Comrades in Arms: China and Vietnam, 1949-1979

Kristyn Allred

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sigma

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sigma/vol7/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sigma: Journal of Political and International Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
COMRADES IN ARMS: CHINA AND VIETNAM, 1949-1979

Kristyn Allred

On October 1, 1949 Mao Zedong and his Communist forces defeated Chiang Kaishek and his Nationalist Army to become the ruling party in China. Many a Chinese peasant chanted the popular song "The East is Red," which described the success of Communism in the eastern world. For years Americans viewed China and its Communist neighbors as a strongly unified Communist bloc. However, a deeper analysis of the relationship between China and other Southeast Asian countries illustrates that ideological loyalty is not the only ingredient in a state's foreign policy.

In fact, a study of the relationship between China and Vietnam during the years 1949 to 1979 reveals a great deal of hostility between the two countries. One of the major reasons for this hostility may be attributed to intervention from the two major superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. This paper will investigate the reason why Vietnam has been China's most formidable foe in Southeast Asia since 1949. I believe that much of the enmity between the two countries is due to China's shift from the Soviet Union to the United States in the early 1970s, and to the alliance formed between Vietnam and the Soviet Union after the Vietnam War.

Many of the scholars who study Sino-Vietnamese relations have commented on the limitations that exist in approaching this subject. It is more difficult to get reliable information from Communist China than it is from a variety of sources in the free world. Therefore, rather than to relying heavily on official government statements (which may or may not be true) or editorial opinions in the "People's Daily," researchers have traced Chinese foreign policy by observing how China has reacted in
specific situations. The best way to analyze Chinese foreign policy towards Vietnam is by examining what each country has done with respect to their posture towards the superpowers.

**INTERNAL CONFLICTS**

Before the argument is made concerning the influence of the United States and the USSR on Chinese foreign policy, it should be noted that there were several other factors which caused tension in Sino-Vietnamese relations after 1949. Overseas Chinese in Vietnam were a major source of conflict and tension. The majority of overseas Chinese wanted a relationship with China that was profitable and friendly (Fitzgerald 1977, 339). However, these foreign residents proved to be a nuisance to both China and Vietnam as their capitalist practices upset attempts at a centrally controlled government in Vietnam. Vietnam was said to be overly harsh with its northern visitors, thus sparking heated debates between the two nations (Ross 1988, 240).

Another problem for China and Vietnam was establishing a common border. While several confrontations were recorded, the most prominent dispute occurred in 1979 when China actually invaded Vietnam (Harding 1984, 129).

Perhaps the greatest tension between China and Vietnam resulted from their power struggle in Southeast Asia. Both countries competed to gain the upper hand in Indochina (Lawson 1984, 4). After the Vietnam war, both China and Vietnam sought domination in Laos and Cambodia (Kampuchea).

**SUPERPOWER INFLUENCE**

While all of these problems created tension
between China and Vietnam, they were only symptoms of a much greater problem. I will argue that outside influence from the United States and the Soviet Union was the real problem between China and Vietnam (Lawson 1984, 6). These smaller issues were an affirmation of the deep seated hostility that was already present due to relations with the superpowers. Nations sometimes act as children when they are not getting along; they will use anything as an excuse to fight.

Lean to One Side Policy

When the Communists took over China in 1949, China turned to its most likely ally, the Soviet Union. During the early 1950s China followed Mao's "lean to one side" policy (Yao 1980, 1). This theory directed China's domestic and foreign policies. Using Soviet technology and funding, China followed the Soviet model of industrialization in its first 5-year economic plan (Harding 1983, 3). In foreign relations with Southeast Asia, China promoted Communist uprisings and anti-U.S. campaigns (Martin 1977, 8).

Chinese relations with Vietnam during this period were quite positive. Both countries were aligned against the United States, who was then fighting in Korea. China provided military and monetary aid to Vietnam in its fight against the French (Ross 1988, 18-19). They also shared the desire for Communist revolution in Vietnam (Lawson 1984, 20). Perhaps the most important factor which led to favorable relations between the two countries was the fact that China was so busy organizing a new government and managing the recovery of a war-torn nation that it had little time for Vietnam.

As long as regional powers were getting along, Vietnam was in a good position to ask for aid and assistance from both China and the Soviet Union.

The Spirit of Neutrality

These rosy relations soon wilted in 1954 with the Geneva Conference. Both China and the Soviet Union supported the division of Vietnam, which upset Ho Chi Minh and his Communist forces who wanted a unified Communist nation (Wang 1977, 75). In the wake of the Geneva talks, a conference of Third World countries from Africa and Asia was held in Bandung, Indonesia. It was here, in the face of anti-Chinese sentiments, that Zhou Enlai presented China's policy of neutrality and unity among the lesser-developed nations (Chen 1979, 15). North Vietnam was the only other Communist country present, but seemed unimpressed with China's proposal for neutrality. Ho Chi Minh might have felt that China was trying to be too independent of the Soviet Union (especially in its foreign policy), which did not bode well for Vietnam.

Great Leap Forward

Relations began to deteriorate between China and the Soviet Union in 1957 when Mao launched the "Great Leap Forward." Toward the end of the first 5-year plan, Mao Zedong was frustrated by the effects of the Soviet Model on China. The very things he detested were happening: unemployment, a large bureaucracy, a greater division between rural and urban workers, and an elitist education system (Harding 1984, 50). The Great Leap was the first wedge driven between China and the Soviet Union because it emphasized Mao's rejection of Soviet advice. The most extreme Soviet reaction to the
COMRADES IN ARMS

Great Leap took place in 1958, when Soviet advisors pulled out of China (Harding 1983, 3).

Vietnam reacted negatively to China’s Great Leap Forward for two reasons. First, Vietnam had always looked to China as the model on many domestic issues due to its size, culture, and dominating political system (Fitzgerald 1977, 50). Vietnam had also experienced some devastating economic problems during the late 1950s, some of which the Vietnamese blamed on China’s bad example. The Great Leap was a disaster for China economically, which made Vietnam leery of Chinese policy and the direction it was taking (Bloodworth 1975, 104).

The second reason the Great Leap upset Vietnam was because China had pulled even further away from the Soviet Union. At the same time Vietnam was criticizing China for the Great Leap Forward, it was quite complimentary of Khrushchev’s policies in the USSR. As a result, Ho Chi Minh tilted towards the Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet split (Bloodworth 1975, 104). Later we will see how Vietnam cunningly shifted back and forth between the Soviets and the Chinese during the war.

Vietnam War

Probably the most crucial event which affected China and Vietnam in relation to the major superpowers was the war in Vietnam. In 1957 Communist forces from North Vietnam began attacking South Vietnam. During the first year of fighting China was very supportive of the Communist revolution in Vietnam. Mao had always asserted the Marxist idea of continuous revolution, and wanted Communism to succeed in Southeast Asia (Fitzgerald 1977, 65).

However, because China was not on good terms with the USSR, Mao rejected Communist bloc efforts
to provide joint assistance to Vietnam (Harding 1984, 121). China had additional motives for sending money and weapons to the Vietcong. China wanted to protect its own border, and gain favor with the Vietnamese so that they would lean away from the Soviet Union and toward the PRC (Martin 1977, 4).

Nevertheless, by 1958 the Soviet Union had pushed itself into a more favorable position with Vietnam by supplying Vietnam with a substantial amount of financial aid to fight the war (Ross 1988, 20). Mao was caught between a dual policy of encouraging Communist insurgencies, while at the same time claiming that foreign revolutions must be fought by their own people. As a result, ideologically China was hesitant about supporting Vietnam (Yen 1976, 56). However, the biggest reason China did not compete with Soviet foreign aid to Vietnam was a lack of resources.

Sino-Soviet Split

What had begun in the mid-1950s as a rejection of the Soviet model and a more independent China was by 1960 clearly a Sino-Soviet split. Several factors led to the falling-out between China and the Soviet Union. As far back as 1957 China and the USSR had been quarrelling over atomic warfare (Garver 1981, 22). Following the conflict in domestic policy with the Great Leap, the Soviets added salt to the wound by refusing to support China in the Sino-Indian dispute (Harding 1983, 3).

In spite of all these problems, it was eventually the different interpretations of Marxism that dropped an ideological axe between China and the Soviet Union. After Stalin died in 1953, the Soviets came out with four basic proposals in the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. First, the USSR presented a new foreign policy which
relied on peaceful coexistence between all nations, even those supporting capitalism. Second, they wanted to move towards socialism peacefully. Third, Khrushchev denounced the Stalin cult. And finally, the Soviets encouraged self-criticism for all the Communist nations (Smyser 1980, 6). China reacted negatively to all four proposals, and felt that the Soviets had forsaken true Communism. In the eyes of Mao, the Soviet Union had turned revisionist and could no longer be trusted (Wang 1977, 103).

It should be noted that for a brief moment after the Sino-Soviet split, Vietnam had a wave of good feelings for the Chinese (Smyser 1980, 60). China increased its military aid, and convinced Vietnam to unite against the Communist revisionists who had taken over in the Soviet Union. It was the fall of Khrushchev in 1964 that pushed Vietnam back into a neutral camp, from which it could receive aid from both China and the Soviets more easily (Smyser 1980, 76). As mentioned earlier, Vietnam did a fairly good job of maintaining favorable relations with both the Soviet Union and the PRC during the war. It was not until after the war that Vietnam swung decidedly towards the USSR.

U.S. in Vietnam

The war in Vietnam changed after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The United States had been involved in the war during the early 1960s, but it wasn’t until 1964 when North Vietnam sank two U.S. PT boats that the United States drastically escalated its war efforts. The United States was a common enemy of the USSR, China, and Vietnam, but strangely enough those countries did not unite against the U.S. In fact, by the end of the war China had left the side of Vietnam, and had become somewhat of an ally with the United States.

One explanation of this phenomenon is that China
was greatly influenced by the maneuvering of the superpowers in dealing with Vietnam during the war (Lawson 1984, 6). China shifted in its foreign policy from pro-Soviet in the 1950s to pro-American in the 1970s (Harding 1984, 216). One must look at what happened to China during these two decades to see what caused the change, and what implications this had for Vietnam.

Two major events during the 1960s involving the United States and the Soviet Union caused China’s immediate interests to deviate from those of Vietnam. First, the war in Vietnam seemed to weaken the U.S. in both domestic and international arenas (Smith 1985, 6-8). While Vietnam was very pleased by a weakened United States, China began to fear that without a powerful U.S. the Soviets would become too strong.

While the United States seemed to be losing steam in Vietnam, the Soviet Union was reasserting itself as a powerful force in Eastern Europe. In 1968, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia to stop a new government that was seeking Communist reforms. With this invasion, China became even more fearful of the Soviets. However, Vietnam was impressed by this display of Soviet strength.

Sino-U.S. Rapprochement

A further analysis shows these incidents to be some of the beginnings to Sino-American rapprochement. In 1968, President Johnson admitted failure in Vietnam (Harding 1984, 125). The United States appeared to have lost some international power in relation to the Soviet Union. Therefore, China had to realign itself with the U.S. in order to achieve a more secure balance of power internationally (Lawson 1984, 5). Harding
describes China's change in this way:

As we have seen, the PRC's position in the ongoing Cold War between Moscow and Washington has been determined by China's assessment of the shifting international balance of power, as well as by the specific policies which the two superpowers have adopted towards Peking (Harding 1984, 216).

China shifted from the Soviet Union to the United States because the U.S. lost power, and the USSR became the major threat to Chinese security (Harding 1983, 13; Hamrin 1983, 210). China sought rapprochement with the United States so that a powerful bloc would be established to oppose the Soviet Union.

Without opposition from the United States, China was admitted into the United Nations as a third world power and permanent member of the Security Council (Harding 1983, 15). Following this recognition, China joined with the U.S. to support the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This was a big step for China because previously the PRC had been a supporter of Communist revolution in Southeast Asia, not of world peace (Horn 1978-79, 585).

Clearly Sino-American rapprochement had a major impact on Vietnam. The United States was a long-standing enemy to the Vietnamese, and now their Chinese comrades were actively courting the U.S. Vietnam was stunned by increasing diplomatic relations between the United States and China. Quasi-alliances were then formed between China and the United States, and Vietnam and the Soviet Union (Horn 1978-79, 590). As the Chinese moved towards warmer relations with the United States, they became more indifferent to Vietnamese desires (Garver 1981, 463).
Anti-Hegemony Campaign

After China had taken moves towards rapprochement with the United States, it took another sharp turn in foreign policy. In 1973, China began an anti-hegemony campaign (Yao 1980, 63). Now China wanted to match the USSR against the U.S. in a power play-off (Yao 1980, 50). China attempted to rhetorically reject both the superpowers in order to be a champion for Third World nations. This change in Chinese foreign policy was in part due to its admittance into the United Nations, which brought renewed world power and independence.

Deng Xiaoping also gave a speech in front of the United Nations in 1974 which was entitled "The Three Worlds" (Harding 1983, 6). In this speech he described the First World made up of the U.S. and the USSR, the Second World made up of Europe, Canada, and Japan, and the Third World made up of China, South America, Southeast Asia, and other developing nations (Yao 1980, 56). China’s move to oppose the world powers was critical in communicating its desire for independence and non-expansion in Southeast Asia (Wang 1977, 138). However, China was clearly pointing to the Soviet Union as the principal threat, and not the United States. The United States even signed an agreement with China in 1972 (the Shanghai Communique) that hegemony should be stopped. As evidence of China’s decision to oppose hegemony, it decreased its military spending, and the People’s Liberation Army lost major political influence (Martin 1977, 19).

In order to see the result of China’s anti-hegemony campaign, it is necessary to look at the conflict of interest it created with Vietnam. By January of 1973, the United States had concluded negotiations with Vietnam to end the war, but China
COMRADES IN ARMS

had been pushing to maintain a divided Vietnam (Ross 1988, 24). China, in its anti-hegemony campaign, pushed for peace and concessions on behalf of Vietnam. Vietnam, on the other hand, wanted a big victory over a unified country, the United States, and more power in Southeast Asia. As a result, the end of the war exacerbated Sino-Vietnamese tensions.

Vietnam took revenge on these tactics of Chinese foreign policy by siding with the Soviet Union (Nguyen, 1979, 1051). Vietnam could play the same game that China had started with the United States by increasing its loyalty to the opposing superpower. When a frightened China countered with its anti-hegemony campaign, Vietnam turned even more strongly towards Soviet support. The Soviet Union was able to offer Vietnam economic assistance, military aid, diplomatic support, and ideological unity (Horn 1978-79, 587).

Postwar Events

From 1973 to 1975 Vietnam pushed to unite North and South Vietnam, and to increase its military power. This was countered by the Chinese surge for peace and neutral relations towards the United States. China’s indifference towards Vietnam’s goal to end the war was a result of the Sino-American talks which had taken place only a few years earlier. In summary, during the final years of the war, China abandoned Vietnam: first, when China moved towards the United States in 1970, and second when it leaned away from the Soviets with its anti-hegemony campaign.

The events which divided China and Vietnam before the end of the war were the cause of the major conflicts between the two nations after 1975 (Garver 1981, 464). Relations had been faltering throughout the Vietnam conflict, but when the war
ended there was nothing holding the two countries together (Lawson 1984, 303). They were free to face each other in open hostility.

The first source of conflict between China and Vietnam following the Vietnam war was Indochina. Ho Chi Minh had not wanted China to intervene in Southeast Asia for fear of future confrontations (Tai 1965, 431). After his death in 1969, Indochina was an even greater problem than Ho Chi Minh had imagined. Following the war, the power vacuum created by American withdrawal paved the way for Vietnamese dominance in Indochina (Yen 1980, 12). Vietnam was also very confident because of its victory over another foreign imperialist. This confidence, among other things, gave Vietnam several advantages in the quest for Indochina (Harding 1984, 119). Also, with financial and diplomatic backing from the Soviet Union, Vietnam was in a powerful position to overthrow the established governments in Cambodia and Laos (Martin 1977, 64).

China had two demands of Vietnam in the mid 1970s: not to closely ally with the Soviet Union, and not to seek domination in Indochina (Ross 1988, 4). Vietnam frustrated China by violating both of these demands. China had moved closer to the United States during the war, but now that the U.S. was out of Southeast Asia, China had no foreign assistance. China’s greatest fear in Indochina was that the Soviet Union and Vietnam would gain control, leaving China sandwiched between two hostile regions (Fitzgerald 1977, 67).

Hostility grew between China and Vietnam when Vietnam joined the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in 1978 (Lawson 1984, 311). This organization, founded in 1949, was comprised of the USSR, and most other Eastern Bloc countries. However, China was never a member. By this move, Vietnam displayed an even
greater commitment to the Soviets.

Despite Chinese backing, in 1975 Pol Pot fell to Communist forces in Cambodia, and the Pathet Lao were victorious in Laos. This Soviet-supported Vietnamese domination in Indochina was the crucial factor which presaged the armed confrontation between China and Vietnam in February, 1979 (Lawson 1984, 311).

The final blow to Sino-Vietnamese relations was a peace treaty signed by Vietnam and the Soviet Union in November of 1978. Technically this was a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviets and the Vietnamese for the next twenty-five years (Buszynski 1980, 837). This move by Vietnam was perhaps the straw that broke China's back with regards to Soviet-Vietnamese relations. China could not risk a conspiracy between two bordering countries.

Hanoi's actions during the late 1970s encouraged an already hostile China to finally attack in 1979 (Ross 1988, 199). It is clear that Vietnamese relations with the Soviet Union were the provoking factor of the invasion, despite China's claim that it was simply a border dispute (Lawson 1984, 303; Ross 1988, 4). China and Vietnam had shared a border for many years, but never had it caused such a serious problem. This was because the Soviet Union had never been such a threat to Chinese security. The alliance between Vietnam and the Soviet Union, which became even stronger after the Vietnam War, was the most threatening thing China faced in the late 1970s. It was this development that eventually triggered armed confrontation in 1979.

A significant conclusion may be drawn from what has been presented in this paper. Much has been said as to the directions both China and Vietnam have taken in response to U.S. and USSR foreign policy. The answer to the question as to why China
and Vietnam based their foreign policies on superpower politics is simply that China and Vietnam were both trying to protect their own sovereignty and security the best way they could. This would account for the shift China made to the U.S. during the early 1970s, and the shift of Vietnam to the Soviet Union after the war.

China felt that it could not win a war against the Soviet Union and Vietnam (Ross 1988, 266). Therefore, Chinese policy toward Vietnam was based on eliminating Soviet influence and improving diplomatic relations with the United States (Ross 1988, 9). The Chinese would have been able to take a different stand towards Vietnam had the Soviets not posed such a great threat.

Mao was able to sum up Chinese foreign policy in three maxims: identify the primary threat, avoid confrontation with the superpowers, and lean toward the less threatening superpower (Harding 1984, 148). According to this world view, China shifted from the USSR to the U.S. in response to the shift in the balance of power (Martin 1977, 26; Lawson 1984, 6).

Vietnam, on the other hand, had a very different perspective. Vietnam is a small nation that wanted to throw off imperialism, and successfully accomplish a Communist takeover. Vietnam initially needed Chinese and Soviet military aid, but after the Chinese sided with the Americans it had a greater incentive to build stronger ties with the Soviet Union (Smyser 1980, 2). Historically, Vietnam was also defensive about Chinese domination -- a natural response when you are the neighbor of a large regional power such as China.

**CONCLUSIONS**

What may be learned from this analysis of Sino-Vietnamese relations between 1949 and 1979 is that
in the international arena states have "fair weather friends." Allies and enemies are continuously shifting in order to maintain a secure balance of power (Hamrin 1983, 209). Kenneth Waltz says in his book about international relations that states form balances of power whether they wish to or not (Waltz 1979, 125). Sino-Vietnamese relations are just another example of states seeking to maintain their positions in the international system.

Also, the fact that the international world is governed by anarchy means that the primary focus of all states is security (Waltz 1979, 126). As a result, often times military clashes are manifestations of the scramble of particular nations for security in the international world (Harding 1983, 6).

It is somewhat difficult to predict what would have happened to Sino-Vietnamese relations from 1949 to 1979 had the superpowers not been so involved in Southeast Asian affairs. However, what may be seen clearly is that the superpowers played a major role in Sino-Vietnamese hostility during the latter part of the 1970s.

CURRENT EVENTS

Within the past several months the situation has changed in Southeast Asia. China and Vietnam have made an effort to resolve differences and sign a peace agreement in Cambodia. What is highly significant is the fact that China and Vietnam have made these moves without major intervention from the superpowers. The United States and the Soviet Union have finally pulled out of Southeast Asia in order to allow these Asian neighbors the freedom to govern themselves. As a result, the press is claiming that the prospects for peace in Southeast Asia have never been better.

According to the thesis of this paper, the
superpowers were one of the major factors in provoking hostility and unrest between China and Vietnam. Now it seems that China and Vietnam are enjoying warmer relations due to the absence of superpower forces. It would seem to hold true then that the superpowers did play a significant role in Sino-Vietnamese relations during the second half of the twentieth century. They continue to affect the outcome of Asian relations. However, this time their impact is from a spectator position. Perhaps relations in Southeast Asia will quiet down now that the superpowers have turned their attention to other things.
COMRADES IN ARMS

WORKS CITED


