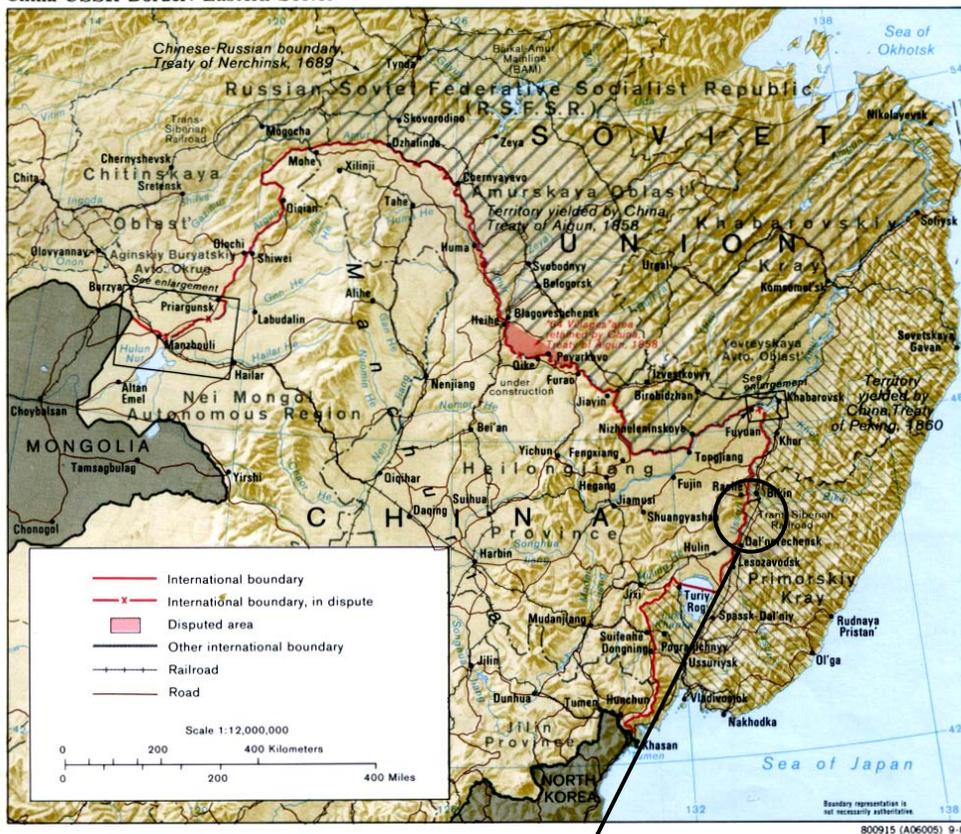
China, lest Moscow's allies became tempted to bury the hatchet of anti-Chinese sentiment in Mao's coffin."¹⁰² A 1977 East German record of a talk with CPSU official Boris Kulik, in preparation for the ninth Interkit meeting, stated that the Soviet delegation had an eighty-page comprehensive report prepared for the meeting that was set to argue that the new Chinese leadership was "just a continuation of Maoist policy" and that the CCP remained Maoist, not Marxist-Leninist. However, the report did note that some things had changed with Mao's death, notably that the new CCP leadership was looking to find "new methods to steer the economy" and that "Chinese representatives are making more efforts to establish contacts with diplomats from socialist fraternal countries."¹⁰³

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 24.

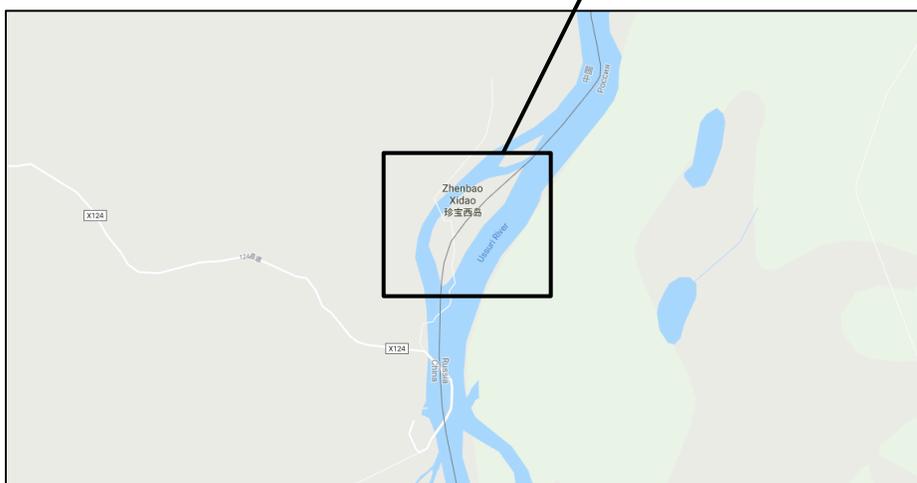
¹⁰³ "East German Record of Talk with Soviet Communist Party official Boris Kulik," January, 26, 1977, Department of International Relations. SAPMO-BA, DY 30, IV B 2/20/126. Translated for CWIHP by Bernd Schaefer, as cited in: Hershberg, James, et al. *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship*. The Cold War International History Project: Working Paper Series, Feb. 2AD. p. 99-102.

CHAPTER IV: CONFLICT ON THE USSURI RIVER

China-USSR Border: Eastern Sector



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¹⁰⁴ Map source: “China-USSR Border: Eastern Sector.” *Wikipedia*.

Circle, line, and rectangle on images are my own.

¹⁰⁵ Current map taken from Google Maps. Damansky/Zhenbao Island shown inside the rectangle.

A series of border clashes throughout the 1960s characterized the Sino-Soviet relationship, each of which was the culmination of years of building tension. The Sino-Soviet border clashes were important because they demonstrated that tensions between the USSR and PRC had been so badly damaged through the 1960s that they engaged in a prolonged, deadly conflict over an island, less than two kilometers in length, that carried no strategic value. Not only did the timing of the conflict coincide with the escalating tensions in Vietnam, but American primary source documents also revealed that the Soviets feared that the Chinese would become increasingly aggressive in Vietnam as a result of the 1969 Damansky/Zhenbao Island conflict.

First, on March 2, 1969, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) attacked the Soviet Far East Border Guards on a small island along the Ussuri River on the Sino-Soviet border that the Soviets called Damansky Island (Russian: *Остров Даманский*) and the Chinese called Zhenbao Island. A 1970 CIA intelligence report stated that it was "more likely that the ambush was directly ordered by Peking," rather than a breach of discipline or a regional command.¹⁰⁶ After some intense fighting, the Soviets reclaimed the island.

Just days later on March 15, the Soviets reported that the Chinese Army launched a more coordinated attack on Damansky/Zhenbao Island, beginning with an artillery attack, followed by a 5,000-man invasion. However, while details of the March 15 conflict remain scarce, CIA analysts believed it likely that the Soviets initiated the attack

¹⁰⁶ *The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*. CIA Directorate of Intelligence, April 28, 1970. p. 36.

as retaliation, and that no such Chinese first strike happened.¹⁰⁷ The 1970 CIA report stated that “Soviet leadership decided to hit hard at Chinese forces.” The report redacted the specific names or agencies that gave the order, but it stated that KGB guards were secretly sent to Damansky/Zhenbao Island in white camouflage during the night, later to be joined by a number of Soviet tanks.¹⁰⁸ The Soviet Union sought to retaliate not only to defend the island, but also to send a strong message to the Chinese to cease any potential future attack plans by firing a massive barrage of artillery at the Chinese side of the river. Ultimately, the Soviet Border Guards killed “several hundred” PLA troops on March 15, 1969.¹⁰⁹

Two days later, on March 17, the Soviet border guards returned to Damansky/Zhenbao Island in an attempt to recover a T-62 tank that had been disabled by the Chinese. Although a seemingly innocuous task, recovery of the T-62 tank carried an extra significance, as this was the first instance in which the Soviets deployed it in battle, and they therefore sought to maintain the secrecy of its existence. The Soviets failed to recover the T-62 tank after coming under Chinese fire and failed to destroy the tank on March 21 for the same reason, and it eventually fell into the Chinese’s hands. Fighting ceased after March 21, but the border dispute was not officially resolved until 1991.

The Central Committee of the CPSU sent a report to East German leadership after the March 2 conflict, beginning by voicing their view that this Chinese attack was long premeditated, with the Chinese having increased troops in that region and violated the

¹⁰⁷ United States Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office , and Michael S Gerson. “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969.”

¹⁰⁸ *The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*. CIA Directorate of Intelligence, April 28, 1970. p. 39.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p. 39.

border at Damansky/Zhenbao multiple times within months of the conflict. The report proceeded to clarify that it was not Chinese border guards that initiated the conflict, but rather a trained unit from the Chinese People's Liberation Army. The report cited that the Chinese unit that initiated the March 2 attack was equipped with "special gear," including camouflaged clothing, a secure line of communication to the Chinese shore, PAC batteries, mines, armored artillery, heavy fire guns, and grenade splinters.¹¹⁰ In listing these capabilities, the Soviet report distinguished this attack from the other "several thousand border violations with provocative goals" since 1960.¹¹¹ The 1969 conflict at Damansky/Zhenbao Island was not another impulsive border skirmish, but it was rather a calculated attack. Thus, the question arose: Why did the Chinese plan and carry out an attack on an island that contained no economic or strategic value?

The Soviets were very clear in answering this question. They strongly believed that Mao Zedong sent a well-trained armed unit to provoke them in order to produce a "chauvinist frenzy in [China], creating an atmosphere which enables them to establish Mao Zedong's anti-Soviet and chauvinist great power course as the general line of Chinese policy"¹¹² This explanation also helps understand the timing of the Chinese aggression. The Ninth Congress in China was coming up in 1969, which provided Mao and the Chinese Communist Party a platform to further their anti-Soviet meta-narrative as a strategy to extend their sphere of influence as the top communist power.

¹¹⁰ "Soviet Report to East German Leadership on Sino-Soviet Border Clashes," March 02, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, SAMPO-BArch J IV 2/202/359. Translated by Christian F. Ostermann.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² "Soviet Report to East German Leadership on Sino-Soviet Border Clashes," March 02, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, SAMPO-BArch J IV 2/202/359.

It is also important to note that the Chinese account of the events at Damansky/Zhenbao Island do not align with the description above. Yang Kuisong, a Chinese historian who specializes in the Chinese Communist Party, translated Chinese documents released in the late 1990s to reveal the Chinese perception of the events on the Ussuri River in March 1969. The Chinese reports following the battle on March 2 claimed that Chinese border patrol was sent to do defensive duties on the island, which they clearly believed was rightfully their own, when “the Soviet revisionists discovered them,” dispatched one truck, two armored vehicles, one command car, and 70 soldiers, surrounding the Chinese, and then proceeded to ignore the Chinese’s warnings and fire on them.¹¹³

The Chinese report focused extensively on the March 15 fighting, which the Soviet troops initiated, praising the preparedness of the Chinese Army for a second attack from the Soviets. The Chinese government promoted the narrative that the Soviet revisionists (a term consistent with Chinese perceptions of the Soviet Union through the Chinese Cultural Revolution) launched an attack on the defensive Chinese Army, but the Chinese held their ground. To their Romanian allies, the Chinese claimed the Soviets were acting aggressively on the border in order to “intimidate China, internationally portraying China as the aggressor and convincing the Soviet people of the Chinese threat.”¹¹⁴ In spreading this narrative, Mao Zedong publicly announced through Chinese propaganda that China should be ready “to fight a great war, an early war, and even a

¹¹³ Kuisong, Yang. “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement.” *Cold War History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000. pp. 26-27.

¹¹⁴ “Telegram from Aurel Duma to Corneliu Manescu Concerning the Conversation with Zhou Enlai,” August 23, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, A.M.A.E., fond Telegrams, Beijing, vol. II, 1969. pp. 269-270.

nuclear war...this year or at any time in the future,” possibly even a war deep into Chinese territory.¹¹⁵

After some additional small skirmishes along the Sino-Soviet border, conflict broke out again on the western part of the Sino-Soviet border in August 1969 near the Chinese Xinjiang region, near Kazakhstan. Soviet troops ambushed and killed 38 Chinese soldiers, with the intent, according to Boris Davydov, a KGB officer disguised as a diplomat, of sending a clear message to CCP leadership that “that they couldn’t continue to get away with” provocations on the border.¹¹⁶ Lyle Goldstein explained that attacking at this location was strategic to send a serious message to the CCP, as China believed itself to be vulnerable to attack in that area.¹¹⁷

In that same month, the Chinese Communist Party laid out more concrete orders for mobilization on the border. Despite ordering the PLA troops not to attack the Soviets unprovoked, the orders contained permissive rules of engagement, prefaced with a statement intended to further engrain the anti-Soviet attitudes stemming from the Cultural Revolution. After stating that China had achieved great victories in the Cultural Revolution and the state of the country was “united” and “excellent,” the order warned:

The U.S. imperialists and the Soviet revisionists are stepping up their collusion and are plotting to encroach upon our great motherland. The

¹¹⁵ Kuisong, Yang. “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement.” *Cold War History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000. p. 31.

¹¹⁶ “Memorandum of Conversation between William L. Stearman and Boris N. Davydov,” 18 August 1969, p. 3, as cited in: United States Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, and Michael S Gerson. “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969” p. 33.

¹¹⁷ Lyle J. Goldstein, *Preventive Attack and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 79.

socialist imperialists of Soviet revisionism are ever more frenziedly and persistently carrying out armed provocations on our border.¹¹⁸

Statements like these sought to portray a situation in which China was in a position of international power, economic strength, and social stability. These statements attacked the Soviets as imperialists and revisionists to promote the Chinese's superior values and dedication to their ideology. These statements were also consistent with the findings of both the Soviet Union and, years later, the CNA Institute for Public Research. Mao sought to use the conflict at Damansky/Zhenbao Island to rile up nationalistic, anti-Soviet attitudes, both amongst PLA troops and Chinese citizens, as part of his goal to establish China as a third great power through aggressive action.

In addition to examining China's motives in the 1969 border clashes, analyzing the role of the conflict at Damansky/Zhenbao island in the larger context of Sino-Soviet history begs the question: Why 1969? That is, while China had frequently declared the 1860 Treaty of Peking "unequal," why did they elect in 1969 to act militarily? Additionally, why did the Chinese not initiate the conflict at the peak of the "Sino-Soviet split," which scholars typically define as 1962-1963?

The timing of the clash on the Ussuri River was not coincidental: China's claim that the 1860 Treaty of Peking was a "treaty forced upon a weak China by czarist Russia"¹¹⁹ makes the critical assumption that China had since achieved a comparable level of power to the Soviet Union. While there is no accessible Chinese primary source to explicitly tell what factors led to this perceived international power, the 1970 CIA

¹¹⁸ "The CCP Central Committee's Order for General Mobilization in Border Provinces and Regions," August 28, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Obtained and translated by Michael Schoenhals.

¹¹⁹ Denisov, Igor. "Aigun, Russia, and China's 'Century of Humiliation.'" *Carnegie Moscow Center*.

report argued that Mao made a calculated risk at Damansky/Zhenbao Island to harness “anti-Soviet energies,” stating:

Mao’s purpose was not to attain a victory for internal use or to blacken the Soviet image internationally, but rather to assert his claim to the island. In wiping out a Soviet border guard detachment, he gambled that the Russians would not escalate either by launching a big ground-force or conventional air attack or by attacking with nuclears. He apparently hoped that the Russians would not respond at all militarily because the Chinese claim to Chen Pao was so clearcut.¹²⁰

While there were skirmishes along the Sino-Soviet border throughout the 1960s, the major clashes in 1969 differed in that they were premeditated and more deadly. The 1970 CIA report noted that the Damansky/Zhenbao Island conflict was the first time in a Sino-Soviet border clash that the People’s Liberation Army used mortars, grenade-launchers, and anti-tank guns against the Soviet border guards. In the midst of the Vietnam War, Sino-Soviet tensions had reached the point of violence, with the CCP leadership seeking to rile up anti-Soviet attitudes consistent with their efforts in the Cultural Revolution, and the Soviet leadership seeking to not only fend off Chinese aggression, but send a clear message that it would not be tolerated.

The Nixon Administration also had a decision to make regarding the official American stance on the Sino-Soviet conflict. Deputy National Security Advisor William G. Hyland, in a 1969 memorandum to Henry Kissinger, explained the debate within the U.S. government as between “strict impartiality” or “shading toward China.” However, Hyland suggested that shading toward the Soviet Union and expressing a willingness to accept a Soviet attack on China “might just be the way to an early Vietnam

¹²⁰ *The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*. CIA Directorate of Intelligence, April 28, 1970. p. 38.

settlement.”¹²¹ However, Hyland’s theory that siding with the Soviets would lead the USSR to achieve a negotiated settlement in Vietnam, in addition to overestimating the USSR’s influence in North Vietnam, was not a common view within the U.S. government.¹²² State department academic consultants, as shown in a 1969 memorandum from State Department official Miriam Camps to Under Secretary of State Elliot Richardson, warned against Hyland’s claim that “a Sino-Soviet war, for a limited period and if limited in scope, is by no means a disaster for the U.S.”¹²³ The consultants explained that a Soviet attack on China would have “a vast destabilizing effect” throughout Asia and Western Europe, additionally warning that an attack “would result in strengthening Chinese nationalism and unity, and would solidify Mao’s position.”¹²⁴

The USSR was also concerned about the potential Vietnam implications of Mao’s aggression against the Soviet Union, particularly in the March 2 conflict at Damansky Island. In a June 1969 conversation between Director of the Office of Research and Analysis for East Asia and the Pacific John Holdridge and Soviet diplomat Yuri Linkov, Holdridge reported that Linkov inquired whether Holdridge believed that China would attack the USSR on a larger scale and what the U.S. reaction to a Sino-Soviet war would be. Despite dismissing it multiple times, Holdridge explained that Linkov repeatedly

¹²¹ Hyland, William. “Memorandum for Mr. Kissinger: Sino-Soviet Contingencies.” *National Security Council*, 28 Aug. 1969. p. 2.

¹²² Hyland also acknowledged at the beginning of his memorandum to Kissinger that his theory that a Sino-Soviet conflict could be beneficial to U.S. aims in Vietnam was “highly personal and [an] apparently minority view.”

¹²³ *Ibid.* p. 2.

¹²⁴ Camps, Miriam. “NSSM 63 - Meeting with Consultants.” *Department of State*, 29 Aug. 1969. p. 2.

“raised...the question of possible Chinese Communist intervention in Vietnam.”¹²⁵ In an August 1969 conversation, Soviet diplomat Boris Davydov probed Bureau of Intelligence and Research Vietnam Expert William L. Stearman on similar questions regarding the possibility of a Sino-Soviet war. After discussing the Damansky Island conflict, Davydov stated that the Soviet Union was “still interested in letting the U.S. withdraw from Vietnam in a manner which will not leave it bitter and angry,” but that China demanded a “rapid and complete withdrawal of U.S. forces... and [the United States’] agreement to a coalition government [in Vietnam],” despite knowing that these conditions were not acceptable to the United States in 1969.¹²⁶ This, in turn, also demonstrated the Soviet Union’s fear over a potential direct Chinese intervention in Vietnam after their aggressiveness on the Sino-Soviet border.

¹²⁵ Holdridge, John H. “Comments of Soviet Embassy Officer on China and Vietnam.” *Department of State*, 13 June 1969. p. 3.

¹²⁶ Stearman, William L. “US Reaction to Soviet Destruction of CPR [Chinese Peoples Republic] Nuclear Capability; Significance of Latest Sino-Soviet Border Clash,....” *U.S. Department of State*, 18 Aug. 1969. p. 3.

CHAPTER V: SINO-SOVIET-VIETNAMESE POST-WAR RELATIONS

“After all these years, the Vietnamese had learned to live with crises and war, but they haven’t learned yet to live as a nation.”¹²⁷

-- Extracted from Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s *The Vietnam War*

Post-war Vietnam, rather than repaying favors or taking orders from either the Soviet Union or China, focused on unifying, rebuilding, and developing both halves of the country under a socialist model. They also began to establish the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam as a legitimate regional power. While Vietnam needed significant foreign aid to achieve these goals, it had also clearly expressed a desire to conduct its internal politics independent of foreign influence, which was not compatible with Mao’s revolutionary-war, interventionist international doctrine.

In and of itself, the North Vietnamese military victory only benefitted the Vietnamese. The battle between the Soviet Union and China carried on. In the Soviet Union and China’s attempts to use the North Vietnamese victory to bolster their international reputations because of their shared beliefs in communism, the Chinese severely overestimated the amount of loyalty they had won from North Vietnam. While North Vietnamese leaders, notably Le Duan, praised the Chinese throughout the war and took strategic advice and inspiration from them, the newly unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam was incapable of repaying any favors after the war, as at least 25 percent of their national budget in 1977 budget depended on foreign aid.¹²⁸

The Vietnamese showed that rather than provide the USSR or China with outspoken political support to bolster their perceived geopolitical power, they focused on

¹²⁷ Burns, Ken, and Lynn Novick. “Resolve (January 1966-June 1967).” *The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick*, episode 4, PBS.

¹²⁸ Turley, William S. "Vietnam Since Reunification," *Problems of Communism*. March-April 1977. pp. 47-48.

becoming an independent regional power in Indochina. While Vietnam may still have depended on foreign aid after the end of the war, it did not want foreign powers to dictate its own domestic and international policies. The leadership of the newly unified Vietnam had made it clear that they owed no favors to China, as they sought to become their own power. Truong Nhu Tang, in his famous book, *A Vietcong Memoir*, explained part of the Vietnamese rationale behind this Vietnamese belief: “What was the point of freeing ourselves from American neocolonialist visions...in order to enroll as pawns?” Tang continued to explain that any energy the Vietnamese spent appeasing the Soviet Union or China would have been a waste of effort that should have been used for internal reconstruction.¹²⁹ The shift in Vietnamese policies after independence precipitated an adverse reaction from CCP leadership, both before and after Mao’s death in September 1976.

Although the Vietnam War did not officially end until April 1975, when the North Vietnamese overran Saigon and helicopters famously evacuated the last Americans, the war had been approaching its finish for years. As early as December 1969, President Nixon remarked in a news conference that “we can see that the Vietnam War will come to a conclusion regardless of what happens at the bargaining table.”¹³⁰ Especially after the news broke in the United States of American soldiers’ unjustified massacre of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the village of Mỹ Lai in March 1968, which led to twenty-five indictments in the military (and controversially only one guilty sentence), it was evident

¹²⁹ Tang, Truong Nhu. *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*. Vintage Books, 1985. pp. 248-249.

¹³⁰ Richard Nixon: "The President's News Conference," December 8, 1969. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

that not only was an American victory in Vietnam looking less plausible by the day, but also that the American public could no longer support war in Vietnam.

From the Soviet perspective, the U.S. drawing down its forces in Vietnam through Nixon's policy of "Vietnamization" had both positive and negative ramifications. Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam became less intense, as there was no longer room for debate regarding North Vietnamese military strategy. But it was also the case that the bellicose "Chinese path," which Le Duan followed, characterized by many offensive attacks, had succeeded to a large extent. As the United States gradually left Vietnam, North Vietnamese forces advanced into the south with a series of offensives, which the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) could not deter, making a communist victory imminent.

Post-war Vietnam faced a steep path to recovery and stabilization. The country was depleted economically and torn apart physically, with an entire generation having experienced war. An estimated 1.3 million North and South Vietnamese soldiers and two million civilians died on both sides, not including those killed in the First Indochina War from 1946 to 1954.¹³¹ This devastation required the Soviet Union to continue to provide as much aid for as long as they could, as the battle for influence in Southeast Asia turned a new chapter. The communists had achieved territorial victory on the battlefield, but Vietnam now needed to be developed, politically and industrially. Vietnam was an agrarian state whose farmland had been destroyed and polluted in the war, and the economy in the south was now without its previous backbone: the United States.

¹³¹ Spector, Ronald H. "Vietnam War." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Inc., 8 May 2017.

The bulk of available English-language primary sources regarding the Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese triangle in the 1970s come from conversations between Chinese and Vietnamese officials, in which the Vietnamese consistently reiterated their praise for Mao, the inspiration they drew from China, and their stated neutrality between the Soviet Union and China. Stephen J. Morris's "The Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese Triangle in the 1970s," however, provides analyses of the limited number of Russian-language sources, which reveal increasing tensions throughout the 1970s between China and Vietnam stemming from disagreements on various international issues.

Morris explains that the North Vietnamese leadership shifted strategic thinking in 1968, when victory seemed more likely. They were no longer thinking in primarily military terms, but they also began to speak of political and diplomatic aims.¹³² While the Vietnamese still refused to publicly side with either the Soviet Union or China, this change in focus laid the groundwork for future Sino-Vietnamese tension, as it was in these latter two categories where Chinese doctrine failed. That is, while Mao's doctrine of revolutionary warfare was largely successful in leading to North Vietnam capturing Saigon and winning the Second Indochina War, it was devoid of any effective peacetime state building strategies, which the Vietnamese then needed.

To describe the Vietnamese viewpoints as a rigid dichotomy between pro-Soviet forces and pro-Chinese forces would not only be an oversimplification, but it would also denigrate the Vietnamese leadership. Morris demonstrated that the factions that existed within the WPV in the late 1960s and early 1970s did not line up perfectly as pro-Soviet

¹³² Morris, Stephen J. "The Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese Triangle in the 1970's: The View from Moscow." *Woodrow Wilson International Center For Scholars*, vol. 25, Apr. 1999. p. 12.

versus pro-Chinese. Rather, they varied by issue and signified a broad “Soviet tilt,” rather than the North Vietnamese actively choosing the Soviet Union over China.¹³³

Morris argues that there was a sequence of geopolitical stances taken by the North Vietnamese leading up to 1975, on which Vietnam could have remained neutral but chose to take a stance. Morris listed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Soviet-West German *détente*, the attempted *coup d'état* in Sudan, the *coup d'état* in Portugal, and the Civil War in Angola as five major points of contestation between the Soviet Union and China in which the Vietnamese could have remained neutral or not said anything but chose to instead make “a public stand in support of the Soviet line.”¹³⁴

Additionally, Morris explains that North Vietnam was upset with both China and the Soviet Union over hosting President Nixon for talks in 1972, but the Soviet Union made a serious effort to send delegations to North Vietnam after Nixon’s visit to reaffirm relations.¹³⁵ These Soviet efforts were successful in ameliorating any tension created by the Nixon visit to Moscow. In 1973, the Soviet embassy in Hanoi reported a strengthening in their relationship with “the Vietnamese comrades.” In that year, the Soviet Union forgave \$1.08 billion in debt from previous aid and provided North Vietnam with 132.7 million rubles (roughly \$2.34 million) in both credit and grants, along with 10 million rubles (roughly \$176,000) in free aid.¹³⁶

However, while the Soviets had repaired any damage done to their relations with the Vietnamese, the Chinese were vocally upset about Vietnam’s disagreement on the variety of foreign policy issues listed above. For example, Vietnam publicly supported

¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 23.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 9-10.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 17.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 20.

the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968,¹³⁷ while Zhou Enlai likened the Soviet invasion to Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938, the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, and Japanese imperialism in China.¹³⁸ China's frustrations culminated in a secret Sino-Vietnamese meeting in September 1975 in China, with Le Duan leading the Vietnamese delegation. Morris noted that the subsequent report on the meeting was never published, but the Vietnamese provided an account of the meeting to the Soviets in October of that year. While the document stated that the Vietnamese came to China to strengthen mutual relations, China "openly and officially" scrutinized Vietnam's closeness with the Soviet Union, warning that continuation of this policy would result in China cutting off support. The Vietnamese, according to the report, stood by their policy decisions and concluded the report describing the condition of Sino-Vietnamese relations as "alarming" and "critical."¹³⁹

In the second half of 1975, China's material assistance to Vietnam declined significantly. At the beginning of 1976, China began to recall specialists and delay work on recovery projects in Vietnam. The Vietnamese expressed concerns to the Soviets that the Chinese might use territorial disputes in the Tonkin Gulf and/or the Parcel and Spartley Islands as a platform to act on their anger with the Vietnamese. However, the

¹³⁷ *World Communist Reaction to the Invasion of Czechoslovakia*. CIA Directorate of Intelligence, 1968.

¹³⁸ "Telegrams from Romanian Embassy, Beijing, to Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22-24 August 1968," August 24, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Romanian Foreign Ministry Archives (AMAE), fond Telegrams, Peking 1968, Vol II, pp. 272-274.

¹³⁹ The report cited by Morris is contained in: "Results of the Visit of the Vietnamese Party-Government Delegation to China (1975)," TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 73, d. 1933.

Vietnamese message to the Soviet Union noted that they still sought to repair relations with China rather than work solely with the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁰

The Fourth Vietnamese Party Congress in December 1976 proved to be a critical juncture in the course of not only Vietnamese politics but also Sino-Vietnamese relations. The party removed many of the remaining pro-Chinese leaders. Economic socialization efforts in the south targeted the urban class, and by association, the Chinese community living there. Vietnam also chose to adopt a more militant stance regarding border tensions with the Khmer Rouge-controlled territory in Cambodia known as Kampuchea to remove Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot. Vietnamese leadership sought to replace the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian communists that won the Cambodian Civil War in 1975, with a government more friendly to Vietnam and less reliant on violence, thereby increasing Vietnam's security.¹⁴¹ This angered CCP leadership, which had financially supported the Khmer Rouge since its inception in 1968, funding the Khmer Rouge's insurgency and sending thousands of technicians to help until Pol Pot's regime eventually took over Cambodia in 1975.¹⁴² In February 1977, China formally notified Vietnam that they were unable to continue to provide aid for Vietnam's reconstruction. At the same time, China increased its financial and technical assistance to Kampuchea, a direct threat to the Vietnamese.

¹⁴⁰ The message cited by Morris is contained in: V. Sviridov (2nd Secretary, Embassy of the USSR in the SRV), "O nekotorykh aspektakh v'etnamokitaiskikh otnosheni" ["About several aspects of Vietnamese-Chinese relations"], April 1976, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 69, d. 2313, l.18.

¹⁴¹ Chang, Pao-min. *Beijing, Hanoi, and the Overseas Chinese*. Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, Center for Chinese Studies, 1982. pp. 15-21.

¹⁴² Sambath, Phou. *Cambodia-China Relation Past Present and Future*. IIMBA, College of Management. p. 4.

In efforts to establish themselves in the international arena, Vietnam became an official member of the United Nations in September 1977 and in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in May 1978. China subsequently eliminated all remaining funding to Vietnam. Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in November 1978, which demonstrated Soviet solidarity with Vietnam. The treaty also warned China regarding its support for Kampuchea against Vietnam and their increased presence on the Sino-Vietnamese border. Vietnam proceeded to invade Cambodia in December of the same year, with the primary motivation of removing the Khmer Rouge from power in favor of a government more sympathetic to Vietnam.¹⁴³ Since 1975, China provided at least 90 percent of the Khmer Rouge's foreign aid in hopes that they would serve as a strong ally in Indochina with Vietnam allying with the Soviet Union. China was "furious" with the Vietnamese invasion, and the People's Liberation Army proceeded to invade Vietnam across a broad front, to "teach Vietnam a lesson," in February 1979.¹⁴⁴ Following the 1979 conflict, six clashes along the border occurred between 1980 and 1988. Both sides claimed victory in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, and the conflict made clear that Sino-Vietnamese relations had reached an irreparable point.

Rather than use their role in the war to build a strong alliance with Vietnam to increase their international power, the CCP viewed their strong military support for the North Vietnamese as sufficient in and of itself for gaining international credibility. Pao-

¹⁴³ This information comes from Bernd Schaefer's research with East German Archives, which he summarizes in: Brooke, James. "Why Did Vietnam Overthrow the Khmer Rouge in 1978?" *Khmer Times*, 7 Aug. 2014. Web.

¹⁴⁴ Morris, Stephen J. "The Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese Triangle in the 1970's: The View from Moscow." *Woodrow Wilson International Center For Scholars*, vol. 25, Apr. 1999. p. 37.

min Chang, in “Beijing, Hanoi, and the Overseas Chinese,” explained, “the communist victory in the south apparently led the Chinese to believe that [Vietnam] now had behind them a powerful protector, China; they therefore expected more respect from the Vietnamese.”¹⁴⁵

Maoist doctrine, it seems clear in retrospect, was focused too narrowly on aggressive military tactics and not on state and economy building. As a result, Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping, renounced the Cultural Revolution after taking office in 1977, critiqued Mao as “seven parts good, three parts bad.”¹⁴⁶ Along with significant economic reforms, Deng also established an “open door policy,” seeking to expand contact and trade with the rest of the world. However, despite Deng’s significant reforms, tensions with the Vietnamese leadership had blown up so badly as a result of China’s perception that the Vietnamese had “chosen” the Soviets over them. These tensions manifested themselves in the 1979 attack. While the 1979 attack itself lasted roughly four weeks, China and Vietnam did not ultimately resolve the border issue until the Treaty of Land Border in Hanoi on December 31, 1999.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Chang, Pao-min. *Beijing, Hanoi, and the Overseas Chinese*. Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, Center for Chinese Studies, 1982. p. 16

¹⁴⁶ As quoted in: Lu, Xing. *The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People*. The University of South Carolina Press, 2017.

¹⁴⁷ “China and Vietnam Sign Land Border Treaty.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, 15 Nov. 2000.

CONCLUSION

“Reliance on lessons of the past tends to be particularly marked during crises. The stress and imperfect information associated with crisis decision-making frequently lead policy-makers to rely on the past to illuminate the present.”¹⁴⁸

Ret. Gen. David Petraeus, 1987

Central to this paper’s arguments is a rejection of the “Cold War mindset” that the Vietnam War was predominantly a battle between communists and capitalists to determine if Vietnam were to look like the United States or the Soviet Union. In fact, to view the Vietnam War as a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union ignores many fundamental aspects of the conflict. A complete analysis of the Vietnam War should view the war as an event embedded in international systems, rather than through the lens of American parochialism. The Soviets knew from the onset that war in Vietnam was not favorable to their foreign policy aims, one reason being the potentially dangerous effect on relations with the United States and China. The Vietnam War, for the Soviet Union, produced the unintended risk of empowering the Chinese as an anti-imperialist alternative to the USSR. Through exploring the intersection of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China in Vietnam, this thesis has explored international relations in the Cold War beyond the bipolarity of the United States and the Soviet Union, illustrating Mao’s attempt to turn revolutionary rhetoric to action on its largest global stage through the Vietnam War.

Tracing Soviet and Chinese ideologies heading into the Vietnam War allows us to understand what each government’s goals were in Vietnam, explaining why Sino-Soviet competition existed in Vietnam. A close examination of the largely understudied

¹⁴⁸ Petraeus, David Howell. “The American Military and the Lessons From Vietnam: A Study of American Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era.” *Princeton University*, 1987. pp. 31-32.

organization Interkit furthers this story, showing that not only did the Soviet Union and China have differing goals and strategies in Vietnam, but also that the Soviet Union acknowledged and actively fought against China's rise to prominence. As the above analysis demonstrates, one factor leading to this rise in prominence was China's role as one of the "two big brothers" to North Vietnam, providing advice contrary to that of the Soviets.

These Sino-Soviet disagreements in Vietnam continued even after the end of the war. It became apparent that the leadership of the newly united Socialist Republic of Vietnam had its own domestic and regional ambitions and had no desire to be a puppet stage of neither the Soviets nor the Chinese. Although China had previously been influential in North Vietnam's war efforts, when the post-war Vietnamese did not openly agree with some of their foreign policy views, China was quick to cut off aid to a rebuilding Vietnam, which so desperately relied on it. With the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia being the final straw, China attacked along the Sino-Vietnamese border in February 1979. In March of the same year, a Vietnamese delegation joined Interkit, greeted by "a working group of Interkit...gathered to Moscow to welcome Hanoi to the fold, express solidarity with its righteous struggle against Beijing and to condemn Maoism, once again."¹⁴⁹ China's attack on Vietnam and Vietnam's subsequent participation in Interkit left Sino-Vietnamese relations beyond repair and signifying the failure of Chinese foreign policy doctrine in Vietnam.

¹⁴⁹ Hershberg, James, et al. *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship*. The Cold War International History Project: Working Paper Series, Feb. 2AD. pp. 24-25.

Analyzing Sino-Soviet competition in and after the Vietnam War illustrates the complex nature of multinational conflict. Not only has this thesis rebuffed the “Cold War mindset” view that the Vietnam War was a U.S.-communist war, but it also illustrated the complicated Soviet reality, as they fought both the U.S. and China, as well as being engaged in Vietnam. Studying the intersection of America, the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam is beneficial in both academic and policy settings. Not only do these studies assist in creating a more complete understanding of Cold War and Vietnam War history, but also in underscoring the numerous actors and interests, whether direct or peripheral, involved in transnational war, which should cause leaders to take heed in potential crisis situations and understand the multifariousness of factors in play in war.

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