

**Barbarians in the South: China's Vietnam Policy, 1966-73**

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## Declaration

I, Christopher Anthony Connolly, declare that the work contained within this thesis is all my own.

Signed:

7<sup>th</sup> June 2007

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the policy of the People's Republic of China to the Second Indochina (or Vietnam) War. It looks at how Mao Zedong's perception of the United States' escalation of the conflict in Vietnam influenced both China's diplomatic and military response, and also Mao's own domestic campaign to transform Chinese society in the form of the Cultural Revolution. In the 1960s China sought to avoid war with the U.S. for both ideological and security reasons, yet offered large-scale support for Hanoi's war effort. China's military support fell as the prospect of a war with the Soviet Union loomed, and rebounded in the early 1970s when the threat had receded.

Sino-Vietnamese discord in this period has been over-emphasised, for throughout the duration of the Vietnam War intimate co-operation characterised the relationship. The key change in Sino-Vietnamese relations came not from Hanoi's decision to enter into negotiations with the U.S., but in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, for which Hanoi exhibited fulsome support. From this point on differing Chinese and North Vietnamese interests in the occupant of the White House set Hanoi's and Beijing's tactics on divergent paths.

This does not mean, however, that Beijing reduced its support for Hanoi's war effort as a result of Sino-American rapprochement. Henry Kissinger continually misinterpreted Chinese strategy and statements on the topic of Vietnam, and failed to understand the Chinese paternalism that underpinned much of Beijing's policy. Mao remained determined to see a complete American withdrawal from Indochina and substantially increased its military and economic aid. When an apparent stalemate was arrived at in mid-1972, only then did China intervene to counsel moderation and compromise at the negotiating table, hoping to have the war ended before Richard Nixon began his second term in office.



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## Introduction

Aside from the dramatic scenes in central and eastern Europe in the late 1980s that heralded its end, the 1966-73 period witnessed two of the most significant, and contrasting, events of the Cold War: the United States' engagement in and disengagement from the war in Vietnam, and Sino-American rapprochement. These momentous shifts in the dynamic of global Cold War politics occurred against a background of unprecedented domestic turmoil in both the People's Republic of China and the United States of America, for which, in both nations, the American war in Vietnam was an important catalyst. As the U.S. began its military entanglement in Southeast Asia, Mao's China was carving out for itself a position of studied isolation in the world; the entire Chinese nation soon became caught in a wave of social disruption and dislocation that had at its heart Mao's vision of a China untainted by the twin evils of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism. The People's Republic of China was vilified in Europe and North America as a dangerous threat to world peace: a belligerent, adolescent state, angry at the international system and determined to export Mao's vision of violent Marxist revolution throughout the globe – particularly to the recently decolonised nations of Africa and Asia. Critics only had to look to China's southern frontier where Vietnamese communists, supported and encouraged by China, were engaged in a bloody conflict against the pro-American government of the Republic of Vietnam and, of course, from 1965 onwards the United States itself. In contrast to the communist leaders in the Kremlin, between 1965 and 1968 Mao's China loudly and repeatedly opposed every move towards a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War, claiming that such peace talks were a fraud designed to cheat the Vietnamese people and the global revolution of a great victory against American imperialism and neo-colonialism. Yet, by early 1973 the American National Security Adviser was being hosted in the Chinese capital and congratulated on his success in negotiating a peace accord with North Vietnam that extricated the United States from the morass of the Vietnam War. Nothing could more definitively highlight the apparent *volte-face* in Chinese policy.

In contrast to Richard M. Nixon's and Henry Kissinger's conceptualisations of linkage and triangular diplomacy in international politics

(which are well known at least on the protagonists' own terms) and the history of America's military intervention in Indochina, until recently only the broad contours of Chinese policy towards Vietnam and their connection to the process of Sino-American rapprochement were tentatively understood. The paucity of historical knowledge on this subject, while not unexpected, is glaring and alarming in equal measure. For most of the 1960s, the Vietnam War was the principal foreign policy focus and concern of Mao's China as well as of the United States. According to its own propaganda, Beijing viewed the result of the war in South Vietnam as a prism through which the destined end of the Cold War, the global revolution, and perhaps even history itself, would be foretold. Yet a decade ago historians were only just beginning to learn the extent of China's involvement in that struggle, and the precise nature of its assistance to the Vietnamese communists. Similarly, our understanding of how Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai conceptualised the link between their opening to the United States and the war in Vietnam was largely based on the assessment of the primary American protagonists (Henry Kissinger in particular), and on the angry claims of betrayal that emanated from Hanoi in the wake of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict of 1979. It is this unsatisfactory situation that this thesis seeks to remedy.

The tale of China's involvement in the Vietnam War began to be told in 1979, after the P.R.C. embarked on a punitive invasion of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Hanoi's propaganda machinery went into overdrive, as chronologies of historic Chinese aggression against Vietnam flew off the presses, locating the recent Chinese invasion firmly within a framework of longstanding Chinese hostility towards and domination of the beleaguered and heroic Vietnamese people.<sup>1</sup> Mao Zedong, it was alleged, had held long-standing ambitions to re-colonize Indochina for his People's Republic, while the plucky Vietnamese had managed to triumph against French imperialism and American neo-colonialism despite Chinese treachery and betrayal, firstly in Geneva in 1954, and later in Beijing in 1971-2. The former had seen the Viet Minh denied their victory over France, when they were forced to accept a partition of their country. In the case of the latter, it was alleged, China had backed the Vietnamese struggle when it

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<sup>1</sup> Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs [hereafter S.R.V. For. Min.], *The Truth About Vietnam-China Relations Over the Last Thirty Years* [commonly and hereafter referred to as the *White Book*], (Hanoi: 1979).

suited Beijing's selfish and narrow interests, but later betrayed Hanoi's anti-American resistance war through the process of Sino-American rapprochement. Hanoi claimed that the P.R.C. abandoned its support for an American withdrawal from South Vietnam, and attempted to pressurize the Vietnamese comrades into accepting the continuation of the "puppet" South Vietnamese state, in exchange for the withdrawal of American forces from Taiwan and Beijing's admission into the United Nations. The claims were grist to the Vietnamese propagandists' mill, and satisfied the suspicions of many who felt betrayed by China's dalliances with Washington D.C. or were sympathetic to the seemingly ageless and unending Vietnamese struggle for territorial integrity and national independence.

It was from the midst of these bitter mutual recriminations between Beijing and Hanoi that historians first learned of the extent of Chinese involvement in the Vietnamese communists' conflict with the United States. Although the presence in North Vietnam of a limited number of Chinese engineering and support troops had been public knowledge in the United States as early as January 1966, the number was believed to be around 50,000, and it was a fact that neither the U.S. nor Chinese governments wished to draw attention to.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, in 1979 neither did Hanoi make any mention of the fact that the People's Republic of China had actually dispatched some 320,000 engineering, logistical and support troops to North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968. This fact was only revealed in a series of Chinese responses published in late November, 1979. Not only did China reveal the true dimensions of the assistance it had afforded North Vietnam, but it supported its claims with a commentary from former Vietnam Workers' Party Politburo member Hoang Van Hoan, who had recently defected to China. Naturally, Beijing angrily denied the allegations that Hanoi had made against it, and charged that the roots of the deterioration in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship were Hanoi's hegemonic ambitions in Indochina, discriminatory policies towards ethnic Chinese, and a fundamental desire to act as a Soviet proxy in East Asia. This was all peppered with more than a hint of indignation at perceived Vietnamese ingratitude.<sup>3</sup>

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2 'China and Vietnam', 6 April 1967, Folder 14, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection [hereafter DPC]: Unit 06 - Democratic Republic of Vietnam, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University [TVA-TTU].

3 See e.g., 'Yuenan kang Fa, kang Mei douzheng shiqi de Zhong-Yue guanxi' [Sino-Vietnamese

Felicitously for historians, the release of the details buried within these charges and counter-claims coincided with the publication of the first volume of Henry Kissinger's memoirs, *White House Years*.<sup>4</sup> This afforded western scholars the opportunity to compare the claims of the belligerents in Beijing and Hanoi with Kissinger's record of events, and John Garver impressively rose to the challenge in his 1981 monograph, 'Sino-Vietnamese Conflict and the Sino-American Rapprochement'.<sup>5</sup> The focus of Garver's enquiry was the veracity of the Vietnamese cries of 'betrayal', and using only the published sources available to him he made a relatively insightful analysis of the interplay between Sino-American rapprochement and Beijing's Vietnam policy, concluding that while Beijing had not 'betrayed' Hanoi in 1970-73, Chinese policy had certainly embittered the Vietnamese "and made Hanoi more willing to implement policies after 1975 that were likely to antagonize China." Given the poverty of the sources available at that juncture, the accuracy of his conclusions is impressive, and this thesis provides much evidence to support Garver's 1981 instincts and analysis.

However, Garver's article had a limited impact on the historiography of the Second and Third Indochina Wars. Works such as William Duiker's *China and Vietnam: The Roots of the Conflict*, and Daniel Papp's, *Vietnam: The View from Moscow, Peking, Washington* tended to examine the issues from the Vietnamese perspective and focused on either traditional Sino-Vietnamese enmity, or treated Chinese foreign policy with and as high cynicism.<sup>6</sup> The contention of the 1960s that Mao had been prepared to 'fight the United States to the last Vietnamese' lived on, bolstered by the assumption that from 1971 onwards China began to run down its support for Hanoi's war effort. Hanoi's allegations against Beijing were often uncritically accepted, without reference to

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relations in the period of Vietnam's anti-French and anti-American struggles], *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], 21 November, 1979; 'Weishenme Yuenan tongyi hou Zhong-Yue guanxi ouhui le?' [Why did Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorate after Vietnam's unification?], *Renmin Ribao*, 26 November, 1979; Hoang Van Hoan, 'Yue-Zhong zhandou youyi de shishi bu rong waiqu' [It is impermissible to distort the facts of Vietnamese-Chinese friendship], *Renmin Ribao*, 27 November, 1979.

4 Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company, 1979) [hereafter cited as *W.H.Y.*]

5 John W. Garver, 'Sino-Vietnamese Conflict and the Sino-American Rapprochement', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 96, no. 3 (Autumn 1981), pp. 445-464.

6 William Duiker *China and Vietnam: The Roots of the Conflict* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, 1986); Daniel S. Papp, *Vietnam: The View from Moscow, Peking, Washington* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1981).

the Chinese rebuttals or scholarly analysis, particularly by writers on the American left who were picking over the bones of the Nixon presidency. The most significant of these was Seymour Hersh, who in 1983 published *The Price of Power*.<sup>7</sup> A sharp critique of both Kissinger and the first of the two presidents he served under, *The Price of Power* also painted a picture of the beleaguered Vietnamese communists, victims of great power triangular diplomacy and Chinese betrayal. As Hersh put it, “The two nations [China and the U.S.] were willing to deal cynically with each other and with the life and death of the peoples of Vietnam.”<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Garver’s infinitely less punchy monograph, the impact of Hersh’s work was to be felt for the best part of two decades, until the text of the Kissinger-Zhou talks became publicly available. Despite a complete lack of evidence for the claim, Seymour Hersh concluded that Kissinger and Zhou must have struck a deal over Vietnam in light of the perceived American surrender over the Taiwan issue; little thought was given to what Mao had also conceded on Taiwan. Hersh discounted Kissinger’s assertion that there was no deal on Vietnam, and in order to support his narrative of hardnosed American and Chinese leaders callously trading the lives of innocent Vietnamese, he preferred to rely on the unlikely combination of the diaries of Albanian Communist leader Enver Hoxha and an oft-repeated claim that Zhou Enlai once told Kissinger’s one-time deputy, Alexander Haig, “not to lose in Vietnam”.<sup>9</sup> And yet, despite the lack of evidence to support the claims, Hersh’s depiction of events resonated as historians documented other facets of the mendacity of the Nixon White House. Even as late as 1998, Jeffery Kimball’s generally well-researched *Nixon’s Vietnam War* partly relied on Hersh’s imagined scenes of Sino-American dealings on Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

However, as this thesis demonstrates, where they related to Vietnam these critical conversations between the Chinese Premier and the American National Security Advisor contained little of the “marvels of realpolitik – ‘hardball,’ as

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7 Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit, 1983).

8 Ibid., p.378.

9 Ibid., p.492.

10 Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998), see e.g. pp. 284, 297.

Nixon would put it” of which Hersh foretold.<sup>11</sup> Mao and Nixon’s strategic visions were sufficiently in tandem to obviate the need for serious horse-trading in the Zhou-Kissinger discussions – something that Kissinger himself drew attention to in his memoirs. And while *White House Years* was by no means the fraudulent cover-up that Hersh imagined, it presented an incomplete, at times inaccurate and occasionally somewhat schizophrenic version of the history of Sino-American rapprochement. It presented an overly parallelistic analysis of Chinese motivations, aims, and objectives in relation to Vietnam, which reflected Kissinger’s contemporary interpretation that hinged upon concepts of great powers and interests. Yet, for two decades scholars largely relied on Kissinger’s analysis of Chinese motives that largely speculated on China’s Vietnam policy and its underpinnings.

The first steps towards putting some documentary meat on these speculative bones came from two China-born U.S. scholars – Chen Jian and Qiang Zhai. Taken together, Qiang Zhai’s 2000 book *China and the Vietnam Wars*, and Chen Jian’s 2001 publication *Mao’s China and the Cold War* greatly advanced our understanding of Mao’s Vietnam policy; both brought a wealth of new information about the depth of Chinese involvement in Vietnam, and the extent of Beijing’s support for Hanoi’s war effort in the 1964-69 period.<sup>12</sup> And while the former traced the story of Sino-Vietnamese communist co-operation from the earliest days of the P.R.C., the latter expertly located Mao’s Vietnam policy in a broader context of modern China’s international relations that centred around the interaction between Mao’s vision of permanent revolution and his foreign policy choices. With respect to the period in question in this thesis, Chen Jian demonstrated how Mao carefully exploited the Vietnam War as a means of radicalising Chinese society in pursuit of his Cultural Revolution; however Chen’s work is lacking an examination of the role of the Vietnam War in necessitating and prompting that same Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, his treatment of Sino-American rapprochement largely focuses on bilateral issues (Taiwan in particular), thus leaving many questions about China’s post-1969

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11 Hersh, *Price of Power*, p.378.

12 Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000) [hereafter cited as *CATVW*]; Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001).

policy towards Vietnam unanswered. Zhai, on the other hand, drives the Vietnam story on into the Nixon era; however his treatment of this period is severely hampered by a reliance on the memoirs of Kissinger, Nixon, and Alexander Haig, all of which contain serious distortions of Chinese policy and action.

Two main sources have permitted me to re-examine these gaps in our understanding and to clarify some of the distortions. Firstly, the release by the United States National Archives of documentation from inside the Nixon White House has allowed an examination of how Kissinger and Nixon perceived Chinese interests and aims, and what actions they took to oppose or cater for these in relation to Vietnam; it also provides us with the complete record of the discussions that took place between the Chinese and American leaders. When placed alongside the new information that has emerged from within China over the past decade about the actions Beijing took in relation to Vietnam during this period, it became possible to construct a more complete understanding of Chinese policy that addressed the deficiencies previously noted. The bulk of this new information from within China is thanks to the work of the Chinese historian Li Danhui, who over the past few years has published or edited a series of monographs on China's Vietnam policy and its place in both Sino-American and Sino-Soviet relations. Without her research and scholarship it would not have been possible to write this thesis, and I am grateful to her for the assistance and advice she has afforded me.<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious that having to rely on secondary and published sources to learn the details of China's political and material contribution to Vietnam's war effort, however well-researched and well-written they may be, is unsatisfactory and no substitute to full and unfettered access to Chinese archives. Thus I have regrettably been forced to largely reconstruct the policy decisions made by the Chinese leadership on the basis of their application and outcomes; evidence from the discussions and processes that arrived at them is still sadly lacking,

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13 See e.g., Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su zai yuan Yue kang Mei wenti shang de chongtu yu maodun, 1965-1972' ['Sino-Soviet Conflicts and Contradictions over the Issue of Assisting Vietnam, Resisting America', hereafter 'Zhong-Su chongtu yu maodun'], part 1, *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* [Research in Contemporary Chinese History], vol. 7. no. 4 (July, 2000); Li Danhui, 'Zhongguo dui Yue-Mei hetan de lichang, fangzhen ji qi bianhua (1965-1968)' [The Changes in China's Standpoint and Policy towards Vietnam-U.S. Peace Talks, (1965-1968)], *Dangdai Zhongguoshi yanjiu* [Research in Contemporary Chinese History], supplement, December 2001; Li Danhui ed., *Zhongguo yu yinduzhina zhanzheng* [China and the Indochina Wars], (Hong Kong: Tiandi Tushu Gongs, 2000).



particularly in relation to the upper echelons of P.R.C. officials. Nonetheless, Li Danhui has enabled the scholarship of modern China's foreign policy to make an enormous advance with the publication of *Yunnan yu Zhongguo yuan Yue kang Mei (dang'an wenxian)*.<sup>14</sup> Co-edited with Xiao Zuhou, an archivist at the Yunnan provincial archives, this ground-breaking book is the first ever volume of documents from the modern era to be published by a scholar not working under the aegis of a state or party organ. As with Li's own published works I have been, of course, at her mercy with regard to what has been excluded from this volume; however it has provided new and fascinating insights into the functioning of China's 'Assist Vietnam Resist America' campaign, and is a landmark on the road to the free availability of sources from within the P.R.C.'s archives.

Acknowledging these limitations, nonetheless this thesis seeks to examine China's Vietnam policy within its own Chinese context, as well as the broader international one. And while it is not about Sino-American rapprochement per se, a large portion of this study focuses on this for a number of reasons. Firstly, Mao's evolving perception of both the Soviet Union and the United States was a key factor in determining P.R.C. policies towards the war in Vietnam. Secondly, the Vietnamese perception of the nature of Sino-American relations played a crucial role in determining the state of Hanoi's relationship with Beijing, which in turn influenced how the P.R.C. handled its Vietnamese allies. And thirdly, much of our previous interpretation and understanding of China's Vietnam policy emerged from literature on the topics of Sino-American relations and America's own Vietnam policy; thus these assertions need to be directly addressed.

This dissertation begins with an examination of Mao's domestic and international imperatives at the time of the American escalation in South Vietnam, i.e. the C.C.P. Chairman's visions of continuous revolution both at home and abroad, and the interplay between these and his Vietnam policy. It challenges the view that China's Cultural Revolution was a uniquely negative experience for North Vietnam and that China sought to keep the United States interminably bogged down in the Indochinese quagmire. Tactical issues, rather than strategic ones, separated Beijing and Hanoi during this period; however this

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14 Xiao Zuhou and Li Danhui, eds., *Yunnan yu yuan Yue kang Mei (dang'an wenxian)* [Yunnan and Assist Vietnam, Resist America (Archival Documents)], (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian, 2003).

was irretrievably altered by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the North Vietnamese reaction to it. From this point on Chinese and North Vietnamese interests in the occupant of the White House put these two Asian communist states on divergent paths, though it remained in the interests of both to stay in close contact and co-operation.

Events, however, conspired to make the maintenance of this relationship harder than either side desired, as shall be shown in chapter two. Occurring shortly before the death of Ho Chi Minh, the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969 meant that Beijing was forced to drastically cut back its aid to the D.R.V. at a time when China needed to demonstrate its continuing goodwill to the post-Ho leadership in Hanoi headed by Le Duan. The fluctuations in Chinese military aid during this period were not a crude punishment for Hanoi entering into negotiations with the United States, but rather a reflection of China's own security situation and the battlefield realities in both North and South Vietnam. These events were also concurrent with the first steps in the uncertain process of Sino-American rapprochement – a process Hanoi certainly did not approve of. It shall be shown, however, that ironically it was Nixon's expansion of the war into Cambodia and Laos that provided Mao the opportunity to calm ruffled Vietnamese feathers by demonstrating to the U.S. President that U.S. de-escalation in Indochina was a precondition for Sino-American co-operation. Nonetheless, despite this there was still a growing tension between the policies the P.R.C. was pursuing in relation to Washington and Hanoi – two enemies engaged in a costly and bloody war. The question was then how was Beijing to manage this contradiction?

As shall be seen in chapters three and four, the answer was to attempt to ensure that the speed of American withdrawal from Indochina accelerated in tandem with the quickening pace of Sino-American rapprochement. For Mao, the military humiliation of the United States was no longer necessary; a negotiated retreat from the Indochinese peninsula would suffice. In pursuit of this Zhou Enlai put diplomatic pressure on Washington to give ground, not Hanoi, and simultaneously greatly increased China's arms supplies to the North Vietnamese so they could exert their own rather less subtle form of persuasion. Mao certainly hoped that a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War could be arrived at before a Sino-American summit, but it was Nixon who was going to have to make

compromises on the political future of Saigon, not the Vietnam Workers' Party. If Nixon refused to use the opportunity of the 1971 South Vietnamese presidential election to remove Nguyen Van Thieu from power, then Chinese guns and shells would play their role in the likely attempt to remove Thieu by force in 1972. None of this, however, was to interfere with improving relations with the United States, and despite protests from Hanoi the planning for Nixon's visit to China continued apace. The consolation for Hanoi, poor though it may have been, was that when Nixon arrived in the Chinese capital his hosts continued to urge him to get rid of Thieu in order to extract the U.S. from Indochina; Zhou Enlai was not, however, going to expend any political capital in securing this end.

The reason for this was the general understanding in Beijing, Washington, and Hanoi that 1972 would be a crunch year in Vietnam because of the U.S. electoral cycle. Nixon's visit to China was merely a prelude to the two main events of the year: the by now inevitable communist offensive in South Vietnam, and the November U.S. general election. The full extent of China's military aid to North Vietnam in preparation for the offensive is only now becoming clear, as is the extent to which China mobilised its economy to help the Vietnamese comrades break the punishing blockade and bombardment of their coast and cities. However, Chinese patience with both Hanoi and Washington had its limits, and in July 1972 Zhou Enlai utilized his considerable diplomatic skills in an attempt to ensure that the war was brought to a conclusion before the November elections. Hanoi clearly believed that it was in its interests to conclude the war before Nixon received a renewed mandate, and that tactical outlook was probably shared in Beijing, even though China and North Vietnam once again had opposing interests in the result of the presidential election. The North Vietnamese sought to threaten Nixon's electoral prospects and extract the maximum concessions from him; Beijing wished to see him returned to office with a strong mandate so that he could focus attention on securing a normalization of diplomatic relations with the P.R.C. The result was that Zhou and Mao began to talk to Hanoi of the wisdom of compromising.

One must be cautious, however, of over-estimating the importance of this Chinese intervention during the summer of 1972, or the degree to which Sino-Vietnamese relations soured as a direct result. Hanoi was already minded to end

the war before the election (after the failure of the offensive), and in reality Beijing's preferred timetable was not met. It was not until January 1973 that the peace negotiations between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho reached a mutually acceptable conclusion, and by that point both Hanoi and Beijing had another, new, problem to deal with: an obdurate and determined Khmer Rouge ally in Cambodia that had declared its determination to carry on the struggle irrespective of events in Vietnam. Washington still hugely over-estimated Hanoi's influence over Pol Pot and the Khmer communists, and the situation in Cambodia posed the danger of threatening the delicate balance in Indochina. This thesis then closes with an examination of how Beijing, Hanoi, and Washington all spent the opening months of 1973 unsuccessfully working towards the same goal of finding a negotiated settlement of the civil war in the Khmer Republic. Ironically, towards the end of the decade it would ultimately be events in Cambodia that precipitated the most grave of crises in Sino-Vietnamese relations, although much of the groundwork had been laid in the 1971-3 period.

Until now we knew little of what China did in relation to Vietnam, even less of how it did it, and were largely confined to the interpretations of foreign contemporaries as to what was the motivation. It is my hope that this thesis will provide at least some new insight into these matters.

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## Chapter 1

### 1966-1968: China, Vietnam, and the Cultural Revolution

China's policy towards, and support for, the insurgency in South Vietnam that erupted in the late 1950s had been conditioned by a combination of Beijing's perception of the danger of American intervention in the region, and domestic political considerations. The P.R.C.'s support for Hanoi's policies and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) had initially been tempered by a fear that it might provoke U.S. intervention and Beijing's preoccupation with the results of the Great Leap Forward. However, once the Kennedy administration began increasing the commitment of U.S. resources to Laos, South Vietnam, and Thailand, a newly assertive Mao increased China's support for the revolutionary struggle in South Vietnam as a means of countering the American 'special war'. In the summer of 1962, China provided 90,000 rifles free of charge for use in the anti-Diem struggle in South Vietnam. It represented a significant increase in China's support for the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam, and marked a new leftward turn in Chinese foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

Mao had always been ideologically inclined towards support for the Vietnamese communists' struggle; after all, not only was Vietnam a country on China's doorstep with which it shared millennia of history, but the personal friendships, history and revolutionary struggles of the communist parties of China and Vietnam were intimately intertwined. There existed no better environment to demonstrate the external applicability of Mao's ideological and strategic innovation than in Vietnam. However, there was a continual interplay between the domestic political environment, external strategic threats, and the prosecution of Mao's ideological impulses in Vietnam. This chapter examines how the American escalation in South Vietnam influenced not only the extent of China's support for Hanoi's anti-American war, but also the necessity and timing of Mao's Cultural Revolution, for which the Vietnam War was a vital tool of mass mobilization. The Cultural Revolution, in turn, affected both Beijing's relations

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<sup>1</sup> Zhai, *CATVW*, p.116; Niu Jun, *1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 48, (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2005), p.25.

with Hanoi, and its external threat perception, whereby China came to view the Soviet Union as its biggest threat, setting it sharply at odds with the leadership in Hanoi. As shall be seen, these changes would have profound effects on the subsequent evolution of China's Vietnam policy.

### Shock to the system: the paper tiger has claws

The physical threat from the United States in South Vietnam escalated during a year that saw a series of reverses for Chinese foreign policy and its stand as the champion of the oppressed peoples of the world. Guerrillas operating against the government of Niger had admitted to receiving training in China, while Beijing had been implicated in the assassination of Burundi's Prime Minister. Beijing's representatives had been declared *personae non gratae* in no fewer than ten African states, and four African nations broke diplomatic relations completely with the People's Republic of China; while relations with other important African and Arab states – in particular Kenya and Egypt – had been seriously damaged. India strengthened its influence in the Afro-Asian movement and defeated China's ally Pakistan in a war over Kashmir. Along with Ho Chi Minh, China had singled out President Ben Bella of Algeria as the leading example of a national liberation leader, only to see him overthrown by his own movement in June. The tide of revolution had apparently been successfully turned by 'imperialists and reactionaries' in the Congo and most worryingly of all in Indonesia, where the Indonesian Communist Party (one of the two Communist parties – the other being that of Japan – that Mao had identified as standard bearers of anti-revisionism in the event of revisionists taking control in China) had been largely exterminated.<sup>2</sup> By late 1965 only the Albanian and New Zealand Communist parties were located firmly within the 'anti-revisionist camp'.<sup>3</sup>

The combination of these setbacks and the exponential increase in U.S. troop levels from March to December 1965 shook Mao from his belief of little

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<sup>2</sup> Bo Yibo, *Ruogan zhongda juece yu shijian de huigu*, [Recollections of Certain Important Decisions and Events], (2 vols.; Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao, 1991-1993), p.1150.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Taylor, *China and Southeast Asia: Peking's relations with revolutionary movements* (New York: Praeger, 1976), p.51; Zhai, *CATVW*, p.147; Mohamed A. El-Khawas, 'China's Changing Policies in Africa', *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, vol. 3, no. 1, (Spring, 1973), p.26; George T. Yu, 'China's Failure in Africa', *Asian Survey*, vol. 6, no. 8, (Aug. 1966), p.461.

more than twelve months earlier that “it is impossible for the United States to send many troops to South Vietnam.”<sup>4</sup> He had not believed that Johnson would attack North Vietnam directly. But by the close of 1965, U.S. troop levels in South Vietnam had already reached almost 200,000, the thunder from the U.S. Air Force (USAF) B-52s was still rolling, and there was little sign that the rate of escalation would slow down. In February Mao had told Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin that a more general war with the United States was possible in ten to fifteen, or perhaps even seven or eight, years’ time.<sup>5</sup> The events of 1965 surely hardened Mao’s conviction that a shorter time-scale was likely. Not only did China need to heighten its military and revolutionary preparedness, but the Vietnamese communists had to hold out long enough for the P.R.C. to steel itself, in case an emboldened United States, perhaps in collusion with the Soviet revisionists, struck out at the main revolutionary challenger to the global *status quo*. The cause was the inherently aggressive nature of capitalism, and while China sought to avoid a world war, Mao and Zhou Enlai were not, in the Chairman’s words, “the leaders of the General Staff of the imperialists.”<sup>6</sup> China needed to be ready. For Mao, that state of revolutionary preparedness was to be achieved by the state through the ‘Third Front’ mobilization campaign, and by the Party and people through his Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

The values underpinning this were laid out for the world in an article penned under Lin Biao’s name, entitled ‘Long Live the Victory of People’s War!’. It was viewed with alarm in Washington as a blueprint for Communist aggression that reminded policy makers of *Mein Kampf*, but its intended target audience was the Soviet revisionists rather than the United States. For Chairman Mao, who had long derided dependence on nuclear technology as a means of attaining victory, the survival of his revolution was not simply a physical

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<sup>4</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong, Pham Van Dong and Hoang Van Hoan, 5 October, 1964, in Odd Arne Westad, Chen Jian, Stein Tønneson, Nguyen Vu Tung and James G. Hershberg, eds., *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 22, (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Memcon – Polish record, Mao and Kosygin, February 11, 1965. This document was obtained from the Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of Modern Records], Warsaw, Poland, by Douglas Selvage, translated by Malgorzata Gnoiska, and presented at the GWCW Conference on New Central and Eastern European Evidence on the Cold War in Asia, Budapest, Hungary, 31 October-1 November 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Zheng Qian and Zhang Hua, *Mao Zedong shidai de Zhongguo* [China in the Era of Mao Zedong], vol. 3, (Beijing: Zhonggong Dangshi, 2003), pp.11-12.



question but also a metaphysical one: the Chinese people, particularly the young, needed to experience struggle in the search for ideological integrity in order to remain true to the values of the revolution and to preserve its survival. At the core of Mao's new domestic mobilization project was struggle-criticism-transformation in all spheres of the superstructure. As Mao had told Kosygin, when war with the imperialists came in ten to fifteen (or perhaps even seven or eight) years hence, it would require co-operation between China and the U.S.S.R. Thus, for the C.C.P. Chairman to prevent revisionism and capitulationism taking hold under these circumstances, a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was now a key priority.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of 1965, Mao's growing domestic isolation was beginning to mirror the increasingly isolated position of China in the international arena. A change of direction from Mao's economic radicalism in the wake of the failure of the Great Leap Forward had led Mao to doubt the judgement of many of the top leadership of the C.C.P., including the President of the P.R.C., Liu Shaoqi, and General Secretary of the Party Deng Xiaoping.<sup>9</sup> As Mao remarked in the summer of 1965, "[Revisionists] are not numerous, but they are influential."<sup>10</sup> For Mao, Khrushchevism loomed on the previously red Chinese horizon.

The central problem for Mao was that as the centre of the world revolution, which is how he had come to view China, the P.R.C. had the duty to preserve and protect his vision of revolutionary orthodoxy at home in order to ensure its survival and global success. Mao constantly made the connection between the Chinese revolution and a worldwide series of events, especially within the Communist bloc – specifically the potential slide from revisionism to social-imperialism and social-fascism. Mao's dispute with Soviet revisionism sprang from a fear that his life's work would be corrupted, that China would slide

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<sup>8</sup> Allen Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), p.176; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, pp.212-5; 'Long Live the Victory of People's War', *Peking Review*, September 3, 1965; 'Long Live the All-Round Victory in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', *Peking Review*, September 13, 1968; 'Telegram from the Embassy in Poland to the Department of State', September 15, 1968, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Johnson Administration volumes* [hereafter *FRUS-Johnson*], vol. XXX, (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1998), document 101; memcon – Polish record, Mao and Kosygin, February 11, 1965, courtesy of Selvage and Gnoiska.

<sup>9</sup> Bo Yibo, *Ruogan zhongda juece*, p.1167; Zheng & Zhang, *Mao Zedong shidai de Zhongguo*, pp.2-14.

<sup>10</sup> Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi [C.C.P. Central Documentary Research Office] (hereafter C.D.R.O.), *Mao Zedong zhuan* [A Biography of Mao Zedong], (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 2003), p.1393.

back to the evils of capitalism and the world revolution would come to nought – “revisionism will overcome Marxism, and, as a result, capitalism will be restored.”<sup>11</sup> To this end, Mao was prepared to antagonize and even break with, if necessary, communist parties which had up until that point been sympathetic to China’s stand – among these the Vietnam Workers’ Party (V.W.P.).<sup>12</sup>

As long as Moscow had ignored the unfolding struggle in South Vietnam, the Hanoi leadership had sided with China in the deepening Sino-Soviet dispute. In February 1965, the new leadership in Moscow indicated a more sympathetic attitude towards the Vietnamese revolution and was prepared to adopt a more active role in support of it. When Kosygin visited Beijing that month, the Soviet Premier proposed reconciling the Soviet and Chinese parties in order to form a united front to come to the assistance of North Vietnam. Mao was clear that the time was not yet right. As Edgar Snow observed a year later, “[F]or Mao to accept Soviet policy would mean to accept a compromise on Vietnam. Capitulation to Soviet pressure would be the equivalent to him of capitulation to the United States: sacrificing the revolution and China’s national interests simultaneously; in short, the suicide of the C.C.P.”<sup>13</sup> For the Chairman, the equivalence between revisionism and imperialism was clear and categorical. ‘Peaceful coexistence with the West’ was equated with surrender to the United States in South Vietnam: the abandonment of the revolution. Victory for the revolution could not be won at the negotiating table unless it had already been won on the battlefield; this was the C.C.P.’s own experience and was the experience that Mao felt would be born out on the battlefields of South Vietnam. Soviet support for a negotiated resolution to the Vietnam conflict was anathema to this. According to the C.C.P. Chairman’s reasoning, since the Soviet revisionists had failed to prevent the outbreak of the fire of revolution in Indochina, they were now seeking to throw water on it through the fraud of peace talks.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong and the head of the Cultural Group of the Laotian Patriotic Front, September 4, 1964, *77 Conversations*, p.68.

<sup>12</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution, volume 3: the coming of the cataclysm*, (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p.297.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Ambroz, *Realignment of World Power: the Russo-Chinese schism under the impact of Mao Tse-Tung’s last revolution*, (New York: Speller, 1972), vol. 1, p.50;

<sup>14</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao’s China*, p.241; Zheng & Zhang, *Mao Zedong shidai de Zhongguo*, pp.9-11; Yang Kuisong, *Changes in Mao Zedong’s Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949-1973*, (translated by Qiang Zhai), Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 34,

In dialectic terms, as the focal point of all the contradictions in the world, Vietnam was something of a laboratory in which Mao wished to see the applicability of 'People's War' demonstrated outside of China, in which revolutionary violence would emerge victorious. As Zhou Enlai told Le Duan "Vietnam is the great standard-bearer representing the world's revolutionary peoples."<sup>15</sup> That this great victory would take place on China's frontier, and would be delivered by a people most Chinese, including Mao, traditionally felt to be under their tutelage would serve as a glorification to and vindication of Mao's revolution. Although the Koreans and the Vietnamese fell outside the borders of the post-imperial Chinese state, Mao had believed that they, as well as the Tibetans, Mongols and other 'minority peoples', would be directed towards a bright socialist future by China's leadership. This made the Vietnamese revolution crucially important to Mao, and made the stakes personally high for him. Vis-à-vis the capitalist camp, if the United States could be defeated it would prove to be a heavy blow against imperialism, perhaps even the fatal one he had often foretold; while within the socialist camp Maoist orthodoxy (which was coming under increasing pressure from a renewed Soviet interest in Asia and the Third World) and its emphasis on the potential for limited national wars of liberation would be victorious over Soviet revisionism.<sup>16</sup>

Events in Southeast Asia had not evolved quite as Mao had anticipated, however. The Chairman's analysis of events both globally and in Indochina had been predicated upon the belief that the United States was not only a 'paper tiger', but also one waning in might; this had been one of the main factors behind his calculation that a full break with the Soviet Union was viable. As late as December 1963 Mao was proclaiming to visitors that Britain and America's policy towards socialist countries was not one of military attack, but peaceful evolution.<sup>17</sup> This appraisal did not significantly change in the immediate aftermath of the firefight between the U.S.S. Maddox and North Vietnamese forces in the Gulf of Tonkin, when Mao gave his analysis of the unfolding situation to acting general secretary of the Vietnam Workers' Party, Le Duan. He

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(Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2002), p.32.

<sup>15</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Duan, March 23, 1966, *77 Conversations*, p.91.

<sup>16</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu* [A Chronicle of Zhou Enlai's Life], (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1997), vol. 3, p.2; Michael Hunt, *The Genesis of Chinese Foreign Policy*, (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.133.

<sup>17</sup> Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 1, p.46.

told his Vietnamese guest that “it seems that the Americans do not want to fight a war, you do not want to fight a war, and we do not necessarily want to fight a war... because no one wants to fight a war, there will be no war.”<sup>18</sup> However, America’s violent response to the deteriorating situation in Vietnam, in the form of the landing of ground troops and the fury of the “Rolling Thunder” raids, had forced a recalculation.

The Chairman’s belief, dating at least as far back as the closing months of the Second World War, that the global revolutionary tide would prevent war was now shaken. For all his bluster about paper tigers, he knew well that China was not prepared for a war with the United States – economically or ideologically. Industrial production was too concentrated to effectively withstand heavy bombing from the undisputed might of the USAF, and, most perniciously, the bourgeois class within China had maintained a grip on Chinese society and culture that had proved surprisingly difficult to prise off. Under these circumstances, and whatever Zhou Enlai’s protestations to the President of Pakistan that China was prepared for war both “militarily and spiritually”, a war with the United States could well prove to be a catalyst to the revisionist, or even capitalist, take-over Mao had been brooding over. While China would not shy away from direct conflict with the United States if it was boldly confronted with it, the priority for the Chairman was to avoid such a war, at least until the chronic weaknesses in Chinese society had been overcome.<sup>19</sup>

The Chinese reaction to this new American threat was belligerence as a form of deterrence. The People’s Republic of China sent a series of messages to the United States, via several different media including President Ayub Khan of Pakistan, Indonesian Deputy Prime Minister Subandrio, the British *chargé d’affaires* in Beijing and President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, outlining their response to the United States’ escalation of the conflict in Vietnam. This message, whose import was emphasized by the variety of channels utilized by Beijing to ensure it was conveyed, had four points. Noting that China would not

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<sup>18</sup> Westad et al., *77 Conversations*, p.72 n. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Yang Qian, ‘Shilun Mao Zedong guanyu zhanzheng bu ke bimian sixiang de yanbian ji qi yingxiang’ [On the Evolution and Influence of Mao Zedong’s Thinking on the Inevitability of War], *Junshi lishi yanjiu* [Research in Military History], Issue 3, 2004, pp.35-39; Zheng & Zhang, *Mao Zedong shidai de Zhongguo*, p.9; ‘Telegram from the Consulate General at Hong Kong to the Department of State’, February 19, 1966, *FRUS-Johnson*, vol. XXX, document 125; memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pakistani President Muhammad Ayub Khan, April 2, 1965, *77 Conversations*, p.81.

take the initiative to provoke a war with the United States, Beijing nonetheless warned that it meant what it said and would honour its international obligations. Striking a note of defiance, Beijing declared that it was prepared for war, before it got to the core of the issue, warning America it should not consider bombing China as a means of exerting pressure. Bombing was an act of war, the message went, and once war commenced, it would have no boundaries. To further underscore China's solemn intent, at the same time as Zhou Enlai was transmitting the first instance of China's four point warning, Mao personally rescinded the 'Six Point Directive' that had barred Chinese fighter jets from engaging U.S.A.F. planes that intruded into Chinese air-space, saying "Since they are here, we ought to hit them firmly!"<sup>20</sup> In April 1965 three U.S. aircraft were shot down by the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force. Mao still believed that the power of the paper tiger was declining, but his faith had been shaken; he knew only too well that an animal in its death-throes was at its most dangerous. Consequently China had to take precautions to prevent America lashing out at China, while arming the Vietnamese comrades to inflict the fatal blow.<sup>21</sup>

The P.R.C. was not going to deal that blow in Vietnam: that was not the nature of People's War. Nonetheless, if U.S. ground troops crossed the line China had drawn in the sand at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, then Chinese intervention was promised; but how to ensure that the U.S. would heed the warning this time, unlike 15 years earlier in Korea, was a major preoccupation for Mao and the P.R.C. leadership. But this caution not to provoke a war with the United States was not simply about protecting China's national security. Rather, if the United States were to lash out at China, particularly through the use of nuclear weapons, the very position of ideological leadership that Mao had laid claim to for himself

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<sup>20</sup> Liu Bingfeng, 'Zhong-Mei kongjun de dierci jiaoliang: yuan Yue kang Mei qijian de Zhongguo renmin kongjun' [The Second Test of Strength between the Chinese and American Air Forces: the Chinese People's Air Force in the period of Assisting Vietnam and Resisting America], *Dangshi wenhui* [Party History Literature], no. 2, 2001, pp.10-11.

<sup>21</sup> Whiting, *Chinese Calculus*, ch. 6; memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pakistani President Muhammad Ayub Khan, April 2, 1965, 77 *Conversations*, pp.80-2; Zhai, *CATVW*, p.138; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p.216; Qu Aiguo, 'Yuenan zhanzheng qijian de Zhongguo yuan Yue kang Mei junshi xingdong' [Vietnam War Period Chinese Military Activities to Assist Vietnam, Resist America], in Zhang Baijia and Niu Jun, eds., *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo* [The Cold War and China], (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi, 2002), p.354; 'Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson', June 4, 1965, *FRUS - Johnson*, vol. XXX, document 88; 'Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Bundy) to Secretary of State Rusk', June 5, 1965, *FRUS - Johnson*, vol. II, document 335.

and China would be destroyed, and the Khrushchevite revisionists, the “betrayers of People’s War” would be proven correct. For reasons of ideology as well as national security, Mao had to strike a balance between supporting Vietnam and inviting an American attack.<sup>22</sup>

Such was Mao’s disdain for these ‘fake Marxist-Leninists’ that he refused to undertake joint actions with the Soviets that were ostensibly to assist the Vietnamese struggle. Following on from Kosygin’s visit in February 1965, the Soviets requested that China permit 4,000 Soviet troops and other personnel to travel to Vietnam by rail through China; that one or two airbases (such as Kunming) be opened to Soviet MiG-21s and an accompaniment of 500 troops; thirdly they hoped that the Chinese would open a permanent air corridor over their airspace for Soviet use in delivering aid to Vietnam; and finally that China permit the over-flight of 45 Soviet airplanes delivering urgently needed anti-aircraft (AAC) materiel to the D.R.V. Whether the Soviets actually expected China to accede to these requests or whether they sought to sow discord between Hanoi and Beijing remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the Chinese leadership rejected the Soviet requests, believing that such ulterior motives existed, and in some respects felt vindicated by the Soviet response. The Soviets were informed that China would transport the AAC guns to Vietnam by rail. Yet despite the alleged urgency that had accompanied the Soviet request for overflight rights, they still took a further week to deliver the AAC to the Chinese, who had them on Vietnamese soil in two days. If Mao needed further evidence of modern revisionist attempts to undermine Chinese sovereignty and the Vietnamese war effort, by their deeds the Soviets had once again betrayed themselves and the revolution. The enmity further intensified during the next few months when the Soviets began publicly accusing the Chinese of intentionally obstructing Soviet aid to Vietnam. Was the Soviet intention, the Chinese wondered, to provoke an American response through the appearance of a Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese alliance openly at war with the United States?<sup>23</sup>

Were the conflict in Vietnam to evolve into a more general war, Mao Zedong Thought would be bankrupt. Strategically, the only likely beneficiary of such a war would be the Soviet Union. Thus, in coming to the aid of North

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Long Live the Victory of People’s War’, *Peking Review*, number 36, September 3, 1965.

<sup>23</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-Su chongtu’, part 1, pp.55-56.

Vietnam, China was forced to maintain a delicate balance between deterrence and provocation. As Allen Whiting observed, the manner in which China came to the D.R.V.'s assistance, "as a token of credible commitment, it increased the likelihood of escalation to the extent that the provocative role of the P.L.A. might outweigh its deterrent role. Yet despite this acknowledged risk, Beijing committed the force on behalf of Hanoi." Thus, for a year-long period from approximately February 1965 to March 1966, Mao had to ensure that this delicate balance had been struck in the Chinese campaign to 'assist Vietnam, resist America'. Once he was confident of this, only then he could proceed to launching his Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.<sup>24</sup>

### Assisting Vietnam; resisting America

"Struggle in order to strengthen socialist construction and assist Vietnam, resist America" was the editorial headline in the May Day 1965, edition of the *Renmin Ribao*, heralding the start of a national campaign of support for China's embattled southern neighbour. The very name of this campaign, however, revealed the relative caution of China's response to the threat from the south, and provides clear evidence of the contrast between Beijing's strategic thinking in 1965 and that of fifteen years earlier in Korea. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, copying the phraseology of the Korean War era, *Renmin Ribao* had made reference to 'resisting America, assisting Vietnam', a slogan that was repeated in the same publication on April 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, whereupon it disappeared; its connotation of a direct parallel with the Korean conflict was clearly a cause for concern among the Chinese leadership. By the time an expanded meeting of the Politburo took place on April 12<sup>th</sup> to discuss a report on strengthening war preparations, the slogan had been switched to 'assisting Vietnam, resisting America'. The disappearance of the Korea-style phrase and after a hiatus the emergence of this new slogan was another signal to the United States that China did not view the situation unfolding in Vietnam as identical to Korea. In terms of Chinese domestic consumption, launching 'assist Vietnam, resist America' as an official slogan in a Mayday editorial served to underline the importance attached by the party leadership to this new

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<sup>24</sup> Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus*, p.192.

mobilization campaign. Nonetheless, the leadership's caution was demonstrated by the Premier's advice: "at the moment we are supporting Vietnam's anti-American struggle; we had better make Vietnam the principal."<sup>25</sup>

The landing of the Marines at Danang two months earlier had made Hanoi's situation much more acute and they desperately needed Chinese diplomatic and, more importantly, military support. However, the North Vietnamese leaders estimated that the risk of an American ground attack on the D.R.V. was small, though they were not complacent. Their basic approach was to further strengthen the struggle in the South and aerial defences in the North, while striving to limit both the ground war to the South and the American attacks on the North to within the scope of an aerial bombing 'war of destruction'. In light of this, Duan requested from the Chinese comrades, "volunteer pilots, volunteer soldiers... [and] essential personnel in other areas".<sup>26</sup> Liu Shaoqi spoke for the Chinese leadership when he told him that assisting Vietnam in the conduct of its struggle against America "is the binding duty of the Chinese people and the Chinese party." A few days later the C.C.P. Central Committee issued a directive calling on the entire Party, military and country to exert all efforts to support the Vietnamese anti-American struggle.<sup>27</sup>

A little over a week later agreements were reached in Beijing in discussions between top Chinese and Vietnamese military leaders outlining the Chinese deployment in North Vietnam. Beijing's support for the Vietnamese struggle was confirmed one month later in a meeting between Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong in the Chinese Chairman's hometown of Changsha, Hunan province. The D.R.V. Chairman was a long-standing personal friend of the Chinese communist leadership, dating back to Paris in the early 1920s when he and Zhou Enlai had been contemporaneous members of the French Communist Party, and who as Asian proto-revolutionaries had held clandestine meetings in the Paris Metro. Following Ho's return to Asia in 1924, he had taken up residence in Guangzhou, where he established the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth

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<sup>25</sup> Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 1, p.47; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 2, p.724; 'Memorandum from Chester L. Cooper of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy)', March 9, 1965, *FRUS - Johnson*, vol. II, document 192.

<sup>26</sup> Qu Aiguo, 'Yuenan zhanzheng', in Zhang & Niu, eds., *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo*, pp.355-6.

<sup>27</sup> Zhai, *CATVW*, p.133; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, pp.218-9; Xiaoming Zhang, 'The Vietnam War, 1964-1969: A Chinese Perspective', *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 60, no. 4 (Oct., 1996), p.747.



Association and where he continued his friendship with Zhou Enlai and Zhou's wife, Deng Yingchao, and even gave occasional lectures on the revolutionary situation in Vietnam at the Whampoa Military Academy. According to Ho's personal secretary, this trip to Guangzhou, Changsha and then on to Beijing, was ostensibly for the aging Vietnamese leader to rest and recuperate, and to be away from Vietnam to avoid ostentatious celebrations of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday (he left Vietnam for China during the same period the following year). It was at Mao's invitation that the old comrade visited him in Changsha, where they dined and held a two-hour discussion (Ho is said to have been fluent in several Chinese dialects, so presumably there was no need for translation). As Ho had surely done with Zhou Enlai in Guangzhou some forty years earlier, the two men discussed the situation in Vietnam. It was their intent, Ho told his host, to transfer more forces from the rear (meaning North Vietnam) to the front (South Vietnam), and in this case logistical safeguards at the rear would be affected; this was where China could help. If China could undertake these works, it would release the men to go to the front. Mao agreed immediately, prompting Ho to quip, "It's too easy to arrive at agreements between us!"<sup>28</sup>

Mao agreed that the Chinese would assume responsibility for building six new roads in North Vietnam, following on from Liu Shaoqi's agreement with Le Duan to take responsibility for the construction, defence and repair of railways in the D.R.V.<sup>29</sup> This pledge augmented agreements reached in Hanoi in late April between Chinese Vice Premier and Party Secretary of the Central-South Region, Tao Zhu, and Vietnamese officials. Among these agreements was a Chinese promise on road construction, including two roads to be built by the Yunnan provincial authorities: one from the Chinese border to Ha Giang, and another from Phong Tho to Lai Chau, in addition to two that were already under construction by the Chinese, probably as the result of an agreement signed on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1964. It seems probable that the V.W.P. decided to use the

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<sup>28</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, May 16, 1965, 77 *Conversations*, pp.84-85; Li Jiazhong, ed. and transl., *Yuenan guoye Hu Zhiming* [Ho Chi Minh: Father of Vietnam], (Beijing: Shijie zhishi, 2003), pp.253-255; Qu Aiguo, 'Yuenan zhanzheng', Zhang & Niu, *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo*, p.356; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p.219.

<sup>29</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, May 16, 1965, Westad et al., 77 *Conversations*, pp.84-85. Other sources report that at this point Ho requested that the Chinese assist in the reparation of a total of twelve roads. Cf. Wang Xianguan, *Yuan Yue Kang Mei shilu* [A Factual Record of Assisting Vietnam, Resisting America], (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chubanshe, 1990) p.43. See also Zhai, *CATVW*, pp.133-4, Chen Jian *Mao's China*, p.222.

comradeship between Mao and Ho to bypass ‘blockages’ they had come up against in the Chinese bureaucracy in their attempts to negotiate the extent of Chinese aid, for it became clear that there existed disagreements between the Chinese and Vietnamese sides on the extent of the proposed road-building programme. In late May the Chinese leadership stated their preference for initially concentrating on five to seven roads (possibly that which had been agreed to by Tao Zhu in Hanoi), while the Vietnamese had upped their request to twelve roads to be worked on simultaneously – something that would require an additional 20,000 troops. When the two sides met, the D.R.V. delegation continued to request work on all twelve roads, to which the Chinese side agreed. An agreement was signed in Beijing on May 30<sup>th</sup>.<sup>30</sup>

The final details of China’s potential military involvement were thrashed out in meetings in Beijing in early June when Van Tien Dung and Giap visited the Chinese capital. Agreements were arrived at which set out the limits of Chinese involvement, and the triggers that would invite the escalation of the Chinese commitment: if the Americans contained the war within its current limits, then China would keep the supporting role that had been requested by the Vietnamese, sending road, rail and bridge engineering troops, and supporting anti-aircraft units; in the event of a South Vietnamese invasion of the D.R.V. supported by U.S. naval and air forces, China would then provide equivalent support to the People’s Army of Vietnam (P.A.V.N.); and if U.S. ground troops were involved themselves in a ground invasion of North Vietnam, China would send in its own land forces to act as a strategic reserve for the Vietnamese allies. The discussions between Luo and Dung also turned to the feasibility of the

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Yunnan sheng fu Yue gongzuozu guanyu Yuenan san sheng tongzhi tichu de yaoqiu he womende chubu yijian de baogao’ [Report from the Yunnan provincial workgroup that visited Vietnam regarding the requests of the comrades from the three Vietnamese provinces and our initial opinions], May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1965, in Xiao & Li, *Yunnan yu yuan Yue kang Mei*, pp.42-43; ‘Duiwaijingweibangongting tong Yuenan zhengfu jingji daibiaotuan huitan jianbao (di qi qi)’ [Briefing on the meeting of the General Office of the Foreign Economic Relations Committee with the Vietnamese government economic delegation], November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1966, *ibid.*, pp.170-172; ‘Yunnansheng jiaotongting guanyu baosong yuan Yue gonglu gongcheng jishu sheji, jiaojie zhengshu, jiancha yanshou ji jungong tubiao de baogao’ [Report of the Yunnan provincial Transport Office on sending the ‘Assist Vietnam’ road construction technical plans, exchange of credentials, inspection approval and work completion charts], December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1966, *ibid.*, pp.183-4; Chen Jian, *Mao’s China*, pp.222-3; Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *‘Wenhua da geming’ zhong de renmin jiefangjun* [The People’s Liberation Army in the Cultural Revolution] (hereafter *Wenge jiefangjun*), (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao, 1989), p.422. In late 1966 the Vietnamese eventually requested that work be concentrated on seven roads, as the Chinese had originally proposed.

PLAAF entering the war on Hanoi's behalf, which had been, after all, the very first thing Le Duan had mentioned when asked what the North Vietnamese needed. The two military men considered three options: Chinese volunteer pilots would fly Vietnamese planes; Chinese pilots and planes could fly from Vietnamese airfields; or thirdly, the 'Andong model' of the Korean War could be resurrected, whereby Chinese planes and pilots would operate out of China and only refuel in North Vietnam, if necessary. According to Chen Jian, "Luo emphasized that the Chinese would enter operations in any of these forms according to the circumstances."<sup>31</sup> The Vietnamese would later claim that PLAAF forces were to be despatched before the end of the month.<sup>32</sup>

However, this issue would prove to be a clear example of the finely-calibrated nature of China's assistance to North Vietnam in striking the balance between effective assistance and rash provocation. According to the Hanoi government, on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1965, China reneged on its offer of some form of aerial support for the D.R.V.; one is forced to conclude that it was decided that such operations would tip the balance too far towards provocation when compared to their deterrent capacity and tactical efficacy. In March of the following year Deng Xiaoping hinted at just such a rationale.<sup>33</sup> This must surely have come as a disappointment to the Hanoi leadership, as it was contrary to the promises of both Liu and Mao; nonetheless given the extent of the support that China had agreed to provide to North Vietnam, the size of the fly in the ointment was surely not too large, as already on June 9<sup>th</sup> the first units of the Chinese People's Volunteer Engineering Force had crossed from Youyiguan in Guangxi province into Vietnam. They would prove to be the first of 320,000 Chinese troops who would be rotated into North Vietnam over a five year period, their maximum number peaking at 170,000 in 1967.<sup>34</sup>

Foremost among the four main types of Chinese troops who entered North Vietnam were the road-building units present from September 1965 until February 1969, during which time they repaired or built seven roads with a total

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<sup>31</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p.219-220.

<sup>32</sup> Qu Aiguo, 'Yuenan zhanzheng', Zhang & Niu, *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo*, p.357; Zhai, *CATVW*, pp.134-5; S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p.33.

<sup>33</sup> Masaru Kojima, *The Record of the JCP-CPC Talks: how Mao Zedong scrapped the joint communiqué*, (Tokyo: Central Committee of the Japanese Communist Party, 1980), p.101.

<sup>34</sup> Qu Aiguo, 'Yuenan zhanzheng', Zhang & Niu, *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo*, p.357; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p.229; Zhai, *CATVW*, pp.134-5; S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p.33.

length of 1206 km, of which 606km was newly laid, as well as 305 bridges totalling 6854m in length. Performing a similar function to keep North Vietnam's rail network functioning in the face of American bombing were railway units that operated in North Vietnam between June 1965 and June 1970. They were responsible for repairing and building the railway lines as above, as well as the bomb damage on all four lines north of Hanoi. Protecting them were anti-aircraft units, the first of which entered Vietnam in August 1965. On the basis of an agreement signed between the Chinese and North Vietnamese governments on July 24, 1965, they were responsible for protecting the Bac Ninh to Lang Son section of the Hanoi-Youyiguan railway, the Yen Bai (later extended to Kien Tien) to Lao Cai section of the Hanoi-Lao Cai railway (which were the two vital rail links between Vietnam and China) as well as the defence of the construction of a new line between Co Phuc and Thai Nguyen, and providing general cover for the Chinese troops. According to Chinese statistics they engaged with the U.S. Air Force 2153 times, and shot down 1707 U.S. planes, damaging another 1608. The final component of the logistical support was the Chinese defence engineering units in North Vietnam between June 1965 and November 1969, which were comprised of engineering, communications and artillery units. Some were involved in the construction of coastal and river defences, and laying submarine telecommunication cables and above-ground telecommunication wires, while certain units connected areas of the Northwest D.R.V., through which the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran, into the telephone network. They also worked on strengthening the defences of Hanoi and Haiphong against aerial bombardment, fortifying the provinces of the Red River delta, and constructing the Yen Bai airbase.<sup>35</sup>

Two new leadership bodies were formed at the top level to co-ordinate Chinese assistance to North Vietnam, one dealing with strategic matters, and the other concerning itself with more tactical and practical issues. The former group, initially led by Luo Ruiqing (and later after Luo's purge by Li Xiannian) was the 'Leading Group on Vietnamese Affairs', whose role was to "carry out the central leadership's grand strategy, to make decisions and suggestions on matters associated with Vietnam, and to examine and determine if any new support to

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<sup>35</sup> Qu Aiguo, 'Yuenan zhanzheng', Zhang & Niu, *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo*, p.359-369; Li & Hao, *Wenge jiefangjun*, pp.415-427; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, pp.221-225.

Vietnam was necessary.” The second body came under the authority of the Central Committee and the State Council and was headed up by P.L.A. Deputy Chief of Staff Yang Chengwu. It contained representatives from a large swathe of the bureaucracy, including the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Trade, as well as the Railway, Transport, and Material Supplies Ministries, the Commissions of Foreign Economic Affairs, State Economic Planning, and Economic Affairs, along with representatives from a number of different divisions of the P.L.A.<sup>36</sup>

While the central working groups agreed the annual aid and assistance agreements, and directed large-scale military and economic aid to North Vietnam, much of the responsibility for implementation of the decisions taken at the centre, as well as more localized assistance, fell upon the provincial leadership of China’s southern provinces. Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong exercised responsibility for economic assistance and co-operation with the Vietnamese border provinces: Yunnan dealt with Lai Chau, Lao Cai and Ha Giang; Guangxi was responsible for Lang Son and Cao Bang, while Guangdong assisted Quang Ninh; furthermore, Hunan co-operated with the province of Hoa Binh, which lay to the west of the Red River delta region. This co-operation had preceded the American escalation of the conflict in the summer of 1964, and further deepened in the wake of the launch of ROLLING THUNDER.<sup>37</sup>

Tao Zhu, as head of the C.C.P. Central South Bureau, took charge of co-ordinating the co-operation between the Chinese provinces and their Vietnamese counterparts, which took the form of both trade and aid, the parameters of which were set by the Central Committee, presumably the ‘Group in Charge of Supporting Vietnam’. With a view to not upsetting the national economy, and keeping political control over the extent of China’s economic aid, in June a directive was issued stating that “[A]ll items that relate to national defence

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<sup>36</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao’s China*, p.220

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. ‘Yunnansheng renmin weiyuanhui dui 1964 nian Yunnan sheng yu Yuenan Laojie, Hejiang, Laizhou san sheng difang maoyi shangtan de yijian de pifu’ [Response of the Yunnan Province People’s Committee on opinions [expressed] on the local trade talks between Yunnan and the three Vietnamese provinces of Lao Cai, Ha Giang, and Lai Chau], May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1964, Xiao & Li, *Yunnan yu yuan Yue kang Mei*, pp.10-15; ‘Zhonggong Yunnan shengwei guanyu wo sheng fu Yue gongzuozu he Yuenan Laojie, Laizhou, Hejiang san sheng daibiaotuan huitan de huibao’ [C.C.P. Yunnan Provincial Committee report on the talks between the provincial workgroup that visited Vietnam and the delegation from the three Vietnamese provinces of Lao Cai, Lai Chau, and Ha Giang], *ibid.*, pp.47-50.

construction, or economic and transport construction, as well as large-scale material aid, will be handled in an integrated manner through assignment of such items by the Central Committee to the jurisdiction of the Foreign Economics or Foreign Trade Ministries and the General Staff Headquarters of the Central Military Commission.”<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, a huge range and variety of assistance was given to the Vietnamese by the four Chinese provinces in co-ordination with North Vietnamese efforts at economic decentralisation and provincial self-sufficiency.<sup>39</sup> The approved forms of assistance fell into three main categories: agriculture, irrigation, and industry. The range of items supplied to the Vietnamese provinces was vast, and ranged from entire factories to advice on improving apple yields. Among the items provided were a copper processing factory, agricultural machinery repair factories, and assistance in the construction of extensions to water turbine-pump and vehicle repair factories. In order to improve the future supply of imports the Chinese provinces supplied motor vehicles, hand-carts, and rubber-tired animal carts, iron-clad barges and small transport vessels, as well as ship-building plans to enable the D.R.V. to expand its own capacity.<sup>40</sup>

The North Vietnamese emphasis on developing self-sufficiency at the provincial level accorded with the Maoist emphasis on self-sufficiency as an essential component of People’s War, so much of the Chinese aid was aimed at fostering long-term sustainability; thus Chinese experts, such as agricultural fishing, saltern and ceramics technicians travelled to the D.R.V. to educate their Vietnamese colleagues. In the agricultural sphere this took the form of the supply of various types of fertilizer, insecticides, soil laboratories, new and higher qualities of seeds (such as rice, soybean, peanuts, sugar-cane, Chinese kale, tea-tree, corn, tobacco, green manure), and even the supply of cattle and pigs, presumably destined for state farms and breeding programs, along with veterinary treatment clinics to keep them healthy. This was accompanied by

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu difang yuan wai wenti de qingshi de pifu’ [C.C.P. Central Committee response to the request for instruction on the issue of local aid for foreign countries], December 12, 1965, *ibid.*, pp.84-86.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002), p.11.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Yunnansheng waishibangongshi guanyu Guangdong, Guangxi, Hunan, Yunnan si sheng yuan Yue gongzuo qingkuang baogao’ [Report of the Yunnan provincial foreign affairs office on the state of affairs of Guangdong, Guangxi, Hunan and Yunnan provinces’ ‘Assist Vietnam’ work], August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1966, Xiao & Li, *Yunnan yu yuan Yue kang Mei*, pp.148-52.

agricultural machinery such as mini-tractors, sprinklers and threshers, tea rollers and grain presses.<sup>41</sup>

However, of all the items supplied to the underdeveloped North Vietnamese border provinces, the most valuable to them were water-turbine pumps, and the construction of a certain number of hydroelectric power stations in the mountainous regions that bordered China's southern frontier. In the summer of 1966, Ha Giang province had been directed to establish hydro-electric production capacity, and requested that Yunnan help them to survey and plan the construction of six 50-100kw hydro-electric power stations. The Yunnanese authorities were reluctant to engage in the work, preferring to concentrate their efforts on the installation of the 100 water turbine-pumps they had already agreed to supply to the North Vietnamese provinces (40 of which were destined for Ha Giang.) Their objections were over-ridden, however, when Tao Zhu held discussions with his Vietnamese counterparts on the topic of the four southern Chinese provinces' aid. On the basis of the principles of these talks, an aid package from Yunnan costing nine million yuan, including the provision that Yunnan would help Ha Giang and Lai Chau to construct a 500-800kw hydro-electric plant in each province, was agreed. The dire need for such a utility was emphasized to the Chinese when it was discovered that the Vietnamese were unable to use the machine tools Yunnan had supplied to a Vietnamese agricultural machinery factory because the factory did not receive enough electricity.<sup>42</sup>

Beijing offered its support to a beleaguered and endangered Hanoi through a combination of centrally-directed and province-level assistance programs. This on occasion produced friction between the occasionally reluctant

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.; 'Yunnansheng renmin weiyuanhui waishichu guanyu wo zai Yue Hejiang sheng nongye gongzuo zu qingkuang fanying' [Reflections of the Yunnan Province People's Committee Foreign Affairs Department on the situation of our agricultural workgroup in Vietnam's Ha Giang province], June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1966, *ibid.*, pp.136-39; 'Yunnansheng renmin weiyuanhui waishichu dangzu guanyu Yue Hejiang sheng yaoqiu wo nongye gongzuo zu sheji xiaoxing shuidian zhan de qingshi' [Request for instruction from the Yunnan Province People's Committee Foreign Affairs Department Party Group relating to the request from the Vietnamese province of Ha Giang for our agricultural workgroup to plan a small-scale hydroelectric power plant], June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1966, *ibid.*, pp.139-40; Yunnansheng waishi bangongshi, shengrenwei waishichu guanyu Yunnansheng zhiyuan Yuenan Laojie, Laizhou, Hejiang san sheng gongnongye jianshe de qingkuang baogao' [Report from the Yunnan provincial Foreign Affairs Department and the provincial People's Committee on the state of affairs of Yunnan's assistance in the industrial and agricultural construction of the three Vietnamese provinces of Lao Cai, Lai Chau and Ha Giang], July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1966, *ibid.*, pp.140-41.

provinces, and the more generous Beijing, and provided the Vietnamese the opportunity to exploit these differences in order to achieve the maximum advantage for themselves. The issue of the hydroelectric power-stations was a point in case: by designating a border province as one which had a responsibility to increase electrical production, the Vietnamese provincial authorities could legitimately hope to approach their Chinese counterparts for assistance in the spirit of proletarian internationalism. And while the province, (Yunnan in this case) may only be willing to provide help on a small scale (if at all), Hanoi was able to bypass their objections by approaching Beijing directly and including the hydro-electric power issue within the larger framework of an aid package negotiated between the two national governments.

Beijing, for its part, would not permit “items that relate to national defence construction, or economic and transport construction, as well as large-scale material aid” to be handled by the provinces. By keeping high-value articles, as well as those relating to defence, under the control of the centre, Mao and Zhou were able to retain a degree of political control that would not be possible at the lower levels. At the same time, Beijing could ensure that overly enthusiastic provincial leaders, such as in Guangdong and Guangxi, would not agree to a degree of aid that might upset a carefully regulated planned economy in the midst of ‘Third Front Construction’. This concern was replicated on the provincial level, where some local leaders (it appears in Yunnan in particular) worried that excess commitment to Vietnam would imperil their own Third Front Construction efforts.<sup>43</sup>

Along with assisting Vietnam to resist America, Third Front Construction was a parallel component of Mao’s defensive strategy against the United States. The plan predated the American escalation of 1965 – in fact it even predated the Gulf of Tonkin incident in the summer of 1964. Like the assistance to North Vietnam, it served both defensive and deterrent purposes, though the scale and scope of its original intent suggested that it reflected Mao’s view as expressed to Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin in February 1965 that war between China and the United States was unlikely for ten to fifteen years.<sup>44</sup> Naturally, the events of the

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Zhonggong zhongyang[...] de pifu’, December 12, 1965, *ibid.*, pp.84-86.

<sup>44</sup> Memcon – Polish record, Mao, Kosygin et al., February 11, 1965, courtesy of Selvage and Gnoiska.



spring and summer of 1965 necessitated a reappraisal of the Chairman's original prognostication, and as his official C.C.P. biography noted, "For the greater part of 1965, Mao Zedong talked a lot about the issue of war preparations".<sup>45</sup> However, as Mao himself told Wang Dongxing in June 1965, "One cannot look at things so easily. There are some who think that when Third Front Construction is finished, then we will fight another war. Is [American imperialism] going to wait until you have finished the construction and then fight a war? It's possible it'll fight before construction is finished, or it's also possible that the construction will be finished and yet it won't fight a war at all. We have to prepare for both eventualities."<sup>46</sup>

China and Vietnam had been pushed into even closer co-operation by the American decision to escalate and internationalise the conflict in South Vietnam. China pledged to stand by its smaller ally in resisting American 'aggression' and implemented a series of concrete actions designed to maximise its supporting role in the Vietnamese conflict, without triggering a widening of the war to directly include China itself. And whatever of subsequent Vietnamese claims to the contrary, there is no evidence to suggest that the Hanoi leadership recognised China's threat "not to stand idly by" to be anything other than a welcome deterrent to further American escalation, rather than a "green light" to the United States.<sup>47</sup> And while it is possible that the Vietnamese were willing to tolerate a greater degree of risk of further confrontation than their Chinese comrades, by the late summer of 1965 Mao appeared increasingly confident that the combination of Chinese warning and concrete actions were sufficient to pre-empt the signalling failures that had characterized China's entry into the Korean War, while simultaneously equipping North Vietnam economically and militarily to resist American escalation broadly in line with the Maoist doctrine of self-reliance. The Chinese leadership had believed at least as late as the end of March 1965 that the U.S. possessed neither the will nor the capacity to commit land forces to Vietnam; rather, it was believed, Johnson would expand the air war all across North Vietnam and then to China before he would commit large numbers

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<sup>45</sup> C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, pp.1391-2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* For a discussion of the background of the Third Front and Mao's attitude to the outbreak of war in the summer of 1964 see Li Xiangqian, '1964 nian: Yuenan zhanzheng shengji yu Zhongguo jingji zhengzhi de biandong' [1964: Vietnam War Escalation and China's Economic and Political Shift], in Zhang & Niu, *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo*, pp.319-340.

<sup>47</sup> S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, pp.31-33.

of ground troops.<sup>48</sup> By late summer it appeared that the opposite was the case: the United States was willing to engage in another ground war on Asian soil, though its parameters were not yet quite clear. And although he continued to talk about the possibility of war, Mao must have felt increasingly confident that it would be confined to within South Vietnam's borders and that the United States did not intend to invade North Vietnam or attack the Chinese Communist state – for he himself was already preparing to attack the Chinese Communist Party. And even were he wrong about American intentions, what would be of greater effect in putting pay to the revisionist myth of 'peaceful coexistence' than American imperialism launching a war of aggression against China? As the U.S. Consul in Hong Kong observed, "We are also tempted to conclude he would half-welcome a U.S.-GRC [government of the Republic of China] invasion, believing his two old enemies could, before he dies, be drowned in the sea of Chinese manpower... [which] would also deal a mortal blow to the revisionism he sees affecting China."<sup>49</sup>

### Going it alone

By mid-August 1965 Mao had begun to openly discuss the issue of revisionism at home – and in particular its presence among the leadership of the party. In early September, on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the surrender of Japan, the perfidious influence of Khrushchevist revisionism on the global revolution was loudly condemned in 'Long Live the Victory of People's War!', published in Lin Biao's name, though actually written by a team of writers in the P.L.A. General Staff. In January Mao had requested that someone write a commentary on Soviet Marshall Vasily Sokolovsky's 1962 work *Military Strategy*, in which the Soviet former Chief-of-Staff had emphasized the central controlling role of the Soviet Red Army in the event of a war between the socialist countries and their foes. 'Long Live the Victory of People's War' served as a repudiation of this thesis,

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<sup>48</sup> 'Minutes of Conversation Between the RCP leadership led by Nicolae Ceausescu and the CCP leadership led by Zhou Enlai', March 26, 1965, ANIC, Bucharest, Romania, Fond CC Chancellery, 39/1965, pp.53-86. [This document was obtained and translated for CWIHP by Mircea Munteanu and presented at the international conference 'The Vietnam War, Thirty Years On: the Unanswered Questions and the Search for Documentary Evidence', Temple University, Philadelphia, June 20-21, 2005].

<sup>49</sup> 'Telegram from the Consulate General at Hong Kong to the Department of State', February 19, 1966, *FRUS-Johnson*, vol. XXX, document 125.

through its emphasis on People's War and the necessity of self-reliance on the part of any revolution (a theme indeed taken up by the D.R.V. press in the wake of its publication). It sought to nurture the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese comrades and to persuade them of the negative consequences that would stem from listening to the "publicity [Khrushchevite revisionists] give to defeatism and capitulationism [which] tend to demoralize and spiritually disarm revolutionary people everywhere"<sup>50</sup> This was particularly germane in the late summer of 1965, as reports began to surface from Hanoi about the "hurt" caused by the American bombing, and an increasing proclivity towards entering into negotiations with the United States.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, this article sought to explain the Vietnamese struggle against the Americans firmly within the realm of Mao Zedong thought and theory, and to claim for Chinese Maoism the eventual victory of the Vietnamese over American imperialism. Vo Nguyen Giap had refined People's War to suit Vietnamese circumstances and, as Mao had himself admitted to North Vietnamese leaders a month after the publication of this article, it was ten or twenty years since the C.C.P. Chairman had written on the topic, and many of the situations facing the Vietnamese were new. However, by casting the net sufficiently widely so as not even to focus on strategy, let alone tactics, but instead to lay claim to the spirit of national liberation struggle, 'Lin Biao' handed the conceptual credit of the expected Vietnamese victory to Mao.<sup>52</sup>

The issue of domestic revisionism weighed on Mao's mind in equal measure. He began more frequently addressing his own party leadership on the dangers of revisionism and the need to rebel should revisionism surface within the leadership ranks of the C.C.P. A few weeks later the opening salvos of the Cultural Revolution were fired in the form of Yao Wenyuan's attack on Wu Han and his play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, though as yet the extent of the campaign of cultural revolution that Mao was planning was not yet obvious. It marked the first step in Mao's campaign to remove his and Lin Biao's enemies

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<sup>50</sup> 'Long Live the Victory of People's War', *Peking Review*, September 3, 1965.

<sup>51</sup> C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, p.1393; Zhai, *CATVW*, p.145-6; 'Biweekly Report: Communist Statements Regarding Intervention in Vietnam and Possible Negotiations', 15 October 1965, Folder 113, Box 07, C.I.A. Collection, VVA-TTU; 'Intelligence Information Cable: Statements on Alleged North Vietnamese Interest in Negotiations', 10 September 1965, Folder 26/Box 02/C.I.A., VVA-TTU.

<sup>52</sup> C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong wenji* [The Collected Works of Mao Zedong], vol. 8, (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1999), pp.425-6.

within the Party and military. The backdrop to this was clear concern among Chinese leaders concerned with foreign policy such as Chen Yi and Zhou Enlai that the North Vietnamese would get sucked into peace talks with the United States, and in this they were almost certainly reflecting Mao's own personal views. Hanoi's agreement to a Soviet-induced negotiation would not only deprive Mao of the Vietnam War as vehicle for domestic mobilization and martial emphasis; but Mao was also concerned that the United States would use the breakdown of a false peace offensive as a pretext for further expansion of the war. Thus the Chinese leadership sought to try and prevent this worrying possibility, and Mao further bided his time before making his next move against domestic revisionism.<sup>53</sup>

China reacted with horror and apprehension at the American bombing pause instituted less than three weeks later, which was accompanied by a 'peace offensive' on the part of the Johnson administration. On January 29<sup>th</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk announced the United States' 'Fourteen Points' for negotiating an end to the conflict in Vietnam. Contacts were initiated between the United States and North Vietnam directly in Rangoon, and indirectly through the governments of Hungary and Poland, along with the dispatch of a flurry of American emissaries to various world capitals. Recent research has indicated that the most significant of these peace probes was that conducted through the Polish channel, in which the Warsaw government dispatched a special envoy, Jerzy Michałowski, to encourage Hanoi to enter into negotiations with Washington on the basis of conversations held in Warsaw between the Polish government and President Johnson's ambassador-at-large W. Averell Harriman.<sup>54</sup> The Polish envoy had not even managed to leave Warsaw before the Chinese attempted to thwart the American peace probe, when the Chinese ambassador in Warsaw denounced Harriman's proposals as lies and insisted there was no point in even discussing them with Hanoi. In order to preempt Michałowski the

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<sup>53</sup> C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, pp.1394-6.

<sup>54</sup> Robert S. McNamara, James Blight, Robert Brigham, Thomas Biersteker, & Herbert Schandler, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy*, (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), pp.232-5, 274-5; James G. Hershberg, "'Operation Lumbago': New Evidence on Poland's Secret Vietnam Diplomacy during Lyndon B. Johnson's 37-day Bombing 'Pause', Dec. 1965-Jan. 1966", presented at the GWCW Conference on New East-Central European Evidence on the Cold War in Asia, Budapest, 31 October-1 November 2003; idem, 'Peace Probes and the Bombing Pause: Hungarian and Polish Diplomacy During the Vietnam War, December 1965-January 1966', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, (Spring 2003), pp.32-67.

Chinese ambassador in Hanoi had followed hot on the heels of the Polish ambassador in seeking an audience with D.R.V. Premier Pham Van Dong in the wee hours of December 30<sup>th</sup>, before promptly setting off for Beijing the next morning. An editorial in the *Renmin Ribao* on New Year's Day castigated the American 'peace offensive' as "debauched", masquerading plans "to widen its aggressive war in Vietnam."<sup>55</sup>

In truth, even before Dean Rusk announced the 'Fourteen Points' and the American 'peace offensive' began, the Chinese leaders had been very worried by a North Vietnamese proposal to announce that the unconditional cessation of bombing of the D.R.V. was a precondition for peace talks. In mid-December, in conversation with D.R.V. Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh both Chen and Zhou addressed this issue, and expressed concern that were the Vietnamese to enter into talks with the Americans at this point it would be a tactical error. Comments by Zhou Enlai indicate that the Chinese were deeply concerned by this North Vietnamese suggestion that there could be talks between Hanoi and Washington if there was a cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam (a position subsequently put forward by Trinh in January 1967). The tone of the Zhou-Trinh discussions seem to indicate that Hanoi was giving serious thought to the possibility at this time. It is also clear, though, from Zhou Enlai's comments that this was considered part of the political struggle, and that Hanoi's intent was to propose a bombing cessation in exchange for talks in the belief that the U.S. would not accept. What now worried Beijing was that Hanoi's bluff might be called.<sup>56</sup>

Zhou's main worry was that the United States would indeed accept the North Vietnamese conditions and agree to enter into talks. "Vietnamese comrades consider that the U.S. will not accept the new conditions... [W]hat will the situation be if they accept?"<sup>57</sup> Zhou was concerned about both tactics (being in a passive position) and strategy (succumbing to Soviet influence and negotiating a compromise). In this respect the situation was indeed as Edgar Snow observed a few months later, that acceptance of compromise on Vietnam

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<sup>55</sup> Hershberg, 'Operation Lumbago', p.20.

<sup>56</sup> Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi and Nguyen Duy Trinh, December 18 & 19, 1965, 77 *Conversations*, pp.89-90; Robert S. McNamara et al, *Argument Without End*, pp.278-9.

<sup>57</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Nguyen Duy Trinh, December 19, 1965, eds., 77 *Conversations*, p.90.

would mean an acceptance of Soviet policy and a defeat for Chinese foreign policy; it would be a betrayal and repudiation of Chinese backing for the Vietnamese challenge to the United States in 1964 when Khrushchev had more or less left the Vietnamese to their own plight. And more than anything, from Mao's perspective, the global revolution needed a success story.<sup>58</sup>

Vietnam aside, 1965 had proved to be a disaster for Chinese foreign policy, particularly in the developing world. Mao's brand of revolution was in retreat, yet right on China's doorstep there existed the opportunity not only to reverse the successes of the reactionaries, but to inflict a direct blow on the United States, if only the Vietnamese held their resolve and rejected the capitulationist arguments of the Soviet revisionists. Peace talks were a fraud designed to 'sell out' the Vietnamese at the hands of the Soviet Union, at a time when Hanoi and the N.L.F. held it within their grasp to force out the Americans through force of arms. Mao and Zhou feared that a compromise agreement would be forced on Hanoi if it fell into the 'peace talks trap', and thus were particularly worried that the U.S. might call Hanoi's bluff in late 1965 and agree to their conditions. "We sincerely hope that Vietnam's party and government would think further on this issue" he implored Nguyen Duy Trinh, "Otherwise, you may fall into the trap".<sup>59</sup>

For China, the mediation of the Poles, Hungarians, the 'Fourteen Points', and the 'peace offensive' were all part of this trap, and although superficially it may appear that the Chinese attitude was one of obstructionism, there was a clear logic behind the Chinese actions in Warsaw, Beijing, and Hanoi. As shown, only a few weeks earlier, the Vietnamese comrades had discussed with Zhou Enlai the possibility of launching an attack on the diplomatic front, on the basis that they were not yet ready to move to the 'negotiating while fighting stage' and that the United States would not respond positively. If, as the Chinese certainly anticipated and hoped, they held to this position, then the failure of the Polish mission might indeed paint the Vietnamese as 'not being interested in peace' – hence Wang Bingnan's ridicule of the concept of the Polish mission. Indeed, a CIA report later concluded that Hanoi was "concerned over the success of the

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<sup>58</sup> Ambroz, *Realignment of World Power*, vol. 1, p.50.

<sup>59</sup> Memcon (extract), Chen Yi and Nguyen Duy Trinh, December 19, 1965, *77 Conversations*, p.90; Li Danhui, 'Zhongguo dui Yue-Mei hetan de lichang', p.83.

U.S. peace effort in convincing world opinion of U.S. willingness to seek a quick and reasonable end to the war.”<sup>60</sup> At the same time, however, as ever wary of the influence of the ‘Khrushchevite revisionists and their lackeys’ and aware of a divergence of opinion as regards peace talks in the V.W.P. Central Committee, Chinese diplomats sought to rally the resolve of their Vietnamese comrades not to be fooled by the ‘fraud’, even to the extent of delaying Michałowski to ensure that they had the floor in Hanoi before him, lest Johnson use the failure of the peace initiative as an excuse for the expansion of the war.<sup>61</sup>

Publicly at least, this was a major part of the rationale behind the Chinese condemnation of Johnson’s peace probes. There is tentative evidence to suggest that war preparation activities took on a new intensity in January 1966, during the bombing pause. These became so acute that in February the U.S. Consul General in Hong Kong cabled Washington to recommend that the U.S. take measures “whereby dangerous ChiCom [Chinese Communist] delusions about our intentions could be corrected—perhaps at Warsaw and by public statements.”<sup>62</sup> This recommendation was acted on at the highest level, when on March 16<sup>th</sup> Dean Rusk advocated in front of a congressional committee steps “to reassure Peiping [Beijing] that the United States does not intend to attack mainland China.”<sup>63</sup> The message was further driven home that same day in a more private forum, at the Sino-American ambassadorial talks in Warsaw, during which U.S. Ambassador John Gronouski emphasized that the Johnson administration had no intention of starting a war with China, nor did it feel hostility towards the Chinese government or people. He expressed the hope that the Vietnam question could be resolved peacefully, and that China could use its influence with the Vietnamese to transfer the struggle from the military plane onto the political one. Undoubtedly, word of these developments reached Chairman Mao in Shanghai, to where he had retreated in November, after the publication of Yao Wenyuan’s article criticising Wu Han’s *Hai Rui Dismissed From Office*.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Intelligence Memorandum: Communist Reaction to the US Peace Offensive’, January 20, 1966, Folder 94/Box 06/C.I.A./TVA-TTU.

<sup>61</sup> Kojima, *The Record*, p.116.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Telegram from the Consulate General at Hong Kong to the Department of State’, February 19, 1966, *FRUS-Johnson*, vol. XXX, document 125.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Lumbers, ‘The Irony of Vietnam: The Johnson Administration’s Tentative Bridge Building to China, 1965-1966’, *The Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, (Summer 2004), pp.94-95.

<sup>64</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhongguo dui Yue-Mei hetan de lichang’, pp.84-85.

By March 1966, the Cultural Revolution was gathering momentum, and with it a renewed emphasis on the perils of revisionism; however, at this point the vexed question of joint action with the Soviets on assisting Vietnam raised its head again. Although in the spring of 1965 the P.R.C. had rejected the idea of Soviet over-flights and other measures that the Chinese leadership considered would violate Chinese sovereignty, they had managed to come to certain arrangements with the Soviet Union regarding the transportation of aid for Vietnam by rail across China. The situation was, however, characterised by disputes between the two sides, largely revolving around the Soviet inability to keep to the agreed delivery schedule and the officious response this provoked on the Chinese side. In March 1966, a delegation of the Japanese Communist Party, led by General Secretary Kenji Miyamoto, embarked on a three-country tour of East Asian communism to North Vietnam, China, and North Korea. While in China, the Japanese had long discussions with their hosts on the international situation during which differing interpretations of world trends came to the fore. Most notably, the Japanese pushed for the formation of a united front of socialist countries to aid the Vietnamese communists' struggle, taking up the call that had been issued by the leadership of the C.P.S.U one year earlier. However, for Mao, such a front was nothing more than a trap that would give legitimacy to the heterodoxy of the Soviet revisionists.<sup>65</sup>

The J.C.P. had previously largely sided with the C.C.P. in the Sino-Soviet dispute, and when the delegation came to Beijing in March 1966 they still held the view that the C.P.S.U. had a revisionist leadership pursuing policies of splitism and big country chauvinism. But while in Hanoi they had heard direct appeals from Le Duan and Ho Chi Minh about the need for socialist unity, and at the conclusion of their visit declared that "at the present the formation and expansion of a united front of the world's peoples against U.S. imperialism, for world peace and national independence, is an extremely important and urgent task." They resolved with the Vietnamese comrades to "do all in their power to make active contributions" to it, and in this manner pressed the issue on their return to Beijing from the North Vietnamese capital.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 2, *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, vol. 7, no. 5, (Sep.2000), pp.26-27; Kojima, *The Record*, pp.7, 106, 109.

<sup>66</sup> Kojima, *The Record*, pp.58-59, 97.



The Japanese delegation held further discussions with their Chinese hosts, headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping upon their return to Beijing, during which time Liu admitted that “If the Soviet Union is serious in countering the U.S. in Vietnam, we can act together with them”, however this statement was tempered by frequent statements that the Chinese leadership did not believe that the Soviets were serious in this desire. The J.C.P. delegation then set off on March 11<sup>th</sup> to visit Pyongyang, without any suggestion from “either side on issuing a joint statement or joint communiqué.” Thus, the group was surprised when they arrived back in the Chinese capital, on what was intended to be merely a stop-over on their way back to Japan, that the Chinese side wanted to issue a joint communiqué, and that a meeting with Chairman Mao in Shanghai had been arranged for after its conclusion. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, the text was agreed, and early the next morning the party set off for Shanghai to meet the C.C.P. Chairman, after which the communiqué was to be released.<sup>67</sup>

There exists little in the available literature indicating the provenance of the idea of the joint communiqué; however the fact that it was connected to a meeting with the Chairman hints at a Shanghai connection, possibly through the medium of Mao’s trusted ideologue, Kang Sheng. Indeed, it was Kang who accompanied the Japanese on the flight from Beijing to Shanghai, during which time busied himself correcting galley proofs of “a *Renmin Ribao* article that criticized ‘Hai Rui’s Dismissal From Office’, the historical play; he was taking them to Mao for him to check, he said.” The Chairman was limbering up to launch a simultaneous attack on revisionism both domestically and internationally, and from the moment of their arrival in Shanghai, Miyamoto felt that there was something rather strange afoot: Kang left them waiting at the airport for an hour while he and Zhao Yimin went to hold “preliminary talks” with the Chairman. Probably, in fact, this was to give Mao time to compose the “amendments” to the communiqué he was about to propose to his Japanese counterpart, which were duly presented to Miyamoto at the Chairman’s residence shortly in advance of a meeting with him. As intended, they proved to be completely unacceptable.<sup>68</sup>

The changes Mao demanded, in effect, completely altered both the tone

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp.160-3.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp.197-8.

and substance of the text. The new version explicitly named the Soviet Union as the centre of modern revisionism that had to be struggled against, and rejected the idea of any united front that included the Soviets. Instead, Mao called for “the unity of revolutionary peoples of the world”; he demanded that international democratic movements “hold fast to the genuinely revolutionary line that reflects the aspiration of revolutionary peoples of the world”. Most revealing of the Chairman’s mindset was the longest passage he inserted into the text: “It is of utmost importance to resolutely oppose the thoughts of modern revisionism, which is a reflection of the anti-communist, anti-revolutionary and anti-popular thoughts of the bourgeoisie in and outside of our countries.”<sup>69</sup>

Mao was prepared to up the ante in his evolving plan to challenge revisionism at home and abroad, and this communiqué provided him with an opportunity to do so. In many respects it represented for the international arena what *Hai Rui Dismissed From Office* had done for China’s domestic politics. Mao publicly repudiated his own party and its leadership in the presence of a foreign dignitary, and did so in a manner designed to fundamentally emphasise his rejection of what he viewed to be Soviet revisionism, and its pernicious influence within China. “This communiqué is lacking in courage: it is soft and powerless... Those in Beijing agreed to it, too, I presume. (They are) too soft.” Furthermore, he had acted in a manner deliberately designed to alienate in one fell swoop not only the Vietnamese Workers’ Party, who clearly hoped for some kind of Sino-Soviet joint action, but also one of the handful of mainstream communist parties in the world that had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the C.C.P. in the face of Soviet revisionism. The C.C.P. was going it alone, and Mao was taking it there.<sup>70</sup>

The visit of the Japanese delegation and the clear messages from Washington about its lack of aggressive intent had provided the Chairman with the perfect opportunity to put on display all the dramatic effects at his disposal. Mao welcomed isolation, as well as revolution, chaos and rebellion at home and abroad; and it is no coincidence that he began a full-frontal assault on Peng Zhen and the Beijing party apparatus in the days that followed this encounter.<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp.200-204.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp.204, 208.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp.205-6.

view from Hanoi was something quite different: chaos was the very last thing the V.W.P. needed on the territory of its main overland supply route. Yet, despite this, not only did North Vietnam still need China, but the ideological underpinnings of Mao's mayhem struck a chord with many among the Hanoi leadership, except when it came into conflict with the needs of the Vietnamese struggle.<sup>72</sup>

The American wind blowing up from Saigon had further emphasised the closeness of the 'lips and teeth' relationship between China and North Vietnam. China provided the military assistance it believed would have a positive and deterrent capacity without triggering an American response against China itself. Beyond military aid, China mobilized its border provinces and the machinery of central government to keep the North Vietnamese state functioning and viable in the face of American bombing, from improvements in apple farming to the construction of railways and hydro-electric dams. North Vietnam would fight on until victory, and the reflected glory would shine on Zhongnanhai, not the Kremlin. Thus it was with irritation that Mao looked on at the Soviet Union's new-found interest in, and sympathy for, the predicament of the Vietnamese; confident in the utility of the Vietnamese' struggle for the global revolution, and in the inevitability of their victory, the Soviet 'Johnny Come-Latelys' posed a threat to both. Mao believed this threat had to be countered, even at the risk of aggravating the Vietnamese comrades, through the rejection of peace proposals that had Soviet fingerprints on them, or obdurately rejecting any form of joint action with the U.S.S.R. Revisionism in the international arena, just as at home, was a plague – potentially contagious through contact.

Likewise, at home as abroad, the Vietnam War and the Cultural Revolution were inextricably linked: the former functioned as impetus, catalyst, and cover for the latter. However, Mao moved cautiously during this period, conducting his own policy of gradual escalation against his party, while closely observing the American actions in Indochina. Every time the United States escalated its involvement in Southeast Asia, Mao paused in his manoeuvres against those within the C.C.P. whom he viewed to be a threat to his revolutionary vision. And yet with every American escalation and the heightened

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<sup>72</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge, 'The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967–68', *Cold War History*, vol. 5, no. 4, November 2005, p.495.

fear of attack it provoked in China, so too it made Mao's own next step easier, until such times as the country was gripped with war-fever, and an attack on dangerous revisionism within could be launched (only, of course, after Mao had received signals from Washington that no American attack from without was intended.) Thus a real though waning threat in the form of American imperialism was transposed onto an imagined one in the form of the Soviet Union and domestic revisionism. China would continue to support the battle in Vietnam against Mao's American enemies, but Mao was about to decidedly direct China's energies inwards.

### The effects of the Cultural Revolution on North Vietnam

Mao's rejection of joint action with the Soviet Union clearly rankled with North Vietnamese leaders, including Le Duan, who was back in Beijing barely a fortnight after the uncomfortable meeting between Mao and Miyamoto (indeed Comrade B [Le Duan] recalled the incident as evidence of Mao's personal perfidy over a decade later after China invaded Vietnam in 1979), although Duan did engage in some flattery about the important role China was playing in combating "reformists" and "counter-revolutionaries." Even so, the leftward turn in Chinese polity and the emphasis on ideology and politics within the Chinese party and army had begun to filter down to P.L.A. troops serving in North Vietnam and provincial officials interacting with their Vietnamese colleagues; this began to introduce new tension into the relationship between Hanoi and Beijing, when already the sheer number of Chinese troops on Vietnamese soil was apparently causing concern in certain quarters of the D.R.V.<sup>73</sup>

Deng Xiaoping, ever ready to cut to the chase, raised the issue in discussions with Le Duan, admitting that perhaps, as Chairman Mao had predicted, the Chinese "had too much enthusiasm" in the Vietnam question." This was, Deng intimated, causing "suspicion from Vietnamese comrades." Deng had little time for diplomatic niceties between the two allies, and appeared irritated at circumlocution on the part of the Vietnamese guests. "Do the Chinese want to take control over Vietnam?... [W]e don't have any such intention... [W]e

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<sup>73</sup> 'Comrade B on the Plot of the Reactionary Chinese Clique Against Vietnam', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 12/13 (Winter 2001), p.282.

hope in this matter, if you have any problem, please tell us straightforwardly.” Clearly affronted by the elements of traditional Vietnamese suspicion that were creeping into the relationship, Deng’s response was the diplomatic equivalent of threatening to take his ball home with him. “I pose a question for you to consider: Do you need our military men or not?... We don’t know whether it is good for the relations between two parties and two countries or not when we sent 100,000 people to Vietnam [sic]. Personally, I think it’s better for our military men to come back home right after they finish their work... the results are not what we both want.”<sup>74</sup>

Part of Deng’s anger stemmed from the failure of the North Vietnamese to counter claims that were again emanating from Moscow that the Chinese were interfering with Soviet and Eastern European aid destined for the D.R.V. but which had to be transported across China by rail. The unfolding Cultural Revolution environment meant that the Soviet allegations had currency abroad. Le Duan’s mealy-mouthed appraisal of the situation surely did nothing to massage bruised Chinese pride. “We hold that the Soviet assistance to Vietnam is partly sincere, so neither do we ask whether the Soviets [will] sell Vietnam out nor [do we] say the Soviets slander China in the matter transportation of Soviet aid. Because we know that if we say this, the problem will become more complicated.”<sup>75</sup> Thus the situation continued: not long after Le Duan was in the Chinese capital, the Soviet Defence Minister, Rodion Malinovski, complained to Hungarian comrades that China was trying to block the transit of aid. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, the Chinese Foreign Ministry felt compelled to issue a statement rejecting the Soviet claims, stating that China gave all materiel from the Soviet bloc gratis and priority transportation across Chinese territory, and had in 1965 alone moved over 40,000 tonnes as such. On June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1966, the North Vietnamese released a statement, condemning “Western media organizations” for broadcasting allegations about Chinese blockages of Soviet aid. These allegations were an “extremely despicable plot fabricated to sow discord” – words that would have been welcomed by Deng Xiaoping in April, but by June were probably viewed in

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<sup>74</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Kang Sheng and Le Duan, Nguyen Duy Trinh, April 13, 1966 in Westad et al., *77 Conversations*, pp.91-96.

<sup>75</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Kang Sheng and Le Duan, Nguyen Duy Trinh, April 13, 1966 in Westad et al., *77 Conversations*, p.94.

Beijing as being a little late.<sup>76</sup>

As the Cultural Revolution took hold, however, and tensions between China and the Soviet Union grew, the “Western media organizations” allegations began to take on a rather more factual basis. By the autumn of 1966 the party Central Committee and State Council were being forced to issue notices relating to how the conduct of the Cultural Revolution was interfering with rail transportation, but apparently to little effect. So serious was the disruption to the national rail system being caused by Red Guards that in June 1967 an order was sent down, bearing the imprimatur of the Cultural Revolution Small Group and the Central Military Commission, as well as the State Council and the Central Committee, strictly prohibiting obstruction or damage to the railways. By mid-summer the railway system had been put under military control, indicating that a second denial of delays issued by Hanoi in February was designed more to save Chinese embarrassment than having any basis in fact. To compound matters, increasing violence between revolutionary groups in the summer of 1967, partly stemming from Mao’s decision to “arm the left”, reached its apogee in Guangxi, one of the Chinese provinces bordering North Vietnam and a key transit point for Chinese, and for that matter Soviet, aid passing through Pingxiang’s “Friendship Pass” between the P.R.C. and North Vietnam. In November, when Beijing moved to try and resolve the state of near civil war that was developing in the province through a call for unity, one tactic employed was an appeal to the rebels’ sense of proletarian internationalism. The ‘Decision on the Guangxi Problem’ reminded all concerned that “Guangxi is the front line of ‘Assist Vietnam, Resist America’, and the Vietnamese people take Guangxi to be their most reliable rear area”; the ‘Decision’ also linked making revolution with assisting Vietnam.<sup>77</sup> However, there was little appetite in Hanoi for the sort of revolution that Mao was pursuing at home.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-Su chongtu’, part 2, pp.27-28.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Guanyu Guangxi wenti de jue ding’ [Decision on the Guangxi problem], November 18, 1967 in Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun guofang daxue dangshi dangjian, zheng, gong jiaoyanshi [The Party History Teaching and Research Department of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army National Defence University (hereafter Guofang daxue)], ed., *Zhonggong dangshi jiaoxue cankao ziliao* (‘wenhua da geming’ shiqi) [C.C.P. History Teaching and Reference Materials, (‘Cultural Revolution’ period)] (hereafter *Cankao ziliao*), vol. 25, (Beijing, 1998), pp.624-5.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Guanyu wei hu tielu yunshu zhixu jinji de tongzhi’ [Urgent notice about safeguarding the smooth running of railway transportation], October 31, 1966 in *ibid.* p.152; ‘Guanyu jianjue wei hu tielu, jiaotong yunshu zhixu de mingling’ [Order on protecting the smooth running of railway and communications transportation], June 1, 1967 in *ibid.* p.488; Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-Su

In mid-1967 China once again refused a Soviet request to fly over Chinese airspace in order to transport MiG aircraft to North Vietnam, and despite a new agreement in February 1968 between China and the Soviet Union on the transportation of Soviet military aid by rail across China, problems at the northern transfer points persisted and multiplied to the extent that by early 1969 the Soviets accused the Chinese of not simply “blocking” Soviet aid, but of actually refusing to transport materiel destined for Vietnam. According to the Soviets, in a three month period over 500 wagons were dispatched to the Chinese border only to be sent back again; in March, with a new shipment on its way, the Chinese officials responsible found themselves too busy to meet with their Soviet counterparts. When their schedules finally freed up, the officials refused to accept the Soviet shipment under the pretence that the Soviets had not given them sufficient notification. Unsurprisingly, in the summer of 1969 as tensions and incidents along the Sino-Soviet border appeared as if they were going to lead to all-out war, traffic between the two nations destined for Vietnam was suspended by China, forcing the Soviets to open up an air corridor over Laos, Burma and India.<sup>79</sup>

And despite all this, it is clear that the Cultural Revolution actually had some positive effects for the North Vietnamese through its emphasis on the political nature of ‘Assist Vietnam, Resist America’; reluctant provincial officials were goaded into revolutionary and political action in circumstances that would otherwise have been simply a matter of economic relations on the inter-state and inter-provincial level. In parallel with their colleagues throughout China, beginning in the summer of 1966, Yunnanese provincial officials responsible for dealings with their Vietnamese comrades began to emphasise the importance of studying the works of Mao Zedong and political events. Concurrent to this many of the large-scale assistance projects for which the Vietnamese were seeking Chinese assistance – in particular hydroelectric projects, which were of particular importance to the Vietnamese comrades – received approval with a view to “giving prominence to Mao Zedong Thought.” In 1967, transport workers on the ground in the D.R.V. also doubled their efforts – literally in some cases,

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chongtu’, part 2, p.28; “Why Don’t We Arm the Left?” Mao’s Culpability for the Cultural Revolution’s “Great Chaos” of 1967, *The China Quarterly*, no182, June 2005, pp.277-300 .

<sup>79</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-Su chongtu’, part 1, pp.56-57, part 2, pp.28-29.

completing six months' scheduled work within three months – in order to “hold high the great banner of Mao Zedong Thought” and demonstrate to their Vietnamese comrades that the anti-revisionist line would yield their struggle greater results than their misguided dalliances with the Soviets.<sup>80</sup>

And many among the Chinese people took the Vietnamese plight to their hearts. Almost as soon as the ‘Assist Vietnam, Resist America’ movement was launched, the State Council was forced to issue instructions on how to handle the Chinese revolutionary masses’ desire to assist the Vietnamese struggle, among whom many were sending money, gifts, and even food and commodity stamps. Appropriate procedures were established for the transmission of letters, money and gifts (though not stamps) to both North and South Vietnam according to the wishes of the sender (though if there was ambiguity the gift was to be sent to the South). However, such was the motivational power of the ‘Assist Vietnam, Resist America’ campaign that when it was compounded by the revolutionary fervour of the Cultural Revolution many Chinese civilians and Red Guards were inspired to make their own way to Vietnam in the hope of being able to join in the anti-American struggle. Not only that, but the D.R.V. embassy and consulates were being plagued by letters, telegrams, and even telephone calls, from ‘volunteers’ who hoped to join the fight; the problem became so acute that Chinese central authorities were forced to admit that it was interfering in Sino-Vietnamese relations. By early 1967 the problem had become so serious that the North Vietnamese government was forced to complain about it to their Chinese counterparts, and in March of that year a notification was issued giving instructions on how to deal with such persons: they were to be reminded that crossing into North Vietnam on their own was disrespectful to Vietnamese sovereignty, and an illegal act. The best thing they could do to help Vietnam,

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<sup>80</sup> ‘Yunnan sheng renmin weiyuanhui waishichu guanyu wo zai Yue Hejiang sheng nongye gongzuozu qingkuang fanying’, June 2, 1966 in Xiao & Li, *Yunnan yu yuan Yue kang Mei*, pp.136-9; ‘Yunnan sheng renmin weiyuanhui waishi bangongshi guanyu yuanzhu Yunnan Laojie, Hejiang, Laizhou san sheng de buchong qingshi’ [Supplementary request of the Yunnan Province People’s Committee Foreign Affairs General Office relating to assistance for the three Vietnamese provinces of Lao Cai, Ha Giang, and Lai Chau], April 10, 1967, *ibid.*, pp.221-5; ‘Zhongguo Dian-Gui qiche yunshu dadui Kaiyuan lianluozhan yuan Yue gongzuo zongjie’ [Summary of the ‘assist Vietnam’ work of the Yunnan-Guangxi vehicular transportation unit Kaiyuan liaison station], July 4, 1967, *ibid.*, pp.245-54; ‘Yunnan Sheng fu Laojie er dianli youshuizhan gongzuozu gongzuo zongjie’ [Summary of the work of the Yunnan province workgroup that visited Lao Cai number 2 hydroelectric pump station], March 1, 1967, *ibid.*, pp.204-5.



they were told, was to “return to their work-unit and make revolution; carrying out the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to its end is also a positive contribution to the Vietnamese people’s anti-American struggle for national salvation.”<sup>81</sup> For these Chinese transgressions both Mao and Zhou were embarrassingly forced to personally apologise to D.R.V. Premier, Pham Van Dong.<sup>82</sup>

Perhaps predictably, “giving prominence to Mao Zedong Thought” soon gave way to outright hectoring and proselytizing from Chinese officials when dealing with their Vietnamese counterparts and actively ‘assisting’ in North Vietnam. Some of the more enthusiastic Maoists felt the Vietnamese comrades were not sufficiently appreciative of the Chinese efforts, nor of the inspiration behind them. More often than not this accompanied the valiant hard work that the Chinese support and transport troops performed in the D.R.V., thereby undermining their efforts in the eyes of their counterparts who were generally quite scornful of the methods, if not the aims, of the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’; occasionally this was accompanied by pointed Vietnamese reference to the mistakes of the Chinese-inspired ‘Land Reform Campaign’ of the 1950s. This reaction was not universal, however, and it appears on occasion young Vietnamese workers, probably unaware that the very fabric of Chinese society was being strained to breaking point by Mao’s pet project, enjoyed getting caught up in the enthusiasm and apparently unshakeable faith of their C.R. inspired guests; indeed, in a country whose morale and fibre were being drained by an increasingly costly and bloody war, the certainty and clarity offered by those who religiously adhered to Mao Zedong Thought must have resembled the spiritual tonic of an old style revival meeting. And this, of course – young Vietnamese quite literally singing the praises of Mao Zedong as their great leader – was what the Vietnamese authorities desperately sought to avoid, and gave them yet another reason to be circumspect in their dealings with their northern neighbour.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> ‘Guanyu quan zu hongweibing he geming qun zong zifa fu Yue yuan Yue kang Mei de tongzhi’ [Notification on dissuading Red Guards and revolutionary masses from spontaneously going to Vietnam to Assist Vietnam, Resist America], March 3, 1967 in Guofang daxue, *Cankao ziliao wenge shiqi*, p.329.

<sup>82</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, April 10, 1967, 77 *Conversations*, pp.101-2.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Yunnan Sheng fu Laojie er dianli youshuizhan gongzuo zu gongzuo zongjie’, March 1, 1967 in

It is clear that in concert with the deterioration in the P.R.C.'s relations with practically every other country, the Cultural Revolution placed additional strains on Beijing's relations with Hanoi. Had the Cultural Revolution occurred at a time when there were not several hundred thousand Chinese troops on Vietnamese soil, the D.R.V. leadership would have probably looked on with a degree of mistrust, and perhaps even disgust, though its effects on the bilateral relationship would have been limited. As it was, the "enthusiasm" expressed by the Chinese troops on the ground, and their assertion of the global relevance of "Mao Zedong Thought", heightened the traditional Vietnamese sensitivities about Chinese dominance – cultural as well as political. Furthermore, the "anti-revisionist" struggle waged by Mao, and his refusal to countenance joint action with the Soviets, greatly frustrated the Vietnamese comrades, for whom Soviet missile technology was an increasingly important component of their national defence structure. And while the evidence seems to suggest that for most of this period the Chinese authorities did in fact assiduously undertake their duties and responsibilities to transport Soviet bloc materiel to the D.R.V., the attacks on these very structures of authority that Mao orchestrated and guided seriously hampered the capacity for external aid, upon which North Vietnam was dependent, to reach the D.R.V.

Likewise, diplomatic relations between the two nations were hampered by the fact that the Chinese ambassador in Hanoi, like P.R.C. ambassadors the world over, was recalled to Beijing to engage in the C.R. Whatever differences of opinion Pham Van Dong and Le Duan may have had with the Chinese ambassador during his tenure (such as during the Michalowski incident), it is unlikely that they gave much credence to the allegation that he was a 'Guomindang agent', given the context of the extreme radicalization of Chinese overseas diplomatic posts in the spring and summer of 1967 that caused numerous diplomatic crises, including on Vietnam's doorstep – in Cambodia and in Hong Kong.<sup>84</sup> And it must have been with equal shock and incredulity that Hanoi learned of the pitched battles that were being fought in the summer of

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Xiao & Li, *Yunnan yu Yuan Yue kang Mei*, pp.204-5; 'Zhongguo Dian-Gui qiche yunshu dadui Kaiyuan lianluozhan yuan Yue gongzuo zongjie', July 4, 1967, *ibid.*, pp.245-54; 'Yunnan sheng Qujing cichang peixun Yuenan Laojie taoci jishu gongren de gongzuo zongjie' [Summary of the work of the Yunnan province Qujing ceramics factory in training Vietnamese ceramics technicians from Lao Cai], March 27, 1968, *ibid.*, pp.300-8.

<sup>84</sup> Westad et al., *77 Conversations*, p.162, n. 225.

1967 not in Vietnam, but on Chinese soil in Yunnan and in Guangxi – the very provinces that bordered the D.R.V. and which were so vital for the supply of North Vietnam’s war effort. From Hanoi’s perspective, while there would never have been a good time for such disruption, the timing could not have been worse, occurring just as Hanoi was making its preparations for the ‘General Offensive-General Uprising’ (Tet Offensive).

In international relations, just as in domestic matters, the Cultural Revolution was to have a destructive phase, after which there would be rebuilding on the basis of the “new things” that had sprouted. Despite this, however, the communist parties of China and Vietnam, like their very nations, had a relationship of such length and intimacy that while the external effects of Mao’s Cultural Revolution were probably felt most acutely in the V.W.P., it was the very closeness of the fraternal links that made this so. A preponderance of Soviet military aid had not translated into dominant Soviet political influence in Hanoi. In fact, in the second half of 1967 the Vietnam Workers’ Party carried out its own purge of elements who were considered to be ‘pro-Soviet’, and who were charged with passing on information to the Soviet Union about Hanoi’s policies in advance of the launch of the Tet Offensive. North Vietnam’s domestic polity took a leftward turn in this period, during which the hand of those known to have more ideologically radical outlooks, such as Truong Chinh, Le Duc Tho, and Le Duan, were strengthened. Some Vietnamese sources indicate that the V.W.P. “approved of Maoist policies and the ideas behind the Cultural Revolution, even though it disapproved of the methods used in China.”<sup>85</sup> It is ironic then, that it would be these ‘radicals’ (in Vietnamese terms), in particular Tho and Duan, who would be at the forefront of Hanoi’s politics when Sino-Vietnamese relations would reach breaking point a decade later. For the time being, however, just as it had been on several occasions in the past, the differences between Hanoi and Beijing, between the North Vietnamese leadership and a Chinese Communist Party now totally and completely dominated by the figure of Mao Zedong, were largely tactical, not strategic.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge, ‘The Ideological Debate’, pp.495.

<sup>86</sup> Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, (Chicago: I.R. Dec, 1994), p.72.

“At a certain point negotiations can begin”

The issue that was most central to the Vietnamese communists’ war effort, and as has been seen was also of great interest and concern to the Chinese leadership, was when and under what circumstances Hanoi should enter into negotiations with the U.S. government. The North Vietnamese Communists were left in no doubt about the Chinese view of their April decision to open negotiations with the United States government. As early as December 1965, after Resolution 12 (authorising the opening of negotiations with the United States) had been passed at the V.W.P.’s Twelfth Plenum, Zhou Enlai counselled North Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Nguyen Duy Trinh, that “we are not against the idea that when war reaches a certain point negotiations will be needed. But the problem is that the time is not yet ripe”.<sup>87</sup> This was a view China had consistently maintained in the intervening period. It is important to note, however, that not only had Beijing not ruled out the commencement of negotiations when appropriate, from at least as early as the autumn of 1966 the Chinese leaders had acknowledged the importance of 1968 as an opportunity to turn the war in Hanoi’s favour through a more offensive strategy. Beijing did not expect the Vietnamese to fight an interminable war of attrition, and in 1967 Mao had urged Ho Chi Minh to move towards big-unit warfare in South Vietnam in anticipation of a 1968 dry season victory over the United States.<sup>88</sup>

In response to Lyndon Johnson’s 31<sup>st</sup> March 1968 announcement of the suspension of the bombing of North Vietnam above the 20<sup>th</sup> parallel in order to facilitate peace talks, on April 3<sup>rd</sup> the North Vietnamese responded positively, apparently without having informed their Chinese allies beforehand.<sup>89</sup> Hanoi proposed Warsaw as a suitable venue for initial contacts, after the Americans had rejected Phnom Penh; however the Chinese strongly censured their North Vietnamese comrades for these two acts of compromise, “From our experience, we see that negotiations must start when we have a stronger position, not a weak one... The situation showed that Vietnamese comrades find it easy to

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<sup>87</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Nguyen Duy Trinh, December 19, 1965, eds., 77 Conversations, p.90.

<sup>88</sup> Qiang Zhai, *Beijing and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965-68: New Evidence From Chinese Sources*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper Number 18, (Washington D.C.: 1997), p.15; Zhang, ‘The Vietnam War’, p.738.

<sup>89</sup> Zhai, *CATVW*, p.172.

compromise. The world's peoples can't help thinking that you are facing some difficulties in your struggle.”<sup>90</sup> And while it is probable that the actual tactics used during the Tet Offensive were considered dubious in Beijing, it appears that it was a combination of wounded Chinese pride at not being informed beforehand, and genuine concerns about how Hanoi handled Johnson's offer of peace talks that elicited a negative response from Beijing, rather than strategic divergences.

China's relations with North Vietnam deteriorated through the summer of 1968, and took a sharp turn after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia on 20<sup>th</sup> August, an event which shook the leaders of the P.R.C. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Mao met with senior party figures, including Zhou Enlai and the 'Four Marshals' (Chen Yi, Xu Xiangqian, Nie Rongzhen and Ye Jianying), to discuss their reaction to the invasion. The next evening, after consultations with the Romanian ambassador in Beijing and Chairman Mao, the decision was taken that that same evening Zhou Enlai would attend in person a reception in the Romanian Embassy for that country's National Day, where he would make a speech announcing China's reaction. The timing, in this respect at least, was fortunate: the degree of alarm felt in Beijing was surpassed only by that felt in Bucharest, so the Romanian embassy provided a 'socialist' public forum, at which all the Warsaw Pact nations' ambassadors would be present, where Zhou could express China's fury. Thus, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August Zhou Enlai made the first public charge that the Soviet Union had become 'social-imperialist' and, in tandem, the Chinese media issued vitriolic denunciations of the events in Czechoslovakia. While Brezhnev's doctrine of 'limited sovereignty' would not be articulated for another few months, the implications for their own sovereignty seemed clear enough to the Chinese: the Soviets were now a greater threat to China's security than the Americans.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, April 13, 1968, 77 *Conversations*, p.122.

<sup>91</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.252-3; Liu and Mastny, eds., 'Proceedings of the International Symposium: Reviewing the History of Chinese-East European Relations from the 1960s to the 1980s', in *Zürcher Beiträge zur Sicherheitspolitik und Konfliktforschung* [Zurich Contributions to Security Policy and Conflict Research], nr. 72, (hereafter cited as 'China and Eastern Europe'), p.111; Dillon, Burton & Soderlund, 'Who Was the Principal Enemy?: Shifts in Chinese Perceptions of the Two Superpowers, 1968-1969' in *Asian Survey*, Volume 17, Issue 5 (May 1977), p.466. This study of the 'hostile symbols' used by China to describe the United States and the Soviet Union also noted that (by its measurements), in the wake of the invasion, Chinese hostility towards the Soviet Union was greater than that towards the United States at any time during the 1968-69 period.

The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, expressed extremely strong and swift support for the Soviet action, something that surely infuriated, worried and unnerved the Chinese. On 22<sup>nd</sup> August, before the Chinese had even formalised their position, *Nhan Dan* [The People] published the first TASS declaration justifying the invasion. This was followed by Hanoi radio and official newspapers in the D.R.V. describing the invading Soviet troops as pursuing the noble goal of protecting Czechoslovakia. Further positive comment was provided by the North Vietnamese spokesman at the Paris peace talks, Nguyen Le Thanh, who came out publicly in support of the invasion's goal of "strengthening the unity of the socialist camp".<sup>92</sup>

The D.R.V.'s response to events in Czechoslovakia drew Chinese ire, and had the effect of further of making Beijing even more nervous about any 'capitulationist' peace deal that might have come out of the Paris talks, and about the future course of North Vietnamese policy. As North Vietnam increased its support for the Soviet action, so too China increased the intensity of its invective, both towards the Soviets, and toward those "who cherish illusions about Soviet revisionism and U.S. imperialism". Zhou Enlai's charge (in the same speech) of September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1969 was that "it is high time [they] woke up!"<sup>93</sup> This statement, demonstrating a willingness on the part of the Chinese leadership to acutely embarrass the North Vietnamese on their National Day, reflected the deep level of Chinese displeasure and unease. It does appear, though, that Zhou Enlai had adequately made his point, since Hanoi fell silent on the issue in the wake of this harangue.

Despite this, on October 1<sup>st</sup>, during National Day celebrations to mark the nineteenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the North Vietnamese dignitaries attending the festivities in Beijing found themselves ranked behind those of the Australian Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), reflecting the low esteem in which they were held in Beijing at that point.<sup>94</sup> On the October 6<sup>th</sup>, Zhou Enlai cabled the Chinese chargé d'affaires in

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<sup>92</sup> 'Democratic National Convention', *New York Times*, 27 August 1968, Folder 12/Box 07/DPC: Unit 03/TVA-TTU; 'Nguyen Thanh Le Holds Press Meeting in Paris', AFP, 26 August 1968, Folder 19/Box 07/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU.

<sup>93</sup> 'The Bombing Halt and Peking's Deathly Hush', *South China Morning Post*, 3rd November 1968, Folder 08/Box 08/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU.

<sup>94</sup> W.R. Smyser, *The Independent Vietnamese: Vietnamese Communism Between Russia and China, 1956-1969*, Ohio University Center for International Studies Papers in International

Hanoi to instruct him to inform Premier Pham Van Dong that “due to domestic commitments” China would be no longer able to receive a North Vietnamese delegation that had intended to visit.<sup>95</sup> An acrimonious meeting between North Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Trade Minister Ly Ban and Zhou Enlai took place on October 9<sup>th</sup>, where Zhou suggested that the negotiations with the United States would lead to a mistake of similar proportions to the Geneva Accords of 1954, while it was also in this month that China began the withdrawal of some of its engineering troops and accompanying anti-aircraft battalions. Beijing’s message was unambiguous: Hanoi could not expect China to continue its assistance in defending North Vietnam against American attack if the threat no longer existed.<sup>96</sup> Because of the events in Paris but particularly Prague, Beijing’s relationship with Hanoi plummeted to its nadir.

The growing tensions between the two parties came to a head in a spat between P.R.C. Foreign Minister Chen Yi and North Vietnamese politburo member and Paris negotiator Le Duc Tho. Chen criticised the North Vietnamese comrades on four issues: they had lost the initiative in accepting the peace talks in exchange for a partial bombing cessation; and secondly, by accepting quadripartite negotiations they had undermined the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front’s status as the unique legal representative of the people of South Vietnam. Most significantly though, Chen Yi alleged that the North Vietnamese response would help Hubert Humphrey win the U.S. presidential election in November; and finally that they had accepted compromising and capitulationist proposals put forward by the Soviet revisionists. Clearly unhappy, Chen Yi concluded, “So, between our two parties and the two governments of Vietnam and China, there is nothing more to talk about. Nevertheless, as President Ho has said, our relationship is one of both comrades and brothers; we will therefore

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Studies – Southeast Asia No. 55 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1980) p.104; Taylor, *China and Southeast Asia*, p.61.

<sup>95</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.262.

<sup>96</sup> S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p.36; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China Diplomatic History Research Department (hereafter P.R.C. For. Min.), *Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong dashi ji* [A Record of Major Events in the Diplomatic Activities of Zhou Enlai] (hereafter cited as *Zhou waijiao huodong*), (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi, 1993), p.531; ‘Eye on China’, *South China Morning Post*, 3rd November 1968, Folder 08/Box 08/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU; Qu Aiguo ‘Zhongguo zhiyuan budui zai yuenan zhanchang de junshi xingdong’ [The Military Activities of Chinese Support Troops on the Vietnam Battlefield], in Li Danhui ed., *Zhongguo yu yinduzhina zhanzheng*, esp.pp.91-101; Chen Jian, *Mao’s China*, p.235.

consider the changes of the situation in November.”<sup>97</sup> While heated, this argument was by no means the cynical “threat to cut off relations between the two Parties” later alleged by Hanoi.<sup>98</sup> Tho, however, was in no mood to take such criticisms lying down,

Le Duc Tho: On this matter, we will wait and see... We have gained experience over the past 15 years...

Chen Yi: We signed the Geneva accords in 1954 when the US did not agree to do so. We withdrew our armed forces from the South to the North, thus letting the people in the South be killed. We at that time made a mistake in which we [Chinese] shared a part.

Le Duc Tho: Because we listened to your advice.

Chen Yi: You just mentioned that in the Geneva Conference, you made a mistake because you followed our advice. But this time, you will make another mistake if you do not take our words into account.<sup>99</sup>

Behind Chen’s harsh words lay two factors underpinning Chinese unease at the turn of events in Vietnam and in Paris. As noted, the Chinese leaders had not only been offended by the failure of the Vietnamese to inform them beforehand of their decision to open talks, but also had concerns about Hanoi’s tactical response. More significantly, however, by September 1968 Beijing had been rattled by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the Chinese and Vietnamese comrades began to diverge on what would be the optimal outcome of the November U.S. presidential election. While Hanoi sought to use the elections to squeeze the maximum concessions out of the Johnson administration, it still preferred a Humphrey presidency to a victory for the well-known Republican ‘cold warrior’ and former vice-president Richard Nixon. It now seems clear that Mao wanted to see a man in the White House who would take a strong stand against Soviet social-imperialism, and Nixon fitted that bill. Mao was voting for Nixon, but was concerned that the North Vietnamese concessions in Paris would allow Hubert Humphrey and the Democratic Party to snatch a victory on the back of increased optimism among the American public about an end to the war. Chen Yi’s reference to reappraising the situation in November, after the elections, was the first hint of differing preferences in Beijing and Hanoi about who occupied the White House.

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<sup>97</sup> Memcon (extract), Chen Yi and Le Duc Tho, October 17, 1968, *77 Conversations*, pp.136-7.

<sup>98</sup> S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p.37.

<sup>99</sup> Memcon (extract), Chen Yi and Le Duc Tho, October 17, 1968, *77 Conversations*, pp.136-7.



In the intense atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution, Vietnam had been held to be the focal point of all the contradictions in the world, i.e. the focal point of the struggle between imperialism and socialism, and the Chinese had often reminded their Vietnamese comrades that in their struggle what had not been won on the battlefield could not be won at the negotiating table either.<sup>100</sup> The military results of the 'General Offensive-General Uprising' had fallen well-short of the expectations of either Hanoi or Beijing. However, the Vietnamese comrades had grasped the psychological impact of Tet on the U.S. media and on American public opinion; Beijing hadn't. Hanoi had seized the opportunity to open contact with Washington, but the rapidity of the decision had caught Beijing off-guard, and undermined the P.R.C. by not giving Beijing's propaganda machine time to lay the groundwork to prepare its own public and international supporters for the advent of the 'fighting while negotiating' stage in the Vietnamese struggle. On top of this, the Chinese held that the concessions made by the North Vietnamese meant approaching negotiations in a passive position and without holding the upper hand on the military front; this would, ultimately, be damaging to the Vietnamese, and world, revolutionary cause. Moreover, China feared that Johnson and the Soviets would collude and, in furtherance of their own goals, between them force North Vietnam into settling for something short of victory, trading concessions on Czechoslovakia and South Vietnam. All of these factors combined to make Beijing irritated and edgy about the turn of events in Paris. Nonetheless, whatever of Chinese concerns about Hanoi's tactics, the events of this period did not represent a slackening in Chinese support for the goals of the Vietnamese comrades.

North Vietnam's success was important for China for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the Chinese leadership felt genuine empathy for the Vietnamese struggle, in a manner only replicated in the attention paid to Korean affairs. The concern extended beyond mere geopolitical calculations: for China, Vietnam and Korea were part of its 'cultural universe', nations whose destiny was tied to that of China on the basis of historical ties, and to whom China had obligations. The continued survival of the regimes in Pyongyang and Hanoi were not only important to Beijing in a geopolitical sense, but also in a moral one: the failure of

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<sup>100</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.2

socialism in either of these two countries, or indeed a permanent rupture between Beijing and either nation, would be a failure of Mao's project and China's leadership role. These events occurred against a backdrop where Mao was attempting to rein in the more excessive claims of the Cultural Revolution years that China was the 'centre of world revolution', and that he himself was the "great teacher of the entire world's revolutionary peoples."<sup>101</sup> Beginning in early March the Chairman had begun excising Maoist propaganda from documents submitted to him for approval, and urged his subordinates not to "impose on others", particularly other communist parties. And while Mao was now downplaying the leadership role he had previously claimed for China at the global level, for historic and cultural reasons that did not apply to Vietnam. Successful Soviet and American pressure on Hanoi to produce a compromise in Paris would represent both a blow to Mao and China, but also greatly aid Hubert Humphrey. Thus China resolved to have nothing to do with the Paris talks, and condemned them as a 'fraud'.<sup>102</sup>

As the momentum for serious negotiations in Paris gathered pace through early October, and the prospect of a negotiated settlement (and a Humphrey victory) became more real, Chinese concern and opposition grew in intensity. This then had the effect of forcing the North Vietnamese to become more closely aligned with the Soviets as a source of diplomatic support for their chosen course of action. On this issue, Beijing had become a victim of its own ideology and propaganda, and thus, by mid-October, the P.R.C. had backed itself into something of a corner. If the talks succeeded in the face of its militant opposition, then China would be even further marginalized internationally, Beijing's line would be badly discredited, and North Vietnam would be likely to move even closer to the Soviets, who were now an even greater threat to Beijing than they had appeared when the Paris talks had begun in May. The choices for Beijing were indeed stark.

Two days after the tetchy meeting between Chen and Tho, Chinese radio made the first reference to the existence of the talks in Paris, indicating the beginning of a change in the Chinese attitude to the Paris talks. There was at the

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<sup>101</sup> Guofang daxue, *Cankao ziliao*, vol. 26, pp.513-9.

<sup>102</sup> Hunt, *The Genesis of Chinese Foreign Policy*, p.133; Guofang daxue, *Cankao ziliao*, vol. 26, p.126;

same time a reduction in the coverage of the fighting in South Vietnam and the U.S. bombing of the North. During the week running up to the U.S. Presidential election on November 5<sup>th</sup>, coverage of Vietnam (and the Paris talks) dried up completely. Given the expectation that any deal was most likely to be brokered in the days just before the election (many expected Johnson to ‘pull something out of the bag’ to clinch the election for Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey), Beijing’s total silence was a reflection of the quandary it found itself in: if talks did fail, then the P.R.C. leadership’s stance all along would have been vindicated; on the other hand, to continue condemning the talks as they reached success would further alienate North Vietnam and push them further into the arms of the ‘revisionists’. Thus, silence reigned during the last days of October, and the first few days of November until, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, *Renmin Ribao* [The People’s Daily] published the full text of President Johnson’s speech announcing the total cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam, accompanied by the text of the D.R.V. government’s response. The message inherent in this for the Chinese public was that the Chinese government had suspended judgement “until the talks make progress – or fail to do so”: in essence that it was “for the Vietnamese themselves to decide.”<sup>103</sup>

These were, in fact, the words used by Mao Zedong less than a fortnight later, after hearing a report on Zhou Enlai’s meeting with North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong.<sup>104</sup> Two days later, Mao himself told the visiting Vietnamese delegation “We agree with your slogan of fighting while negotiating. Some comrades worry that the U.S. will deceive you. But I tell them not to [worry]. Negotiations are just like fighting. You have drawn experience, understood the rules.”<sup>105</sup> This meeting between Mao and Pham Van Dong on the 17<sup>th</sup> November 1968 was an important and nuanced occasion for both sides. Mao’s endorsement of the Vietnamese strategy was still caveated. It was he who turned the conversation to the Geneva Conference of 1954 (as previously noted still a sore point between the Chinese and Vietnamese comrades), noting how in 1954 “the Soviets wanted to solve the [Vietnam] problem”. Mao, while

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<sup>103</sup> ‘Wait and See?’, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14th November 1968, Folder 08/Box 08/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU.

<sup>104</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol.3., p.266

<sup>105</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, November 17, 1968, in Westad et al. *77 Conversations*, p.143.

somewhat embarrassingly not being able to “remember the whole story”, admitted that an error had been made by compromising in 1954, as “the mood of the people in the South at that time was rising high”; furthermore, in his opinion, including in the agreement “a provision on the withdrawal of troops” to the North was a lost opportunity. As well as moving to improve relations with the North Vietnamese after several very stormy months, Mao was drawing a clear parallel with the current round of negotiations, and indirectly advising the Vietnamese on what they should and should not accept.<sup>106</sup> He also set about probing the resolve of the Vietnamese to continue the struggle, and their willingness to compromise on whether U.S. troops would be allowed to stay in South Vietnam. As was his wont, Mao was deliberately provocative:

Mao Zedong:... When the war broke out, the Americans came, at first as advisers, and then as combat troops. But now, they again say that the Americans in Vietnam are advisers.

Pham Van Dong: It is impossible for them to be advisors.

Mao Zedong: I, however, think that they will be advisors[...]

Muoi Cuc: [...] Our blood has been shed for several years now. Why do we have to accept them to stay as advisors? [...]

Mao Zedong: It is good to think that way. It is imperative to fight and to talk at the same time. It will be difficult if you rely on negotiations to request their departure.

After the nadir in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship in October, this meeting was also an opportunity for the North Vietnamese to improve relations with their ‘big brother’: it was, in fact, they who had requested the meeting with the Chairman.<sup>107</sup> Pham Van Dong went out of his way to point out almost immediately that the delegation contained two southerners, Nguyen Van Linh (Muoi Cuc)<sup>108</sup> and Le Duc Anh, who had been asked by the Central Committee to “accompany Comrades Pham Van Dong and Le Thanh Nghi to China to report to Chairman Mao, Vice-Chairman Lin Biao, and other Chinese leaders about the situation in the South.”<sup>109</sup> The message here was one of reassurance for the Chinese that they were not going to sell out their southern compatriots, that is to say, follow the ‘capitulationist’ advice of the Soviet ‘revisionists’. During the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.139

<sup>107</sup> Westad et al., *77 Conversations*, p.137 n.206.

<sup>108</sup> Nguyen Van Linh was actually originally from northern Vietnam, but had spent most of his life in the south. See Westad et al., *77 Conversations*, p.144 n. 210.

<sup>109</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, November 17, 1968, in Westad et al. *77 Conversations*, p.145

course of the conversation, Nguyen Van Linh was obsequious, telling the Chairman that the “victories gained in the South are due, to a great extent, to the assistance, as well as the encouragement, of the Chinese people and your [encouragement], Chairman Mao... Our troops are very moved when they know that Chairman Mao pays attention even to our health.”<sup>110</sup>

Clearly, the Vietnamese were going to great lengths to convince the Chinese of their determination to see the struggle through to the end, as the Chairman advised. Mao sought to encourage the Vietnamese that their ‘fighting while talking’ strategy was appropriate for this stage in the campaign. For both sides, what made this new tone of respect and co-operation possible, and desirable, was the election of Richard M. Nixon to the Presidency of the United States less than two weeks earlier. Given Nixon’s reputation as a ‘Cold Warrior’, his victory made the prospect of a quick negotiated settlement in Vietnam appear more remote, and thus continued Chinese support, both moral and material, was needed. Yet, despite his hardline reputation towards communism, Nixon had expressed a desire for a new form of relationship with China, most notably in his widely-publicised *Foreign Affairs* article of October 1967, thus raising the possibility of a new relationship between the P.R.C. and the United States in the face of a growing strategic threat to China from the Soviet Union.<sup>111</sup> The new atmosphere created by Nixon’s election, with its possibility for “new changes”, was emphasised by Zhou Enlai in comments to a delegation from the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1968.<sup>112</sup> However, these new changes simultaneously created a new contradiction in China’s foreign policy: how to continue to support North Vietnam and the N.L.F.’s struggle while pursuing improved relations with the United States.

It is unlikely that Nixon was the preferred presidential choice of the D.R.V. leaders, but both Beijing and Hanoi were faced with a new international situation after the November general election. Nixon’s publicly expressed desire to improve relations with China was at odds with his Cold Warrior reputation; and while Beijing would indicate its approval for the new president by rapidly seeking a resumption of the dormant Warsaw ambassadorial talks, Hanoi was

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.145-6

<sup>111</sup> Richard M. Nixon, ‘Asia After Vietnam’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 46, no. 1, (October, 1967).

<sup>112</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.267.

uncertain as to what the 'secret peace plan' that had become associated with Nixon during the electoral campaign would mean for its war. While Beijing and Hanoi had been united in their contempt for Lyndon Johnson, differing perspectives on the 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States would become an enduring feature of their relationship. However with Johnson and Humphrey safely dispatched, a direct consequence of Nixon's victory was Mao's personal approval for Hanoi's 'negotiating while fighting' strategy. Mao's evolving strategic assessment of the United States continued to influence his position on both the Vietnam War and Hanoi's tactics for winning it.

The unexpected American escalation in Vietnam had a defining influence on China's domestic polity and foreign affairs between 1965 and 1968. It presented both risks and opportunities for the P.R.C., and Mao in particular. From Beijing, the American actions in Indochina both reaffirmed the inherently unpredictable and belligerent nature of imperialism, and caused a re-examination of Mao's long-standing assertion that the United States was a 'paper tiger'. By raising the spectre of a Sino-American war, it undermined the rationale that had underpinned China's break with the Soviet Union, and raised two possible future scenarios: Sino-Soviet co-operation to withstand the United States, or U.S.-Soviet collusion to defeat China. In either case, for Mao a prerequisite was a New China steeled to withstand not just imperialist aggression, but also the regrettably baleful influence of Soviet revisionism. In preparation for this, both the C.C.P. and Chinese society needed to be further radicalized and revolutionized; its form was to take that of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

This next stage in Mao's continuous revolution could only be achieved, however, in the absence of a direct Sino-American confrontation. Not only was China not militarily prepared for such a clash, but by its very nature (and particularly in the event of the use of nuclear weapons) this conflict would have undermined Mao's contention that revolutionary war could be waged without sparking a world war. Thus China needed to strike a delicate balance between assisting the North Vietnamese war effort and defending the P.R.C.'s security on the one hand, and not provoking a war with the United States on the other. The result was the continuation of the Third Front Construction campaign at home, while beyond China's borders P.L.A. troops took responsibility for defensive and

logistical operations in North Vietnam, thereby freeing up equivalent numbers of D.R.V. troops to infiltrate the South. China also bank-rolled and armed the N.L.F., while supplying the North Vietnamese army with most of its small arms, as well as a huge array of miscellaneous items from mosquito nets and radios to rice and playing cards. Determined not to repeat the mistakes of the Korean War, Beijing also issued clear warnings to Washington to learn the lessons of the Yalu and take seriously its statements of what would trigger direct Chinese intervention: a land invasion of North Vietnam or any attack on China itself. These warnings were indeed heeded, and in early 1966 senior U.S. officials made a point of stating the United States' lack of aggressive intent towards China.

Relatively confident that China was safe from attack, and that Hanoi was determined to continue the fight, by mid-March 1966 Mao was liberated to step up another gear his gradual escalation against his own party. His comrades' willingness to co-operate with the Soviets for Hanoi's sake now became a benchmark by which to measure revisionist tendencies. It appears that in all likelihood the 'joint communiqué' agreed between the J.C.P. and the C.C.P. was prompted by Mao or those closest to him so that he could demolish it. It gave him an opportunity to definitively isolate the C.C.P., even from a party that had been previously sympathetic to Beijing's position, and to directly target those within his own party he viewed to be 'soft'. By demonstrating that not even the plight of the Vietnamese was sufficient to merit Chinese co-operation with the Soviet Union, he signalled a high benchmark for those who might wish to prove their anti-revisionist credentials when the full force of the Cultural Revolution came to be felt.

Such an attitude naturally dismayed the Vietnamese comrades, for whom Sino-Soviet joint action would have been an enormous boost in terms of both materiel and morale. But this mattered little to Mao, for whom the primary revolutionary focus was domestic. And besides, in his view, Chinese aid was genuine and without strings, unlike that of the Soviets; the assistance and sacrifices of the Chinese party and people would only be cheapened through association with the Soviet revisionists. So too were the Vietnamese disappointed at the chaos that began to take hold across China, most worryingly along its southern border provinces, as Mao's last great attempt at permanently remoulding Chinese society unfolded. Nonetheless, as with the Vietnamese Land

Reform of the 1950s, certain left-leaning sections of the Vietnamese leadership approved of the intent behind the Cultural Revolution, if not the methods used to achieve it. As with most aspects of international affairs during this period the yardstick used in Hanoi to assess the 'correctness' of a fraternal party's policy was the effect that it had on Vietnam's own revolutionary endeavours.

Hanoi certainly did not welcome the Cultural Revolution. Like every other nation bar Egypt, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was left without an ambassador of the People's Republic of China in its capital. Co-operation and co-ordination between North Vietnam's largest benefactors was practically non-existent; where Chinese officials were forced to come into contact with their 'revisionist' counterparts, it was only done at the request of the Vietnamese comrades and as a favour to Vietnam. Petty squabbles between Moscow and Beijing about who was to blame for delays in deliveries to North Vietnam projected an image of disunity and discord to the outside world. Chinese nationals constantly made illegal crossings of the Sino-Vietnamese border seeking a fight with the 'Yankee imperialists', while the staff of North Vietnam's embassy and consulates across China were snowed under by sack-loads of mail from Chinese well-wishers.

Many of these problems arose from an 'excess of enthusiasm' in support of North Vietnam, which Mao had predicted and expertly exploited. So intimately tied to the Cultural Revolution was the Chinese people's support for Vietnam's plight that as the intensity of the former increased, so too did fanaticism for the latter cause. Chinese civilians were willing to lay down their lives for the sake of Vietnam's freedom, while over one thousand Chinese soldiers did just that. During the tough years of the late 1960s, ordinary Chinese citizens dug deep into their own pockets to help the resistance in South Vietnam and the beleaguered citizens of Hanoi and beyond. Provincial officials in their Kunming offices and Chinese troops on the ground in North Vietnam alike went the extra mile, worked harder and longer for Vietnam's cause than would have otherwise been the case without the revolutionary fervour that the Cultural Revolution had engendered. Yet, that very enthusiasm was viewed with suspicion and unease in Hanoi: the line between it and attempts at control was thin. Furthermore, for many of the Chinese rallying to Vietnam's cause, their exertions were not an example of proletarian internationalism, but rather a



demonstration of the power of China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and the supremacy of Mao Zedong Thought. Unsurprisingly, many Vietnamese balked at demonstrations of Chinese power and supremacy, no matter what fraternal form they took. Nonetheless, the two nations remained in close contact and co-operation, and Chinese support proved vital in North Vietnam's survival of ROLLING THUNDER for three years from 1965.

But 1968 changed everything. For while Beijing was sceptical about the tactics adopted during the Tet Offensive, and was indeed affronted that Hanoi did not consult with it before it took the decision to open talks with the United States, it was the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia in the summer of that year, and North Vietnam's reaction to it, that fundamentally changed the nature of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance. Beijing raged at Hanoi's fulsome response to the Soviet tanks that trundled into Prague, and the Chinese suspicion that Tet had been tactically unsound and that the Paris talks were hasty and premature turned into rampant paranoia that Moscow was pulling Hanoi's strings and forcing it to accept a compromise that was disadvantageous to the 'revolution'. From Beijing's perspective it appeared to be the worst possible scenario: Moscow was pressuring Hanoi to do a deal with Washington in return for American concessions elsewhere in the globe; the American presence would linger in Indochina, while the Soviet Union, now seemingly closer than ever to Hanoi, would grow stronger. For Mao it was an intolerable situation. Never one to shy away from embracing a contradiction, he wanted North Vietnam to continue its fight against the United States, and for those same United States to elect a more 'hawkish' president who would take a firmer line with the Soviets, and perhaps even be open to improving relations with China.

As the Chairman himself later admitted, he voted for the Republican candidate in '68, and in Richard Milhous Nixon he got his man.

Nixon's arrival on the scene provided the impetus for both Beijing and Hanoi to mend the fences between them that had been broken during that year. Superficially the year's end seemed to bring the two nations closer together than at any point since early 1966, but the currents running under the surface were now beginning to move in differing directions.

## Chapter 2

### January 1969 – April 1971: Strategic divergence, tactical accord

The difficulties in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship that had been brought on by the Cultural Revolution had been compounded by the rapidly changing international arena in 1968. By the autumn of that year Beijing's relations with Hanoi had reached their nadir, from which point onward there would have to be an improvement. The increasing prominence of the Soviet Union's largesse and the damage caused by the excesses of the Cultural Revolution meant that the Chairman needed to act to improve relations with the Vietnamese comrades. In many respects in the early and mid 1960s the Vietnamese revolution had come to represent an opportunity to complete the unfinished business of Korea and deal a conclusive blow to American imperialism. And while the survival of the regimes in Hanoi and Pyongyang were of geostrategic concern to Beijing, the reasons for China's continued support were much more complex and grounded in a sense of China's position and role in the region that had only a tenuous connection to Marxism. By the end of the decade, several more complicating factors had entered into the equation.

After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the U.S.S.R. was identified in ideological terms as a 'social-imperialist' country: a form of imperialism more nefarious than the neo-imperialism practised by the United States due to its perfidious pretence of socialism. If China were to improve its relationship with the United States it had the potential to strengthen both countries' abilities to withstand the Soviet challenge: something the Vietnam Workers' Party, embroiled in a bitter war against America and the recipient of large amounts of Soviet aid, would not welcome. By the dawn of 1969, therefore, once the destructive phase of the Cultural Revolution was over, an improvement in relations with North Vietnam was an inevitable and necessary step, not just for Beijing but also for Hanoi, who had been badly hurt by the losses of the Tet Offensive. During 1968, as a result of Beijing's unwillingness and inability to furnish the Vietnamese with everything they asked for,

China's aid to the D.R.V. was cut back, and by 1969 the Soviet Union had overtaken China as the main source of foreign aid to North Vietnam. However, after Richard Nixon's narrow election victory in November 1968, and cognizant of the likely need for Chinese aid for several years to come, the Hanoi leadership began to reach out to Beijing at a time when a reciprocal gesture was being made. This process was to be complicated, however, by Mao's changing appraisal of the international security environment.<sup>1</sup> The election of Richard Nixon to the presidency of the United States would fundamentally alter the dynamic between the People's Republic of China and the U.S. As 1968 drew to a close, bilateral efforts to improve Sino-Vietnamese relations had been accompanied by tentative moves from China that hinted at a more conciliatory attitude towards the United States. As we shall see in this chapter, this presented China with two divergent, and occasionally conflicting, foreign policy aims: to improve relations with the U.S.A. while maintaining the amity of North Vietnam.

### New beginnings

In January 1969 in Washington D.C., Richard Milhous Nixon, President Eisenhower's Vice President and a man who had made his political reputation as an arch 'red-baiter', was inaugurated as the 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. His inaugural address, in which he stated his desire to improve relations with all countries of the world had been reprinted in official Chinese media organs such as *Renmin Ribao* and *Hong Qi* [Red Flag], as well as in local newspapers throughout China. The significance and unprecedented nature of this move was largely lost on the new leadership in Washington, however. Nonetheless, the new administration took deliberate steps not to associate Hanoi's war with Beijing but rather "never... even hinted at, an anti-Chinese motive for our Vietnam involvement". In this respect, at an early stage in the Nixon administration, the problem of U.S.-China relations was being decoupled from that of the Vietnam War. However, as Nixon's newly-

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<sup>1</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: the Vietnamese Communists' Perspective*, (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp.24-6; Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, p.215.

appointed National Security Adviser, the former Harvard professor and occasional foreign policy consultant to the Johnson administration, Henry Kissinger himself noted, Nixon was “somewhat schizophrenic in the early days” in terms of the messages he was sending to Beijing, reflecting his own uncertainty, and the lack of a clear policy on the issue (as opposed to a general intent). Nevertheless, an early priority for the administration was to examine the possibilities and costs associated with an improved relationship with the People’s Republic of China.<sup>2</sup>

In order to explore the policy options associated with the new administration’s China policy, Kissinger ordered ‘N.S.S.M. [National Security Study Memorandum] 14: United States China Policy’, which was completed three months later. In this document the attention paid to the relationship between improved relations with China and the situation in Vietnam did not stray beyond an unimaginative assessment that “Although North Viet-Nam and North Korea pursue largely independent policies, sometimes in conflict with those of the PRC, Peking has a major national security interest in their continued existence and would almost certainly intervene militarily if the communist regime of either country were seriously threatened.”<sup>3</sup> The report also discussed, in brief, the effects that the removal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam, or indeed their maintenance there, would have on Sino-American relations, but only in a post-war context. Those strategising for the first private meeting of the Paris peace talks with the D.R.V. recognised that China may have some role to play as a guarantor of peace terms, but they were unsure of what, if any, that role would be. “The question of the Communist Chinese role must be weighed carefully, as between the obvious difficulty of any Communist full participation in the final negotiating stages and, on the other hand, the difficulty of a settlement without any Communist Chinese role or endorsement.”<sup>4</sup> Given the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution, the fair assumption was that China’s attitude to the talks would be one of strong antagonism towards the

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<sup>2</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.168-71.

<sup>3</sup> ‘NSSM 14: United States China Policy’, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1969, NSC institutional files [hereafter NSCIF]/H-134, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Archives at College Park, Md., U.S.A. [hereafter NPMP].

<sup>4</sup> ‘A General Strategy and Plan of Action for Viet-Nam Negotiations (revised draft)’, 21<sup>st</sup> March 1969, NPMP/NSCIF /H-021/5.

United States. Both of these documents, drawn up at outset of the Nixon administration, largely viewed the issues of the Vietnam War and Sino-American relations in isolation from each other. As Kissinger noted with dissatisfaction, they were treated “as if they existed in a vacuum. No reference was made to the global implications of Sino-Soviet tensions and the opportunities for us in the triangular relationship.” This assessment was as true in relation to the war in Vietnam as it was to any other.<sup>5</sup>

In the first quarter of 1969 no-one, from the President down to the National Security Council staff, really explored the idea of attempting to make it in Beijing’s interest to see the war in Vietnam ended. While Nixon hoped to make a move toward China at the first opportunity, and even though he felt it was of utmost importance, he was still unsure about how quickly it was achievable, or indeed, how to go about it. On the other hand, he was confident that the war in Indochina could, and should, be brought to a conclusion on a much shorter time-scale, although precisely how he was going to bring this about other than through what he perceived to be the force of his personality remains unclear. He resolved, he later wrote, “not to fall into the trap Johnson had fallen into, of devoting virtually all my foreign policy time and energy to Vietnam, which was really a short-term problem. I felt that failing to deal with the longer-term problems could be devastating to America’s security and survival.”<sup>6</sup> This aside, it is also clear that until the eruption of the Sino-Soviet border clashes few, if any, in Washington foresaw a drastic course-change in Chinese foreign policy, nor had they envisaged bringing the ending of the Vietnam War and a tentative Sino-American rapprochement into tandem.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.178.

<sup>6</sup> Richard M. Nixon, *RN: the memoirs of Richard Nixon*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978) p.341.

<sup>7</sup> A partial exception to this statement is N.S.C. staffer Alfred Jenkins who in October 1968 noted that limited trade moves towards the P.R.C. “would reassure Hanoi that the rigidities of our stand do not flow from any doctrine of blanket hostility to Asian communism but relate to North Vietnamese aggression against South Vietnam.” ‘Paper Prepared by Alfred Jenkins of the National Security Council Staff’, October 9, 1968, *FRUS – Johnson*, vol. XXX, document 328.

## 1969: the view from Beijing

Although the significance of the changes had not yet been noticed in Washington, and probably neither in Hanoi, Beijing's foreign policy was also undergoing a slow but major realignment in the early months of 1969. In the wake of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August and the election of Nixon to the U.S. Presidency in November of the previous year, the Chairman had ordered the resumption of the Sino-American ambassadorial talks in Warsaw, and when announcing the scheduling of the meeting for February 20<sup>th</sup> the Chinese media publicly mentioned the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' in connection with the talks. This was the first mention of the 'principles' since the start of the Cultural Revolution, and U.S. officials took it as an indication that China may be preparing to return onto the international stage; President-elect Nixon accordingly instructed the State Department that the new administration would welcome a February meeting.<sup>8</sup>

Mao had personally ordered the publication of Nixon's inaugural address, and although China cancelled the ambassadorial talks in Warsaw that had been scheduled for February 20<sup>th</sup> (after the defection to the United States of a member of the Chinese mission in the Netherlands) Mao continued with steps that would make possible a reorientation of Chinese foreign policy. Chen Yi had already submitted a report on the international situation to the Central Committee the previous December, hinting at possibilities for China to exploit contradictions between the Soviets and Americans, but without saying so explicitly. We cannot be sure whether Mao read this report or not, but the sentiments contained in it were certainly in concert with the strategic ideas Mao himself later pursued. On February 19<sup>th</sup> Mao personally asked the 'Four Marshals' (Chen Yi, Xu Xiangqian, Nie Rongzhen and Ye Jianying) to examine the international situation, under the leadership of Chen. Just before military clashes broke out between Chinese and Soviet forces on Zhenbao Island (Damanski in Russian) on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the marshals were instructed to meet weekly,

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<sup>8</sup> Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Mei huanhe yu yuan Yue kang Mei: Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue tiaozheng zhong de Yuenan yinsu' [Sino-American Détente and Assisting Vietnam, Resisting America: the Vietnam Factor in the Strategic Adjustment of China's Foreign Policy] in *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao*, 2002, no. 11, pp.4-5; 'Telegram From the Embassy in Poland to the Department of State', November 25, 1968, *FRUS - Johnson*, vol. XXX, document 331.

and finished their first report on March 18<sup>th</sup>, and another one, specifically relating to the Zhenbao Island incident, was completed eleven days later.<sup>9</sup>

It is now clear that the violent clash at Zhenbao Island was a deliberate and premeditated 'self-defence counter attack' on the part of the Chinese forces, ostensibly designed to re-take Zhenbao Island, which the Chinese considered to be theirs, but also as a means of retaliating against what the Chinese perceived to be repeated Soviet provocations along the border over several years. The attack had been approved in mid-February by the Chinese General Staff and the Foreign Ministry (though its exact timing was left to commanders on the ground), and by Mao himself on February 19<sup>th</sup> – the very same day Mao instructed the Four Marshals to begin their research on the 'international situation'. And although the evidence currently available from China suggests that the Chairman was somewhat taken aback by the ferocity of the Soviet counter-attack, it is hard to discount the coincidence of Mao's approval of the attack and his instructions to the Four Marshals occurring on the same day (and very possibly at the same Politburo meeting), and also the significance of the upcoming Ninth Party Congress, scheduled for four weeks hence.<sup>10</sup>

It has been argued that because the Chinese assault on the Soviet border garrison itself was limited and had limited objectives, and because the Chinese appeared to be largely unprepared for the strength of the Soviet reaction, then this attack was not part of a larger strategic plan; rather it was wholly connected to domestic political concerns and the upcoming congress, and there is a certain amount of evidence to support this. Mao did not believe that the clashes would spread, nor did he want excessive attention to be paid to them in the political report for the Ninth

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<sup>9</sup> Zhang Baijia, 'The Changing International Scene and Chinese Policy Towards the United States, 1954-1970' in Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin, eds., *Re-examining The Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), p.69; Chen Xiaolu, 'Chen Yi yu Zhongguo waijiao' [Chen Yi and Chinese Foreign Policy] in Zhang Tuosheng, ed., *Huanqiu tongci liangre: yi dai lingxiumen de guoji zhanlue sixiang* [The Whole World Is the Same: The International Strategic Thinking of a Generation of Leaders], (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1993), p.155; C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, p.1541; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, pp.245-6.

<sup>10</sup> Niu Jun, '1969 nian Zhong-Su bianjie chongtu yu Zhongguo zhanlue de tiaozheng' [The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Clashes and China's Strategic Adjustment] in *Dangdai Zhongguoshi Yanjiu*, 1999, no. 1, p.71; Yang Kuisong, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement', *Cold War History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (August 2000), pp.24-8; C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, p.1541.

Congress. He later gave instructions that a speech on the incident was not to emphasize preparations for war, but rather should emphasize the outstanding political and psychological functions that the incident could serve. Moreover, the leadership believed that the Soviet mobilization was largely cosmetic.<sup>11</sup>

For Mao to successfully counter the threat that he perceived from the Soviet Union (which in his eyes was both ideological and geopolitical), then this threat had to be demonstrated on both the ideological and geopolitical fronts in a mutually reinforcing manner. To this end, the attack on Zhenbao Island, while serving short-term political goals, furthered the pursuit of the longer-term strategic ones. At the Ninth Congress, the elevation of the Soviet Union to the status of co-equal threat along with the United States represented the formalization of an analysis which had become concrete the previous summer after the August 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, though whose origins can be traced back to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and perhaps as far back as 1964. As such, while the March 1969 clashes were only intended to serve the limited political purpose of domestic mobilization (though one which was an essential component of a strategic realignment), the Soviet reaction in the late Spring and Summer of 1969, particularly along the extensive Sino-Soviet border in China's western Xinjiang province, confirmed the fears about 'social-imperialism' which had manifested themselves the previous August, and acted as a further catalyst in driving forward Sino-U.S. rapprochement.<sup>12</sup>

It is in this context that the reports of the 'Four Marshals' take their significance. The fact that they were commissioned by Mao the same day as the Zhenbao Island 'self-defence counter-attack' was approved, and before the Ninth Congress, lends credence to the argument that, despite the initial localised nature of the clashes between China and the U.S.S.R., Mao was already thinking of opening up new strategic possibilities in tandem with, and as a part of, his desire to teach the Soviets a lesson. Between March and October, the four marshals held twenty-five

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<sup>11</sup> Niu Jun, '1969 nian Zhong-Su bianjie chongtu', p.72; Yang Kuisong. 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash', p.30.

<sup>12</sup> See Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, pp.238-44; Li Xiangqian, '1964 nian: Yuenan zhanzheng shengji', Zhang & Niu, *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo*, pp.319-340.



seminars and submitted four reports, with three major conclusions. The first conclusion was that, due to the contradictions between them, war was much more likely to occur between the United States and the Soviet Union than between either, or both, of them and China. Second, they concluded, both superpowers still regarded Europe as their strategic priority, but the U.S.S.R. held China to be a greater threat to its security than America, thus making the Soviets the greater threat to the P.R.C. Their third conclusion was that given the United States was trying to take advantage of contradictions between the P.R.C. and the Soviets, and the U.S.S.R. was trying to exploit contradictions between China and the U.S.A., then so should China take advantage of the contradictions between the other two. The scene was being set for a major realignment in China's diplomatic strategy.<sup>13</sup>

America's four year entanglement in Vietnam had demonstrated the weakness of American power and the Johnson administration had demonstrated no willingness to engage China in a direct military confrontation. The evidence of the summer of 1968 and the spring of 1969 had shown both cases to be quite the opposite with the Soviets. As such, by mid-1969 the C.C.P. Chairman's strategic analysis of the situation in Asia was veering even further away from that of the Vietnam Workers' Party. Tactics were no longer to be the main point of disagreement.

#### Zhenbaodao: the impact on Hanoi

Zhou Enlai demonstrated a renewed nervousness, post-Zhenbao Island, about Soviet influence on the peace talks the Vietnamese were pursuing in Paris with the new American government. In discussions with Vietnamese counterparts he reverted to the line that had predominated throughout most of 1968, stating that the Soviets were in collusion with the United States. In further talks a week later, at which North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong was present, Zhou elaborated on the Chinese position, expressing concern about the negotiating stance the Vietnamese were

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<sup>13</sup> Yang Kuisong, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash', p.30; Zhang Baijia, 'The Changing International Scene', Ross and Jiang, eds., *Re-examining the Cold War*, pp.69-70.

adopting in Paris, warning them that “We are somewhat concerned that you will be deceived by [the U.S. and the Soviets] The Soviets talk about peace and socialism, but what they really want to preserve is their interests”, views echoed later in the visit by Li Xiannian in conversation with Le Duc Tho.<sup>14</sup> By expressing these concerns, the Chinese leaders demonstrated heightened fears of a U.S.-Soviet condominium in Vietnam, and the further encirclement of China.<sup>15</sup>

Soviet military intelligence also reported that a series of very high-level meetings that took place between P.R.C. leaders and senior members of the V.W.P., “after the Ninth Congress.”<sup>16</sup> The Soviets reported that Mao held talks with Le Duan, and that Pham Van Dong and Truong Chinh had discussions with Lin Biao. We have no Chinese verification for these claims, but they were most likely part of the series of talks described above. The Soviets claimed that during the meetings the Chinese leadership criticized the North Vietnamese for supporting the Soviet “revisionist road” and sought reassurances that their fight would be continued to final victory, while at the same time expressing concerns about the effectiveness of the D.R.V.’s tactics in Paris. Neither were the V.W.P. leaders successful in obtaining a supplemental aid agreement for 1969 from the P.R.C. during this visit, despite the fact aid had already been cut by approximately 20% from its 1968 levels. China’s supply of armaments (artillery pieces, shells, guns and bullets) were also down by an average of 42%, taking it back to the approximate level for 1967 (although it should also be noted that Soviet military aid to North Vietnam also declined in 1969, in Ilya Gaiduk’s analysis, as a result of reduced activity on the battlefield). As noted in the previous chapter, as Beijing and Moscow inched towards war in the summer of 1969 China stopped all transportation of Soviet goods across its territory – a move certain North Vietnamese told the Soviets they interpreted as an attempt to force them to break with the U.S.S.R. Zhou and Kang

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<sup>14</sup> Memcon (extract), ‘Zhou Enlai, Kang Sheng and Pham Van Dong, Hoang Van Thai, Phan Hung and Others in the COSVN Delegation’, April 20 and 21, 1969, 77 *Conversations*, pp.156-7.

<sup>15</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-Mei huanhe’, p.6.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Sujun zongsanmoubu jiancha zongju guanyu guoji xingshi diaocha gei sugong zhongyang de baogao’ [Report from the Chief Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Soviet Army to the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. on its Survey of the International Situation], 15th August 1969. (I am grateful to Li Danhui for giving me a Chinese translation of this Soviet document. Unfortunately it does not contain the original archival reference).

Sheng's exhortations in April to their Vietnamese visitors to become more self-reliant were well-grounded. Economic dislocation caused by the Cultural Revolution, and the lengthening shadow of a potential Sino-Soviet war meant that the Vietnamese could not depend on Beijing to continue supplying their war effort. Chinese actions, intentionally or not, were putting a squeeze on Hanoi.<sup>17</sup>

By the dying days of the summer of 1969 China was stuck in the position of having to maintain its own national security in the face of a very real and growing threat from the Soviet Union, while simultaneously supplying weapons and aid to a Vietnamese ally who was itself becoming on ever friendlier terms with the angry Russian bear. On August 28<sup>th</sup>, Chinese provinces bordering Outer Mongolia and the Soviet Union were put onto a general mobilization status. At around this time Le Thanh Nghi led a North Vietnamese delegation to China to once again discuss China's aid to the D.R.V. for the following year. Unsurprisingly, at this juncture the Vietnamese received nothing more than moral support from their Chinese comrades, and according to the *White Book* they were pressed for firm assurances that the war would continue to final victory as a condition for continued aid. Indeed, under the circumstances the Chinese question is not at all surprising: "You want to continue fighting or make peace? China must know the answer when considering the question of aid."<sup>18</sup> Fully cognizant of the Vietnamese proclivity for stockpiling Soviet aid they did not need (they often kept it on Chinese soil), whether Hanoi planned to make peace in the immediate future was a question of prime importance to a China potentially on the brink of war with the Soviet Union. In fact, the Chinese Central Military Commission felt that the P.L.A. was so underfunded that it requested a defence spending increase of a whopping 34%. Unfortunately for Hanoi, China's own military needs had to take precedence: in the first six months of 1969 Beijing had only managed to fulfil 31.4% of its promised assistance to Hanoi; Chinese logistical troops continued to be withdrawn from North Vietnam as they finished their assignments; and Beijing continued in its reticence to sign an aid agreement for

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<sup>17</sup> Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, p.215; Shen Zhihua, 'Zhong-Mei hejie yu zhongguo dui yue waijiao, (1968-1973)' [Sino-American Rapprochement and China's Vietnam Policy], in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo Yu Yinduzhina Zhanzheng*, p.224; Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 2, pp.28-29.

<sup>18</sup> S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p.37.

the year ahead. China's own exigencies, though largely self-inflicted, threatened to greatly undermine the improvement in relations that had been forged since November 1968.<sup>19</sup>

### A timely death?

An important turning point in Sino-Vietnamese relations, with both immediate and long-term implications, came in early September, when the D.R.V. President and old revolutionary Ho Chi Minh died, aged 79. Ho's longstanding personal links with China had undoubtedly been a moderating influence in Hanoi's relationship with Beijing, even though Ho's own personal power had greatly diminished as the 1960s wore on. Nonetheless, without him the potential for North Vietnam to become more closely aligned with the Soviet Union increased. The frequency of Ho's visits to China in later years, particularly when his health was suffering, was testament to his affection for Vietnam's northern neighbour and ancient erstwhile overlord. Over the previous few years Ho had spent many periods of convalescence in China, and the Chinese leadership had been aware of the seriousness of his condition for several months before his death; at the request of the Vietnamese comrades Beijing had dispatched several teams of top Chinese doctors to nurse the dying Ho, some of whom had been personally received by Zhou Enlai before their departure to Hanoi.<sup>20</sup>

In his life, Ho Chi Minh had managed to walk a delicate balancing act between China and the Soviet Union in a manner unrivalled by any other leader in the Communist world. In a bitter irony, his decline in health paralleled the state of Sino-Soviet relations; in the wake of the extremely serious armed clashes in Xinjiang in August, Ho's condition became critical. On August 26<sup>th</sup>, the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party sent a telegram to their Chinese Communist Party

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<sup>19</sup> Niu Jun, '1969 Nian Zhong-Su bianjie chongtu', p.72; Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.28; Liu & Mastny, 'China and Eastern Europe', p.67; Barnouin and Yu, *Chinese Foreign Policy During the Cultural Revolution*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), p.90; 'Sujun zongsanmoubu jiancha zongju [...] de baogao', n.16 above. Chinese anti-aircraft units had withdrawn from North Vietnam by March 1969, while engineering and road-building units completed their withdrawal in November. Railway construction and repair units would remain until June 1970. See previous chapter.

<sup>20</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.306, 310.

counterparts requesting that China send another team of doctors to tend to the ailing Ho. Once again, a testament to the importance being placed on their task, Zhou Enlai received them before they left for Hanoi. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, the Chinese sent another medical team to Hanoi, this time led by the renowned doctor Wu Jieping, with instructions from Zhou Enlai that as soon as they returned to Beijing they were to report to him, no matter what time of the day or night. Wu and his colleagues returned to Beijing on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September, and conferred with the Chinese Premier. Though the prognosis clearly must have been bleak, it was decided that Wu and his team would return to Hanoi with more medicine and equipment in an attempt to save Ho Chi Minh. Their efforts proved to be fruitless however, and the D.R.V. President died the next day.<sup>21</sup>

While there can be no doubt that the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party held Ho Chi Minh in esteem and affection, and that the medical teams sent to Hanoi were genuine efforts at attempting to save the life of an old comrade, as ever, political realities too played their part in the relationship between Beijing and Hanoi in this period. Without Ho Chi Minh, Beijing's influence in Hanoi was undoubtedly weakened, further aggravating the tensions that had entered into the relationship as a result of the reduction in Chinese aid stemming from the acute Sino-Soviet tensions. Beijing was now forced to reach out to Hanoi, since there would be no more significant nor poignant occasion to remind the Vietnamese comrades of the ties that bound their two parties than in the shadow of Ho Chi Minh's death. And somewhat ironically, not only did Ho's funeral provide an occasion for an improvement in Sino-Vietnamese relations, it also afforded the opportunity to relax tensions along the Sino-Soviet border as well.<sup>22</sup>

That is not to say, however, that the simmering Sino-Soviet tensions that had recently almost boiled over into full-scale war were absent from the funeral of the late Vietnamese leader, and China's difficulties with the U.S.S.R. spilled over into the manner in which they mourned Ho Chi Minh. Chinese premier and C.C.P. politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Enlai led the official Party delegation

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp.316, 319.

<sup>22</sup> See Gilks, *The Breakdown*, p.46; Zhai, *CATVW*, p.174.

to Hanoi to mourn Ho, arriving on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> September, accompanied by politburo member and Vice-Chairman of the Military Affairs Commission, Ye Jianying, and Wei Guoqing, Central Committee member and Chairman of the Guangxi Autonomous Regional Revolutionary Committee. The inclusion of Wei in this initial party was significant: Guangxi was one of the Chinese border provinces contiguous to Vietnam, and Wei had commanded the Chinese military advisory group which had aided the Vietminh in their war against the French; his presence, along with that of Ye Jianying, emphasized the continuity in China's support for the Vietnamese revolutionary struggle. Zhou had meetings with all the senior members of the V.W.P. leadership, including Le Duan, Pham Van Dong and Truong Chinh, during which he expressed the great sadness that was felt by the entire Chinese Party, government, army and the whole Chinese people, at the death of President Ho. Zhou eulogised Ho's nationalist credentials and his contribution to the international proletariat, but significantly he flew back to Beijing that same evening (though the next day he also led the official delegations of all the organs of the party, state and army to the North Vietnamese embassy to again mourn Ho.) It was left to vice-premier, Li Xiannian, to lead the government delegation to Hanoi on September 8<sup>th</sup> to attend the funeral.<sup>23</sup>

The apparent cause of Zhou's return to Beijing was the increasingly arduous duties being thrust upon him as a result of the war panic that was infecting the C.C.P. leadership in the wake of the clashes in Xinjiang. Throughout China's urban areas people were urged to begin stockpiling rations and digging shelters in case of a nuclear strike by the Soviet Union, and P.L.A. forces were put on a war footing. It was, ironically, Ho Chi Minh who managed to temper the sense of impending doom, not quite from beyond the grave, but certainly from within it. It was his express hope, as stated in his will, that "our Party will do its best to contribute to the restoration of unity among the fraternal Parties on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism, in a way which conforms to both reason and

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<sup>23</sup> Zhai, *CATVW*, p.174; Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.29; 'Ho Chi Minh: Funeral Guests', unknown source, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1969, Folder 18/Box 06/DPC Unit 06/TVA-TTU.

sentiment.”<sup>24</sup> The Soviet Premier, Alexey Kosygin, attended Ho’s funeral service in Hanoi, and via the Vietnamese and Li Xiannian he conveyed to Mao and Zhou that he was willing to meet with Zhou in Beijing on his way back to Moscow. While the words of Ho were certainly very far from Mao’s mind when he gave his approval to the Soviet proposal, a positive consequence of this decision for Sino-Vietnamese relations was that it appeared to be in conformity with the dead Vietnamese leader’s wishes.<sup>25</sup>

The talks between Zhou and Kosygin did not solve any of the contentious issues that existed between the two countries, but they did go some way towards the easing of tensions. On the border issue, both sides agreed on four principles: firstly, that the status quo was to be maintained; secondly, that they would avoid armed clashes; thirdly, that in disputed areas both sides’ militaries would avoid contacts; and finally that should bilateral disputes occur, they should be resolved through contacts between the border defence departments. The Chinese leadership in Beijing, however, did not believe that the Soviets were acting in good faith, and became convinced that as with the Japanese at Pearl Harbour, the dispatch of an apparent peace envoy actually presaged a surprise attack. When it did not arrive on China’s National Day, October 1<sup>st</sup>, the Chinese politburo pinpointed the arrival of a Soviet delegation on October 20<sup>th</sup> to negotiate the border issues as likely cover for a surprise attack. So sincere was their belief in this that almost the entire Party, government and military leadership evacuated the capital in advance of the arrival of the Soviets. Those who stayed, including Zhou Enlai, moved to an underground bunker. On October 17<sup>th</sup>, to Mao’s unbridled fury, Lin Biao issued ‘Order Number One’, which among many other drastic measures put the P.L.A. into forward positions and forced the evacuation of many urban areas. This ran counter to P.R.C. attempts to reduce tension with the Soviets, such as October’s sharp reduction in the number of ‘hostile symbols’ aimed at the Soviet Union in official media organs, taking them to their lowest level since July 1968. And when, of course, the Soviet negotiators arrived in

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<sup>24</sup> *President Ho Chi Minh’s Testament: appeal and last tribute of the Central Committee of the Viet Nam Workers’ Party*, (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1969), p.8.

<sup>25</sup> Yang Kuisong, ‘The Sino-Soviet Border Clash’, p.37.

the Chinese capital they brought with them little more than a change of shirts and their discussion papers.<sup>26</sup>

What is most interesting about this period, is that in the midst of this war panic the P.R.C. government found the time to sign the long-delayed Sino-Vietnamese aid agreement for 1970, and took measures to strengthen Sino-Vietnamese relations and improve the efficacy of China's material aid to the D.R.V. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of September in Beijing, less than three weeks after the funeral of Ho and only a few days before China's National Day celebrations (the first suspected date for a Soviet attack), the long-awaited agreement was signed by Li Xiannian and Le Thanh Nghi, under what Hanoi considered to be surprisingly generous terms. "The *Nhan Dan* editorial of 26<sup>th</sup> September recounted China's assistance since the war of resistance against the French, and hailed the recently signed agreement as 'a new, brilliant expression of the increasingly consolidated and developed friendship and militant solidarity between the fraternal Vietnamese and Chinese peoples.'"<sup>27</sup> In late September Mao himself, in a meeting with Pham Van Dong, present in the Chinese capital to attend the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the People's Republic of China, proposed that the four Chinese provinces (Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan and Hunan) that had assumed responsibilities for providing direct assistance to certain provinces in the D.R.V. establish Vietnam Assistance Leadership Groups to fulfill the function of 'Vietnam Assistance Bases'. Zhou Enlai also held three sets of talks with the D.R.V. Premier during this visit. Clearly the business of government and inter-state relations was continuing, irrespective of the fears of a Soviet attack.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to note, however, that despite Vietnamese gratitude for the apparent Chinese largesse, the amount of military aid given to the North Vietnamese in 1970 was, in fact, the lowest of any year since 1964. What is even more curious is the sudden drop-off in the number of bullets supplied to Hanoi by Beijing in

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<sup>26</sup> Wang Taiping, ed., *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo waijiao shi* [A Diplomatic History of the People's Republic of China], vol. 2 (1957-1969), (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 1998), p.275; Yang Kuisong, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969', pp.39-41; C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, pp.1564-5; Dillon, Burton & Soderlund, 'Who Was the Principal Enemy?', p.469.

<sup>27</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, pp.30-1.

<sup>28</sup> P.R.C. Foreign Ministry, *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp.540-6; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.324-330; Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', p.31; Shen Zhihua, 'Zhong-Mei hejie', Li Danhui, *Zhongguo Yu Yinduzhina Zhanzheng*, p.227.



comparison to the other main armaments the Chinese supplied to the D.R.V. (guns, artillery pieces and artillery shells).<sup>29</sup>

Figure 1a:

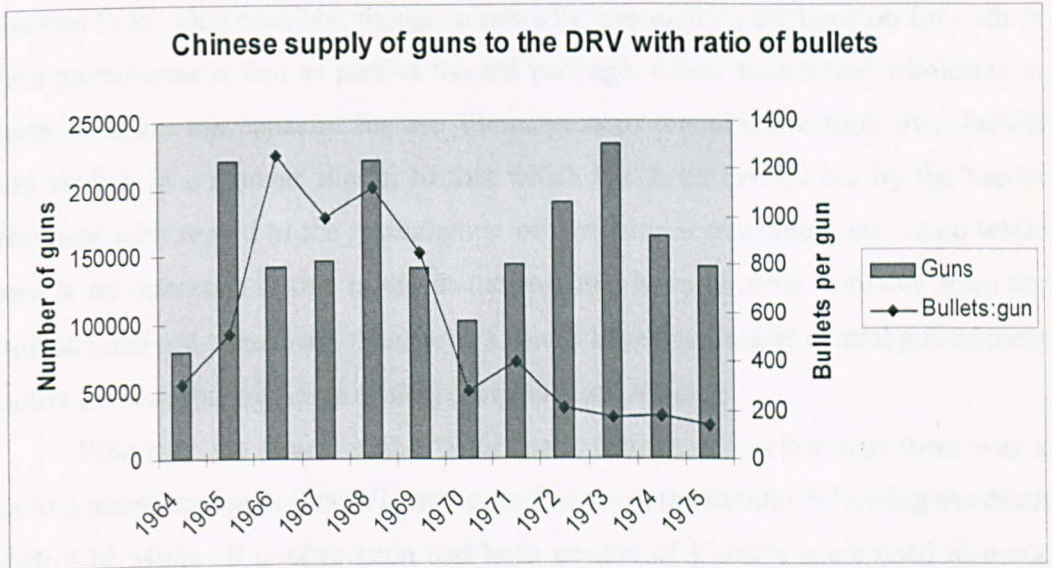
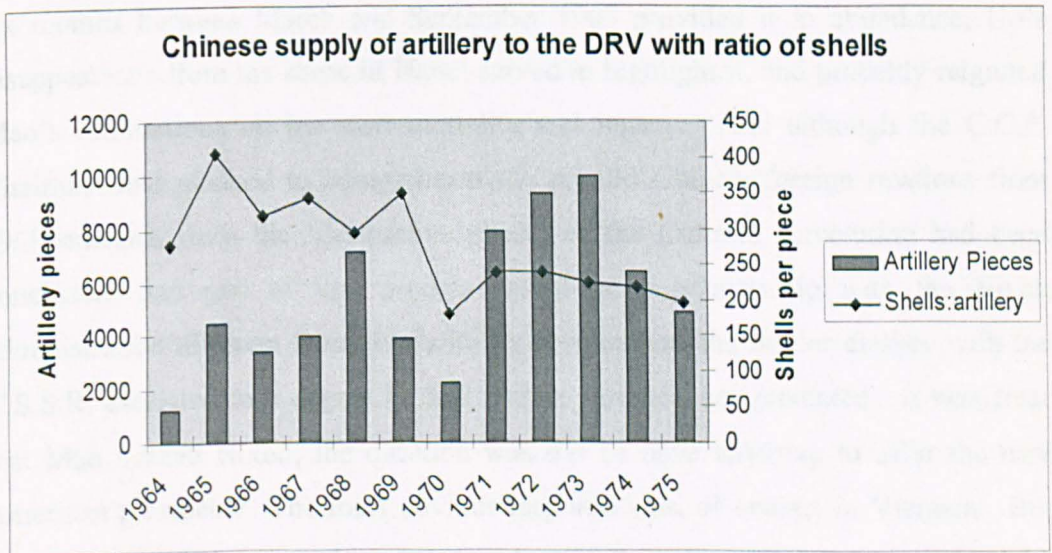


Figure 1b:



(Source: Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, p. 136)

<sup>29</sup> P.R.C. Foreign Ministry, *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p.540; Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.30.

Quite how such Vietnamese enthusiasm could be engendered by what is clearly a further sharp drop in Chinese military aid is difficult to explain, unless one considers the strange and new imbalance in the proportion of bullets (and to a much smaller extent, artillery shells) that would remain for the rest of the duration of the Vietnam War. One possible, though admittedly speculative, explanation for both of these phenomena is that as part of the aid package, China transferred wholesale to North Vietnam the capacity for the Vietnamese to manufacture their own bullets (and shells), in a manner similar to that which had been carried out by the border provinces with regard to the manufacture of agricultural machinery etc. And while there is no reference to this in the documents that have become available from the Yunnan archives, armament manufacture would have been under central government control and beyond the scope of the provincial authorities.

Whatever the cause of the Vietnamese delight, it is clear that there was a marked improvement in Sino-Vietnamese relations in the months following the death of Ho Chi Minh. If confirmation had been needed of China's acute need to break free of the diplomatic isolation Mao had thrust upon it three years earlier, then the six months between March and September 1969 provided it in abundance; Ho's disappearance from the scene in Hanoi served to highlight it, and probably reignited Mao's ruminations on his own mortality and legacy. And although the C.C.P. Chairman had planned to comprehensively rebuild China's foreign relations from 1969 onwards once the 'destructive phase' of the Cultural Revolution had been concluded, and part of that process would be a relationship with the Nixon administration different from that with its predecessor, the border clashes with the U.S.S.R. escalated to a degree he had neither foreseen nor predicted. It was clear that Mao needed Nixon; the question was did he have anything to offer the new American president? The most obvious response was, of course, in Vietnam. But rather than moving to ease the pain of the broken limb that Indochina represented for America by leaning on Hanoi, Mao's strategy would be quite the opposite: he aimed to help Hanoi amputate it as quickly as possible.

### Starter signals and initial contacts

In the background to this fluid situation within the communist world, President Richard Nixon and his foreign policy team had been paying close attention to the violent confrontation between the Chinese and Soviets in the spring and summer of 1969. Taking the incidents at Zhenbao Island as their cue, they began to recognise that an opportunity was now opening up for improved relations between Washington and Beijing. Presidential approval was given to Senator Mike Mansfield's attempts to get a visa to visit China; Mansfield's request was duly passed to Zhou Enlai in late August by Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia. The lifting of the ban on travel to the People's Republic of China followed, intended to be a public gesture of the new policy in Washington.<sup>30</sup>

By late July, Nixon had embarked on a world tour, "during which he intended leaving visiting cards for the Chinese at every stop. Nixon began at once spreading the word of our readiness to open communication with Peking." In Southeast Asia, Nixon indicated that America opposed Brezhnev's proposed 'Asian collective security system', words which will have gone some way towards un-forming the impression of U.S.-Soviet community of interest in containing China, an impression Nixon had inopportunistically created in March through comments on the 'Safeguard' missile programme. In both Bucharest and Lahore Nixon conveyed the message that he believed "Asia could not 'move forward' if a nation as large as China remained isolated" and asked his hosts to act as intermediaries in conveying the message to Beijing. Both Presidents Yahya Khan of Pakistan and Ceaușescu of Romania agreed to convey the American views to their Chinese counterparts, 'at the highest level'.<sup>31</sup>

Just as it had provided an opportunity for a breakthrough in Sino-Soviet contacts, so too the funeral of Ho Chi Minh provided a forum for one of Nixon's intermediaries to make their point to their Chinese interlocutors. On his way to Hanoi to attend Ho's funeral, and on his return to Bucharest, the Chairman of the Romanian Council of Ministers, Ion Gheorghe Maurer, stopped in Beijing for talks

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<sup>30</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.180; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.312.

<sup>31</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.180-1.

with Zhou Enlai. During these discussions with Maurer, Zhou reiterated the Chinese had a policy of non-interference in the U.S.-D.R.V. Paris talks, while he hinted at differences of opinion between Hanoi and Beijing, he stressed that what was important was the war situation on the ground, and that China would continue to support the Vietnamese war effort.<sup>32</sup> Zhou placed the impetus on the United States to demonstrate the *bona fides* of their desire to improve bilateral relations, and that, in line with imperial Chinese traditions, it would have to be the barbarian envoy who would come to Beijing, not the other way round.

The Chief-of-Staff of the Pakistani Army was present in Beijing at the start of October for the celebrations for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, where he also had talks with Zhou. The Pakistanis had been instructed to convey Nixon's message "only at the highest level", and it is likely that this happened when General Abdul Hamid Khan held talks with Zhou on October 2<sup>nd</sup>. In the course of the discussions on the international situation (not specifically Sino-U.S. relations), Zhou drew attention to places of tension that had existed in the world since the early 1950s, and emphasized that China had experience of 'talking while fighting' with the Americans in Korea. When listing the areas of global tension, he named areas which had been divided or partitioned: Korea, Berlin, China, Vietnam, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. What is noteworthy, however, is that while Zhou emphasized that the obstacle to Chinese unity was the fact that the Americans hadn't withdrawn from Taiwan, he noted that Vietnam "was a special situation" because they were fighting in the South, but not in the North. Zhou's message to his Pakistani interlocutor was once again hidden behind a veil of diplomatic language, but it was there nonetheless: Taiwan was the key to an improvement in Sino-U.S. relations; Vietnam, though an area of tension, was 'special', and thus, by inference, not insurmountable.<sup>33</sup>

Presumably as a consequence of this meeting, Pakistani Air Marshal Sher Ali Khan visited Kissinger in Washington D.C. on October 10<sup>th</sup>, during which he expressed the opinion that Nixon's general message of a willingness to improve

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<sup>32</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.319-320.

<sup>33</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.326.

relations with China was insufficient, and that President Yahya Khan “needed something more specific to convey when Zhou Enlai came to Pakistan.” And while Kissinger has written that the ensuing ‘minuet’ between the Americans and Chinese was “so stylized that neither side needed to bear the onus of an initiative”, by the time Kissinger had met with Sher Ali Khan, he had already approved the initiation of a bold initiative towards China. On September 9<sup>th</sup>, the American National Security Advisor instructed the American ambassador to Poland, Walter Stoessel, to approach the Chinese Ambassador in Warsaw at the first social function they both attended and convey the message that the United States was ready for serious talks, presumably in the forum of the Warsaw ambassadorial-level talks that had been postponed since January 1968. The opportunity was not to present itself for several months, however, and in the interim Beijing and Washington continued their signalling to each other.<sup>34</sup>

Air Marshal Khan had departed Washington with instructions that his President was free to convey to the P.R.C. Washington’s decision to withdraw from the Taiwan Straits two destroyers that had been on permanent, though largely symbolic, patrol there. This was accompanied shortly afterwards by the U.S. Consul-General in Hong Kong’s enquiries about the fate of two Americans who had been arrested in February in Chinese territorial waters. These gestures were accentuated by a telegram from the Chinese embassy in Pakistan, almost certainly detailing the content of Nixon’s conversation with the Pakistani Air Marshal. Zhou Enlai passed the message on to Mao, noting that “the trend of Nixon and Kissinger is worth keeping an eye on.”<sup>35</sup> In response to the enquiry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing internally approved the release of the two imprisoned Americans, and recommended that the news be conveyed to the American ambassador in Poland, indicating Beijing’s willingness to resume the Warsaw channel of communication; but Zhou chose to wait for a more concrete gesture from Washington before acting on the recommendations. He did not have to wait too long.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.186-7.

<sup>35</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.334.

<sup>36</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.186-7.

On December 3<sup>rd</sup> Ambassador Stoessel in Warsaw seized an opportunity presented to him at a fashion show in the Yugoslavian embassy in the Polish capital, and attempted to transmit to a startled and fleeing Chinese chargé d'affaires the message that the U.S. government was prepared for serious talks. Undeterred by the flight of Lei Yang, who had not been briefed for such a contingency, Stoessel delivered the message to his interpreter, and it was hurriedly passed to Beijing where Zhou brought it to the attention of Mao. Zhou told Lei (the ambassador having been recalled to Beijing during the Cultural Revolution) to respond positively to the American initiative, and on December 4<sup>th</sup> Mao gave his personal approval to the Foreign Ministry proposal to release the two Americans and to convey the news to the Americans via their ambassador in Poland. Contact between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China had been re-established.<sup>37</sup>

One cannot say for certain whether the timing was connected, however on December 11<sup>th</sup>, the same day that the Chinese Politburo met to discuss the withdrawal of the Soviets from the Sino-Soviet border talks 'to take a rest' and return to Moscow, in Warsaw Ambassador Stoessel was invited to the Chinese embassy for discussions - the first time any such invitation had been issued since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. During the meeting the resumption of the Warsaw talks was discussed, and it was agreed that there should be another meeting before the New Year to discuss the issue further. The next day Zhou instructed the Pakistani ambassador to China to convey the message that the official Warsaw channel should be used for any communications. Zhou further emphasized that while China would approach the meetings on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence, its standpoint was that all American military forces must withdraw from Taiwan and the Taiwan Straits, and he hoped the Pakistani President would make this very clear to the Americans. During this conversation, Zhou noted, presumably for the attention of Nixon, that the Warsaw channel, though dormant, had not been closed. Nixon did not need to "circuitously play games", although he was of the opinion that "it remained to be seen how the great the results [of this

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<sup>37</sup> Zhang Baijia and Jia Qingguo, 'Steering Wheel, Shock Absorber and Diplomatic Probe in Confrontation: Sino-American Ambassadorial Talks seen from the Chinese Perspective', in Ross and Jiang, *Re-examining the Cold War*, p.195; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol.3, pp.336-7.

channel] will be".<sup>38</sup> In the words of the Chinese diplomatic historian Zhang Baijia, "Beijing wanted to see how effective the Warsaw channel would be."<sup>39</sup>

On January 8<sup>th</sup> Lei Yang and the American ambassador held an informal meeting at the U.S. embassy and agreed to hold their first official meeting on January 20<sup>th</sup>. Zhang Baijia has written, "Zhou Enlai still harboured considerable doubts about Nixon's intentions and thus approached resumption of the ambassadorial talks with great caution. Taiwan had been the key problem in the earlier Sino-American talks, but the United States had then had little to say about the issue. For China, a resolution of the Taiwan problem could not be avoided, because it was the precondition for normalisation of Sino-American relations."<sup>40</sup> This was emphasised in a communication received in Washington on January 15<sup>th</sup>, but with an added twist,

Kissinger: The Ambassador in Kabul had an interesting contact with the Chinese Ambassador through the Yugoslavian Ambassador. He suggested that talks begin in Warsaw then talk could begin about talking elsewhere. One interesting thing he said – Vietnam has no bearing on China-U.S. relations.

President: Whole new attitude on that.

Kissinger: We have to withdraw from Taiwan. In Vietnam we have to withdraw eventually.... The Chinese push is withdraw from Vietnam as soon as possible and should not be raised in Warsaw. It has no bearing on U.S.-China relations. Very interesting.

President: Yes.<sup>41</sup>

The meeting between Lei and Stoessel took place five days later. At this 135<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Warsaw talks Stoessel reiterated the fact that the United States was willing to send an envoy to Beijing, or accept one in Washington, to have more thorough discussions. Lei replied that if Washington was interested in holding meetings at higher levels or through other channels they should then present more specific proposals. The Chinese replied at the next meeting, on February 20<sup>th</sup>, that they would be willing to receive a representative of the President in Beijing for

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<sup>38</sup> P.R.C. Foreign Ministry, *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p.546.

<sup>39</sup> *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.338-9; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.188-9, 191; Zhang and Jia, 'Steering Wheel, Shock Absorber and Diplomatic Probe', in Ross and Jiang, *Re-examining the Cold War* p.195.

<sup>40</sup> Zhang and Jia, 'Steering Wheel, Shock Absorber and Diplomatic Probe', in Ross and Jiang, *Re-examining the Cold War*, p.196.

<sup>41</sup> Telcon, The President/Kissinger, 6:10 p.m., January 15th, 1970, NPMP/Kissinger telcons/8/3.

exploratory discussions on the basic issues in Sino-American relations, and once again expressed their desire to improve relations with the United States on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence. However, this proved to be the last ever meeting of the Warsaw talks. The situation in Indochina became even more complicated with a coup in Cambodia, and a subsequent upturn in fighting in Vietnam: Beijing's hopes that the war in Vietnam would not be widened, and that Indochina could be passed over as an irritant in Sino-American relations, had been dashed.<sup>42</sup>

### The war expands

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, Cambodia's Prince Norodom Sihanouk was deposed as head of state while abroad and replaced by the pro-American general Lon Nol. The former Cambodian head-of-state arrived in Beijing the next day, where he was greeted at the airport by a party headed by Zhou Enlai. And while the Chinese Premier warmly welcomed the prince, he surely wished that his royal guest were arriving under different circumstances. The new situation in Cambodia had greatly complicated the nature of the war in Indochina, and brought the prospect of a pro-American government in Phnom Penh moving against the Cambodian and Vietnamese communist forces in the north and east of the country, bringing with it the possibility of further expansion of the war across Vietnam's borders. In the morning, Zhou and Sihanouk held talks during which Zhou advised the Cambodian Prince not to return to his homeland, to which Sihanouk agreed. Later that afternoon, a politburo meeting was convened to discuss the situation in Cambodia and a request made from Sihanouk to hold a press conference and issue a statement. The politburo decided to assist Sihanouk's activities, and to make preparations in case the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh was trashed or overseas Chinese in Cambodia arrested. The decisions were approved by the Chairman.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.348; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p.251; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.689-92.

<sup>43</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.356; P.R.C. Foreign Ministry, *Zhou Waijiao Huodong*, p.549; Zhai, *CATVW*, p.187-8.



Further talks about the situation in Cambodia continued over the next two days with both Sihanouk and the North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong who had flown to Beijing specifically to discuss the events in Phnom Penh. At a meeting with Sihanouk on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Sihanouk shared with the Chinese premier a draft of an appeal he was intending to make to the Cambodian people, calling on them to rally behind him. Zhou commented positively on the speech and reiterated China's support for him, and the next day Sihanouk announced to the press his five point statement proposing the establishment of a Royal National Union Government of Kampuchea (more commonly known by its French acronym, GRUNK), a National Liberation Army, and the National United Front of Kampuchea (also more commonly known by the French, FUNK). Sihanouk's statement was printed in full the next day in *Renmin Ribao* although it was not, as yet, accompanied by any official commentary. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, the government of the D.R.V. expressed its full support for Sihanouk's statement; the Chinese government, as yet did not. That same day, however, Zhou sent a report on the Cambodian problem and the situation in Indochina to Mao and Lin Biao, proposing a 'three countries, four sides' (Cambodia, Laos and the two Vietnams) meeting in Nanning or Guangzhou, in support of a proposal by Sihanouk to issue an anti-American united declaration in the name of the same four parties. Mao approved the suggestion, and the level of support being offered Sihanouk further increased a week later when, on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, Zhou informed him that he intended to publicly endorse his March 23<sup>rd</sup> announcement in two days time, while on a visit to North Korea.<sup>44</sup>

The Chinese reaction to Sihanouk was one of tentative support, tempered by past experience of the Cambodian prince's volatile and mercurial personality. He had successfully ducked and weaved his way through both war and peace in Indochina for two decades, successfully keeping his country out of the conflicts that had afflicted Laos and Vietnam since independence from France. Given this, the Chinese leadership opted to exercise caution in their dealings with him. Zhou made China's attitude clear to Pham Van Dong in a meeting between the two in Beijing on

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<sup>44</sup> Philip Short, *Pol Pot: the history of a nightmare*, (London: John Murray, 2005), p.198; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.356-9; S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p.44; Zhai, *CATVW*, pp.189-190; Gilks, *The Breakdown*, pp.55-6.

March 21<sup>st</sup>, when he told the North Vietnamese premier, “We should support Sihanouk for the time being and see how he will act. We should support him because he supports the anti-American struggle in Vietnam... We will also see whether he really wants to establish a united front to oppose the U.S. before we support him.”<sup>45</sup> Given the fluidity of the prince’s political inclinations, the P.R.C.’s support for him was conditioned on the re-affirmation of his continued support for the anti-imperialist struggle, on a basis acceptable to China. And given Sihanouk’s presence on Chinese soil, diplomatic humiliation, particularly in the eyes of the world revolutionary movement, would have followed premature support for the Cambodian prince; the stakes were not as high for the Hanoi leadership, who also needed to overcome traditional Cambodian suspicion of, and hostility towards, all things Vietnamese. Thus, while Hanoi offered immediate and fulsome support for the prince, Beijing opted not to close off other possible channels to Phnom Penh until, as Zhou outlined to Dong, such times as Sihanouk proved himself.

As a result of Beijing’s wariness of Sihanouk, Zhou continued to keep channels of communication open to the Lon Nol government in late March, in an attempt to use its diplomatic leverage to persuade him to tolerate the Vietnamese communist sanctuaries in the east of the country, and to permit the continued supply of Chinese weapons and rice to them via the port of Sihanoukville (a practice Lon Nol had grown personally rich upon). If Lon Nol could be persuaded to continue as before, (and there were financial incentives for him to do so), Zhou and Mao were not averse to co-operating with him in a continuation of Sihanouk’s policies but without Sihanouk; as Zhou had commented on the Cambodian general in 1967, “If we spend some money on him, he can be exploited for some time.”<sup>46</sup> And while Lon Nol’s blood had been condemned by the Chinese premier as “feudal [and] capitalistic”, the fact that that same blood was said to have been Chinese cannot but have counted in his favour in Beijing. Thus Beijing trod carefully through the minefield of Cambodian politics in full awareness of the unpredictability of all three

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<sup>45</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, March 21, 1970, 77 *Conversations*, p.158.

<sup>46</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, April 10, 1967, in *ibid.*, p.101.

major parties – Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and Pol Pot – until such times as Zhou Enlai felt certain he had found a reliable partner (by Cambodian standards).<sup>47</sup>

Much has been made of China's backing of Sihanouk while simultaneously exploring contacts with Lon Nol, and some have argued that that these actions were designed primarily to "improve its position vis-à-vis Hanoi".<sup>48</sup> However, while China certainly was keen to retain influence in Cambodia, the case for Sino-Vietnamese competition at this stage must not be overstated. The Hanoi leadership had also discussed the utility of negotiating with the new regime in Phnom Penh, but had concluded that "negotiations would not bring about any results, because [Lon Nol and Sirik Matak] would eventually fight against us."<sup>49</sup> Hanoi, however, had very little diplomatic leverage with which to negotiate with the new Cambodian government; Beijing, on the other hand, through military aid and road transport fees paid to Phnom Penh for matériel shipped to the Vietnamese communists, did. Hanoi, too, was also prepared to play for time in Cambodia, though they were largely dependent on the actions of the other players. Having little faith in the outcome of negotiations with Lon Nol, the best way for the D.R.V. to achieve an outcome favourable to them was to publicly, swiftly, and firmly back Sihanouk in an effort to overcome his suspicion of them, and to create momentum behind his co-operation with the Khmer Rouge.<sup>50</sup>

Beijing certainly adopted a more circumspect approach to Sihanouk than did Hanoi, but this must not be taken as evidence of wildly different analyses or goals. While we are still not sure at what point in April Beijing broke off discussions with Lon Nol, and despite the fact that it only finally severed diplomatic relations with him on May 5<sup>th</sup>, it is highly improbable that China could have back-tracked from Zhou's April 5<sup>th</sup> public declaration of support (approved by Mao and the entire politburo) for Sihanouk's proposed national unity government. China remained cautious, however, until the Cambodian prince actually formed this government; when he did so (under Chinese instruction), on May 5<sup>th</sup>, China recalled its diplomats

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<sup>47</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Duan, Pham Van Dong, and Le Thanh Nghi, June 5, 1973, in *ibid.*, p.186.

<sup>48</sup> Gilks, *The Breakdown*, p.54.

<sup>49</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, March 21, 1970, *77 Conversations*, p.160.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

from Phnom Penh (admittedly one full month after Hanoi had done so) and recognised the new government-in-exile. It was merely a formality, however, for the GRUNK had already joined the government of North Vietnam, the Pathet Lao, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (P.R.G.) in late April at the Conghua hot springs resort, in Guangxi, China, for the Summit Conference of the Indochinese Peoples.<sup>51</sup>

For the Indochinese revolutionary parties to be meeting under the Chinese aegis and pledging their united resolve to defeat American aggression represented a great diplomatic coup for Mao and Zhou, not just against the United States, but also against the Soviet Union, which had opted to recognise the Lon Nol government in Phnom Penh. So important was the Conference to the Chinese leadership that its planning received the attention of not just the Premier, but also of Chairman Mao and Vice Chairman Lin Biao, as well as the rest of the politburo. Zhou arrived on April 25<sup>th</sup>, the second day of the two-day conference, in order to celebrate its success, and to hold talks with the main participants (Pham Van Dong, P.R.G. Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho, Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong, and, of course, Sihanouk). Zhou again expressed the total support of the Chinese government and people for the joint declaration issued by the conference, and emphasised the unbreakable front formed by the peoples of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, who could “rest assured that in the common struggle against U.S. imperialism, the Chinese people will always stand by their side. “Together we unite, together we fight and together we will win victory.”<sup>52</sup> A statement in support of the conference was also added to the official Chinese May Day celebrations’ slogan.<sup>53</sup>

Before May Day arrived, however, the situation on the ground in Cambodia became even more complicated, with the announcement by the American government of its incursions into Cambodia. A flurry of meetings took place in the days that followed, reflecting the seriousness with which the Chinese viewed this new turn of events. Mao himself (accompanied by Zhou Enlai) met with Sihanouk

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<sup>51</sup> Short, *Pol Pot*, pp.201-2.

<sup>52</sup> *Signal Victory of the Militant Unity of the Three Indo-Chinese Peoples*, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1970), pp.90-91.

<sup>53</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.363-4.

on May 1<sup>st</sup>, and in a meeting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May Sihanouk informed Zhou that he was soon to announce the establishment of the GRUNK, under the leadership of the national front. The next day officials from the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Trade met to discuss the question of supporting Sihanouk, and on May 4<sup>th</sup> the Chinese government issued a statement strongly condemning the American invasion, and reiterating its support for the Conghua declaration. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, in Beijing, Sihanouk announced the establishment of the GRUNK, whereupon Zhou personally went to the Cambodian prince's residence to express the Chinese party, government and army's congratulations to him and to formally recognise his new government as the sole legal government of Cambodia.<sup>54</sup>

Neither the Chinese nor the North Vietnamese had sought an expansion of the war throughout all of Indochina, and had for several years been working to prevent the Khmer communists from taking up arms against Sihanouk's government. Both North Vietnamese and Chinese leaders had been in agreement that the best way to further the revolutionary cause in Indochina was in a process of stages, and the liberation of Vietnam must precede a revolution in Cambodia. To have acted otherwise would have meant the end of Sihanouk's passive acquiescence to the supply of the Ho Chi Minh trail through the east of his country, and the supply and sale of arms through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. Now that this had come to pass, full-scale war in Cambodia was inevitable – something that had the potential to grievously retard the war effort in South Vietnam, and would certainly increase American involvement in the region and interfere with the burgeoning Sino-American rapprochement. It was, however, the actions of the pro-American Cambodian Prime Minister that caused this to pass, rather than those of the Cambodian communists. Nonetheless, it was this latter group who would prove to be the ultimate beneficiary. Lon Nol's coup released them from the shadows of their Vietnamese comrades and gave them international legitimacy behind the figure-head of Sihanouk, and established the Khmer Rouge as independent actors on the Indochinese stage. It was an event that would prove to have lasting consequences for China's relationship with Vietnam.

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<sup>54</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.365.

In the meantime, however, Zhou Enlai had been able to unite the four revolutionary 'governments' of the three Indochinese peoples under a Chinese banner. The coup against Sihanouk was an unexpected though useful turn of events: the turmoil in Phnom Penh had caught the Soviets flat-footed, and they continued to recognise the Lon Nol government in Phnom Penh, putting them at odds with Hanoi as well as Beijing. From the Chinese perspective, the P.R.C. and North Vietnam had been brought into close co-operation at an opportune time, given the relative poverty of Chinese aid to Hanoi in 1970, while the Indochinese Peoples' Summit was a welcome answer to Brezhnev's Asian collective security proposals. Conversely, however, the Cambodian incursions represented a rebuffal of Mao's overtures to Nixon and a setback in his quest to counter the Soviet threat. It was also something of a personal rejection for the C.C.P. Chairman, who after all had 'voted for Nixon' in 1968 in the belief that he would counter Soviet pressure, not expand the war in Southeast Asia. An angry Chinese response was to be expected.

#### Unite and Defeat the U.S. Aggressors and All Their Running Dogs!

The events in Cambodia completely altered the strategic picture in Indochina and caused a major reassessment of the burgeoning Chinese contacts with the United States. Prior to the American incursions into what was now the Khmer Republic, Beijing's message to Washington was that while the war in Vietnam, as it currently stood, would not necessarily be an impediment to improved Sino-U.S. relations, a further expansion of the war into Cambodia would be. Thus, when Nixon ordered incursions into Cambodia on April 29<sup>th</sup> to eliminate Vietnamese Communist strongholds there, China took measures to show that improved relations between the P.R.C. and the United States were not to be had at any price. Initially, however, the Chinese reaction was relatively cautious, and Beijing restrained itself to issuing stern warnings about flagrant U.S. provocation, and expressions of support for the Indochinese Peoples' Congress. Mao personally expressed his concern about the turn of events in Indochina to visiting North Vietnamese comrades, and reiterated his belief that the most important factor in getting the Americans out of Vietnam was

military force. If the war could be ended with a communist victory, then a contentious issue would be removed from Sino-American bilateral relations, something that was clearly also on the Chairman's mind during this conversation with Le Duan (who was in Beijing on his way back to Hanoi from Moscow), and he addressed many rhetorical points to an invisible Nixon – “You invade another country, why is it wrong for us to back that country?” The paradoxical nature of the policies China was beginning to pursue was clearly weighing heavily, as he concluded, “We do not need to fear... You have occupied our Taiwan Island, but I have never occupied your Long Island.”<sup>55</sup> Mao felt personally indignant at Nixon's expansion of the war, and his presumption that he could have both an improvement in Sino-American relations, and expand the war on China's doorstep.<sup>56</sup>

On May 16<sup>th</sup> the Chinese leadership decided to postpone the next round of Warsaw ambassadorial talks that had been scheduled for the 20<sup>th</sup>. However, to emphasise the conditional nature of continued contacts, and that the Chinese would not abandon their Indochinese comrades, it was also proposed that Mao should issue a statement reiterating Chinese support for the Indochinese peoples' struggle and for Sihanouk's government; it was also decided to organise a mass rally in Tiananmen Square for the 21<sup>st</sup> which would be attended by Mao, Lin Biao, Zhou and recently deposed head-of state Sihanouk. These acts were designed to test the United States' reaction, and its seriousness about improving relations with China.<sup>57</sup>

The cancellation of the talks, announced on May 18<sup>th</sup>, gravely concerned Nixon, particularly as the operations in Cambodia coincided with hints of progress in Sino-Soviet border talks. Kissinger reassured the President that the Chinese response, bellicose as it was, was the best that could have been hoped for under the circumstances; the President, however, was clearly worried about the implications for his China policy, and instructed Kissinger to “open that channel to Paris again right away”.<sup>58</sup> The President's attitude changed somewhat, however, when he read

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<sup>55</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong and Le Duan, May 11, 1970, 77 *Conversations*, pp.164-5.

<sup>56</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.365.

<sup>57</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.366-7; Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Mei huanhe', p.69.

<sup>58</sup> Telcon, The President and Henry Kissinger, 19th May 1970, NPMP/NSC/853/1.

the text of the short declaration, issued in Mao's name, of May 20<sup>th</sup>, entitled "People of the World, Unite and Defeat the U.S. Aggressors and All Their Running Dogs!"

Zhou, Kang Sheng and Chen Boda drafted and redrafted the declaration over a period of several days before sending it to the Chairman for his approval, and had then even been shown to Sihanouk for his opinion; it was a very nuanced message, notably deviating from the line of the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress in singling out the U.S.A. for defeat, and not naming the Soviet Union. This did not, however, represent a reduction in the Chinese assessment of the threat from the Soviet Union; it was, rather, a declaration of the futility of the American involvement in Indochina, and an exhortation to withdraw. It was, in many ways, the announcement of Beijing's fundamental analysis of the American predicament in Indochina, and was one that would be oft repeated (in less strident tones) in subsequent direct talks.<sup>59</sup>

The message for Nixon was clear: improved Sino-U.S. relations were contingent on the realisation of a continued de-escalation of American involvement in the war in Indochina, with a view to total U.S. disengagement. The Chinese sense of affront also surfaced in Mao's statement, which took pains to draw attention to Nixon's own troubles, "with utter chaos at home and extreme isolation abroad... a paper tiger, now in the throes of its deathbed struggle... [W]ho actually fears whom?"<sup>60</sup> Inherent was the assertion that the U.S. needed China as much as China needed the United States, and that Nixon should not take Mao's co-operation for granted. Even before any high-level contacts had taken place, the Chairman was laying out to the President the terms under which business could be done.<sup>61</sup>

Nixon's immediate reaction to this statement was one of belligerent posturing, and he ordered "every element of the Seventh Fleet not needed for Vietnam moved

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<sup>59</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.694; 'People of the World, Unite and Defeat the U.S. Aggressors and All Their Running Dogs!', *Peking Review*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1970; P.R.C. Foreign Ministry, *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p.554; Yu Wanli, 'Tongxiang Huanhe de Daolu: 1968-1970 nian Zhongguo dui Mei zhengce de tiaozheng' [The Road Towards Détente: the readjustment in China's U.S. policy, 1968-1970] in *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, 1999, no. 3.

<sup>60</sup> 'People of the World, Unite and Defeat the U.S. Aggressors and All Their Running Dogs!', *Peking Review*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1970.

<sup>61</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.367; Robert Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.35; C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, p.1627; C.D.R.O., *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, [The Manuscripts of Mao Zedong Since the Foundation of the P.R.C.] volume 13, (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian, 1998), p.32.



into the Taiwan Strait. ‘Stuff that will look belligerent. I want them to know we are not playing the chicken game.’” However, Kissinger’s analysis of Mao’s statement that it was “remarkably bland” served to dissuade the Commander-in-Chief of the appropriateness of his orders.<sup>62</sup> And for all he claimed that he didn’t want to play a game of ‘chicken’, nonetheless it was Nixon who blinked first. Taking up the instructions about the Paris channel the President had given before the publication of ‘People of the World Unite’, on June 15<sup>th</sup> Major General Vernon Walters, the U.S. Defence Attaché in Paris who had been responsible for keeping secret contacts with the North Vietnamese there, was instructed to deliver a message to his Chinese counterpart, indicating Washington’s desire to open another, private, channel for communications. Dissatisfaction with the public nature of the Warsaw meetings was a sentiment shared in Beijing, and after the invasion of Cambodia the Chinese leadership became convinced that only high-level direct talks would have any utility, and only when Nixon played ball.<sup>63</sup>

Nonetheless, Beijing was unresponsive to Nixon’s Parisian overtures. Undeterred by the silence from the other end, the United States ploughed on with its own goodwill gestures and signalling, relaxing a variety of trade restrictions that had been in place against China; still though, the Chinese leadership made no further response throughout the summer of 1970. This was partially intended to serve as a rebuke to Nixon for Cambodia, but also because Mao was also preoccupied with domestic affairs: for most of the summer of 1970 a showdown between Mao and Lin Biao dominated the Chinese political landscape. Mao later alleged to Nixon that Lin had opposed Sino-American rapprochement; whether this was true and contributed to the slowing of contacts is unknown but unlikely. Nonetheless, with Lin dispatched, at least in political terms, at Lushan, Mao could once again turn to address the issue of Sino-American relations and, despite Mao’s best efforts, the

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<sup>62</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.695-6.

<sup>63</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-Mei huanhe’, p.10; memcon, Nixon, Zhou et al., February 24, 1972, White House Special Files/President's Office Files/87/Memoranda for the President Beginning February 20, 1972, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-3.pdf>.

inseparable issue of the war in Vietnam. Nonetheless, Mao would continue to treat the issue of Vietnam in isolation from his policy towards the U.S.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the Chairman's desire to pursue rapprochement with the United States to counter the Soviet threat in the north, his desired outcome was still to see the Americans removed from China's southern frontiers. What the new circumstances dictated, however, was that China abandon its previous position, which demanded that the Americans be driven into the South China Sea by force of arms, and now be prepared to see the Americans withdraw as the result of a negotiated settlement. However, as the Chairman had repeatedly reminded his Vietnamese colleagues during the 1960s, they were not going to win at the negotiating table what they hadn't already won on the battlefield. To assist the Vietnamese in this endeavour during the summer of 1970 the Chinese took a much more proactive approach in their assistance to Vietnam. American focus on interdicting supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail (of which the Cambodian incursions had been a part), particularly heavy and sustained aerial bombing, were hampering the communists' supply routes into South Vietnam. In talks with Pham Van Dong in September 1970, Zhou made a self-criticism in front of his Vietnamese counterpart, remarking, "Comrade Mao has often reminded us of understanding your difficulties and helping you to solve them, of considering these difficulties ours because our relations are the ones between the front and the rear... [W]e have basically to satisfy your demands. We have also reviewed some issues that have not been brought up by you... The Great Rear has to help the front."<sup>65</sup> Though Chinese military aid to Vietnam in 1970 was the lowest of any year since 1964, the Chinese began to seek ways to increase its efficacy in the face of an intensified U.S. aerial interdiction campaign, as well as increasing the volume for the year ahead. Reflecting the reduction in threat from the Soviet Union, the increase in military aid

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<sup>64</sup> John Holdridge, *Crossing The Divide*, (Lanham, MD : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), p.41; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.496-8; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p.253; William Burr, *The Kissinger Transcripts*, (New York: The New Press, 1999), p.61.

<sup>65</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, September 17, 1970, *77 Conversations*, pp.172-3.

was huge, and from 1970-71 military aid was restored back to approximately the levels enjoyed by Hanoi in 1968.<sup>66</sup>

Sometime in the summer of 1970 the head of the External Economic Liaison Committee of the C.C.P., Fang Yi, was sent by Zhou Enlai to visit Vietnam to assess how to more effectively assist North Vietnam in the face of intensive American bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail, and how to restore the infrastructure that had been built by China and destroyed by American bombing. At this same meeting, Zhou went on to comment to Dong that “The report by comrade Fang Yi about his recent trip to Vietnam is a good document to learn about the situation in Vietnam. We are bureaucratic.”<sup>67</sup> His recommendations were approved by the Central Committee, but significantly did not extend to dispatching Chinese engineering or anti-aircraft troops back to Vietnam. However, Mao felt free to mention the Chinese support troops, though by now withdrawn, in conversation with Pham Van Dong in late September, which hints that this may not have been a contentious issue between the two nations and that the withdrawal was in fact, as Chinese authors have written, by mutual consent once their assigned projects were completed.<sup>68</sup>

Chinese aid was still struggling to get through though, in the face of USAF ordinance and the closure of the port of Sihanoukville by Lon Nol; as a result Zhou dispatched another work group, this time led by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Trade, Li Qiang, to go to Vietnam, and even visit the Ho Chi Minh Trail, in order to help the Vietnamese overcome their supply difficulties. Li personally reported his conclusions to the Chairman who himself made some practical suggestions as to how the situation could be improved, including ordering research into dried foods and portable mosquito nets for the Vietnamese comrades. Zhou Enlai also personally ordered that loads from China should not exceed a weight limit of twenty kilograms since most of the porters were women. As a further gesture of China’s commitment to their cause, some oil-pipeline construction projects within China were postponed in order to supply Vietnam with the actual pipes to help them overcome the losses of

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<sup>66</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao’s China*, p.136.

<sup>67</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, September 17, 1970, *77 Conversations*, pp.172-3.

<sup>68</sup> Shen Zhihua, ‘Zhong-Mei hejie’, in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo Yu Yinduzhina Zhanzheng*, p.228; Qu Aiguo, ‘Yuenan zhanzheng’, in Zhang & Niu, *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo*, p.368.

oil they were sustaining from American bombing, actions which helped contribute to a ten-fold increase in oil supplies over the 1970-71 period.<sup>69</sup>

By mid-September, Mao was once again able, and willing, to turn his attentions to the United States. The corollary of this was increased reassurance for North Vietnam's diplomatic strategy. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, Zhou commended Pham Van Dong on the experience the Vietnamese had gained in the diplomatic struggle, and complimented Nguyen Thi Binh and Xuan Thuy on their negotiating abilities.<sup>70</sup> In a significant conversation four days later, Mao, subtly, linked the three issues of the North Vietnamese negotiating skill, Chinese assistance to Vietnam, and the American desire to come to Beijing for talks,

Mao Zedong: Why have the Americans not made a fuss about the fact that more than 100,000 Chinese troops help you build railways, roads and airports although they knew about it?...They should have made a fuss about it...If they did this, what would they do later? The Americans want to go to Beijing for talks... we replied that if they wanted to go to Beijing, [they should] just go. Later they did not dare to go... I see that you can conduct the diplomatic struggle and you do it well... At first we were a little worried that you were trapped. We are no longer worried.<sup>71</sup>

There were several messages in this for Dong: first, the P.R.C. had sent Chinese troops to North Vietnam, despite the fact that America would know about it. This proved China was not afraid of confrontation with the United States in assisting Vietnam, and had risked a lot to do so: it is the Americans who are afraid. Second, just as the North Vietnamese had proved successful in negotiating with the Americans and had not capitulated at the negotiating table, nor would China. Finally, the Americans were seeking to come to Beijing for talks, not the other way round: China has nothing to fear from talking to America, and nor should North Vietnam. Mao concluded the meeting with praise for the Vietnamese, "You are fighting very well on the battlefield. Your policy for the diplomatic struggle is correct. We must give you what you want."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Shen Zihua, 'Zhong-Mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo Yu Yinduzhina Zhanzheng*, pp.228-9.

<sup>70</sup> Memcon, (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, September 19, 1970, *77 Conversations*, pp.173-4.

<sup>71</sup> Memcon (extract), Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, September 23, 1970, *ibid.*, pp.174-6.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

The events in Cambodia in 1970 had strengthened Mao's hand. Not only had the revolutionary parties in Indochina been pushed together by America and her allies into a compact under Chinese tutelage, but the failure of the Cambodian incursions had demonstrated the weakness of Nixon's strategy in Southeast Asia. And while the Sino-Soviet border negotiations had yielded no results, the threat of war had dissipated. Domestically China was recovering from the worst ravages of the Cultural Revolution, while Mao had successfully dealt with a perceived political challenge from Lin Biao. If Nixon wanted to revive the stalled process of rapprochement, he was going to have to make the first move.

#### Back channels, open doors, and false starts

By late September 1970, Mao had been stung by Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, and was determined that it was Nixon who was going to have to make the running to advance Sino-American relations. The global and domestic reaction to Nixon's invasion of Cambodia had been overwhelmingly negative, and the killing of four students by National Guardsmen at Kent State University on May 4<sup>th</sup> had given new momentum to the domestic anti-war movement. At the end of June the Senate passed the 'Cooper-Church amendment', which prohibited military aid to, and US military activity in, Cambodia; in mid-July Nixon's Secretary of State had passed comment that the Cambodian incursions had been a 'non-success' and in early September the 'McGovern-Hatfield amendment' (setting a deadline for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1971) received the support of thirty-nine members of the United States Senate. It was probably with all this American domestic turmoil over Indochina in mind that the Chairman expressed his satisfaction at the North Vietnamese negotiating strategy. Encouraged by Nixon's troubles Mao decided that the Chinese government would sit on its hands and wait for an overture from Washington. It appears, nonetheless, that the Chairman was supremely confident that such a move would eventually come from Nixon, and in preparation for it the most prominent American friend of Communist China, the author Edgar Snow, was invited onto the podium with Chairman Mao at the National

Day celebrations on October 1<sup>st</sup>. A photograph was taken of the two men together, but it was not published; the Chairman wanted to keep it and publish it at a more appropriate juncture, when it was hoped its message would have more impact.<sup>73</sup>

Nixon did not keep the Chinese waiting for long, for by the start of October the Americans were scrambling to find a channel through which to re-open dialogue with Beijing. On September 27<sup>th</sup>, Kissinger enlisted his friend, the Frenchman Jean Sainteny, into attempting to make private contact with Beijing. At the start of October, the American President pointedly commented in an interview with Time magazine that “If there is anything I want to do before I die, it is to go to China.”<sup>74</sup> Towards the end of the month, Nixon personally asked Pakistani President Yahya Khan to pass the message to Beijing that they were willing to send a high-level envoy to China for talks. The next day, he made the same point to visiting Romanian President, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and later that evening sent a more public signal when he used the words “People’s Republic of China” – the first time they had ever been publicly uttered by an American President - at a banquet for the Romanian dignitaries.<sup>75</sup>

On November 5<sup>th</sup>, Zhou had talks with Edgar Snow, in which he emphasized that Taiwan was the primary issue in Sino-American relations, and that all other problems were of a secondary nature: words which the Vietnamese comrades would surely have found disturbing. Zhou went on to add that China’s door was “wide open”.<sup>76</sup> Five days later that door got the push it needed when the Chinese Premier personally received Yahya’s message from Nixon. Over the next three days the Pakistani President had three more private meetings with Zhou, and one meeting with Chairman Mao. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, Zhou gave Yahya the P.R.C.’s reply, which echoed the comments made to Snow a few days earlier and came with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman’s seal of approval: Taiwan was an indivisible part of Chinese territory, and the key issue in Sino-American relations; but if the American side really had the desire and means to resolve the issue, then the Chinese

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<sup>73</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.510-514; C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, p.1628.

<sup>74</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.699.

<sup>75</sup> Memcon, ‘Dr Kissinger and Mr. Sainteny’, September 27, 1970, NPMP/NSC/853/2; C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, p.1627.

<sup>76</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.407.

government would welcome a special representative of President Nixon's to Beijing. Pakistan was designated as the appropriate channel for their response, even though on November 21<sup>st</sup> the Romanians delivered the same message from Nixon, and were given an almost identical reply to pass on.<sup>77</sup>

Washington received the Pakistani message on December 9<sup>th</sup> in the form of a verbal note, read out by the Pakistani Ambassador to the United States. The content of the message closely resembled the original message given by Zhou to Yahya, though in a somewhat abbreviated form. Significantly, the verbal message received by Kissinger was not so adamant in its emphasis on the fact that Taiwan stood in the way of Sino-American diplomatic relations, hinting at a certain degree of Pakistani 'finessing' of the message. Washington passed its reply on to the Pakistani Ambassador one week later, and immediately tried to link the Taiwan question with that of Vietnam. The message concluded by stating that "the meeting in Peking would not be limited only to the Taiwan question but would encompass other steps designed to improve relations and reduce tensions between our two countries. With respect to the U.S. military presence on Taiwan, however, the policy of the United States Government is to reduce its military presence in the region of East Asia and the Pacific as tensions in this region diminish."<sup>78</sup> With this began Kissinger's attempts to lever Beijing into pressurising Hanoi to end the war on conditions more favourable to the United States by linking it to the question of Taiwan. In twelve months the situation had been reversed: at the start of 1970 China had grabbed the American President's attention with the statement that the war in Indochina was not an impediment to improved relations; by the year's end the Americans were attempting to make it so.<sup>79</sup>

In the meantime, Mao was making preparations to demonstrate the seriousness of China's response through an interview with Edgar Snow, on December 18<sup>th</sup>. In this interview, Mao told Snow that he "would be happy to talk to [Nixon], either as a tourist or as President". What the interview didn't touch on, however,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp.409-11, 415.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum for the President from Henry Kissinger, 'Chinese Communist Initiative', undated (ca. December 10<sup>th</sup> 1970), NPMP/NSC/1031/1.

<sup>79</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.702.

was Vietnam, even when Snow mentioned the war as a cause of social unrest in America. The corollary of Mao's renewed practical interest and support for the Vietnamese war effort was a creeping diplomatic silence on the subject: in line with the message Nixon had received in January, Beijing wanted to keep Indochina as an issue peripheral to Sino-American relations.<sup>80</sup>

Mao had initially told Snow, however, that their conversation was not for publication, but for "scholars and researchers".<sup>81</sup> Later, though, the American was given a verbatim transcript of the conversation, but was instructed not to publish it for several months: the Chairman was making the assumption that the C.I.A. would have the intelligence to pick up on his message before it made it to print. As a stamp of the authenticity of the interview, and the seriousness with which Mao intended its contents to be taken in Washington, on Christmas Day 1970, the photograph of Edgar Snow with Mao on Tiananmen Gate was published on the front page of *Renmin Ribao*. The picture was meant to grab the attention of Washington's China watchers and draw attention to his conversations with Snow. For emphasis, it was accompanied by the caption: "The Great Teacher of the Chinese people, Chairman Mao, recently met with American friend and distinguished personage Edgar Snow, and had cordial and friendly discussions with him." The significance of the photograph and caption went unnoticed in Washington. Kissinger noted that the Chinese overestimated Washington's subtlety and the message did not get to the Nixon administration for several months. It mattered little though, because on January 12<sup>th</sup> Zhou's message via Bucharest arrived, echoing Mao's comments to Snow, and reinforcing that delivered via Pakistan. In the week after Yahya's visit the Chinese had decided to up the stakes substantially and invite Nixon himself. It was a decision that was going to have a long-term detrimental effect on Beijing's relationship with Hanoi.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> C.D.R.O., *Mao wengao*, vol. 13, p.167.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.164.

<sup>82</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.702; *Renmin Ribao*, December 25, 1970; Memo for the President from Henry Kissinger, 'Conversation with Ambassador Bogdan', January 12, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1031/1; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.699. Nixon claimed in his memoir, *RN*, p.547 that he learned of Mao's statement "within a few days after he made it". This was contradicted by Kissinger in *W.H.Y.*, p.1487, n.6, where he claimed the Snow interview first came to the attention of the Americans when it was



Upon reading the message Nixon decided that “we may appear too eager. Let’s cool it – wait for them to respond to our initiatives.”<sup>83</sup> It would prove to be a much longer wait than either Nixon or Kissinger had bargained for: the joint South Vietnamese-American invasion of Laos from January to March temporarily suspended the process. Sino-American rapprochement was on hold again, and despite Mao’s best efforts once again one of the main causes lay in Indochina.<sup>84</sup> The first stage of the offensive began on January 29<sup>th</sup>. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, as Kissinger noted, the *Renmin Ribao* issued “an eloquent denunciation of the operations in Laos. But just as in the preceding year over Cambodia, it carefully avoided personal attacks on Nixon.” To emphasise this point, that same day, the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister passed a message to the Norwegian Ambassador in Beijing for transmission to Washington stating that “China was aware of a new trend on American policy. The Indochina war made it impossible to resume the Warsaw talks... but sooner or later the Chinese would want to sit down and talk”. However, there would be no further movements between the two sides until after the incursions had ended in late March.<sup>85</sup>

In some respects, the pause in progress provided the Chinese with a useful respite during which time they could lay the groundwork to alleviate the undoubted shock, at minimum, that Hanoi would feel as a result of a visit to China by Nixon. As far back as the previous November Mao had personally intervened when the Chinese Foreign Ministry proposed that the Chinese Red Cross donate two million yuan to the South Vietnamese Liberation Red Cross for disaster relief: the Chairman increased the donation to five million yuan. That same month, the Foreign Trade Ministry sent orders that aid commitments to Vietnam for the coming year should be met as quickly as possible.<sup>86</sup>

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published in April. Kissinger is supported in this by John Holdridge in his memoir, *Crossing The Divide*, p.47.

<sup>83</sup> Memo for the President from Henry Kissinger, ‘Conversation with Ambassador Bogdan’, January 12<sup>th</sup> 1971, NPMP/NSC/1031/1.

<sup>84</sup> Zhou would later comment to Kissinger, “[T]here was a cessation of contacts for a period of time. As you know, one reason was last year’s Cambodian incident, and this year there was the Route 9 battle. This could not but affect our contacts”, memcon, Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger, July 9, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1032/2.

<sup>85</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp.706, 1002, 1008-9.

<sup>86</sup> Shen Zhihua, ‘Zhong-Mei hejie’, in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo Yu Yinduzhina Zhanzheng*, p, 228.

While the South Vietnamese operations in Laos were ongoing, on February 12<sup>th</sup> Zhou hosted a North Vietnamese economic delegation, led by D.R.V. Vice-Premier Le Thanh Nghi, during which Nghi invited the Chinese Premier to visit North Vietnam, an invitation that Zhou accepted. Three days later, “what the Vietnamese communists themselves had then acknowledged as a very generous package of supplementary economic and military aid to Hanoi”, worth around 15 million yuan was signed.<sup>87</sup> On March 3<sup>rd</sup> the Politburo met to discuss aspects of Zhou’s impending visit to Hanoi, and resolved to strengthen China’s course of action in assisting Vietnam. It served as a strong public declaration of continued support for the Vietnamese struggle. To further emphasize this statement of intent, a senior Chinese delegation visited Hanoi from March 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>, led by Zhou Enlai, but also including Ye Jianying, Vice-Chairman of the Military Commission of the C.C.P. Central Committee, the director of the Armament Department of the P.L.A.’s General Logistics Department, Yuan Huaping, and a Deputy Chief-of-Staff of the P.L.A., Qiu Huizhuo. The prominence of military men in the delegation indicates that a strong show of solidarity with the Vietnamese war effort was intended, and was surely connected to both the events in Laos and the Sino-American opening.<sup>88</sup>

While in Hanoi, Zhou addressed a mass rally at which he used Mao’s name to publicly reaffirm China’s support for Vietnam. The Vietnamese comrades were clearly nervous, however, and urged Zhou to spearhead a ‘world-wide People’s Front’ that would include the Soviet Union to oppose the U.S. and other imperialists, but the Chinese premier was, unsurprisingly, unwilling to enter into such a movement. We do not know whether Zhou’s speeches in Hanoi merely hinted to their Vietnamese comrades, though without specifically mentioning it, the contradictions that would lie ahead as China continued to pursue rapprochement with the United States, though given the tone of Zhou’s conversations with Pham Van Dong it seems clear that the Vietnamese had some idea of the goings-on between Washington and Beijing. Zhou went to great pains to emphasise that “peoples’ revolutionary struggles cannot be sacrificed for the sake of relations between

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<sup>87</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.67; Shen Zhihua, ‘Zhong-Mei hejie’, in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, p.229; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.436.

<sup>88</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-Mei huanhe’, p.70; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p.441.

governments. Only traitors do that.” In another significant section of his speech, while explaining the dangers of entering into a United Front with the Soviets, he emphasised that “a country’s foreign policy is the product of history; *whether it has a rapprochement with a particular country sooner or whether it has it later*, it is all the product of history and it cannot use the problems or successes of any other country to serve its own foreign policy”.<sup>89</sup> By evoking an image of the Soviet Union conducting such a policy, and condemning it, Zhou was giving assurances, in advance, that China’s future course of action vis-à-vis the United States would be honourable. It is unlikely, however, that the comrades in Hanoi were convinced. They were surely able to sense that an unstoppable momentum was building behind a Sino-American détente, and feared for the consequences.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, as April began, China and the United States were tantalisingly (or from Hanoi’s perspective, worryingly) close to a breakthrough. Lam Son 719 had ended, without success, and American troops had left Laos. China’s terms for improved relations were being realised, and now all that was required was a major gesture to move the process forward. The unlikely environment of the World Table Tennis Championships would provide that opportunity, and a new era in Sino-American relations would dawn; however, for China another new challenge was also only just beginning. China had to avoid completely losing the faith of the Vietnamese comrades, and prevent them from moving further into the orbit of the Soviet Union, a move that would seriously undermine China’s security, perhaps in a manner even more dangerous than the threat the Americans had posed in South Vietnam. China’s relationship with America was to change fundamentally; the challenge was to prevent the same happening to the relationship with Hanoi.

The Cultural Revolution had pushed Chinese society to the brink of catastrophe, forcing Mao to call a halt to its activities. The irony was that by the time his effort to purge China of revisionism was winding down, the revisionist threat to the P.R.C. was more acute than ever. The domestic fight against perceived, or perhaps even

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<sup>89</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp.580-1; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp.441-2 (author’s emphasis).

<sup>90</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, pp.68-9.

imagined, revisionists had created ever-increasing tensions along the Sino-Soviet border, beyond which lay the very real power of the 'revisionist' Soviet Red Army, whose strength, and willingness to use it, had been demonstrated in central Europe in the summer of 1968. Mao's reaction, in the wake of Nixon's election victory, was to embark on a dual policy of attempting to improve relations with both Hanoi and Washington, a process that was accelerated by the crisis caused by the Sino-Soviet border clashes in the spring and summer of 1969. And while the tensions in Sino-Vietnamese relations that had been created by the Cultural Revolution began to dissipate, they were to be almost immediately replaced by friction caused by Mao's decision for rapprochement with the United States. This tension was to become an enduring feature of Sino-Vietnamese relations for the next few years, and one which prompted Mao to take remedial measures to counter, such as increasing aid to Hanoi.

The necessity of such measures was emphasized by the death of Ho Chi Minh, who in many ways embodied the longevity and intimacy of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance. The political dynamic in Hanoi would be greatly altered by his passing, and it was imperative for China to demonstrate a continuity of solidarity for the Vietnamese revolution in Ho's absence. Beyond this immediate factor, Mao's decision to seek an improvement in relations with the United States was also an important causal factor behind the huge increase in Chinese support for Hanoi. But this was more than simply a sweetener to encourage the V.W.P. to swallow the bitter pill of Sino-American rapprochement; while Mao had come to believe that Nixon was de-escalating American involvement in Indochina, he wanted to ensure that the United States left the area rapidly and permanently, without leaving any tail behind. Although superficially at odds with his policy of rapprochement, the Chairman's assessment of how best to achieve this was to heavily arm the D.R.V. It was unlikely, Mao felt, that Nixon would entirely surrender at the negotiating table America's position in South Vietnam unless it had been forced upon him on the battlefield – unless, of course, the American President could be convinced that the improvement in Sino-American relations obviated the need for any such continued presence. Furthermore, the path to Sino-American rapprochement would be eased by the conclusion of the Vietnam War: a North Vietnamese victory would not only

enhance China's position relative to the United States, but would also greatly reduce Hanoi's hostility to such a move, ensuring that China did not end up with a Soviet satellite on its southern frontier.

Thus, Mao's America and Vietnam policies were set on parallel tracks, each in isolation from the other. The only point where they converged was when Nixon appeared to reverse the general trend in his policy by temporarily escalating the conflict and spreading it to Cambodia and Laos. At each instance Mao froze contacts with America until such times as the trend towards withdrawal restarted, whereupon the Sino-American rapprochement resumed. After Nixon's Cambodian incursions the Chairman waited for the Americans to restart the process, though he had already prepared his response in the form of the Edgar Snow photograph. It was the C.C.P. Chairman himself who would make the first bold public move to restart the process through 'ping-pong diplomacy' – but only after the failure of Nixon's strategy had been demonstrated in Laos. Mao's 'ping-pong' decision, made from a position of strength, meant that the speed of the rapprochement was to greatly accelerate in the months ahead, but it would be left to Zhou Enlai to manage the tricky issue of explaining China's new strategic design to Hanoi.

## Chapter 3

### April 1971 – January 1972: Making waves and damage control

After a chance encounter between two players on the Chinese and American table-tennis teams at the World Table-Tennis Championships in Japan, Mao took the bold decision to invite the American team to China for a series of exhibition games. It was a masterstroke, for it kick-started again the rapprochement process, while simultaneously preparing the Chinese people for the diplomatic revolution that was in the making. It also functioned as a 'soft landing' that helped to pave the way with China's Vietnamese comrades, who needed as much preparation as the domestic Chinese audience, but who would also require much more convincing of the desirability of improved Sino-American relations.<sup>1</sup>

Mao's continuous revolution was being transferred, in a rather novel and surprising way, into the diplomatic arena by making peace with the arch-imperialist who sat in the White House. Given the previous twenty years' Chinese rhetoric, this was indeed a diplomatic revolution, though its consequences were as yet uncertain. There was no doubt that Nixon and Kissinger would have hopes for reaping dividends in their Vietnam strategy as a result of the new relationship that was being forged with China. The task for Mao and Zhou was to manage these American expectations in such a manner that it did not harm the rapprochement process, while simultaneously demonstrating to Hanoi that China was not engaging in any form of "swindle" of Vietnam of the sort Mao had feared the Soviets would agree to during the Cultural Revolution, and which to the Vietnamese would undoubtedly rekindle the bitter memories of 1954.

#### Ping-pong diplomacy

The American response to 'Ping Pong Diplomacy' was the relaxation of the American trade embargo on China (a move that Nixon was on the verge of making

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, pp. 257-262.

anyway); this was announced on the day that Zhou Enlai received the American table-tennis players in the Great Hall of the People, in the heart of the Chinese capital. A head of steam was building behind the two countries' moves towards each other, only further emphasized by comments Nixon made on April 16<sup>th</sup>, when he repeated his statement that he hoped to see China some day. Despite the President's outward optimism, however, two anxious weeks followed for Nixon and Kissinger, during which they heard nothing from Beijing. As a result, on April 26<sup>th</sup> a courier was dispatched to Paris with a letter for Jean Sainteny, a French former diplomat whom Kissinger knew personally and who had contacts with the Chinese Ambassador in Paris.<sup>2</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger had no need to worry, however, because on April 21<sup>st</sup> Zhou Enlai had sent his own message, traveling in the opposite direction. A week after receiving the American table-tennis team in Beijing, Zhou had requested that the Pakistani President convey a message to President Nixon; because it had to be couriered it took a week to reach Washington D.C., passing Kissinger's letter to Sainteny traveling in the opposite direction. The message noted Nixon's message of January 5<sup>th</sup>, and continued that "Owing to the situation at the time, it has not been possible to reply earlier to the message from the President of the U.S.A. to the Premier of the People's Republic of China". In a characteristically understated fashion, Zhou was reminding Nixon of the problems that his expansion of the Vietnam War into Laos had brought to the process of Sino-American rapprochement; implicit was also the message that any further such misadventures could not but further delay the process of rapprochement. However, unlike previous messages, this message from Zhou did not maintain that the purpose of any American visit would be to discuss their withdrawal from Taiwan; rather, it noted that "[if] the relations between China and the U.S.A. are to be restored fundamentally, a solution to this crucial question can be found only through direct discussions between high-level responsible persons of the two countries." Having postponed Sino-American rapprochement due to the expansion of the war into Laos, in their enthusiasm for its resumption the Chinese had acceded to Nixon's December demand that talks would

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<sup>2</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 713.

not be limited to discussions of the Taiwan question. Events had demonstrated that to protest that Indochina was unconnected flew in the face of reality. Beijing had understood that the U.S. envoy was not prepared to appear like a supplicant at the Dragon Throne; more significantly, however, an expanded agenda dangled in front of Nixon the opportunity to 'discuss' the Vietnam War with the Chinese leaders. The message went on to reaffirm the "willingness of the Chinese government to receive publically [sic] in Peking a special envoy of the President of the U.S (for instance Mr. Kissinger)... or even the President himself, for a direct meeting and discussions."<sup>3</sup> The Paris courier was intercepted before he could fulfill his task.<sup>4</sup>

If Zhou Enlai had intended to excite the White House's optimism that rapprochement with China might bear its fruit in Vietnam, it certainly worked. Kissinger was buoyed by the whole situation, and felt that it portended well for his attempts to negotiate an end to the war in Vietnam, telling the President, "We've done it now, we have got it all hooked together.... I have not said this before but I think if we get this thing working, we will end Vietnam this year. The mere fact of these contacts makes that."<sup>5</sup> The President was a little more hesitant than Kissinger to believe that "everything is beginning to fit together", however he was convinced that his moves in Laos had strengthened his hand in dealing with the Chinese: "The people over two to one thought it had failed and yet here comes the Chinese move", enthused Nixon, little realising that it was the very failure of the invasion of Laos that had emboldened Mao.<sup>6</sup>

Having received the positive response he had hoped for, Nixon set to work on maximising political advantage by ensuring that no Democrats would visit China before he did. The next day the Pakistani Ambassador in Washington, Agha Hilaly, was called in by Kissinger to transmit a message onward to the Chinese, stating that "President Nixon is very anxious to handle these negotiations entirely by himself and

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<sup>3</sup> 'Message from Premier Zhou Enlai dated April 21, 1971', NPMP/NSC/1031/1.

<sup>4</sup> H.R. Haldeman diary entries for April 12, 14, 17, 19, 20, 23, 1971, *The Haldeman Diaries* CD ROM (Santa Monica, CA: Sony, 1994); Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp. 709-713; letter, Haig to Walters, April 27, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1031/1; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, p. 452; Memorandum of record from Col. Richard T. Kennedy, December 16, 1970, NPMP/NSC/1031/1.

<sup>5</sup> Telcon, 'The President/Mr. Kissinger, 8.18 p.m., April 27, 1971', NPMP/NSC/1031/1.

<sup>6</sup> 'Peking Seeking a Tripolar World', in the *Washington Post*, July 22, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1036/1; Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power*, (New York: Summit Books, 1983), p. 369.



not to let any politician come into the picture until a government-to-government channel is established".<sup>7</sup> A more substantive reply from the Americans followed on May 10<sup>th</sup>, in which Nixon accepted Zhou's suggestion that he visit Beijing "for direct conversations with the leaders of the People's Republic of China", and as a preparatory measure proposed a meeting between Kissinger (to whom he had eventually awarded the preparatory trip to Beijing) and Zhou Enlai or another high-level Chinese official. While agreeing that it take place on Chinese soil, the President, hoping to prevent his emissary from visiting Beijing before him, suggested that it would be preferable were the meeting to take place "at some location within convenient flying distance from Pakistan to be suggested by the People's Republic of China." It reiterated the American position that the visit would "begin a preliminary exchange of views on all subjects of mutual interest," among which Vietnam was an obvious priority for the U.S. side. The note continued, "Dr. Kissinger will be prepared to come from June 15 onward." Furthermore, the President went to great pains to emphasise the secret nature of Kissinger's visit, in direct opposition to Zhou's invitation to receive him publicly in Beijing.<sup>8</sup>

As further evidence of his *bona fides*, on May 20<sup>th</sup> Nixon, via his ambassador in Pakistan (who had been taken into Nixon and Kissinger's confidence for the purpose of planning the secret trip to Beijing), passed on a message for transmission to the Chinese, emphasizing to them that the breakthrough on SALT negotiations with the Soviet Union that had been announced that day was in no way directed against the People's Republic of China.<sup>9</sup> China's response arrived on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, in the form of a hand-written note, transcribed by the President of Pakistan, welcoming Nixon to Beijing for direct discussions at some point in the future. While emphasising the primacy of the Taiwan issue, it went further than the previous missive from Zhou by specifically acknowledging that "each side would be free to raise the principal issue of concern to it." There could have existed in Beijing little doubt as to what was the principle issue of concern to the U.S. Likely concerned that

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<sup>7</sup> 'Extract of memcon dated May 5, 1971', NPMP/NSC/1031/2.

<sup>8</sup> Undated and unsigned message from Nixon to Zhou (May 10<sup>th</sup> 1971), NPMP/NSC/1031/1.

<sup>9</sup> National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book No. 66, document 24, <http://www.nsarchive.org>

another unanticipated turn of events in Indochina could once again halt the rapprochement process, the message suggested June 15<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>, the earliest possible date suggested by Nixon and less than two weeks away, as the date for Kissinger's own visit to the Chinese capital.<sup>10</sup> For while Beijing was determined to separate the issue of the Vietnam War from Sino-American relations, it could not ignore any further escalation of the war. Unsurprisingly, such a short schedule was impossible to implement given the President and his advisor's desire for absolute secrecy; after the transmission of a further note via Pakistan, the dates of July 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> were agreed upon. An emissary of the President of the United States of America was going to Beijing, where he and Zhou Enlai would be free to raise the issues of principal concern to them. Taiwan and Vietnam were clearly going to top the agenda; what remained to be seen was whether there would be a trade-off between the two.<sup>11</sup>

### Making waves

Nixon's insistence on secrecy caused no small amount of suspicion and unease in Beijing, and certainly complicated Chinese relations with Hanoi. Had Kissinger been able to come publicly to Beijing, Zhou would have at least been able to inform his North Vietnamese counterparts in advance, and while it would not have totally assuaged their fears about what Beijing was up to with Nixon, it may have gone some way toward reassuring them that the Chinese were not going to sell them out to the Americans. However, it was impossible to inform the Vietnamese comrades of Kissinger's secret visit beforehand, as their anger could well have manifested itself in the form of a leak, thereby undercutting Beijing's reliability as a partner in the eyes of Nixon. On the other hand, if the North Vietnamese were to find out about Kissinger's visit from a source other than the Chinese leadership, then Beijing's relations with their comrades in Hanoi would be even further traumatised. Thus, by

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<sup>10</sup> 'Message from Premier Zhou Enlai to President Nixon, May 29, 1971', NPMP/NSC/1031/1. Intriguingly, Kissinger appears to have edited the original message written by President Yahya to remove all references to his own invitation to 'Peking' and replaced them with the more generic 'China' – presumably out of fear that Nixon would further insist that Kissinger's meetings take place somewhere other than in the Chinese capital. Cf. *W.H.Y.*, p. 727.

<sup>11</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 727-8; handwritten note, Hilaly to Kissinger, June 19, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1031/1.

acceding to Nixon's demands for secrecy, it was in Beijing's interest that it be maintained by all parties concerned.

The First Secretary of the VWP, Le Duan, passed through Beijing in early May returning from the 24<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU in Moscow, and while there held talks with Zhou Enlai. The Chinese Premier praised the victories of the three Indochinese peoples, and mentioned the victory in the 'Route 9 Battle' (the U.S. supported invasion of Laos) in particular as having hastened the defeat of the Americans. He also pledged continued support for the struggle of all three Indochinese peoples. Clearly disconcerted by the 'ping-pong diplomacy', though as yet unaware of the diplomatic earthquake in the making, Le Duan was unconvinced and his remarks pointed, reminding the audience, and Zhou, that the fraternal and comradely reception that the Vietnamese receive in China was because they "share a common goal." That the Chinese and Vietnamese parties, Le Duan went on, should share the same views was an important factor in driving American imperialism out of Indochina, and an important factor "in the struggle to oppose Japanese militarism."<sup>12</sup> By evoking the spirit of common enemies, Le Duan hoped to remind his Chinese hosts of a common bond; his language, however, was couched more in terms of national interest than ideology. Sensitive to Vietnamese concerns about their moves toward Washington, and perhaps stung by Le Duan's words, Zhou wrote a report of his talks with Le Duan and forwarded it to Mao and Lin Biao. However, on the same day that the Chinese Premier was hosting the First Secretary of the Vietnam Workers' Party, he also participated at a meeting to discuss areas where *Renmin Ribao's* coverage of the war in Vietnam was deficient - particularly where it was vulgar and unreasonable, and was occasionally absolutist. A more temperate tone in Beijing's coverage could be expected from now on. The ideological dogmatism of the Cultural Revolution was badly out of step with China's new foreign policy needs; flexibility was now required, and would be extended to Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Guo Ming et al., eds., *Xiandai Zhong-Yue guanxi ziliao xuanbian, 1949-1978* [A Selection of Materials on Modern Sino-Vietnamese Relations, 1949-1978], (Beijing: Shishi, 1986), vol. 3, pp.777-9.

<sup>13</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp. 456-7; Gilks, *The Breakdown*, p. 71.

Almost a week later, on May 17<sup>th</sup>, via the Chinese ambassador in Islamabad, Zhou received Nixon's formal response to the invitation to send an emissary to Beijing, but another week lapsed before any formal meetings were held to discuss the Chinese response. By the time a core group of Foreign Ministry officials met on May 25<sup>th</sup> to discuss Nixon's acceptance, the third note from the American president in the space of less than four weeks had arrived (informing the Chinese of progress in U.S.-Soviet SALT negotiations). The next day the contents of all four messages were put before the Politburo, at Mao's suggestion, in order to discuss China's response, and to plan for both the preliminary meeting with Kissinger, and the subsequent summit with Nixon himself. Mao was clearly confident of success. The discussion largely centred on the issue of Taiwan and made the resolution of the Taiwan issue the *sine qua non* for the talks' success, and eight principles were drawn up that were to form the basis of China's position in the talks.<sup>14</sup>

Topping the list was, unsurprisingly, the demand that "All American armed forces and special military installations must be withdrawn from China's Taiwan province and the Taiwan Straits area by a set date. This is the key question in the restoration of Sino-American relations." Secondly, the principles went on to declare that the liberation of Taiwan was an internal affair in which external intervention would not be tolerated, but that the P.R.C. would "strive to liberate Taiwan using peaceful means, and our efforts towards Taiwan shall be in earnest." The third condition relating to the restoration of Sino-American relations was opposition to "activities that involve 'Two Chinas' or 'One China, One Taiwan'... If the United States wishes to establish diplomatic relations with us, it must recognise the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government that represents China."<sup>15</sup> Significantly, these conditions relating to Taiwan, while being at the forefront of Chinese concerns, had to be met only in advance of the full normalization of

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<sup>14</sup> Shen Zhihua, 'Zhong-Mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, p. 230; Wang Taiping, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi*, [A Diplomatic History of the People's Republic of China], vol. 3 (1970-1978), vol. 3, (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi, 1999) p. 353; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 478.

<sup>15</sup> Shen Zhihua, 'Zhong-Mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, p. 230; Wang Taiping, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi*, vol. 3, p. 353; Gong Li, "Chinese Decision Making and the Thawing of U.S.-China Relations", in Jiang and Ross, *Re-examining the Cold War*, p. 345.

relations; “if the three previous conditions remain unmet, then China and America... can establish liaison structures in both sides’ capitals.”<sup>16</sup>

Zhou Enlai was being given a lot of leeway to make use of in his discussions of Taiwan with Kissinger. The same was not to be said of the other more minor issues that the Politburo anticipated might surface in the talks. In fact, these instructions that were to form the guidelines for Zhou’s talks with Kissinger were much more strident in their discussion of the issues of the United Nations, trade, and Indochina. The Politburo declared that “We shall not actively raise the issue of the United Nations”, but if the U.S. did China’s position was unequivocal that there could be no “‘Two Chinas’ or a ‘One China, One Taiwan’ arrangement.” Likewise China would not actively raise the issue of trade, but “If the Americans mention it, then talks may proceed once the principle of American withdrawal from Taiwan has been resolved.” The Chinese adopted a lofty attitude towards these areas of bilateral interest – trade and the United Nations – leaving it to the Americans to pursue them, should they so desire; discussions on them, however, were made subordinate and linked to the issue of Taiwan. The war in Indochina, dealt with in the final point, was not.<sup>17</sup>

Point eight stated that, “The Chinese government maintains that American armed forces must withdraw from the three countries of Indochina, from Korea, Japan and the relevant countries of Southeast Asia, in order to maintain peace in the Far East.”<sup>18</sup>. The issue was left to stand on its own with Beijing simply repeating its well-known position; the acceptance or rejection of the Chinese stance would, however, determine nothing. A *modus vivendi* on the issue of Taiwan would prove to be the key to success – this is immediately clear from the milder tone adopted in relation to American withdrawal from Indochina. Similarly, a Politburo report drawn up by Zhou Enlai finished by addressing the impact Beijing’s rapprochement with Washington would have on the war in Indochina and the Paris peace talks. It

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<sup>16</sup> Rather confusingly, the fifth of the eight principles refers to “the three previous conditions”. Presumably this refers to articles 1, 2 and 4, since article 3 relating to the peaceful liberation of Taiwan was not a condition but a statement of intent.

<sup>17</sup> Shen Zhihua, ‘Zhong-Mei hejie’, in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, p. 230; Wang Taiping, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi*, vol. 3, p. 353; Gong Li, “Chinese Decision Making”, Jiang and Ross, *Re-examining the Cold War*, p. 345.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

concluded that Sino-American talks “may make waves for a time, but when [the issue] has been talked through, it will be helpful to the Indochinese war of resistance and the Paris talks because Nixon already knows that the focal point of U.S.-Soviet competition for hegemony lies in the Middle East and Europe, and does not lie in the Far East. If Sino-American talks move forward in progress, this will certainly be helpful to [American] troop withdrawal and the Paris talks”. Just like the final of the eight principles, which appears to be something of an afterthought rather than forming part of a set of principles that were to govern Sino-American discussions and (in a display of the sort of chauvinistic tendency that the North Vietnamese feared), this section dealing with the implications of Sino-American rapprochement for the Vietnamese war effort appears to have given little in-depth consideration to any dividend that Nixon could garner through his opening to Beijing. Most minds at the meeting were focused on Taiwan, and whatever time was given over to discussion of the concerns of the Vietnamese comrades, the conclusions were entirely Sino-centric: since the Americans went into Vietnam to block China, the rapprochement could only speed up the pace of an American withdrawal.<sup>19</sup>

Taiwan thus remained at the heart of the Chinese dialogue with the United States and formed three basic conditions for the successful normalization of diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America. Significantly, however, the bar was not being set too high – clearly indicative of a strong Chinese desire to see the talks succeed. In fact, the Politburo was pre-empting the probability that in the short term Nixon would be unable to fully accede to China’s three key conditions, but it was prepared to accept liaison offices as a substitute (though temporary) for full diplomatic recognition. However, while these principles would form the bedrock for the commencement of Sino-American dialogue, it was Mao who was firmly in charge of foreign policy, rather than the Politburo. While the May 26<sup>th</sup> meeting did lay out a basis for conducting negotiations, as will be seen, they were not China’s final fallback position, which could be changed on the Chairman’s instruction. This meeting and the drawing up of these eight points was more importantly a means for Mao and Zhou to carry the

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<sup>19</sup> Shen Zihua, ‘Zhong-Mei hejie’, in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, p. 231.

Politburo with them along the uncertain path that lay ahead. When Mao was sent a brief summary of the evening's events by Zhou Enlai, the Premier informed him that "after [Zhou's] report has been deliberated on by everyone [in the Politburo]" he would forward it on to Mao and Lin Biao; the Chairman annotated the message, noting that "[to do it] this way is good".<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless it appears that the potential implications for Sino-Vietnamese relations weighed much more heavily on the minds of Mao and Zhou than they did on those of the rest of the Politburo. On the day after the Politburo meeting, Zhou forwarded to Mao the record of, and his report on, his talks with Le Duan a fortnight previous, despite the fact that he had already sent these to the Chairman at the time. The Premier was clearly concerned that Mao may not have initially read his report. He need not have worried, however: the Chairman (with perhaps a hint of indignation) wrote on the back of these materials, "Already examined in detail."<sup>21</sup>

An analysis prepared by Kissinger's staff that attempted to predict Chinese aims for his visit to Beijing correctly anticipated the main thrust of the 'eight points' drawn up by the Politburo as the basis for discussion. Unsurprisingly, though with a certain degree of understatement, Kissinger's Scope Paper predicted that "Taiwan remains an issue at the top of their list of disagreements with the U.S., but while they have spoken lately about the U.S. getting its military forces out of the area of Taiwan (in fact, they have actually employed the word 'eventually' in this connection), they have not chosen to highlight the U.S.-R.O.C. [Republic of China/Taiwan] political relationship and might be willing to accept its continuation under present circumstances". Discussion of other Chinese aims included an American "acknowledgement of the importance of China in world affairs", "some form of non-aggression treaty or agreement under the rubric of 'peaceful coexistence'", but "Above all, affirmation of the foregoing in a summit meeting for which President Nixon will visit Peking". In this discussion of China's primary aims, the war in Vietnam was wholly absent.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> C.D.R.O., *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, vol. 13, p. 235.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 456

<sup>22</sup> Briefing Book-'Polo I'-'Summit', NPMP/NSC/1031/1.

It was rather the opposite, however, when it came to Kissinger's own objectives as he saw them, for Vietnam was at the forefront of those. He declared in the paper prepared for the President that his "purpose in general terms will be to get the point across to the Chinese that we will indeed expect them to pay a price for what they expect to achieve, particularly the summit, and to work out the parameters of the *quid pro quo*". Top of this wish-list of American aims were "indications firm enough to be taken as assurances that the Chinese will use their influence on the North Vietnamese to move them toward a peaceful and acceptable settlement of the Vietnam War". Taiwan was relegated to secondary importance, but the objective that Kissinger set himself was equally as ambitious, namely a *modus vivendi* on the issue of Taiwan that would allow the United States to develop relations with Beijing "while we at the same time retain our diplomatic and mutual defence treaty with the ROC [Republic of China]". Having achieved these objectives, the National Security Adviser would then suggest to Zhou Enlai that he would also be responsive to their main items of concern and be prepared to go to the summit. Kissinger was going to play hardball with the Chinese Premier, only agreeing to a summit when America's basic demands had been met. Or at least that was the plan.<sup>23</sup>

The exchange of letters that led to Kissinger's secret trip clearly brought great hope to the White House. Nixon had been signalling to Beijing and sending out feelers from even before he assumed office, but until the spring of 1971 the Chinese response had been restrained and, influenced by Nixon's military strategy in Indochina, punctuated by long periods of silence. China's insistence that Taiwan was the only issue on the agenda for a visit from an American envoy had been replaced by an agreement to discuss each side's concerns, and Vietnam featured prominently among Nixon's. The Chinese had also acceded to his demands for secrecy. The impression in the White House was the Chinese were "bending over backward to set up a meeting", and that that would translate into pressure on Hanoi to end the war in 1971.<sup>24</sup> It would prove to be a forlorn hope. The Vietnamese war, while no longer by its existence an impediment to Sino-American relations, was not

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *Haldeman Diaries*, entry for June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1971.



about to be abandoned by Mao. As outlined in the eight points, an American withdrawal from Indochina was still the desired Chinese outcome; on each occasion when Nixon had changed tack and escalated the war, the rapprochement with China had stalled. Mao and China had invested money, effort, prestige and Chinese lives to ensure the Americans left the Indochinese peninsula; what had changed was that the C.C.P. Chairman no longer demanded they do so with their tails between their legs. For Mao, Nixon could negotiate his way to a withdrawal if he wished, but a total withdrawal it must be all the same. Whether this was enough for Hanoi was quite another matter.

### Quid pro quo?

When the talks between Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger got underway in Beijing on 9<sup>th</sup> July, Taiwan was placed at the top of the agenda by the Chinese side, and Zhou lost no time in laying out the basic conditions that had been agreed upon by the Politburo. After responding in kind to a general opening statement made by the American National Security Adviser, the Chinese Premier stated candidly that the U.S. “must recognize the P.R.C. as the sole legitimate government of China and not make any exceptions... Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory.” He then stated the Chinese demand that the United States “must withdraw all its armed forces and dismantle its military installations on Taiwan and in the Taiwan Straits within a limited period.” Kissinger’s response was a procedural one, but one designed to reinforce in the Chinese Premier’s mind the ‘linkage’ between the issue of Taiwan and that of Indochina, asking whether it was the intent that each side should state their own primary concern first, while reserving their answers for later, or whether the Premier wished to proceed with the issues one at a time. Zhou, as ever the gracious host and skilled negotiator, deferred to his American guest, “You can say whatever you like. You could speak first on the Taiwan question or Indochina, or together, because you may think they are linked.” The Chinese side, it was made clear from the outset, did not.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., July 9, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1032/3.

As with his negotiations with the Vietnamese in Paris, Kissinger divided his presentation on Taiwan into military and political aspects. Emphasizing the general trend in the Administration's policy towards Taiwan, he pointed out that Nixon had already removed a squadron of air tankers from Taiwan and reduced the size of the American military advisory group by twenty percent. He then made the point that two-thirds of the American forces on Taiwan were related to the war in Indochina, and (offering to show the Chinese side the exact number of U.S. troops stationed on the island) declared that this majority portion would be removed "within a specified brief period of time after the ending of the war in Indochina. We are prepared to begin reducing our other forces on Taiwan as our relations improve". Kissinger clearly laid out to his host the link between the evacuation of U.S. troops from Taiwan, and the settlement of the Vietnam War. On the political aspects of the American relationship with Taipei, Kissinger's statement that the United States was not advocating a 'Two Chinas' solution or a 'One China, One Taiwan' solution accorded with the fourth of the eight Politburo points, and was surely greeted with satisfaction by Zhou Enlai. The Premier was disappointed not long after, however, when after further discussions on Taiwan Kissinger was even more frank. "I must be honest with the Prime Minister", he confided, "there's no sense deluding ourselves. There's no possibility in the next one and a half years for us to recognize the P.R.C. as the sole government of China in a formal way..." As evidence of his dissatisfaction, when Kissinger made it to the end of his sentence Zhou quickly turned the subject around, "You want to talk about Indochina." The Premier, a much more experienced negotiator than his American counterpart, sought to demonstrate that linkage was a 'two-way street'.<sup>26</sup>

The war in Indochina dominated the rest of the day's discussions. Zhou had earlier noted the fact that American expansion of the war into Cambodia in 1970, and then into Laos in early 1971, had delayed the rapprochement process, and in his opening statement on the topic Kissinger reiterated that while such actions were not directed against the P.R.C., similar actions having "unfortunate consequences" for Sino-American relations would be an inevitable consequence of the continuation of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

the war in Vietnam. He then went on to discuss the issue in terms of 'Big Power politics'. Hoping to flatter the Chinese sense of national prestige, he noted that "we look at the problem from the perspective of world peace, but the North Vietnamese and the NLF have only one foreign policy problem, and that is Indochina", leaving the statement suitably ambiguous as to who constituted the "we". In this context Kissinger also chose to resurrect the ghost of the 1954 Geneva Conference. Aware of Zhou's personal sensitivity in relation to the events of 1954 (in particular Dulles's refusal to shake his hand), this discussion gave Kissinger a platform from which to spell out the differences between Nixon's approach and that of the Eisenhower administration. "We know that after a peace is made we will be 10,000 miles away, and they will still be there. So it is in our interests to make a peace that they will want to keep. We do not want the war to start again."<sup>27</sup>

Kissinger then spelt out the four basic points of the American negotiating position that he had offered to the Vietnamese in Paris on May 31<sup>st</sup> – a fixed date for withdrawal, an Indochina-wide ceasefire, a release of all prisoners, and respect for the Geneva accords. What was impeding a rapid settlement of the war, Kissinger went on, was Hanoi's refusal to agree to a ceasefire across Indochina, and their insistence that Thieu be removed from office, citing honour a principal reason why the U.S. could not accede to Hanoi's demands. By presenting the American offer in such reasonable terms, Kissinger clearly hoped that Zhou would convey this message to his Vietnamese comrades and urge them to accept the American conditions. Unashamedly making a pitch for Chinese assistance in resolving this matter, Kissinger concluded his statement on the war by telling his Chinese counterpart, "The President has asked me to tell you that we believe the time for peace has come. It is not up to us to tell you what, if anything, you can do. We believe that the end of the war in Indochina will accelerate the improvement in our relations."<sup>28</sup>

Zhou Enlai's response was a subtle but firm rejection of Kissinger's appeal. In his efforts to recruit the Chinese, Kissinger had recalled the Geneva Conference and sourced the origins of North Vietnamese suspicion and recalcitrance in 1954.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

This prompted a remarkably frank admission of culpability on the part of the Chinese Premier, who told Kissinger, "I believe that, in my opinion, for the Vietnamese people to feel that they were deceived during the first Geneva Conference is not groundless...I think now that if at that time we had been more cool-headed, we could perhaps have forced [former U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles] to sign the agreement, saying we would not sign unless the U.S. did... Chairman Mao has spoken of this many times with our Vietnamese friends." Keen not to let the American detect dissent between Beijing and Hanoi, Zhou then added (not entirely accurately), "our Vietnamese friends do not blame us for this. But we could have done more at the time" Zhou Enlai was accepting, both personally and on behalf of his country and in the presence of an emissary of the President of the United States, responsibility for (America's) non-implementation of the Geneva Accords.<sup>29</sup>

As well as admitting partial responsibility for the failure to implement the nation-wide elections stipulated under the Accords, Zhou also admitted that "Two thousand years ago China committed aggression against [the Vietnamese] and ... was defeated by two ladies, two women generals... I went personally to the grave of these two women generals and left wreaths of flowers on the graves to pay my respects for these two heroines who had defeated our ancestors who were exploiters." He also emphasised his own personal friendship and admiration for Ho Chi Minh. By admitting guilt for errors in the past, he was also sending a message that China would not engage in similar behaviour again, subtly rejecting Kissinger's 'Big Power' pitch. Given the American's attempt to highlight common Sino-American interests in concluding the war speedily, Zhou played with him when he noted that "There is a common point between us in that both of us have respect for the greatness and the courage of the Vietnamese people."<sup>30</sup>

Zhou Enlai took pains to emphasise the longevity of the Vietnamese people's struggle, and the fact that although China had supported them all along they had never sent any (combat) troops into Vietnam; the Premier made the equally important point that nor had the Vietnamese asked them to dispatch any. The

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

message Zhou was conveying to the American National Security Advisor was not just that the (North) Vietnamese are strong and independent and would not give up their struggle against the United States, but also that the issue was a purely Vietnamese one. He summarised the Chinese position as consisting of two points: firstly that “all foreign troops of the United States and the troops of other countries which followed the United States into Indochina should be withdrawn. The second point is that the peoples of the three countries of Indochina should be left alone to decide their own respective fates.” He found no disagreement on these two points from his American interlocutor, though, of course, whether North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam were foreign or not was an issue the two men did not see eye-to-eye on.<sup>31</sup>

During dinner, Zhou addressed the political aspects of the war in Vietnam; something which Kissinger had largely avoided. The Premier adopted a more combative tone than he had previously, and threw his full weight behind the demands the North Vietnamese were making in their negotiations with Kissinger. Zhou rejected an Indochina-wide ceasefire, and advocated the removal of the governments in Phnom Penh and Saigon, “either through democratic elections or by overthrowing them.” Later, referring to the South Vietnamese President, Zhou asked Kissinger, “Why must you want to leave a tail on this matter and be unwilling to give it up?”<sup>32</sup> He continued, “If you, while planning to withdraw, want the Vietnamese to undertake obligations tantamount to recognizing that Thieu will remain or be in a coalition government, then that is a conditional withdrawal on your part. At the same time, you are maintaining the rule of Lon Nol/Sirik Matak in Cambodia... They cannot accept that.” This prompted Kissinger to spell out in unambiguous terms what was to become known as the ‘decent interval solution’, something he had only alluded to before. He rejected Zhou’s calls for American participation in the overthrow of Thieu, but assured the Premier, “If the government is as unpopular as you seem to think, then the quicker our forces are withdrawn the quicker it will be

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Mao would later refer to the continued American presence on Taiwan as a ‘tail’. He characterized losing it as being part of the evolutionary process by which the Americans would evolve from apes into humans; the Vietnamese ‘tail’ must also have fallen under this rubric. See also Chen Jian, *Mao’s China*, p. 267.

overthrown. And if it is overthrown after we withdraw, we will not intervene.” Intrigued, Zhou probed further, inquiring about levels of American support for Saigon during the withdrawal, and their insistence on a ceasefire throughout Indochina. Kissinger replied that aid would have stipulated limitations and, crucially, that the ceasefire throughout Indochina would not be indefinite. “We can put a time limit, say 18 months or some period.” Having successfully probed the American National Security Advisor to the point where he had spelt out what a ‘decent interval’ would be, Zhou desisted. “We cannot consider these specific matters. We are not Vietnamese.”<sup>33</sup>

Both the Americans and the Chinese had a strong interest in achieving a summit visit from Nixon, and in negotiating it sought concessions from the other on the areas of interest that were most important to them: the war in Indochina for the Americans, and Taiwan for the Chinese. Kissinger’s statements on Taiwan appeared to satisfy most of the Politburo’s basic principles governing progress in Sino-American relations. When Zhou reported the day’s proceedings to Mao, the Chairman seemed pleased with the American statements on the future of Sino-American relations and the status of Taiwan. These now made the war in Indochina the most pressing issue in their bilateral relations. Mao told Zhou, “the United States should make a new start and... let the domino fall. The United States must withdraw from Vietnam. We are in no hurry on the Taiwan issue because there is no fighting on Taiwan. But there is a war in Vietnam... We should not invite Nixon to come just for our own purposes.”<sup>34</sup>

The next day’s discussions were dominated less by Taiwan and Indochina, and focused on the broader issue of peace and security in Asia, including discussions on the Soviet Union, India-Pakistan, Japan and Korea; nonetheless, the issue of the Vietnam War was frequently raised in relation to these other issues. Zhou subjected Kissinger to a lengthy monologue, more strident in tone than the previous day’s discussions, explaining to Kissinger his interpretation of the general situation in Asia. Resurrecting the geopolitical analysis that prevailed during the peak of the Cultural

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<sup>33</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., July 9, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1032/3.

<sup>34</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p. 267.

Revolution, Zhou discussed the possibility that the United States could unite with the U.S.S.R. and Japan to divide China up, a mode of discourse almost certainly entered into under the instruction of the Chairman. In such a circumstance, Zhou told Kissinger, "We must be prepared to resist for a protracted period by people's warfare, engaging in a long-term struggle until final victory." Moving swiftly from China's struggle to that of their southern comrades, he went on, "I believe that this is the same case with the Vietnamese people and Indochinese people – they think in similar terms." Returning to Kissinger's oft-repeated theme of American honour, Zhou urged him to "withdraw all your armed forces lock, stock, and barrel and withdraw all other foreign forces and do so on your own initiative. That would be the greatest honour." He turned Kissinger's warning of the previous day back on him, charging, "if the war flares up again in that area, the consequences will be even worse and you will be even more unpopular. You mentioned 'incalculable consequences'. These consequences are not incalculable for the Indochinese people, but only for the U.S. people."<sup>35</sup>

Kissinger's hopes for a *quid pro quo* on Vietnam were being dashed by the Chinese Premier, who had upped the tempo, volume, and rhetoric as his discussions with Kissinger wore on. The American had, probably much more quickly than Zhou or Mao had anticipated, satisfied China's basic demands with regard to Taiwan. And although Kissinger had made it clear that there was no realistic timetable under which Sino-American relations could be normalised before the beginning of a second term in office for Nixon, this was a reality that Mao seemed prepared to accept. So somewhat ironically then, given China's previous attempts to isolate the issue from their contacts with Washington, Indochina was thrust to the forefront as the most urgent, though not the most crucial, issue in Sino-American relations (which remained Taiwan).<sup>36</sup> But rather than extracting a commitment, spoken or unspoken, from Zhou Enlai that he would use his influence in Hanoi in exchange for a summit

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<sup>35</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., July 10, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1032/3.

<sup>36</sup> This was the precise characterization given to these two issues by Zhou Enlai during Kissinger's subsequent visit to Beijing in October, and one repeated by Nixon in his personal notes as he prepared for his meetings in Beijing. See memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., October 21, 1972, NPMP/NSC/1034/2; Jeffrey Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 200.

with Nixon, Kissinger had made a commitment to Zhou that an 18-month ceasefire in Indochina would be a sufficiently 'decent interval' after which the United States would not re-intervene in the internecine warfare of the Indochinese peoples. Zhou's message was clear: 'the United States must withdraw fully and completely from Indochina, but Beijing would not involve itself in the process. How long such a withdrawal would take, "that is for you to negotiate with the people of Vietnam and not for us to speak on their behalf" Zhou told his guest. "Our hope, however, in this problem is that you will leave completely and not leave behind any tail, including any technical advisors. And, secondly, the demand of the Vietnamese that the regime fostered by you be removed, as to how to remove it, this also is for you to discuss with the Vietnamese, and we won't interfere."<sup>37</sup>

As Kissinger departed, Zhou Enlai went so far as to wish Kissinger well in his upcoming negotiations with Le Duc Tho; but he also took pains to ensure Kissinger had well understood the Chinese stance. "I hope that your trip to Paris will see some development, and we will tell our Vietnamese friends about this part of our discussions after the announcement [of Kissinger's visit] is made... I believe that you are quite clear as to our stand. We support [P.R.G. Foreign Minister] Madam Binh's seven point proposal. We hope your withdrawal will be most complete, thorough, and also honourable... I hope your negotiations in Paris will be good for you" offered Zhou, adding, "and that you won't leave a tail behind." Kissinger acknowledged that China's stance had been understood – "There's no danger of misunderstanding the Prime Minister", he replied.<sup>38</sup>

Kissinger arrived back in Washington via Tehran and Paris to understandable excitement. A summit visit from the 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States to the capital of the People's Republic of China had been agreed in principle. Mao and the Chinese leadership had set the bar sufficiently low, and exercised enough flexibility on Taiwan to make Kissinger's visit a success. For the United States' part, Kissinger had affirmed the 'One China' principle, and gave indications of a willingness to break with the Republic of China on Taiwan at some point in the future. That was

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<sup>37</sup> This section was highlighted by Nixon in the copy of the Kissinger-Zhou conversations he received. Memcon, Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger July 10, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1032/3.

<sup>38</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., Thematic--Indochina, NPMP/NSC/1032/2.



sufficient for the C.C.P. Chairman for the time being. Mao and Nixon, Zhou and Kissinger; all four had wanted a summit. The very issues that made such a meeting necessary or desirable, such as Taiwan and Indochina, were temporarily cast aside in pursuit of the meeting itself. For the time being style had taken precedence over substance; form had subjugated function. It was a very Chinese arrangement.

The most contentious issue had turned out to be Indochina. Before arriving in Beijing, Kissinger had expected a *quid pro quo* on Vietnam in exchange for a summit. In his summation of the talks for the President, Kissinger concluded that “Zhou Enlai was as forthcoming as we could have hoped. His attitude throughout reflected the ambivalence of Peking’s position. For ideological reasons, he clearly had to support Hanoi. On the other hand, it was apparent that he did not wish to jeopardise the chances for an improvement in our relations”. In short, Kissinger was still optimistic that his linkage of the Indochina conflict with Sino-American relations had borne fruit, and that the Chinese would intervene to speed up a negotiated settlement. The National Security Advisor stated confidently to the President, “This means [Zhou Enlai] will talk to the North Vietnamese and may be able to exert some influence.”<sup>39</sup>

It is easy to see how Kissinger, carried away by the excitement and historical significance of his visit, believed he would reap a far bigger Vietnam dividend from his trip to Beijing than he ever actually did, or indeed was ever likely to. Encouraged by apparent movement by the North Vietnamese in negotiations on June 26<sup>th</sup> in Paris, it is not difficult to see how he hoped that the Chinese would intervene to encourage their allies in Hanoi to settle. Zhou Enlai significantly probed American intentions in Indochina on the first day of discussions, but appears to have been reprimanded by Mao for going into too fine detail, and subsequently drew back in later discussions, reiterating China’s intention not to intervene. While he rejected Kissinger’s attempts to draw China into a ‘Big Power’ understanding on the subject, Zhou’s presentation on the subject of Indochina demonstrated the curious mix of lofty detachment and emotional involvement that characterised Chinese attitudes

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<sup>39</sup> Memorandum for the President from Henry Kissinger, ‘My Talks with Zhou Enlai’, July 14, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1032/2.

towards the war at this time, and was one that the American National Security Advisor struggled to understand.<sup>40</sup>

It was Kissinger who first mentioned the Geneva Conference of 1954, but Zhou's emotional response should have conveyed the message that as a result of those very events China had an even greater responsibility towards the Vietnamese. By reminding Kissinger that he had paid homage at the shrine of the Truong sisters who had led a rebellion against imperial Chinese rule, Zhou had drawn attention to the long history that both joined and divided China and Vietnam. However, his purpose was not to emphasise the traditional antagonism that existed between the two nations, but was to demonstrate the independence of (North) Vietnam from 'New China', and the abandonment of Chinese imperial pretensions and control. Ironically, however, underpinning all this was a very paternalistic sense of special Chinese responsibility towards the Vietnamese that stemmed from the very same history that Zhou sought to disassociate 'New China' from. China bore partial responsibility for the fact that Vietnam was partitioned and currently at war with the United States, and as part of China's 'cultural universe' the success or failure of the Vietnamese revolution was partly China's responsibility. Kissinger's willingness to ascribe Chinese support for Hanoi as being merely ideological overlooked the long and complicated history between the two nations and peoples, and gave him undue hope for a settlement of the Vietnam War.

Furthermore, given the intimate and complicated nature of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, after his July visit Kissinger appears to have given little thought to the amount of leverage the Chinese leaders actually had available to them to pressure Hanoi, had they chosen to do so. Precisely because of their millennia-old history, the Vietnamese were particularly sensitive to perceived Chinese 'imperialism', 'chauvinism' or 'treachery'. If China were to alienate North Vietnam, the result would be to drive them into the arms of the Soviets, where they would be warmly received. This would undermine one of the main rationales behind China's rapprochement with the United States: to relieve Soviet pressure on China's frontiers. China's actions had the potential, as Kissinger identified, to massively demoralise

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<sup>40</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., Thematic--Indochina, NPMP/NSC/1032/2.

Hanoi, and as such Zhou Enlai was going to need all the diplomatic skills at his disposal to minimise the demoralisation, and attempt to prevent it turning into resentment. It was certainly with this in mind that Zhou Enlai flew to Hanoi on July 13<sup>th</sup> to, as an NSC staffer had put it, perform some hand-holding.

Zhou faced no easy task, for the memories of Geneva in 1954 were still alive in Hanoi. However, the Chinese leadership, demonstrating the Sino-centrism that so concerned the Vietnamese, believed that their contacts with the United States would actually help the Vietnamese cause. Containing communism in Asia, in particular that of the more radical Chinese bent, had originally led America into the Indochinese quagmire. Now that the two nations were inching towards an understanding, it was believed in Beijing, the strategic worries that had underpinned American involvement in the region no longer existed. Mao and Zhou had joined Kissinger and Haldeman in believing that the war in Vietnam could be concluded by the end of 1971; unfortunately how they foresaw that happening could not have been more at odds. Whereas the Americans hoped for, and expected, Chinese pressure on Hanoi to come to terms, the extent to which China involved itself would largely be limited to Zhou's verbal blasts at Kissinger about the redundancy of American policy in the region. What's more, if Kissinger and Nixon refused to be persuaded by argument, Mao and Zhou had opted to accompany the Sino-American opening with a massive injection of Chinese military and financial aid into the D.R.V. that over the next three years would account for almost 45% of the total aid China furnished the Vietnamese communists between 1950 and 1975. And yet despite this, Hanoi's suspicions would be difficult to allay, no matter how much Zhou would reassure them of Chinese probity, nor how many Chinese canons were given to North Vietnam.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Memcon, (extract), Le Duc Tho and Ieng Sary, September 7, 1971, 77 *Conversations*, p. 178; Wang Taiping, ed., *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo waijiao shi*, vol. 3 p. 51.

## Aftershocks<sup>42</sup>

The diplomatic earthquake that would be produced by the news of Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing was going to shake the world, and there would be few places where the reverberations would be felt more strongly than in Hanoi. After Kissinger's departure, the Politburo met to discuss the changes that could arise as a result of the Sino-American talks, and undoubtedly the impact on the Vietnamese comrades featured in this discussion. Probably as a result of the decisions made at this Politburo meeting, it was decided that Zhou Enlai would embark on a hectic three-day diplomatic tour in order to personally inform the leaders of China's closest regional allies about the Kissinger talks. Two days later, he flew to Hanoi to inform the North Vietnamese of Kissinger's visit and the planned summit with Nixon before it was made public on the 16<sup>th</sup>. We know that during the discussions with Le Duan and Pham Van Dong, Le Duan accused Zhou of having removed the element of surprise from their tactics against the United States, "[T]he visit of Kissinger is designed to forestall these surprises", but one must presume that many more unhappy comments were made by the Vietnamese during this visit. What little else we know of these conversations comes from the Hanoi government's post-Sino-Vietnamese War *White Book*, deliberately conceived to demonstrate Chinese perfidy. Yet even this publication seems to indicate that the Chinese Premier was fairly candid with the Vietnamese comrades in his description of his talks with Kissinger. The *White Book* claims that Zhou told the comrades in Hanoi that Indochina was the most important

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<sup>42</sup> A clear understanding of the events of the summer and autumn of 1971 are vital for analysing the extent to which China acquiesced to Nixon and Kissinger's linkage plan. Unfortunately, even by the standards of Sino-Vietnamese relations, 1971 is a particularly sparse year in terms of sources. The record of the events of this period have been largely based on the 1979 Vietnamese government pamphlet *The Truth about Vietnam-China Relations over the Last Thirty Years* (commonly known as the *White Book*), published in the wake of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in that year. In recent years the opportunity has arisen to compare the contents of this work with *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977*. While *77 Conversations* is clearly an incomplete record and its provenance remains a secret, it does provide a more full account of some of the discussions and events recorded in the *White Paper*; such a comparison demonstrates that while the quotations contained within the *White Paper* appear to be based in fact, the propagandistic goal which it was meant to serve has led to serious misrepresentations and distortions, and thus it needs to be treated with a particularly high degree of circumspection. The following section will deal with the events of the latter half of 1971, after Kissinger's visit to Beijing, and where necessary draw attention to the account of the *White Book*.

issue discussed in his talks with the American, and in many respects it was, for Kissinger had at an early stage in the talks with Zhou satisfied most of the Chinese demands relating to Taiwan. He had disassociated the U.S. government with recent comments that the status of Taiwan was undetermined, explicitly rejected American support for Taiwanese independence or a 'Two Chinas' policy, promised that two-thirds of the American forces stationed on Taiwan would be withdrawn at the end of the Vietnam War (with further reductions as Sino-American relations improved), and told Zhou that he could expect the United States to grant full diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China (which would require the severance of relations with Taiwan) in the second term of a Nixon presidency.<sup>43</sup>

Although Kissinger did not go so far as to satisfy the Politburo's first basic principle (that the Americans set a specific date for the withdrawal of all their forces from Taiwan) he had conceded enough that the Chinese were content to defer these more contentious issues for the sake of getting a summit; for the rest of the discussions, Indochina had certainly been the dominant and most pressing issue. Thus, Zhou's statement, as reported in the *White Book*, that "As far as China is concerned, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Viet Nam is problem No. 1 [sic], and the question of China joining the United Nations comes second" should be read in the context of Zhou trying to reassure the Vietnamese comrades that China was not going to engage in a trade-off with America in order to get a Security Council seat, rather than, as the *White Book* claims, an example of China "wanting to make use of the Viet Nam question for the settlement of the Taiwan issue first."<sup>44</sup>

The *White Book* also claims that on July 18<sup>th</sup>, the "Chinese side communicated to the Vietnamese side a four-point programme of the United States" that involved a U.S. troop withdrawal and P.O.W. release over a twelve month period starting August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1971; an Indochina-wide ceasefire; the retention of a number of U.S. technical personnel in South Vietnam for reasons of 'face'; and the American desire not to abandon Nguyen Van Thieu or Sirik Matak. The implication

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<sup>43</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 469; memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Duan, July 13, 1971, 77 Conversations, p. 177; S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, pp. 40-1; memcon, Zhou & Kissinger, July 9, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1032/3.

<sup>44</sup> S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, pp. 40-1.

behind this is that the Chinese were commending such a programme to the Vietnamese, and that is how many historians have interpreted it.<sup>45</sup> These certainly were the four bases of a settlement that Kissinger had outlined to Zhou, but it is very unlikely this was an official commendation of them on China's part, for Zhou had rejected them in person with Kissinger. It is possible that, in an effort to reassure Hanoi that there was nothing underhand or untoward being negotiated between Kissinger and Zhou, the North Vietnamese were passed a summary, or the minutes, of the Zhou-Kissinger talks. Aware of Vietnamese sensitivities and nervousness about Sino-American rapprochement, to have attempted to persuade Hanoi to settle the war on America's terms, less than a week after Kissinger had been in Beijing, would have been a move of such clumsiness that it is impossible to imagine a diplomat of Zhou Enlai's skill and experience performing it. Frightening the Vietnamese horses at this juncture would have been completely counter-productive.<sup>46</sup>

Zhou returned to Beijing from Hanoi on the morning of July 14<sup>th</sup>, and held further talks with North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh who, one must assume, accompanied Zhou back to Beijing. The next morning Zhou set off again and flew to Pyongyang to hold talks with the North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung (in *White House Years* Kissinger erroneously claims that Kim Il-Sung had actually been in Beijing at the same time as him; in fact, the guest Zhou was hosting was the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee Secretary, Kim Jung-ri). Upon his return from Pyongyang, he and Ye Jianying then went to give Prince Sihanouk advance warning of the statement that was to be issued the following morning, informing the world of Kissinger's visit and the planned summit with Nixon – a diplomatic earthquake that shook the world.<sup>47</sup>

Hanoi's initial official response was a thunderous July 19<sup>th</sup> editorial in *Nhan Dan* entitled 'The Nixon Doctrine Is Bound to Fail'. Although it didn't announce to the North Vietnamese people that Kissinger had been to Beijing, nor inform them

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<sup>45</sup> E.g., see Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>47</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp. 596-7; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 469; Kissinger *W.H.Y.*, p. 751; Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p. 368 n. 132.

that the Nixon had accepted an invitation from the Chinese to visit, North Vietnamese fury and fear of a repeat of 1954 was evident. It denounced Nixon's efforts to "achieve a compromise between the big powers in an attempt to make smaller countries bow to their arrangements." Hanoi's resolve to thwart this was also displayed, "The days when a big power could bully a smaller country has also ended for good."<sup>48</sup> Zhou noted that "the article displays the Vietnamese comrades' anxieties and appraisal [of the situation]" so he sought to republish it in full in *Renmin Ribao* as a sign of China's "open and above board manner", but this was blocked by Zhang Chunqiao, one of the 'Gang of Four'. On July 21<sup>st</sup>, the Chinese news agency, Xinhua, did however carry the text of a D.R.V. Foreign Ministry statement that included the charge that the United States was attempting to bring pressure to bear on Hanoi by means of "insidious tricks" that were designed to sow discord among socialist countries.<sup>49</sup>

Over the next few weeks Hanoi's polemicising against Nixon, and implicitly the Chinese leaders, became more intense. An August 3<sup>rd</sup> article in the army newspaper *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* [People's Army] comprehensively indicted not just the American President, but "all who would moderate their 'struggle' against the United States or shift the focus of that struggle from the 'main enemy.'" The article, written by Chien Thang [The Victor], stridently rejected the Chinese downgrading of the American threat, declaring that "the target of the revolution in a given historic period is an objective reality which one can neither invent nor recognize or reject as one wishes."<sup>50</sup> Hanoi's sound and fury reached its peak in a *Nhan Dan* 'Commentator' article on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, falling in the period between the celebration of the anniversary of the August Revolution and the D.R.V.'s national day on September 2<sup>nd</sup>. As reported by the Vietnam News Agency, Commentator alleged that a "very perfidious move of the President's is to spray the toxic gas of chauvinism into opportunists' heads in a bid to play off socialist countries against

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Gilks, *The Breakdown*, pp. 75-6.

<sup>49</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, p. 469; see also Zhai, *CATVW*, p. 198.

<sup>50</sup> 'The D.R.V. and the US-Chinese Rapprochement' [sic], August-October 1971', Folder 04/Box 07/DPC Unit 06/TVA-TTU.

one another and sow schism among the communist and workers' parties."<sup>51</sup> After mid-September the condemnation fell away; assurances given in Beijing to a Vietnamese delegation led by Hoang Van Hoan, the former D.R.V. ambassador in Beijing and the most prominent pro-Beijing figure in Hanoi (who ultimately defected to China), may have contributed to the more mellow Vietnamese tone.<sup>52</sup>

During this period the Chinese media largely ignored the Vietnamese polemics; instead they worked towards calming Vietnamese suspicions, though the emphasis shifted towards support of the P.R.G.'s seven point peace proposal, partly to counter Soviet charges that China had facilitated Nixon's failure to publicly respond to Mme. Binh's initiative. The Chinese also had to work towards distancing the P.R.C. from remarks made by the Australian Labor Party leader, Gough Whitlam, who had held talks with Zhou Enlai on July 5<sup>th</sup> and announced on July 14<sup>th</sup> that China was now supportive of a new Geneva Conference, on condition that the British and Soviets relinquish their co-chairmanship and it was enlarged to involve more Asian countries. If Whitlam's statement was accurate, nevertheless the Chinese moved to distance themselves from it. On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, a *Renmin Ribao* commentator article lent its support to an angry denunciation of the idea from Prince Sihanouk. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, Zhou himself told a journalist from the Yugoslav paper *Vjesnik* that there was no need for a new Geneva conference and that the Vietnam question must be settled between Vietnam and the United States; finally, in a September 2<sup>nd</sup> editorial to celebrate North Vietnam's national day, *Renmin Ribao* again endorsed the P.R.G.'s July 1<sup>st</sup> proposal, and condemned the United States for not making a public reply and "spreading words about the convening of a Geneva conference". These statements may also have gone some way towards reducing the level of polemic coming out of Hanoi.<sup>53</sup>

Nonetheless, despite Hanoi's decision to turn down the volume of its anger towards Beijing, the Kissinger visit had put Le Duc Tho on the back foot in his negotiations in Paris. When Tho and Xuan Thuy had held a secret negotiating

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p. 602.

<sup>53</sup> Zhai, *CATVW*, p. 198; 'The D.R.V. and the US-Chinese Rapprochement' [sic], August-October 1971', Folder 04/Box 07/DPC Unit 06/TVA-TTU; P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p. 602.



session with Kissinger in Paris on the afternoon of July 12<sup>th</sup>, Zhou had not yet set off for Hanoi to drop the bombshell of the American visit on the Vietnamese comrades; unaware of the media frenzy that would erupt in three days' time after the announcement of Kissinger's Beijing sojourn, it was with an irony he was unaware of that Xuan Thuy opened the session with the observation, "Your [Kissinger's] recent trip aroused great publicity." Nonetheless, since the Vietnamese negotiators did not yet know of Kissinger's talks in Beijing, the American National Security Advisor accrued no direct advantage at the negotiating table, though he did have a psychological one. Irrespective of Sino-American progress, Kissinger found the tone of the session "very positive", and Thuy and Tho "serious and constructive", and the major differences between the two sides had been narrowed down largely to Nguyen Van Thieu's future as President of South Vietnam. Progress in Paris was being made despite the moves in Sino-American relations, not because of them.<sup>54</sup>

An integral part of the Vietnamese communists' strategy had been the July 1<sup>st</sup> publication of the P.R.G.'s seven point peace plan, designed to generate domestic pressure on the Nixon administration, and which had been publicly backed by the Chinese media. However, in the private negotiations taking place between Kissinger and his Hanoi counterparts, Tho and Thuy had effectively dismissed it as a basis for negotiation and focused instead on the nine point programme they themselves had put forward. At the conclusion of their July 12<sup>th</sup> meeting, Tho and Kissinger had agreed to reconvene in two weeks' time, but it appears that shortly thereafter Le Duc Tho had planned to postpone the next session to return to Hanoi for consultations. The news of Kissinger's visit to Beijing was surely the cause; not only did it call for a reappraisal of their strategy, but it also severely hampered their tactics by diverting American media attention away from Mme. Nguyen Thi Binh's seven point proposal and onto the opening to China.

The Americans had anticipated such a cancellation – in fact they would have welcomed it, believing that Kissinger's secret visit had created "an international framework in which it will be harder for Hanoi to justify continued warfare and

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<sup>54</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai Nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 472; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1027; memorandum for the President from Henry Kissinger, 'My Meeting with the North Vietnamese, July 26, 1971', July 26 1971, NPMP/NSC/1039/2.

tension.”<sup>55</sup> Washington had drawn hope from reports of Zhou Enlai’s visit to Hanoi and the belief that he “may have used some influence to encourage a settlement.” But in a move calculated to demonstrate Vietnamese ambivalence to the breakthrough in Sino-American relations Le Duc Tho stayed in Paris to hold his meeting with Kissinger. According to the American National Security Advisor’s report to the President on the July 26<sup>th</sup> session, the Vietnamese only made indirect references to his talks with the Chinese, pointedly advising him that there was no “‘magical way’ of settling the Vietnam problem, and that only participants could end the war”, something they failed to do in this set of negotiations. Hanoi’s resolve, it appears, had been hardened.<sup>56</sup>

This round of negotiations had achieved no breakthrough because Nixon would not accede to Hanoi’s condition that Thieu be removed as President of South Vietnam (either by ballot or bullet), nor would Tho drop the demand. In fact, rather than helping Kissinger to force Hanoi’s hand, he advised the President that “The shock of your impending Beijing visit probably complicated their decision”.<sup>57</sup> With the talks stalled, Tho returned to Hanoi, presumably for further Politburo discussions on the newly complicated situation. It was in this context that he met with Zhou Enlai in Beijing on August 1<sup>st</sup>. Their talks, including a luncheon banquet, lasted several hours, during which time Zhou’s exposition to Tho seems to have covered the whole sweep of issues that he had covered in his talks with Kissinger, including “issues relating to Indochina, Taiwan, the United Nations, Japan and Chinese assistance to Vietnam”, as well as Sino-American relations, while Tho updated the Chinese on the Paris talks. The Chinese Premier undoubtedly used the opportunity to clarify the situation for the Vietnamese negotiator, and possibly calm some of the ‘waves’ that the Politburo had anticipated the Zhou-Kissinger would temporarily cause for the D.R.V. At this time, however, North Vietnam lost interest in the talks; Le Duc Tho was absent from two further secret negotiating sessions in Paris in late

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<sup>55</sup> Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger from Dick Smyser and Winston Lord, ‘Your Next Meeting with the North Vietnamese’, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1971, NPMP/NSC/854/1.

<sup>56</sup> Memorandum for the President from Henry A. Kissinger, ‘My Meeting with the North Vietnamese, July 26 1971’, July 26, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1039/2; memcon, Le Duc Tho, Xuan Thuy, Henry Kissinger et al., July 12, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1039/2; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1025.

<sup>57</sup> Memorandum for the President from Henry A. Kissinger, ‘My Meeting with the North Vietnamese, July 26, 1971’, July 26, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1039/2.

August and early September 1971, thereby ensuring that no progress would be made in the peace talks. Hanoi was clearly reassessing its options.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the unintentional blow China had dealt to Hanoi's diplomatic strategy, Beijing continued to offer strong support, both diplomatically and materially, to both Hanoi and the P.R.G. On September 17<sup>th</sup> Zhou Enlai held talks in Beijing with Nguyen Thi Binh and two days later hosted a grand banquet for her and her delegation. This came just a few days after the C.C.P. was shaken to its core in the biggest crisis it had experienced since the foundation of the P.R.C.: on September 13<sup>th</sup> a plane carrying Lin Biao, apparently fleeing to the Soviet Union, crashed in Outer Mongolia after the alleged discovery of a plot to assassinate Mao. However, as during the war scare in the autumn of 1969, the business of government carried on as usual, particularly where it concerned Vietnam, and on September 27<sup>th</sup> a new aid agreement for 1972 was signed in Hanoi by Chinese Deputy Premier Li Xiannian. This brought to seven the number of agreements and supplemental agreements that China had signed with the D.R.V. in 1971 alone, with a total value of 3.6 billion yuan. The Chinese leaders may have caused Hanoi to rethink its diplomatic strategy, but if the Vietnamese comrades concluded that renewed emphasis on the military struggle was needed, Beijing was not going to be found wanting in its support.<sup>59</sup>

These very public declarations of Chinese support for the Vietnamese communist cause came as Beijing was making preparations for another visit by Kissinger to the Chinese capital (this time openly). The purpose was, naturally, to sweeten the pill of Sino-American rapprochement for the Vietnamese comrades, and to prevent a swing towards the Soviet Union on their part. But it also went further: American withdrawal from South Vietnam still remained a key Chinese communist objective as well as a Vietnamese communist one. If the terms of a withdrawal could not be successfully negotiated, then the collapse of the South Vietnamese government would hasten the retreat; and there would be no American tail left behind. Nonetheless, this by no means meant that there was unanimity of view between Beijing and Hanoi in their assessment of the United States. China was

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<sup>58</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, p. 472.

<sup>59</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, p. 484; P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp. 604-5; Shen Zhihua 'Zhong-Mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, pp. 232-3.

beginning to take the Nixon Doctrine seriously, as demonstrated by Zhou Enlai's interest in July in Nixon's 'Kansas City speech'. American military power in Asia was on the wane, as Li Xiannian pointed out in his speech in Hanoi: the United States was an imperial power "which once swaggered like a conquering hero [but] is now heading toward decline and downfall at an accelerated tempo"; significantly, he avoided personal abuse of President Nixon. The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, characterized the Nixon Administration as "stubborn and wicked". Hanoi remained unconvinced of the wisdom of Mao's manoeuvres.<sup>60</sup>

In a similar fashion, Soviet President Nikolai Podgornyi visited Hanoi the week after Li Xiannian in order to sign a new aid agreement with the North Vietnamese; however he also clearly hoped to exploit Vietnamese discomfort over Nixon's planned visit to Beijing and bring the Vietnamese over to their side in their dispute with the Chinese. It was a fruitless exercise for the Soviets, and Podgornyi's efforts were doubtlessly undermined by his announcement to the Vietnamese comrades of Nixon's planned visit to Moscow in May 1972. It is reported that the North Vietnamese did not protest at the time of the Soviet President's visit. Since Hanoi was seeking increased aid from both Beijing and Moscow in anticipation of an offensive in 1972, (one which they knew would probably bring about hard retaliation from Nixon), under these circumstances antagonising both China and the Soviet Union over their foreign policy choices would have been potentially very dangerous. As Le Duc Tho had told senior Khmer Rouge member Ieng Sary shortly after his arrival in Beijing a few weeks beforehand, "We should be independent in thoughts, promote international solidarity and solidarity with the Soviet Union and China... If we take sides in the Sino-Soviet dispute, the situation will become more complicated."<sup>61</sup>

The North Vietnamese leadership was quite predictably disturbed by the revelation of Nixon's planned visit to Beijing. And while the general trend in Chinese policy towards the United States had been clear since the advent of 'Ping-

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<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Gilks, *The Breakdown*, p. 77.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.; Westad et al., *77 Conversations*, p. 178; Stephen J. Morris, *The Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese Triangle in the 1970s: the view from Moscow*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper Number 25, (Washington D.C., Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1999), p. 17.

pong diplomacy', the speed of the progression in Sino-American rapprochement surely sent a shudder down the collective spine of the V.W.P. politburo. Traditional Vietnamese suspicions about their great northern neighbour, and memories of the experiences of Geneva seventeen years earlier were rekindled and for a while vented in the Hanoi press (and even acknowledged by China). However, Chinese verbal assurances of continued support were matched by deed, and the amount of aid Beijing was sending southward to support the war effort reached unprecedented levels. Just as Hanoi had presented Mao with a *fait accompli* in April 1968, the C.C.P. Chairman had reciprocated in 1971. The North Vietnamese leadership were going to have to reassess their strategy in light of the new developments, but there was little they could do to alter the strategic environment they now found themselves in; and all Beijing could do to demonstrate its continued support for the Vietnamese struggle was to keep the money and guns flowing into Hanoi.

#### Ending the war before the summit

Despite the lack of progress in the Paris peace talks in the late summer and early autumn of 1971, Kissinger's secret visits to Paris permitted him to hold further face-to-face discussions with prominent Chinese leaders, this time in the form of the Chinese ambassador to France, Huang Zhen. Facilitated by Major General Vernon Walters, the American military attaché in Paris who conveyed messages to the Chinese ambassador's residence, this had become the main channel of communications between Beijing and Washington. It was agreed in this forum that Kissinger would return to Beijing to have further discussions preparatory to Nixon's own visit, including a decision on the exact date of the presidential arrival. With regard to the war in Indochina, the American objective was now less ambitious than it had been prior to Kissinger's July trip; since the summit had been agreed on in principle in July without any evidence of a *quid pro quo* of Chinese pressure on Hanoi, the hope was now for "constructive Chinese influence on Hanoi to make a reasonable settlement. Short of that we want their continued benevolent abstention on our efforts in Paris and willingness to see, and help guarantee, a negotiated

settlement to the war.”<sup>62</sup> Zhou’s self-admonishing comments about the Chinese role in the 1954 Geneva Conference had also been taken on board by the American policy-makers. There was recognition that aside from China’s own strategic interests in seeing the war ended and American troops withdrawn, the Beijing leadership felt a sense of responsibility towards Hanoi, and they believed “they let Hanoi down in 1954 and do not want to be in the position of pressuring their proletarian friends.”<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, hope remained that the Chinese would still be a positive force in helping bring about an end to the conflict in Indochina.<sup>64</sup>

Kissinger was back in Beijing from October 20<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>. The vast majority of the time that the American National Security Advisor spent in the Chinese capital was taken up by negotiations over the form and content of the joint declaration that was to be issued at the conclusion of Nixon’s visit (what would come to be known as the ‘Shanghai Communiqué’) and discussion of technical arrangements for the summit. Inevitably, though, several hours were devoted to a discussion of the war in Indochina. The Americans had anticipated that the Chinese “want our forces withdrawn, and... don’t particularly care about the political solutions” and this was largely borne out by the tenor of the discussions between Zhou and Kissinger. In comparison to the issue of Taiwan, Zhou once again labelled the war in Indochina as being a “relatively more urgent issue” and it was clear that the pressing issue for the Chinese on this matter was the withdrawal of American troops. Zhou noted somewhat reproachfully that “your troops have not withdrawn totally and the date of final withdrawal has not been set”. Later in conversation, Zhou asked for specifics about the fullness of the American withdrawal, and whether it would be a total withdrawal without any ‘tail’ left behind. Clearly he was concerned that Kissinger had not taken on board his message of July.<sup>65</sup>

Kissinger told his Chinese host that at the end of the American withdrawal, which would take place over five months, there would only be an American military attaché left in Saigon and that Thieu would resign as President of South Vietnam

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Polo II Briefing Book’, part 2, NPMP/NSC/1034/3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp. 768-9.

<sup>65</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., October 21, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1034/2.

with elections scheduled to take place one month later. The fate of Nguyen Van Thieu had remained the sticking point in the Paris negotiations, though Zhou did not express any strong opinion on it reflecting China's general ambivalence towards the future political dispensation in Saigon. Instead, Zhou appeared more concerned about the prospect of Lon Nol remaining in power in Cambodia. Zhou and Mao wanted a role for 'their man' Sihanouk in Phnom Penh, but Cambodia remained a conflict secondary to the one in Vietnam, and would not be settled until after it. And its settlement was inching closer – in one way or another. 1972 was an American presidential year; a fact that, just as in 1968, would focus minds in Hanoi and Washington. The huge amounts of military aid flowing into North Vietnam from both the Soviet Union and P.R.C. (including almost 2 million Chinese artillery shells, 8,000 artillery pieces (including heavy mortars), and 80 tanks in 1971, with a further 220 to follow in 1972) made it clear that Hanoi was going to attempt at least one more big military push and achieve by its own efforts what the United States had thus far refused to do: remove Thieu from office.<sup>66</sup>

Under these circumstances, adopting a completely 'hands-off' approach to the Vietnamese-American negotiations suited Beijing's own diplomatic objectives perfectly: China was able to provide diplomatic and military support to its ally, while at the same time maintaining a posture of non-interference that satisfied Hanoi's demands on that score. Thus Zhou had advised Kissinger of the advisability of complete disengagement from Vietnam, and of the necessity (for Hanoi) of getting rid of Thieu, without having to invest much diplomatic capital, and without pushing the issue so that it became an impediment to Nixon's arrival in Beijing and a successful summit. The Spring Offensive stood a reasonable chance of knocking out Thieu and his government; Mao and Zhou knew this, and were assisting it.

While admitting to an implicit Chinese ambivalence, Zhou expressed sympathy for Hanoi's angst on the issue of Thieu's future role in South Vietnam. He predicted that Kissinger would have to go the extra mile to "untie the knot" in the negotiations. Zhou had evidently taken Kissinger's prior exposition of a 'decent

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.; Li and Hao, eds., *Wenge jiefangjun*, p. 416; Shen Zhihua, 'Zhong-mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, p. 232; Zhai, *CATVW*, p. 136.

interval' solution at face value and believed that Nixon would eventually be forced to, in Mao's words, "let the domino fall". Later in conversation, Zhou adopted a stance of Sino-centric moral superiority, deigning to tell Kissinger of "the mental state [the Vietnamese communists] are in. They are in a state of war, of being submitted to aggression. They are not like China... we still recognize the times have changed and we should look to the future. But you cannot rebuke the 14 million people of South Vietnam who are suffering in the extreme misery at the present for not accepting anything they do not feel is safe". It appears Zhou Enlai and the Chinese leadership had more confidence in the inevitability of a communist victory in South Vietnam than the Vietnamese comrades did.<sup>67</sup>

If Kissinger found Le Duc Tho's negotiating style frustrating, it was also causing a few headaches for Mao and Zhou. While the Chinese Premier chided the American government for not having publicly responded to the P.R.G.'s seven point peace proposal, the diplomatic rouse that Hanoi had played on Nixon, through the P.R.G.'s publication of its seven points, was also having a negative impact on Beijing. Because Le Duc Tho had told Kissinger that his own privately tabled nine points were the more significant and were those to be negotiated, Washington had not issued a public response to Mme. Binh's seven points, and therein lay China's dilemma: Moscow had been making hay at Beijing's expense because of Washington's silence. Zhou practically implored the American negotiator to give a public answer, noting the United States had not responded since the proposal had been put forward barely a week before Kissinger visited Beijing. "Especially after you returned from China," Zhou noted, "the U.S. has refused to take such a position, and this makes the people of the world more unhappy... Some people are saying that it goes without saying the United States in coming to China is wishing to put the Vietnamese people aside in this matter." Zhou listened attentively as Kissinger outlined the United States' position, and professed ignorance of the latest American proposal that had been put forward by Kissinger in a negotiating session with Xuan Thuy on October 11<sup>th</sup>. For this, he blamed the Soviets, and hinted that the visit of

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<sup>67</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., October 21, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1034/2.



Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny to Hanoi had put further distance between Beijing and Hanoi.<sup>68</sup>

In later discussions between the Chinese and American sides on the drafting of the Shanghai Communiqué the problematic issue of the public seven points versus the private nine points again reared its head. In the initial draft of the communiqué put forward by the Chinese, the Chinese side had stated that “the Chinese Government fully supports the seven-point proposal for the peaceful resolution of the Viet Nam question put forward by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam”. Kissinger pointed out to Zhou that he did “not see how it can make any sense” for the Chinese to support publicly a program that the North Vietnamese themselves had eschewed. His motivation was complex; clearly it would benefit Nixon domestically and help to isolate Hanoi internationally if the Chinese could be persuaded to drop such phraseology. At the same time, it was true when he told Zhou that “if we [the American government] make public the secret negotiations we [the United States and the People’s Republic of China] will both look ridiculous.” In the end Kissinger did not pursue the issue, simply concluding that “if you want to maintain this phraseology now, knowing what the record enables us to make public, I will not object.” Although the exact wording was somewhat altered in order to deflect some of the criticisms Zhou had earlier outlined, the final draft of the communiqué, (issued on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1972) did include Beijing’s “firm support” for the seven-point proposal, despite the fact that on January 25<sup>th</sup>, Nixon had indeed made public the secret negotiations and Hanoi’s nine points. In many ways this served the purposes of the Chinese government well, as it helped foster internationally the perception of its ‘non-interference’ in the Paris peace talks. Overall, the issue of the war in Indochina did not prove to be a particularly knotty problem when negotiating the language to be used in the communiqué. Beijing made efforts to tone down its language on the Vietnam War so as not to cause undue offence to American ears, while at the same time sought to maintain its own position as a backer of the revolutionary movements in Indochina.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., October 20, 1971, *ibid*.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Joint Communiqué (Tentative Draft)--First Chinese Draft’, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1971,

As Kissinger noted in his report on the visit for the President, the discussions “were generally similar to those we held in July”. The Chinese urged the Americans to set a specific withdrawal date, and expressed a hope that the issue of Vietnam would be resolved by the time President Nixon made his trip to Beijing; at the same time, though, Zhou specifically stated that the visit would not depend on it. As for the future political dispensation within South Vietnam, Zhou expressed no opinion, though did repeat that Kissinger and Nixon should seek the solution to the Vietnam problem in Hanoi, and not in Beijing. For his part, Kissinger “made a somewhat more emphatic pitch than July for Chinese help with Hanoi”, though he seemed to accept that it would probably serve little good. In his memo to Nixon he concluded, “We cannot expect Peking to lean hard on its friends. We can expect it to help tip the balance for a negotiated settlement if the other objective realities move Hanoi toward a bargain”. All this was a substantial step back from the *quid pro quo* that Kissinger had anticipated prior to his July visit to Beijing. And just because the National Security Advisor noted that Beijing seemed unwilling to help, this did not translate into him actually believing it; rather it made all the more bold in his attempts to elicit Chinese help.<sup>70</sup>

Three days before their meeting in Paris, scheduled for November 20<sup>th</sup>, Hanoi announced that Le Duc Tho was ill and would not attend, though Xuan Thuy would be available. Understanding that without Tho meaningful progress was impossible, on the 19<sup>th</sup> Major General Vernon Walters communicated to the North Vietnamese in Paris that the meeting would not be taking place. Clearly infuriated, Kissinger made his most overt attempt yet at persuading Beijing to exert pressure on the North Vietnamese, hoping that when D.R.V. Premier Pham Van Dong visited Beijing a few days hence Zhou would lean on him on America’s behalf. On November 20<sup>th</sup>, Walters passed on to the Chinese embassy staff in Paris a message for Zhou Enlai, “in view of the fact that a North Vietnamese delegation is shortly visiting Peking... The United States government is taking seriously your views that Indochina is an urgent issue for the relaxation of tensions in the Far East and it would help to have

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NPMP/NSC/1034/4.

<sup>70</sup> Memorandum for The President from Henry A. Kissinger, “My October China Visit: Discussions of the Issues”, November 1971, NPMP/NSC/1035/1.

this issue substantially settled before the President's visit to the People's Republic of China". Kissinger outlined the events in the talks process that had occurred since the new American peace proposals of October 11<sup>th</sup>, and finished with Kissinger's November 19<sup>th</sup> message to Hanoi that they would "wait to hear North Vietnamese suggestions for a new date" for talks. Kissinger hinted at repercussions for Sino-American relations, and resurrected the corpse of 'Great Power' understanding that Zhou believed he had laid to rest in July. The message continued, "[T]he People's Republic of China, as a great country, will recognize that we cannot permit ourselves to be humiliated, no matter what the possible consequences for other policies." It had become clear that Hanoi was not going to negotiate an end to the war in 1971, as Kissinger and Nixon had initially hoped and expected, but would seek a military solution some time in 1972. Kissinger's failure to extract a *quid pro quo* from the Chinese on the issue of Vietnam was coming back to haunt him, and he was now reduced to making increasingly unsubtle pleas for Chinese diplomatic intervention.<sup>71</sup>

That very same day, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1971, a North Vietnamese party and government delegation, led by Pham Van Dong visited Beijing. Their Chinese hosts fanfared the visit, and a large picture of Pham Van Dong was placed on the front cover of *Renmin Ribao* to mark the event, along with a special editorial, all clearly designed to reassure the Vietnamese, and a potentially puzzled domestic audience, of China's continued support for the struggle being waged beyond her southern borders. The communiqué announced at the end of the visit yielded a pledge to support the seven-point solution put forward by the PRG and emphasised its two basic points: a condemnation of Vietnamization and demand for a total U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam; and a demand that the U.S. government "respect the South Vietnamese people's right to self-determination, withdraw support from, and relinquish all its commitments to the Fascist Nguyen Van Thieu clique, stop using this clique to oppose the South Vietnamese people, so as to pave the way for the formation in Saigon of a new administration favouring peace, independence, neutrality and democracy".<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Letter for General Walters from General Haig, November 19, 1971, NSC/849/2.

<sup>72</sup> Memo for Henry A. Kissinger from John Holdridge, 'Communique and wind-up of Pham Van

Despite the outward declarations of solidarity, however, it is clear that differences existed between the Chinese and Vietnamese comrades, and that they were voiced during the private discussions between Pham Van Dong, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. Dong's plea to the Chinese to cancel Nixon's visit was understandable, if unrealistic. During the course of the visit Mao is reported to have commented to Dong that "Where the broom cannot reach, the dust is not swept away" and this has been interpreted as Mao "arguing for Nixon." However, these comments were apparently made within the context of an oration by Mao on how "The Taiwan question is a long-term one."<sup>73</sup> It was precisely Mao's point that China was putting aside the 'liberation' of Taiwan in order to help reduce Sino-American tensions, and to help bring about a resolution of the most pressing of issues in the Far East: the war in Indochina. When probing his interlocutors' intentions, Mao liked to be provocative, and gauge from their response the sincerity of the reply; this was the game in which he was engaged with Pham Van Dong.<sup>74</sup>

In early January, General Alexander Haig visited Beijing to finalise the outstanding details relating to Nixon's visit, and make another bid for Chinese help in ending the war. Originally, it was intended that he would not meet Zhou Enlai, but instead conduct his discussions with Deputy Foreign Minister Ji Pengfei. However, he requested an audience with the Chinese Premier, at Kissinger's behest, to discuss the aftermath of the Indo-Pakistan crisis of December, and to give Zhou an assessment of recent events in South Asia. The key part of this assessment was to note a "precipitous shift in [Soviet] policy to adopt one in which they would now seek to encircle the P.R.C. with unfriendly states." Among the reasons cited for this belief was "increased Soviet material support for Hanoi." He told Zhou, "We [the American government] have concluded that the continuation of the war in Southeast Asia can only give Moscow an opportunity to increase its influence in Hanoi and further the encirclement of the People's Republic." He also attempted to portray any forthcoming Vietnamese communist offensive as being of assistance only to Moscow, characterising it as "forging another link in the chain which is designed to

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Dong's China Trip', November 26, 1971, NPMP/NSC/1036/2.

<sup>73</sup> S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p. 42.

<sup>74</sup> Hersh, *Price of Power*, p. 442.

constrain the People's Republic...[W]e are convinced of and dedicated to the proposition that the viability of the People's Republic of China should be maintained." The subtext of this statement was that through its actions to prevent an Indian attack on West Pakistan, the United States had helped block the encirclement of China by the U.S.S.R.; it was now China's turn to do likewise, and prevent a North Vietnamese attack on South Vietnam in 1972. *Quid pro quo* redux.<sup>75</sup>

Zhou admitted that he could not reply until he had reported to Chairman Mao and consulted with other colleagues, but that aside, he rejected Haig's presentation on Soviet strategic thinking, and on Vietnam. He told the American visitor that "Soviet meddling in the South Asian continent and in Indochina, in my opinion, is not due to a change in the strategic policies of the Soviet Union but rather a necessary consequence of reaction on the part of the Soviet Union" towards Sino-American rapprochement. Although his tone was restrained, he blamed Nixon's December bombing of North Vietnam south of the 20<sup>th</sup> parallel for giving the Soviet Union "an opportunity to increase its influence and its force" in North Vietnam, while in South Vietnam and the rest of Indochina "the U.S. bombing has increased the Soviet influence and tension in this area." American bombs had fallen on North Vietnam just a few weeks before Nixon's visit to Beijing. And while Soviet missiles were put into action, Chinese anti-aircraft guns were back within the P.R.C.'s own borders. Nixon was not making things easy for the Chinese.<sup>76</sup>

Zhou sought and received Mao's approval for the reply to Haig's oral message, which was delivered on the evening of 6<sup>th</sup> January. It was uncompromising in tone. It rejected the American assertion that there had been a change in Soviet strategy; instead it contended that the Soviet machinations in India and Pakistan were "a continuation, under new circumstances, of the consistent Soviet policy of contending for hegemony." When it came to Indochina, Zhou accused the United States of having "wantonly bombed" North Vietnam, and rejected the American "self-justification" as "untenable". Still throwing China's weight behind the P.R.G.'s seven points, Zhou lauded them as a reasonable proposal, telling Haig that there was

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<sup>75</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Haig et al., January 3rd 1972, NPMP/NSC/1037/3.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 505.

“no reason for [the United States] to refuse to accept” them. He laid the blame for the failure to reach a peace deal in Paris at the feet of the Americans, and warned Haig that “As victims of the war of aggression, the Vietnamese people have the right to take every necessary action in self-defence. China firmly supports their struggle.” He then charged that U.S. policy had actually “created obstacles to... the withdrawal of troops and to [America’s] efforts to obtain release of the POWs.” He ended with, from the Chinese perspective, the most serious charge: it had also “brought an unfavourable element into the visit of the President of the United States to the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>77</sup>

Haig’s attempt at a rebuttal echoed the parallelism of Kissinger’s ‘Great Power’ pitch, but was devoid of even the most basic subtlety that his boss had managed to include. He noted that the problem lay with the North Vietnamese and that in the long run “our perception of the convergence of the interests of the United States and the People’s Republic of China in the area of Southeast Asia is the ultimate truth.” This received a further tetchy elaboration from Zhou Enlai. The Chinese Premier put it quite bluntly, “our current opinion has been, quite simply, that the United States is in the wrong.” He acknowledged that it was not Nixon who had sent the troops into Vietnam, but predicted that if America didn’t complete its withdrawal quickly and completely, and continued “to find various excuses to drag on in a messy way [America] will end up losing the initiative.” Zhou demonstrated sensitivity to the attention being drawn in the Moscow media to the fact that Haig had special responsibility for Indochinese affairs, although Zhou noted that it was because of that responsibility he was speaking “with special earnestness.” Zhou’s exasperation eventually came right to the surface. “And if you want some news, I can tell you a bit that if you do not leave that place, then Southeast Asia which does have the possibility of being turned into an area of nonalignment will become an area of contention between the two superpowers. We are very clear about that. And then Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, the subcontinent, the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia will be linked together”.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Haig et al., January 6th 1972, NPMP/NSC/1037/3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

Zhou was clearly disappointed that it appeared the war in Vietnam would not be brought to a conclusion before Nixon's visit to China, for he knew that it portended a massive North Vietnamese offensive in the dry season of 1972. The Chinese leaders were guilty of their own form of 'Great Power' thinking, but it was of a very different form to that of Kissinger. Mao and Zhou's expectation had been that since America's involvement in Vietnam had originated in a fear of China, then the burgeoning Sino-American rapprochement had obviated the need to continue supporting the South Vietnamese regime. Were Hanoi to fail in its objectives once again, while China was embarking on a relationship with the United States, there could develop such bitterness towards China that Beijing could lose all influence there. Military action by Hanoi in 1972 would only increase its ties to the Soviet Union, who supplied technically advanced military hardware that China could not. The only way to prevent this was for America to be forthcoming in negotiations, or for the 1972 offensive to achieve success. Therefore, from China's perspective there was nothing honourable about maintaining Nguyen Van Thieu in office: in fact, the longer he remained in power the more difficult China's relationship with Hanoi would become, and the blame for this was laid at Nixon's feet.

Sino-American relations had moved forward in 1971 at a startling pace, and probably no-one had been more stunned by the developments than the Politburo in Hanoi. The invasion of Laos by South Vietnamese forces had stalled the process of rapprochement, but had also simultaneously validated it: it had demonstrated the futility of the American position in Indochina, and by doing so had strengthened Mao's hand vis-à-vis Nixon. A bold gesture had been needed, and Mao took advantage of a chance encounter in Nagoya to make one. Taiwan remained the key issue in bilateral relations, but Mao and the rest of the C.C.P. Politburo adopted a flexible attitude towards the problem that allowed it to, essentially, be kicked into the long grass. This had the effect of leaving the resolution of the war in Indochina as the most pressing problem in Sino-American relations – all the more surprising a turn of events given Beijing's attempts throughout 1970 to divorce Vietnam from an improvement in its relationship with Washington.

And yet despite the urgency that China now placed on the resolution of the Vietnam War (i.e. a total American withdrawal from Indochina) Zhou Enlai simultaneously disassociated China from Hanoi's war and adopted a stance of 'non-interference'. But disassociation did not equate with disinterest or disengagement from Hanoi; China's long history with Vietnam made that impossible. One of the most striking features of these conversations is the lack of formal communist ideology underpinning Zhou Enlai's explanations to Kissinger as to why the Chinese government could not, and would not, intervene with Hanoi. Rather, he mainly drew from the deep well of shared history between his country and Vietnam, in both ancient times and modern, setting out a uniquely Sino-centric analysis of North Vietnam's predicament, and the nature of Chinese assistance to Hanoi. Rather than being based on a common adherence to Marxism-Leninism (though it played a part) Zhou indirectly explained to his interlocutor that China's continued backing for her smaller ally was rooted in Vietnam's place in China's 'cultural universe', and in a Chinese acknowledgement that they had let down their Vietnamese 'little brothers' at the Geneva Conference of 1954, which had seen the country partitioned. Likewise, Zhou's frustration with America's continued involvement in South Vietnam stemmed from a Sino-centric analysis of the purpose of American intervention. But Kissinger's *realpolitik* had little room for such notions, and thus he failed to come to terms with Zhou's message, interpreting it in terms of ideology and equivalent 'Great Power' notions of national interest.

By the autumn of 1971, Mao and Zhou clearly believed that the United States intended to withdraw from Indochina, and were hopeful that it would be achieved before Nixon's summit visit. The American President's stubborn refusal to let the domino fall was engendering frustration in the Chinese capital. When it became clear that the future of Nguyen Van Thieu was the sticking point in the negotiations, and that the North Vietnamese were determined to have at least one more attempt to remove him by force of arms, China's impatience with the United States became heightened. Beijing continued to increase its level of aid to Vietnam, both military and economic. In the worst example of the 'Great Power' parallelism that permeated the N.S.C. in this period, Alexander Haig interpreted Zhou Enlai's frustration with



the American position as being a coded entreaty to hang on in Vietnam and avoid defeat. He also later claimed, in the words of his interviewer, that in January “Zhou indicated the Chinese aid to Vietnam was the minimum required to prevent a deterioration of relations between Beijing and Hanoi”.<sup>79</sup> On both counts the record tells quite another story. The value of Chinese aid agreements to Vietnam in 1971 amounted to over 3.6 billion yuan; a level that was far beyond the minimum to maintain Vietnamese amity, though admittedly one that it was best the United States was unaware of.<sup>80</sup>

To North Vietnam’s great satisfaction, in late 1968 China had adopted a policy of ‘non-interference’ towards Hanoi’s conduct of peace negotiations with the United States; the Chinese were now pursuing this policy to an extreme degree. Throughout late 1971, the P.R.C. hoped peace would be agreed, but at the same time was furnishing Vietnam with huge amounts of aid to continue their war effort – as ever hoping for the best while preparing for the worst. From Beijing’s perspective the Vietnam War had become the Vietnamese’ war; Hanoi could pursue its own diplomatic strategy, but the corollary was that Beijing would not let that strategy interrupt its own plans or interfere with its own diplomacy. Thus, irrespective of what was happening in Paris or Vietnam, Nixon was coming to Beijing.

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<sup>79</sup> Ross, *Negotiating Co-operation*, p. 49; see also Zhai, *CATVW*, p. 199.

<sup>80</sup> Shen Zhihua, ‘Zhong-Mei hejie’, Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, pp. 232-3.

## Chapter 4

### January 1972 – January 1973: Summit and Accord

Nixon's impending visit to Beijing was a personal triumph for Mao. Despite the continuation of the war in Indochina, Washington and Beijing had managed to come to a *modus vivendi* on the issue: Kissinger would press for Chinese intervention with Hanoi, and Zhou Enlai would rebuff him. Nonetheless, Beijing had indeed hoped that the war in Vietnam might be concluded in advance of Nixon's visit to the Chinese capital, but they had placed their hopes on concessions from Washington, not from Hanoi. The Chinese leaders had believed that the Sino-American rapprochement would ultimately facilitate the end of the war by undermining what they believed to be the main rationale that had led the Johnson administration into the Vietnamese morass: fear of 'Red China'. This analysis was a manifestation of the unique Sinocentric 'Great Power' thinking that the Vietnamese comrades were so suspicious of, but it was never grasped on the analytical level in Washington where the 'Domino Theory' had long-since been overtaken by calculations about credibility, honour, and the dirty business of electoral politics – factors which were of little concern to the C.C.P. Chairman.

While expressing Beijing's general ambivalence towards the future of Nguyen Van Thieu as President of South Vietnam, Zhou Enlai had emphasized to Kissinger the implacability of the Vietnamese communists' position on this issue: it was Washington, not Hanoi, who was going to have to give ground on this issue for the war to be ended in 1971. The result, from Beijing's perspective, would be a win-win scenario for China and the U.S.: America's Indochinese nightmare would be ended (honourably as Beijing saw it), allowing it to turn its attention to countering growing Soviet power elsewhere, while China would be able to demonstrate to a presumably grateful Hanoi that success was to be had by remaining in the Chinese, not Soviet, orbit. Frustratingly for Zhou and Mao it was in a form of 'Great Power' thinking of an entirely different order that Kissinger engaged, whereby respect for a fellow-power's honour and interests meant that pressure should be brought to bear on Hanoi to concede failure and

stop short of its objectives; American honour and the electoral cycle demanded it. These two perspectives failed to be reconciled in 1971.

What Nixon's electoral requirements shared with Mao's strategic dilemma, however, was the need for a foreign policy success, and this allowed the failure to see eye-to-eye on Vietnam (as well as on Taiwan) to be overlooked in pursuit of a meeting of persons, if not minds, in Beijing. For the time being the Vietnam War was to remain a major irritant but not an insurmountable obstacle in Sino-American relations. Nevertheless, both Washington and Beijing realised that this position was not tenable in the longer term, and that in 1972 something was going to have to give.

### No trading principles

The first hint that 1972 was going to prove to be a make or break year in several areas of East Asian international relations emerged on January 25<sup>th</sup>. Frustrated by the lack of progress in the Paris peace negotiations, and irritated by the ability of the Vietnamese communists to manipulate public opinion by means of their differing public and private negotiating positions, Nixon went public with the secret negotiations that Kissinger had been undertaking with Le Duc Tho. The text of Nixon's speech was forwarded to the Chinese and Soviet leaderships. An accompanying note was also transmitted to the Chinese Ambassador in Paris. The communication noted that by informing the Chinese of the American eight-point proposal, which Kissinger had declined to disclose during his October visit to Beijing, "This action completes each of the commitments made by Dr. Kissinger to the Prime Minister with respect to the conflict." Zhou Enlai had on several occasions rejected the suggestion that they would intercede with Hanoi, so it was surely with surprise that the Chinese Foreign Ministry read the conclusion to the note, which clearly referred to the People's Republic of China. "The United States believes that all concerned countries have an interest in helping end this war and that its proposals mean that no country need trade in principles in promoting this objective." American underestimation of Chinese sensitivity on this subject was typified by the salutation that concluded, "The note is sent in the spirit of frankness and mutual understanding which have

characterized our exchanges thus far.”<sup>1</sup> Quite on the contrary, it exemplified a continued lack of understanding of the Chinese position.<sup>2</sup>

Zhou Enlai’s response was largely a reiteration in more strident terms of the previously stated position. Surprise and indignation were expressed at the American mention of “commitments”, while the American eight-point peace proposal was condemned as “a fraud for dragging out the war and... in effect an ultimatum demanding that the Vietnamese people submit.” It reminded the Americans that “The Chinese people will not flinch from even the greatest national sacrifice in giving resolute support to the Vietnamese people.” (The warning was somewhat pro forma, given that both sides knew that the long-understood trigger for provoking “the greatest national sacrifice” from China (an American invasion of the D.R.V.) was all but an impossibility; it did, however, serve to reiterate the long-standing Chinese commitment to the North Vietnamese and their struggle.) The Chinese side also angrily, and correctly, pointed out that the paragraph of the note asserting that “its proposals mean that no country need trade in principles” in actuality did mean that Kissinger “wants us to abandon principles and exert pressure on the Vietnamese side on behalf of the United States. This is absolutely impossible.” The Chinese note concluded by acknowledging the frankness that had characterized the Sino-American exchanges, “and it is exactly in this spirit that we are applying [sic] to you.”<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly there was no reference made to mutual understanding.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese note was indeed “tart”, as Kissinger described in his memoirs, however the American response was anything but as “sharp” as Kissinger portrayed it.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. side hurried to clarify the situation, declaring that “pending publication of its eight points, the U.S. side could not divulge the details of its proposals to the People’s Republic of China but that it would inform it of the details as soon as appropriate. Thus, the term ‘commitment’ in this context connotes a unilateral promise rather than reciprocal obligation.”<sup>6</sup> This explanation satisfied the Chinese Ambassador to Paris, Huang Zhen, through

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<sup>1</sup> Undated and untitled message, NPMP/NSC/849/3.

<sup>2</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp. 1103-4.

<sup>3</sup> Undated and untitled message, NPMP/NSC/849/3.

<sup>4</sup> Memo, ‘To General Haig from General Walters’, January 30, 1972, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1104.

<sup>6</sup> Wire, ‘To Major General Walters from Brig. General Haig’, January 31, 1972, NPMP/NSC/849/3.

whom it was transmitted to Beijing.<sup>7</sup> But despite having defused the issue, Kissinger failed to comprehend the underlying issue that had caused Beijing's irritation, and still hoped that the Chinese desire to see the Vietnam War ended before Nixon's visit to Beijing would entice them into the role of intermediary. A few days later the United States sent another note via Gen. Walters, noting that Le Duc Tho may be visiting the Chinese capital just before President Nixon. "[I]f Special Advisor Le Duc Tho expresses an interest in a private meeting, Dr. Kissinger would be prepared to discuss the situation in Indochina in the spirit of generosity and justice." Given the content and tenor of Zhou Enlai's previous pronouncements on Vietnam, the request was either stupid, audacious, or both. Much like the previous note, it concluded in a rather self-contradictory fashion, and declared that "This is not a request for action by the Chinese side and is simply for its information. No reply is expected."<sup>8</sup> It was a rather wishful statement; a reply followed five days later in which Zhou Enlai reiterated the fact that "China supports the just struggle of Vietnam, but will definitely [sic] not meddle in the Vietnamese-US negotiations." Accompanying this message was another, noting the American affirmation that there existed no reciprocal obligation between the P.R.C. and the U.S.A. with respect to Indochina. The Chinese pedantry contained within the note highlighted Zhou Enlai's sensitivity on the subject. "[N]or was it mentioned that the Chinese side would be informed of the details of this plan as soon as appropriate." Each side was determined to have the last word: once again no reply was required.<sup>9</sup>

This almost farcical exchange of notes in the three weeks leading up to Nixon's trip to China reveals the confusion that lay at the heart of the N.S.C.'s understanding of Beijing's position on Indochina. A final American clarification (though not required) disingenuously claimed that the United States was not attempting to enmesh Beijing, and accused Beijing of perceiving "an exaggerated significance which was never intended."<sup>10</sup> Kissinger's hints at misplaced Chinese sensitivities on the subject would have carried more credibility had this incident not just followed hot on the heels of what even Kissinger later admitted was a

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<sup>7</sup> Memorandum for record, 'Subject: 38<sup>th</sup> Meeting with the Chinese in Paris', February 1, 1972, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Memo, 'To General Haig from General Walters', February 11, 1972, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Memo, 'To General Haig from General Walters', February 15, 1972, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Memo, untitled, February 16, 1972, NPMP/NSC/849/3.

very blatant attempt to “enmesh” China.<sup>11</sup> Fully aware that there was no chance of Mao canceling the summit unless the war gravely escalated, Kissinger had become emboldened in his efforts to get some Chinese assistance on the matter. Given the high degree of sensitivity prevalent among the North Vietnamese about great power chauvinism and a repeat of Geneva 1954, the idea that Le Duc Tho would meet with Kissinger in the Chinese capital was certainly fanciful. And despite protestations to the contrary, the American side’s allegation that its peace proposal “means that no country need trade in principles” was a clear inducement to the Chinese to promote Nixon’s eight-point plan to Hanoi.<sup>12</sup> China’s determination to remain divorced from the U.S.-D.R.V. peace negotiations (or to at least maintain the façade) was made clear in Beijing’s continued expressions of support for the N.L.F.’s seven point proposal, despite the fact it was now public knowledge that this was not even a basis for negotiations in the Kissinger-Tho talks. Kissinger’s notes, like his Vietnam strategy, annoyed Zhou Enlai but they would not affect Beijing’s American policy.

In contrast, but of equal importance to the content of the notes is the tone in which these messages were delivered by Ambassador Huang Zhen, one of the P.R.C.’s most experienced and trusted diplomats. Whenever an acrimonious message was being read out or handed over Huang Zhen appeared embarrassed; when this was out of the way, the short and uncomfortable exchanges were prefaced and followed by “hearty handshakes and back pats”, “persiflage”, “joviality” and a great amount of cordiality and tea.<sup>13</sup> This told the other half of the story. The Chinese were enjoying their new relationship with the United States and intended moving it on irrespective of what was taking place in Vietnam. They wished to see the war there ended before Nixon came to Beijing, but the extent of their involvement in this was to encourage the Americans to sign up to the P.R.G.’s seven points. This in itself was a charade however; the Beijing leaders knew that Hanoi was going to press ahead with what became known as the ‘Spring Offensive’, for they had partly financed it and had supplied North Vietnam with large arms shipments in advance of it. Under these circumstances,

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<sup>11</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1104.

<sup>12</sup> Undated and untitled message, NPMP/NSC/849/3.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum for the record, ‘37<sup>th</sup> meeting with the Chinese in Paris’, undated, NPMP/NSC/849/3; memorandum for the record, ‘Subject: 38<sup>th</sup> meeting with the Chinese in Paris’, February 1, 1972, *ibid*; memorandum for record, ‘Subject: 41<sup>st</sup> meeting with the Chinese in Paris’, February 11, 1972, *ibid*.

adopting a completely 'hands-off' approach to the Vietnamese-American conflict suited Beijing's own diplomatic objectives perfectly: China was able to provide diplomatic and military support to its ally, while at the same time maintaining a posture of non-interference that satisfied Hanoi's demands on that score. Such a stance of studied non-involvement would also prove extremely useful during the anticipated communist offensive in Vietnam expected for a few months hence.<sup>14</sup>

Thus Zhou advised Kissinger of the advisability of complete disengagement from Vietnam, and of the necessity (for Hanoi) of getting rid of Thieu, without having to invest much diplomatic capital, and without pushing the issue so that it became an impediment to Nixon's arrival in Beijing and a successful summit. There was little point. The Spring Offensive stood a reasonable chance of, at the very least, putting Hanoi in the driving seat in the Paris negotiations. Mao and Zhou knew this, and were assisting it. Under these circumstances, adopting any posture that would further antagonize Hanoi would only run counter to China's longer term objective of not 'losing' Vietnam to the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Spring Offensive, and the threatened harsh American reprisal, would place enormous pressure on the Soviet Union: they would be forced either to cancel Nixon's visit, or to receive him while bombs were raining down on Hanoi. At the same time Hanoi's logistical needs would force closer co-operation between Beijing and Hanoi and make the North Vietnamese more dependent on Chinese amity. Contrary to popular belief, the Spring Offensive suited China's purposes well.

The North Vietnamese leaders closely guarded their secrets, and it is unlikely that the Chinese leaders knew the exact date of the planned offensive, though they could have been in no doubt that it was in the offing. Hanoi also had to take the timing of Nixon's visit into account, as demonstrated by the request of the previous November that Mao cancel it. However, there are some hints that an 'understanding' was reached between Beijing and Hanoi on the offensive, given the fact that North Vietnamese criticism of the turnaround in Chinese foreign policy ceased in late 1971. Even without an 'understanding' on the matter, that Hanoi was going to make one last effort to resolve the issue militarily, or at least on its terms, was widely suspected in Washington and was clear to Beijing.

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<sup>14</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp. 1045, 1104.

When the Spring Offensive did come, it was rather late in the dry season; this could, of course, have been solely designed to take the Americans by surprise. However, it is likely that Hanoi decided that it was not in its interests to infuriate Beijing by putting Mao's summit with Nixon at risk. If the U.S. President responded with a blockade of Haiphong, long recognized as a possible course of action, then close co-operation with China would be essential to keep the D.R.V. supplied. And however much Mao and Zhou wanted to keep Hanoi onside, it is unlikely that North Vietnam would go unpunished for having destroyed, or attempted to destroy, Mao's foreign policy triumph.<sup>15</sup>

In the weeks leading up to Nixon's visit, China very publicly exhibited diplomatic support for the Vietnamese communists' reaction to Nixon's January 25<sup>th</sup> announcement by meeting the North Vietnamese and P.R.G. ambassadors to Beijing and issuing official statements in support of the P.R.G.'s stance.<sup>16</sup> But its support for Hanoi extended well beyond rhetoric. In January 1972 the P.R.C. signed secret agreements with various Warsaw Pact countries on the transportation of specialized military materials from these countries across China to Vietnam. Further agreements of this kind were signed in March and April.<sup>17</sup> Kissinger's conclusion that China's "material support for Hanoi was marginal" was a little wide of the mark: the C.I.A. estimated that in 1972 China sent \$200 million worth of military aid and \$80 million of economic aid to North Vietnam; the Soviets estimated that in the same year Chinese aid to the D.R.V. was worth \$500 million. According to Chinese sources the P.R.C. signed aid agreements with the D.R.V. in the 1971-1973 period worth an estimated 9 billion yuan; at the official US\$:RMB exchange rate this would be an annual average in the region of \$1.5 billion.<sup>18</sup> However, his own desire not to see the Vietnam War interfere

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<sup>15</sup> Garver, 'Sino-Vietnamese Conflict', p. 461; memcon, (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, April 10, 1967, 77 *Conversations*, p. 99; Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, pp. 231-2.

<sup>16</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p. 620; 'Chou En-Lai Express Support For PRGSV 7 Point Proposal', NCNA, February 2, 1972, Folder 01/Box 15/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU; 'China Supports PRGRSV Stand on Nixon Plan' NCNA, February 4, 1972, Folder 14/Box 07/DPC Unit 05/TVA-TTU.

<sup>17</sup> Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 2, pp. 31-2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1104. To put this figure into perspective, total Chinese industrial and agricultural output in 1972 was 364 billion yuan, while total state revenue was 77 billion yuan. See Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), p. 412. We do not have exact figures from Chinese sources, in financial terms, for the amount of aid China delivered to North Vietnam year by year during this period. As noted, Soviet, American and Chinese estimates of Chinese aid



with the opening to China, combined with China's "posture of indifference", meant that Kissinger opted not to press China further on the matter, "convinced they have spoken quite forcefully to Hanoi." In his own words, he "did not press China further."<sup>19</sup> China was being let off the hook.

In these weeks Kissinger grew bolder in his attempts to enlist Chinese help with their Vietnamese friends. A combination of growing confidence and growing desperation entered his communications with Zhou Enlai on Vietnam, but these were nonetheless swatted away by the Chinese Premier with a certain degree of contempt and irritation. China was not going to 'trade in principles', as Zhou Enlai had repeatedly stated. The Chinese Premier's entreaties to Kissinger to let go of Thieu and settle the Vietnam issue had fallen on deaf ears; as a result Beijing knew that another chapter of the war was still to be played out in 1972, so there was no point in China wading into the fray with Hanoi until it had had one last roll of the military dice. Ironically, the growing inevitability of another military push by Hanoi in 1972 necessitated that Nixon largely ignore China's role in financing and arming it. He was seeking re-election in November, and desperately needed a big foreign policy success: beginning the year with a visit to Beijing guaranteed at least one, for its success would simply be that it had happened at all. At the same time there existed the possibility that it might help with those altogether knottier problems remained to be untied in Moscow and most of all in Paris. The President was uncertain, but Kissinger remained convinced – Nixon would get something on Vietnam in China.

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vary wildly, due to the intelligence-based nature of foreign assessments and methodological problems contained therein. This is further compounded by problems of calculating the monetary value of specific items in different economic systems and the artificial exchange rates that existed between the currencies in question. All this makes comparing sources very difficult: e.g. C.I.A. estimates of Chinese aid to Hanoi for 1972 in analogous U.S. prices put it at \$280 million; Soviet estimates (in roubles then converted at the official contemporary exchange rate) put it at \$500 million. Chinese sources indicate an annual aid budget (military and economic) for the D.R.V. for 1971-3 of approximately 3 billion yuan (the official exchange rate at the time was approximately 2 RMB to the US\$). See '(Est Pub Date) Communist Military and Economic Aid to North Vietnam, 1970-1974', January 1, 1975, [www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp?pageNumber=1&freqReqRecord=nic\\_vietnam.txt](http://www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp?pageNumber=1&freqReqRecord=nic_vietnam.txt) (for the purposes of comparison the same report estimated the value of Soviet military aid for 1972 to be \$490 million); Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, p. 231; Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 2, pp. 31-2; Wang Taiping, ed., *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo waijiao shi*, vol. 3, p. 51; 'Historical Exchange Rate Regime of Asian Countries', International Economics Project, Chinese University of Hong Kong, [http://intl.econ.cuhk.edu.hk/exchange\\_rate\\_regime/index.php?cid=8](http://intl.econ.cuhk.edu.hk/exchange_rate_regime/index.php?cid=8).

<sup>19</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1104; Briefing Book for the President, 'Briefing Papers for the China Trip – Book V', NPMP/NSC/847/4.

## 'Not a damn thing'

Nixon was clearly someone Mao felt he could do business with, and had reportedly said of the American President that "Although Nixon has a cunning side, he is not as bad as the others, for his policy is more open..."<sup>20</sup> Likewise, it is clear from reading the briefing books that Kissinger's NSC staff put together for the President in preparation for his historic visit to Beijing that Nixon returned the compliment. A section on "traditional assumptions of Chinese politics" particularly caught the President's eye; and while this section had been outlined as assumptions that were "rather different from our own", in the light of subsequent events it appears that Nixon perhaps shared something of the 'traditional Chinese' outlook of the C.C.P. Chairman:

"4. The ruler has a special virtue and prestige, which if maintained prolong his rule. Hence face is necessary to power holding, and criticism (as by a free press) is at once subversive.

5. Rule is personal. Law is not supreme, but a tool of administration. It is loyalty that supports a ruler. Hence civil rights must be limited and law subordinated to personal relations."<sup>21</sup>

As a man who believed that 96% of the bureaucracy was his enemy, ("bastards who are here to screw us") Nixon also felt common cause with a Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party who had "doubts about the virtue of a Party and governmental bureaucracy as instruments of national development." Nixon certainly accorded with Mao's view, as reported to him, that "bureaucracy thwarts popular initiative, making people passive and dependent on guidance from organizational superiors."<sup>22</sup> Despite the gulf in culture, philosophy, political system and life-experience, and impossible as it may seem, it is clear that President Richard Nixon felt that he shared some common ground with

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<sup>20</sup> Memo to the President from Henry A. Kissinger, 'Mao, Chou and the Chinese Litmus Test', February 19, 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/88/3.

<sup>21</sup> Briefing Book for the President, 'China Visit Readings on Mao Tse-Tung and Chou En-Lai', NPMP/NSC/847/2, NPMP (original emphasis). Nixon was obsessed with building up the 'mystique' of the President. E.g. see *Haldeman Diaries* entries for July 21 1969, January 8 1970, April 17, 1970. Nixon and Haldeman's perceptions of loyalty (or more often than not, disloyalty) are also constant themes in Haldeman's diaries.

<sup>22</sup> Briefing Book for the President, 'China Visit Readings on Mao Tse-Tung and Chou En-Lai', NPMP/NSC/847/2.

Chairman Mao Zedong aside from their mutual disdain for the leaders of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup>

It appears, however, that despite his anticipation of a 'meeting of minds', Nixon harboured fewer hopes than his National Security Adviser that the Chinese could play a useful role in bringing the Vietnam War to a conclusion on terms more satisfactory to the United States. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, only a few days prior to the departure of the presidential party for China, Kissinger had received word that Le Duc Tho was prepared to meet with him in Paris in mid-March.<sup>24</sup> What's more, the North Vietnamese had invited Dr. Kissinger to lunch, something they had never done before. Haldeman recorded that Kissinger was "particularly ecstatic" at this course of events, believing that this was a "significant time... [Kissinger] thinks at the very least this will insure no major offensive as we've been fearing." Nixon, on the other hand, was unconvinced "that it wasn't just a North Vietnamese ploy", and felt that it was his military posture and attacks on critics at home that were bearing fruit, rather than his diplomatic manoeuvres with the Chinese.<sup>25</sup>

Despite all the Chinese were saying to him, Kissinger on the other hand could not accept that they were not pushing Hanoi. That is not to say that he was ignorant of China's conflicting policy; on the contrary, in his briefing papers for the President's visit to Beijing he spelt out unambiguously the reasons why it would be disadvantageous to the P.R.C.'s position for Zhou to pressure Hanoi into cutting a deal with the Americans. Kissinger stated to his President, "Any Chinese attempts to influence Hanoi towards a reasonable settlement with us could leave Moscow openings for furthering its influence in Indochina by charging U.S.-Chinese collusion." It continued, "[T]hey must be circumspect in any promoting of a settlement because of their fear of encirclement by the Soviet

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<sup>23</sup> *Haldeman Diaries*, entries for February 6 and June 29, 1971.

<sup>24</sup> There is a discrepancy between the *Haldeman Diaries*, which states that the Vietnamese proposed March 17<sup>th</sup> and Kissinger's recollection in *W.H.Y.*, which states that the invitation was for "a date for any time convenient to us after March 15." Kissinger also fails to record any of the excitement Haldeman attributed to him on this occasion. Cf. *Haldeman Diaries*, entry for February 14 1972, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1105.

<sup>25</sup> *Haldeman Diaries*, entry for February 14 1972. In *Nixon's Vietnam War*, Jeffrey Kimball lists "the imminent trip to China", in addition to the bombing of South Vietnam and the movement of the aircraft carriers, as being factors that "must have had an effect". This was not mentioned by Haldeman, although "dealings with the Chinese" were discussed later in the same conversation. As can be seen, neither Haldeman nor Nixon makes a direct link between the two issues. Cf. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, pp. 296-7.

Union and countries under its sway... Both publicly and privately therefore China has stood closely by its ally, as is to be expected.” That “The P.R.C. probably does not want to see Hanoi control all of Indochina, since such a bloc could be dominated by the U.S.S.R.”, and Zhou’s admission of Chinese culpability in the 1954 Geneva settlement were also duly noted. Thus, the strong incentives for China not to intervene on America’s behalf were clearly elucidated for the president. And yet despite the foregoing analysis and evidence, Kissinger drew the opposite conclusion. Ignoring Zhou’s explanation to him of the bitter history between imperial China and Vietnam, the reminders about Chinese mistakes in 1954, China’s sense of duty to its smaller ally, and the strategic reasons why it would not be in China’s interests to antagonise Hanoi, Kissinger chose to interpret “Hanoi’s extreme sensitivity in its public statements” not as another reason for China not to interfere, but rather as evidence that “Peking had indeed been talking to it.” Of this, he was “convinced”.<sup>26</sup>

Three factors underpinned Kissinger’s assessment: firstly, he correctly understood that “the Chinese would like to see Indochina removed as a distortion in our relations and as an issue for Soviet exploitation”; secondly, a continuation of the war over the longer term would increase Soviet influence in Indochina; the third factor was the resurrection of the “inherent *quid pro quo*” between the issues of Taiwan and Indochina. This *quid pro quo* was, of course, a large step back from Kissinger’s original expectation of July 1971 that Chinese assistance on Vietnam would be the price Beijing would have to pay for a summit; this much more modest trade-off was based on the premise that “Only we can help them concerning Taiwan; and they can help in Indochina”.<sup>27</sup>

On the first point Kissinger was clearly correct, though as has been seen his understanding of China’s approach to solving this issue was seriously flawed. As viewed from Beijing, the best way to limit Soviet influence in Indochina would be for the United States to give up on Nguyen Van Thieu. On the second point he was correct, though Hanoi’s own desire to continue the war into another U.S. electoral cycle must be questioned. Finally, Mao’s decision to kick the issue of Taiwan into touch for the short-term made Kissinger’s much-vaunted *quid pro*

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<sup>26</sup> Briefing Book for the President, ‘Briefing Papers for the China Trip – Book V’, NPMP/NSC/847/4. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

*quo* partially redundant; originally, one of the basic assumptions behind Mao's calculation to open to the United States was that Nixon was pulling out of Indochina, and in the interim Vietnamization and American troop withdrawals had proceeded apace. By promising that two-thirds of U.S. forces on Taiwan would be withdrawn after American involvement in the Vietnam War ended, Nixon and Kissinger had actually weakened the linkage between the two issues: America was on its way out of Vietnam, either through negotiation or a phased unilateral withdrawal. Therefore, the withdrawal of two-thirds of American forces from Taiwan was inevitable; what was in question was simply a matter of timing. The withdrawal of the remaining forces was dependent on the state of Sino-American bilateral relations, making this the key.

Furthermore, under the circumstances of the burgeoning strategic relationship between the P.R.C. and the United States, the remaining American forces represented much less of a threat to China than they had a decade earlier, and served as a useful temporary bulwark against Japanese or Soviet encroachment into Taiwan. Reinforcing this was the link that Mao and Zhou were fostering between Lin Biao's 'coup attempt' and opposition to Sino-American rapprochement: all genuine concern about, or opposition to, the opening could be suppressed as being pro-Lin and therefore anti-Party.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the pressure was somewhat relieved on the need for Zhou to deliver immediate results on Taiwan to satisfy internal doubters.

In this light, the incentive for Beijing to attempt to persuade Hanoi of the merits of a negotiated settlement and dissuade them from launching their planned military offensive are much weaker than Kissinger held to be true. Nixon appeared to appreciate this fact, and annotated his talking points to emphasize that the U.S. did not ask that Beijing exert pressure on its allies, though they would welcome, "but do not expect", a constructive attitude from Beijing towards their new peace proposals.<sup>29</sup> For Mao and Zhou, however, Nixon and Kissinger's new peace proposals were of little interest, for the time being at least. China's main priority was to maintain its relationship with both North Vietnam and the United States at a time when the two belligerents were on course for a

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<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Mao's comments to Nixon in Burr, *Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 61.

<sup>29</sup> Briefing Book for the President, 'Briefing Papers for the China Trip - Book V', NPMP/NSC/847/4.

military showdown in the spring, although Kissinger, and perhaps Nixon, believed otherwise. Nevertheless, the two Americans, like Mao and Zhou, were determined not to let the Vietnam War interfere with the burgeoning Sino-American relationship, and Nixon's first priority when he reached Beijing was to cement this new relationship by undoing an insult from the First Indochina War.

Kissinger had pointed out to the President that Zhou had been "piqued" ever since Eisenhower's Secretary of States, John Foster Dulles, had refused to shake his hand at the 1954 Geneva Conference. Nixon was determined not only not to repeat the mistake, but to make a point of extending his hand to Zhou long before he was within reach. On the afternoon of February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1972, Zhou Enlai stood on the tarmac rather stiffly, as the President of the United States walked towards him, hand-outstretched; naturally, he shook hands with Nixon, but he did not emulate the President's enthusiasm. It mattered little however; Nixon had made his point.<sup>30</sup>

Seventy-eight year old Mao's health had noticeably deteriorated in the wake of the 'Lin Biao affair'. In a spur of the moment decision, in early January he had chosen to attend the memorial service for deceased former Foreign Minister Chen Yi, but refused to dress properly, wearing his pyjama bottoms under a great coat. His health weakened further as a result. Suffering from chronic pneumonia, oedema and related heart problems, in the early morning of February 12<sup>th</sup> as his breathing weakened and his nurse struggled to find a pulse, the Chairman lost consciousness.<sup>31</sup> Nixon had done well to heed the advice of former French Minister of Culture, André Malraux, whom Nixon had hosted in the White House shortly before his visit to China. Malraux had warned the President "You may think he is talking to you, but he will in truth be addressing Death!"<sup>32</sup> Despite this, in the early afternoon of February 21<sup>st</sup> the Chairman was feeling up to meeting Nixon, but no-one could be sure how long it would last. The result was a meeting between the President and the Chairman much sooner than any of the Americans had anticipated. Nixon and Kissinger were rushed to

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<sup>30</sup> Nixon, *RN*, p. 559.

<sup>31</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United State, Nixon-Ford Administrations volumes* [hereafter *FRUS – Nixon*], vol. XVII, (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2006), document 161 (editorial note); C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, pp. 1612, 1615-7; Burr, *Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Nixon, *RN*, p. 557.

his residence in Zhongnanhai just a few hours after they had touched down in Beijing.<sup>33</sup>

It was clear to Nixon and Kissinger that Mao was not a well man, and could only speak with “considerable effort.”<sup>34</sup> But if Mao’s mental agility was impaired by his illness, it did not show, and although it served to emphasize his desired perception of himself as a great philosopher, his refusal to engage in the discussion of specifics with Nixon helped avoid testing his abilities too much. “All these troublesome problems I don’t want to get into very much” he told the American President. “I think your topic is better – philosophic questions.” As a result, the war in Vietnam did not surface in any meaningful way, but China and North Vietnam’s differing interests in who resided in the White House were made clear. Mao confirmed to the President what had already been reported: “I voted for you during your election” he told Nixon, and implied that he wished to see his election victory repeated, half-joking, “[P]erhaps you as an individual may not be among those to be overthrown.” Beijing and Hanoi’s aims could not have been more divergent: part of Hanoi’s diplomatic strategy depended on threatening Nixon’s re-election, while Mao wished to see that in no way endangered. Then, under condition of confidentiality (after having suggested to the American President “that you do a little less briefing”) the Chairman made a statement that would have caused horror in Hanoi. “If all of you [meaning Nixon and Kissinger] are overthrown we wouldn’t have any more friends left.”<sup>35</sup> By saying this, of course, Mao was simply employing “the cardinal Chinese principle in dealing with a non-Chinese... us[ing] friendship as a halter”, but his words would have been horrifying to Vietnamese ears nonetheless.<sup>36</sup>

Nixon never did get the private audience with Mao he had wished for while he remained President. It mattered little however, for the symbolism of the meeting and the strategic direction of the bilateral relationship had been captured in that hurried and unexpected encounter. Specifics would be discussed with the Premier, and despite North Vietnamese objections a substantial portion of these meetings would be devoted to discussing the war in Indochina. In reality,

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<sup>33</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp. 1051-2, 1057.

<sup>34</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1059.

<sup>35</sup> Burr, *Kissinger Transcripts*, pp. 59-65.

<sup>36</sup> Briefing Book for the President, ‘China Visit Readings on Mao Tse-Tung and Chou En-Lai’, NPMP/NSC/847/2. The observation was made by John K. Fairbank in 1960. See also Hersch, *The Price of Power*, p.374 fn.

though, Nixon had little of substance to add to the record already established by Kissinger in his talks with Zhou Enlai the previous July and October, except to add his personal and presidential imprimatur. What is most surprising about the entire set of discussions, however, is how little Nixon had to say on the topic of Vietnam. In their opening, four hour long, discussion on the international situation the closest he came to addressing the topic was the reiteration of the promise to remove “two-thirds of our present forces on Taiwan... as the situation in Southeast Asia is resolved... And the reduction of the remaining third of our military presence on Taiwan will go forward as progress is made on the peaceful resolution of the problem.” Not wanting to appear like a supplicant, Nixon didn’t even mention Vietnam.<sup>37</sup>

It was Zhou, in fact, who raised the topic of Indochina in his reply to the President. He noted that if China and the United States wanted “make some contribution to the relaxation of tensions in the world... the crucial question then is the question of Indochina.” He prefaced his comments by reminding Nixon that “only the Indochinese people themselves have the right to speak, to negotiate with you. But as the Indochina area is of concern to us we have the right to raise our voice on that matter. What’s more we have the obligation to give the Indochinese peoples assistance and support.” He put the Chinese position in much more clear terms than he ever had with Kissinger, and emphasised that the current American course of action only benefited the Soviet Union. “I think it would be better to take more bold action. Otherwise you will only facilitate the Soviets in furthering their influence there...” Kissinger’s recollection was largely accurate when he described Zhou’s rebuttal as being “more in sorrow than anger”, and indeed “a masterpiece of indirection”. Unfortunately, it was so indirect that Kissinger once again missed the point. It is little wonder that Zhou interjected at one point, “Probably it is not easy for us to make these things very clear quickly.”<sup>38</sup>

Zhou’s principal argument for ending the war quickly was not, as Kissinger later wrote, “that it bogged down the United States and deflected our

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<sup>37</sup> Memcon, Nixon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 22, 1972, White House Special Files/President’s Office Files/87/Memoranda for the President beginning February 20 1972, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-1.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Memcon, Nixon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 22, 1972, White House Special Files/President’s Office Files/87/Memoranda for the President beginning February 20 1972, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-1.pdf>; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1073.



energies from more important parts of the globe.” It was, rather, that the longer the United States took to withdraw, the more Soviet influence would grow, and the more likely was the chance that Southeast Asia would become an area of contention between the United States and the Soviet Union – “another Middle East will develop.” He didn’t mention it explicitly but Sino-Soviet contention in Indochina was also surely on his mind. He downplayed Chinese fear of Soviet encirclement in Vietnam, (“we are not afraid of that eventuality”) but this was clearly behind what he was telling Nixon. He tried to persuade the American President that Thieu was dispensable, telling him “That is still your old saying – you don’t want to cast aside old friends. But you have already cast aside many old friends.” He then went on, “It would be beneficial for the relaxation of tensions in the Far East to bring about a non-aligned Southeast Asia.” Nixon interjected that he believed that would eventually happen, but in one of the few occasions the two leaders spoke over each other, Zhou sharply interrupted him. “You have this confidence? But if the Soviet Union goes in and you two powers contend there, then there can be no talk of relaxation... You may say that if you withdraw your influence from the area a vacuum is created and the Soviet Union will fill it up. The fact is the later you move out, the more serious the contention there”. Zhou was walking a tightrope in what he was telling Nixon. Without betraying the Vietnamese comrades’ plans or prejudicing its negotiations with Kissinger, he was trying to get across to Nixon that they would not be satisfied until they had achieved their goals; if in the short-term they went unfulfilled, they would pursue them again in the future, relying even more heavily on the Soviets; but “if the U.S. government would take a very bold move in Indochina you would gain very good feelings on the part of the Indochinese people.”<sup>39</sup>

In further talks with Nixon a few days later, it was once again the Chinese Premier who raised the topic of Indochina and returned to his theme of a few days earlier. This time he placed even greater emphasis on China’s duty “to continue our support, not only to Vietnam but to all three Indochinese countries.” Again he urged America to retreat from its support of Thieu and Lon Nol. He hinted to Nixon at the probability of the civil wars in Indochina continuing even

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<sup>39</sup> Memcon, Nixon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 22, 1972, White House Special Files/President’s Office Files/87/Memoranda for the President beginning February 20 1972, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-1.pdf>

after American disengagement, and made clear that China would continue to “support the sides which we are supporting.” Zhou seemed puzzled that Nixon, who had made the breakthrough in relations with China, seemed intent on hitching himself to Nguyen Van Thieu’s wagon. “Mr. President, for a leader like you, who is known for your farsightedness, it would not be beneficial for you or for the honor of the United States to leave behind a ‘tail’... The ‘tail’ means American forces. You have already said that if there is no agreement with them, then the Air Force bombing and the Navy bombing will continue.” Zhou did not go so far as to use the phrase “let the domino fall” but that was the essence behind what he was telling the American President. He did, however, qualify these remarks by stating concern about the possibility of “a certain big power” going into other countries of Southeast Asia and setting up “a sphere of influence.” In other words, leave Indochina, but hold firm elsewhere in Asia.<sup>40</sup>

A further, special, session between Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Qiao Guanhua and Kissinger took place late at night on the eve of the President’s departure. Kissinger recorded in his memoirs that this was “devoted to Vietnam”; this was not strictly speaking true. The purpose of the meeting was for Kissinger to share intelligence information on the Soviet military with Qiao; it was only as an aside that he then turned the conversation to Vietnam. Kissinger appeared concerned at Nixon’s failure to even attempt to enlist Zhou Enlai’s support for their endeavours in Indochina, so he used the spectre of Soviet encirclement of China as an illustrative device in his efforts at persuading Qiao Guanhua. “From your point of view” he authoritatively told the Vice-Minister, “it should be desirable that the war ends because any realistic analysis makes it clear that we are obviously on the way out of Vietnam... It is our analysis that the reason the war continues is because the Soviet Union encourages its continuation... we believe one purpose of the continuation from the Soviet point of view is to complete the encirclement of the P.R.C.” Kissinger did not, as he later wrote, explain the American negotiating position in more detail than Nixon had outlined to Zhou; instead he opted to spin Qiao a tall tale about Soviet

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<sup>40</sup> Memcon, Nixon, Zhou et al., February 24, 1972, White House Special Files/President's Office Files/87/Memoranda for the President Beginning February 20, 1972, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-3.pdf>

intervention in Hanoi to prevent the North Vietnamese negotiating seriously.<sup>41</sup> Kissinger was, of course, playing both ends off each other, telling the Chinese that the Soviets were pursuing the continuation of the war, while telling the Soviets vice versa. That Kissinger resorted to fabrication indicates the position of weakness he was speaking from, for the linkage of Taiwan to Indochina had proven to be feeble. Nixon realised he had nothing to offer the Chinese in Vietnam, and so had sensibly avoided the subject. Kissinger would have been well advised to do the same.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike his boss, Qiao Guanhua had little time for indirection or subtlety. “You don’t find it possible to withdraw your air force. Nor is it possible for you to withdraw *in toto* your combat forces. And should a turn take place in the war unfavourable to Thieu and his regime, then again you may have to return... Well, speaking rather frankly, our view is that your present line of action cannot bring an end to the war. The Soviet Union does have her motives here, but in our view what you are doing precisely offers an opportunity for the Soviet Union to promote the realization of her motives.” Realising that his foray into Vietnam was clearly going to lead him nowhere with the Vice-Minister, the National Security Adviser attempted to bring the discussion to a close. This meeting was not, as Kissinger later recalled, another instance of quiet Chinese acquiescence in America’s “determination to defeat an offensive by all available means” (partly because Kissinger still thought there might be no offensive). It was, in the clearest terms yet, a Chinese exhortation to let go in Saigon: “[F]or you to maintain the Thieu regime for South Vietnam is not a way out.”<sup>43</sup>

As Nixon would later report to his National Security Council, he “didn’t get a damn thing on Vietnam” during his visit to the People’s Republic of China, though in reality he didn’t try very hard either. Whether this stemmed from a realistic appraisal on the part of the President of what was on offer and obtainable or was a failure of his personal diplomacy is unclear; but it is evident that Nixon’s expectations going into the summit were lower than those of his National Security Advisor. But in terms of image, so important to the complex and

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<sup>41</sup> Memcon, Qiao, Kissinger et al., February 27, 1972, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com> (hereafter cited as DNSA) document KT00451.

<sup>42</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp. 1041, 1043.

<sup>43</sup> Memcon, Kissinger, Qiao et al., February 27 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/92/1; cf. Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1086.

insecure Richard Nixon, he had got what he wanted. China had been extremely accommodating of the American President's desire to have live television coverage of his visit to the People's Republic. Live television pictures of Nixon on the Great Wall and clinking cups of mao tai with the leadership of 'Communist China' had been beamed into the homes of millions of Americans, boosting Nixon's re-election prospects, as both he and Mao had hoped. Perhaps Nixon was overly critical of what he had achieved, or failed to achieve, in Beijing, for the televised images of the 'Nixon the Peacemaker' in Beijing had undermined a major plank in the D.R.V.'s diplomatic strategy: to wrench concessions from Nixon by threatening his re-election prospects. China's actions, it was felt in Hanoi, had been to throw a lifebelt to a drowning man.<sup>44</sup>

Compounding Hanoi's frustration at Nixon's public relations success in China was suspicion over the meaning of the Shanghai Communiqué. The communiqué, which had largely been negotiated by Kissinger and Qiao Guanhua during the National Security Advisor's October 1971 visit to the Chinese capital, was unusual in that it allowed both sides to state their own position on contentious issues (subject to agreement from the other side). The unusual diplomatic move had come at Mao's instigation, and a primary motivating factor was the preservation of China's international revolutionary image and the desire not to alienate China's few purported allies, namely North Korea and North Vietnam, by reassuring them that China was not going to collude with the United States against their interests. Thus, Hanoi was very much the intended audience of China's declaration that "All nations, big or small, should be equal: big nations should not bully the small and strong nations should not bully the weak. China will never be a superpower and it opposes hegemony and power politics of any kind." Despite the fact that Nixon had already publicly revealed the existence of the secret talks in Paris and that the P.R.G.'s 'Seven Points' of the previous July were not actually a basis for negotiating, Mao and Zhou felt duty-bound to restate their public backing for them in the communiqué. Mao's description of these sentiments as "no more than firing an empty cannon" rang true, but it served China's purpose well.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 229; Zhai, *CATVW*, p. 201; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 515.

<sup>45</sup> 'Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China',

For the North Vietnamese however, this was insufficient and they still found cause for suspicion and concern in the text of the communiqué – not on the section dealing with Indochina, however, but that concerning Taiwan. Echoing their accusations of the previous summer that China was attempting to use the issue of Vietnam to gain entry into the United Nations, this time Hanoi's accusation was that Beijing was attempting to make use of Vietnam to solve the Taiwan issue. The section of the text that particularly exercised Hanoi was the United States' declaration that "it will progressively reduce its forces and installations on Taiwan as the tension in the area diminishes."<sup>46</sup> Zhou Enlai had travelled to the North Vietnamese capital to brief and reassure the Vietnamese comrades that nothing contrary to their interests had been agreed between him and Nixon. He repeated to them what he had told Nixon: the Chinese side believed the resolution of the Vietnam problem to be of primary importance and that the resolution of the Taiwan issue was a longer term issue. However, it appears that his assurances were not taken entirely at face value in Hanoi, and suspicions about what had been agreed with Nixon lingered. It perhaps speaks of Hanoi's unhappiness about the entire state of affairs that the Chinese Premier was not even hosted overnight in the North Vietnamese capital; he arrived on the morning of March 4<sup>th</sup> and left that same evening. Hanoi was deeply uneasy with the potential implications of the Shanghai Communiqué.<sup>47</sup>

The irony is that had Le Duan or Pham Van Dong eavesdropped the discussions between Nixon and Zhou there was little in the sections on Indochina they could have found objectionable: Zhou politely, yet consistently and with conviction, urged the American that the best policy he could adopt in the region was to withdraw at the earliest opportunity, never to return, and leave the Vietnamese to finish their civil war. (Mao on the other hand, with his penchant for bombast, provocation and uniquely philosophical persiflage, made several remarks to the American President that would have raised Vietnamese heckles.) Traditional Vietnamese suspicions of their northern neighbour and the memory of 1954 worked to override the solidarity felt between the two countries and

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February 28, 1972, [http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive\\_Index/joint\\_communique\\_1972.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive_Index/joint_communique_1972.html);  
Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, p. 232.

<sup>46</sup> 'Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China', February 28, 1972, [http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive\\_Index/joint\\_communique\\_1972.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive_Index/joint_communique_1972.html).

<sup>47</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 515; S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, pp. 40-41; Zhai, *CATWW*, p. 201.

communist parties: knowing of Taiwan's importance to China, Hanoi found it difficult to believe that Mao had not entered into some sort of trade-off over it at Vietnam's expense. Viewed from Hanoi, Beijing was damned which ever way it turned, and was suspect whether it upped aid for the D.R.V. or lowered it, whether it had a communiqué with Nixon or whether it did not. Mao had himself to blame: the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution had helped to inflate the Vietnamese communists' already substantial sense of revolutionary self-importance. Surely if they were the standard bearers of the world's revolutionary peoples then the world's revolutionary peoples should fall into line behind them? Even though Mao and Zhou had done all that China's own foreign policy requirements would permit in accommodating the Vietnamese comrades, it was what they had failed to do that left the strongest impression in Hanoi.

#### Off the hook

In the dying days of March 1972, barely four weeks after Richard Nixon had departed from Shanghai, Hanoi launched the Spring Offensive. Unlike four years earlier during Tet, there was not the slightest pretence that this military campaign was a popular uprising: several hundred thousand regular troops of the People's Army of Vietnam poured across the D.M.Z. into the northern provinces of South Vietnam. Though such a move had been anticipated in Beijing (and Washington), there still existed the possibility that the inherent tension between China's policies towards Vietnam and the United States could critically damage one or another of the relationships. However, Nixon and Kissinger had little leverage with which to coerce Beijing into limiting assistance to Hanoi. Zhou had consistently refused American entreaties to intervene with Hanoi on Nixon's behalf, and had warned that they would continue to assist North Vietnam in their war effort. In the spring and summer of 1972, the United States passively accepted this fact, and sought to place the blame for Hanoi's actions with Moscow, while largely ignoring China's role. The source of this tactic was Kissinger, rather than Nixon. The President, claimed Kissinger, had wanted to "lump the purposes of Peking and especially of Moscow with Hanoi's." Kissinger, however, persuaded Nixon that it would be better to differentiate "pressures against Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi so as to isolate North Vietnam

and demoralize it.” The net effect of this, however, would be acceptance of what Kissinger had earlier described as Chinese “disengagement”.<sup>48</sup> Chinese disengagement from interference in Washington-Hanoi negotiations was certainly an improvement on the situation that had existed for President Johnson; but in their attempts to pare Beijing away from its southern ally, Nixon and Kissinger also permitted the Chinese to disengage from responsibility for keeping North Vietnam supplied with civilian and military materiel during Nixon’s bombing and mining of the D.R.V.

The main line of communication for important matters between Beijing and Washington was now the new ‘back channel’ of the Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations in New York, Huang Hua. Kissinger met with Huang on March 14, and apparently still had hope that there would be no North Vietnamese offensive since he made little attempt on this occasion to elicit Chinese assistance in preventing one. (A week earlier Hanoi had postponed until April 15<sup>th</sup> the March 20<sup>th</sup> meeting that had previously given Kissinger so much hope.) In response to a Chinese message complaining about alleged American bombing of North Vietnam since Nixon’s visit to China, Kissinger denied the charges, but did however give an undertaking to the Chinese ambassador that the U.S. would not increase military operations over North Vietnam unless there was a North Vietnamese offensive.<sup>49</sup> When the offensive duly began on March 30, Winston Lord was dispatched to New York to convey another message to the Chinese representatives. Once again Kissinger exaggerated in his memoirs the robustness of the American “oral note” - it did not protest “China’s public backing of the North Vietnamese invasion”.<sup>50</sup> It recognised that Beijing was “obliged to take positions that support its friends” but noted that “certain of [Beijing’s] recent comments can only be considered inconsistent with the spirit with which the two sides have conducted negotiations.” Coming down to specifics, the U.S. side complained that the Chinese had made “unacceptable” statements accusing the Americans of “sabotaging the talks in Paris”, and expressed incomprehension as to why the Chinese side continued to publicly support the P.R.G.’s seven point

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<sup>48</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1104, 1113-4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1106; memo for the President from Henry A. Kissinger, ‘My March 14, 1972 Meeting with the Chinese Ambassador’, March 20, 1972, NPMP/NSC/849/4; memo for HAK/Haig from Winston Lord, ‘Undertakings with the PRC’, March 17, 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/87/7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1106, 1114-5.

peace plan. The note is curious because it made practically no mention of the North Vietnamese offensive at all, and the closest it came to being sharp was to repeat Kissinger's by now well-worn observation that "any attempt to impose a military solution upon the U.S. can only lead to unfortunate consequences" (and even this was tempered by the closing statement that "The U.S. also wants to reiterate the extreme importance that it attaches to the improvement of its relations with the People's Republic of China.")<sup>51</sup> This would seem to suggest that by the evening of April 3<sup>rd</sup> the extent of the North Vietnamese attack was still less apparent to the policy-makers in Washington than Kissinger alleged. At the very least, it showed uncertainty as to how to deal with Hanoi's allies.

Kissinger recalled in his memoirs that the Americans received a reply to this message on April 12<sup>th</sup>; what he failed to mention was being personally on the receiving end of the Chinese "stiff reply", as he had requested a meeting with Huang Hua in New York to discuss with him the situation in Indochina (in effect, another plea for Beijing to use its influence to restrain Hanoi.)<sup>52</sup> As he had done in the past, most recently in discussions with Qiao Guanhua, Kissinger conjured up the Soviet ghost, telling Huang that it was the application of the same principle that underpinned Hanoi's attack on South Vietnam as had driven the most recent Indo-Pakistan conflict (i.e. Soviet encirclement of China.) He then told Huang that it would be "tragic" if Hanoi's actions jeopardized the relationship with China "which is so important for our foreign policy." This was not quite a threat, or even a half-threat, simply a recantation of a well-worn prognostication; Huang was unlikely to be worried. For his part, the Chinese ambassador conveyed the message from Beijing, which expressed the continued solidarity of China and which warned the Americans to be "under no misapprehension concerning China's principled stand on the question of Indochina". It was, nonetheless tempered it with a reaffirmation of the importance Beijing attached to the normalization of relations with the United States.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Memo for Henry A. Kissinger from Winston Lord, 'My April 3 Mission to New York', April 3, 1972, NPMP/NSC/849/4; untitled and undated message, NPMP/NSC 849/4.

<sup>52</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1123.

<sup>53</sup> Memo for Henry A. Kissinger from Winston Lord, 'Your April 12 Meeting in New York – Background', April 11, 1972, NPMP/NSC/849/4; 'Talking Points for April 12 Meeting – Vietnam', undated, *ibid.*; memcon, Huang Hua, Henry Kissinger et al., April 12, 1972, *ibid.*



Aside from Kissinger's obfuscation of their purposes and content, these two exchanges of April 3<sup>rd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> are significant in that they illustrate the dilemma that American policy found itself in. At the conclusion of the April 3<sup>rd</sup> message, the American side reiterated "the extreme importance that it attaches to its relations" with the P.R.C., while during Kissinger's meeting with Huang on April 12<sup>th</sup>, the Chinese likewise reaffirmed their desire to see a normalization of relations with the United States. In this respect Kissinger's summation of Nixon's China trip is largely correct - he wrote, "[T]he war in Vietnam would not affect the improvement of our relations... North Vietnam would not be permitted to override [Beijing's] greater geopolitical preoccupations." And indeed, China did opt to keep low the rhetoric on Vietnam in exchanges with the United States and not let the issue interfere in their bilateral relationship. When Kissinger again came to visit Huang Hua, just before Nixon's trip to Moscow and after the announcement of the bombing and mining of Hanoi, he and Huang went through formulaic recantations of well-rehearsed positions on Vietnam, before Huang commented, "In our view [the Vietnam War] is not a very complicated question. But I won't argue with you on this". Wary of damaging Nixon's big foreign policy success in an election year, and possessing little leverage over the Chinese, Nixon and Kissinger could not push the issue, and chose to believe that the formulaic exchanges were indicative of the fact that China was having a benevolent influence in Hanoi. On the contrary, however, China was going to continue supporting North Vietnam for its own historic, cultural and strategic reasons, as can be seen from its reaction to Nixon's LINEBACKER attacks on North Vietnam.<sup>54</sup>

As noted, Chinese co-operation for the Spring Offensive had been successfully enlisted in the run-up to Nixon's visit. Agreements signed in January 1972 with North Vietnam's Soviet and East European allies on the transportation of 'special' military materiel were supplemented further in March and April. China also agreed to an increase in the number of personnel that were permitted to accompany these "special materials".<sup>55</sup> After the Americans resumed bombing of North Vietnam, and on the very day that Kissinger was

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<sup>54</sup> Untitled and undated message, NPMP/NSC 849/4 ; memcon, Huang Hua, Henry Kissinger et al., May 16, 1972, *ibid.*; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1087.

<sup>55</sup> Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 2, p. 32.

meeting Huang Hua in New York, Zhou Enlai met with the D.R.V. chargé d'affaires *ad interim* in Beijing, Nguyen Tien, and expressed the support of the Chinese government and people for the "solemn and just stand" of North Vietnam.<sup>56</sup> He predicted that the United States would be unable to rescue itself from defeat by expanding the war front to North Vietnam, and pledged China's support for the Vietnamese people's 'Anti-American National Salvation War' until the end. At this point, however, China took no specific further action to assist Hanoi. That was to change, however, with Nixon's May 8<sup>th</sup> announcement of the mining of Haiphong harbour, when China and North Vietnam entered a period of extremely close co-operation, probably not seen since the mid-1960s. Rather than separate Hanoi from its sponsors, which was Kissinger's stated aim, the American military action created a new era of close co-operation between Hanoi and Beijing.<sup>57</sup>

Beijing's response to the LINEBACKER blockade was swift. When Nixon made his televised announcement at 9 p.m. on May 8 it was already the morning of May 9 in Beijing. That same day Zhou summoned a meeting of core Foreign Ministry officials to discuss how China should react, and in the evening met with Chairman Mao and Marshall Ye Jianying to report on the situation. The Foreign Ministry group met again the next day, and later Zhou presided over a Politburo meeting to discuss the official Chinese government announcement in response to the blockade. When it was issued, on May 12<sup>th</sup>, it condemned the mining of Haiphong and repeated Zhou's April assurances to Nguyen Tien that China would support North Vietnam until final victory. The outline of how China was going to fulfil its pledges was already taking shape.<sup>58</sup>

On May 9 the North Vietnamese Ambassador in Beijing had met with Zhou and requested assistance in mine clearance; the Chinese Premier met with navy commanders that same evening and instructed them to make plans to help clear mines from the North Vietnamese coast. The next day he met with the chief and deputy chief of staff of the Chinese navy to further discuss the proposed operations. Two weeks later a Chinese investigation team arrived in North

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<sup>56</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 519.

<sup>57</sup> Shen Zhihua, 'Zhong-mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, p. 236.

<sup>58</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 524; Shen Zhihua, 'Zhong-mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, p. 236; Zhai, *CATVW*, p. 203.

Vietnam to examine the situation.<sup>59</sup> Xuan Thuy, presumably returning to Hanoi for consultations, met with Zhou in Beijing on May 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, where they discussed the problems caused to transportation between China and North Vietnam caused by the American bombing. At this meeting Xuan Thuy requested that China open its ports to Soviet shipping in order to get around the blockade, but Zhou refused this request. He did, however, agree to rebuild Vietnamese railways damaged by American bombing, open a concealed shipping route, increase military aid as well as supplies of grain and oil, and help in the sweeping of mines from North Vietnamese ports.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the initial refusal to permit Soviet shipping to unload in Chinese ports, the Chinese government took its own unilateral commitments to Vietnam seriously, and from May 18<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> convened a week-long national conference in Beijing in order to plan the logistics for the assistance promised to Hanoi. It was no small affair; in attendance were officials from 26 provinces and municipalities in charge of industrial transportation and military production, as well as officials from the State Council, the P.L.A. logistics and supply divisions and representatives from 224 state-owned enterprises. The conference closely examined 133 outstanding requests from North Vietnam, as well as 120 new ones put forward by Hanoi, and in total agreed to satisfy 190 of these. In order to expedite their completion the central government would supply the raw materials; if the materials were needed urgently the work unit in question was authorized to obtain them on credit, or if this was not possible the central government would pay the costs directly. Where production capacity was insufficient the work units were ordered to adopt technical innovations, increase workers' shifts and improve efficiency. Industry was ordered to prioritise North Vietnam's needs. Essentially, key sectors of China's economy were being put on a partial war footing to defeat Nixon's blockade.<sup>61</sup>

Further bilateral discussions continued through May and into early June. It was agreed that two oil pipelines would be laid between Pingxiang on the Sino-Vietnamese border and Hanoi (there would eventually be a total of five such pipelines). China also agreed to rush to North Vietnam 300 trucks and 200

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<sup>59</sup> Zhai, *CATVW*, p. 203.

<sup>60</sup> Shen Zhihua, 'Zhong-mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, pp. 236-7.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

tonnes of steel from Hong Kong, along with equipment for repairing bridges and Chinese missile specialists who were to serve under Vietnamese command. On June 8<sup>th</sup> a concealed coastal route was agreed upon, and in addition to the one hundred 50-tonne vessels requested by Hanoi, China agreed to supply another fifty and take responsibility for their supply and maintenance. Thousands of trucks were also dispatched to ensure sufficient capacity of overland transportation routes. Assisting North Vietnam was an urgent duty that was “glorious, important and long-standing”, Vice-Premier Yu Qiuli told the delegates at the week-long conference, “We must use every means possible to completely satisfy their needs.”<sup>62</sup>

There was, of course, still one major area where China was able yet unwilling to satisfy Hanoi’s needs: Beijing’s refusal to allow Soviet shipping destined for the D.R.V. to unload in Chinese ports. Zhou’s initial refusal of the North Vietnamese request was somewhat surprising given the potentially grave situation that Hanoi was now facing in the light of Nixon’s blockade and bombing, particularly as it was clear that Nixon had been emboldened by his rapprochement with China to cross the self-imposed limits of the Johnson administration. Zhou’s explanation of the refusal was tantamount to a fit of pique at the Soviets: TASS had reported that the Chinese ambassador in Moscow had gone to the airport to see off Xuan Thuy as he travelled to Beijing. Kosygin had already written to Zhou requesting the use of Chinese ports, but the Chinese Premier was infuriated by the TASS news report, believing it to imply that some sort of agreement had been reached between Moscow and Beijing, and that the Soviets were using the possibility of Sino-Soviet co-operation to grandstand in the direction of the United States in advance of the summit. In a sharp exchange with Xuan Thuy on May 14 he asked his Vietnamese comrade, what was the Soviet purpose? Did they want to invite American bombing of Chinese railways, or were they trying to pressurize China into agreeing to opening its ports? Did the Soviets want genuine discussions on this issue, or just drop hints? Ostensibly out of pique at perceived Soviet hectoring, Zhou refused Xuan Thuy’s request, and repeated his refusal one week later to Ly Ban.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.; Qu Aiguo, ‘Zhongguo zhiyuan budui’, in *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>63</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-Su chongtu’, part 2, p. 33-4.

A little over three weeks later, shortly before Kissinger arrived in Beijing to brief the Chinese leadership on Nixon's visit to Moscow, China relented. One should be careful to note, however, that this deal between Hanoi and Beijing was not entirely a gesture of altruism on the part of Mao and Zhou. In the mid-1960s China had stockpiled aid from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe on Chinese territory at the request of the North Vietnamese comrades; in June of 1972, fearful that the Soviets would stall on signing an aid agreement for 1973 because those for 1972 had not yet been fully implemented (by June more than one million out of 1.4 million tonnes of promised aid had not yet arrived), Hanoi requested that the Chinese again perform this function and store grain, steel and oil from the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe on Chinese territory. The Chinese were to be free to make use of these goods and replace what they used at such times as North Vietnam was able to receive them. Hanoi was particularly eager to ensure that the Soviets would deliver on schedule between September and November 1972 all 260,000 tonnes of grain that had been promised to Hanoi, in case a bad harvest would mean the shipment would not be delivered in full. To facilitate this delivery the Chinese were instructed to make full use of the Soviet grain and other commodities, on the agreement that they would be replaced when and as needed by Hanoi. "When it's there [in the Soviet Union]", D.R.V. Foreign Trade Minister Ly Ban would later tell his Chinese counterpart, "It's still theirs; when it's transported into China, then it's Vietnam's."<sup>64</sup> The Chinese agreed to the proposition, and on June 18<sup>th</sup>, the day before Kissinger's arrival, Zhou Enlai informed Le Duc Tho that Soviet, East European and Cuban shipping could unload in Chinese ports. The appropriate protocols for this new supplementary economic and military aid agreement were signed on June 28<sup>th</sup>, and included a long-term interest-free hard currency loan worth about \$100 million.<sup>65</sup>

The Chinese *volte-face* was a reward for Hanoi's decision to re-open talks with Kissinger in Paris (a message the American National Security Adviser received on June 20<sup>th</sup> while in Beijing), and it also helped to sow Soviet-D.R.V. discord.<sup>66</sup> However, Hanoi's offer that China could make use of whatever materials North Vietnam did not presently need also meant that China's already

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Liu & Mastny, 'China and Eastern Europe', p. 67; Gilks, *The Breakdown*, p.87; 'Indochina - Concession, by James Pringle, Peking, July 12 1972, Reuter', NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/98/1.

<sup>66</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1303.

heavily burdened southern railway network would not be put under further pressure, nor would China have to bear responsibility for the storage of hundreds of thousand tonnes of aid destined for North Vietnam. Initially, though, restrictions were placed on what goods China would accept by sea, and the agreement was limited to grain, steel, oil and sugar. Furthermore, the Chinese demanded that the Vietnamese provide details of how the goods were going to be dealt with before they would allow them to be unloaded: a very time-consuming process that provoked complaints from the Soviets and East Europeans. One week after the initial agreement, Hanoi requested that in addition to the 600,000 tonnes of permitted goods that China had agreed to receive, they also received a further 300,000 tonnes of iron ore and asbestos tiles. The Chinese side refused, but once again relented just over a month later and agreed to accept, with a few minor exceptions, all goods, even those which were clearly not essential to the war effort, such as chicken incubators. This occurred less than a week after Le Duc Tho and Kissinger's July 19<sup>th</sup> meeting in Paris.<sup>67</sup>

China's initial refusal of the North Vietnamese requests, and then the reversal of this decision served two purposes for Beijing. In the first instance, they were a means of pressuring the Soviets, who were hosting Nixon in Moscow, and an attempt to demonstrate to Hanoi who its 'real friends' were. By refusing to allow Soviet shipping to dock in Chinese ports, while simultaneously mobilizing a large portion of its industrial and human resources to come to Hanoi's aid, Beijing sought to increase the pressure on the Soviets to take a hard line with Nixon in Moscow, or to take firmer unilateral action to come to the aid of the D.R.V. When Zhou reversed this decision some weeks later after the Moscow summit, it was a gesture of magnanimity, to be contrasted with Soviet weakness. The North Vietnamese government was extremely grateful for the reversal of China's position, considering it to be one of the greatest acts of assistance in their war effort.<sup>68</sup> This is not to be underestimated: China's change of heart came at a critical time in the Spring Offensive, when the P.A.V.N.'s advance was beginning to falter and the effects of the LINEBACKER strategic bombing were starting to show. And despite the fact that Hanoi provided strong material incentives for the Chinese to agree to their requests (and it is possible

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<sup>67</sup> Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 2, pp. 33-36; see also Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, p. 233.

<sup>68</sup> Li Danhui, 'Zhong-Su chongtu', part 2, p. 33.

that after a trial period the Chinese found the new arrangement to their liking) the Chinese moves, which were a major policy reversal for them, coincided with a diplomatic offensive by Zhou Enlai designed to bring Kissinger and Le Duc Tho together for serious and constructive talks.<sup>69</sup> Beijing brandished no stick, but by the summer of 1972 was beginning to dangle a few carrots in front of Hanoi.

As well as Nguyen Van Thieu's armed forces, Zhou Enlai's word, Nixon's mettle, and Brezhnev's bottle had all been put to the test in the Spring Offensive. The Russian had fared least well. As well as supplying several hundred tanks for the invasion, China had responded generously to the dire straits imposed on North Vietnam by Nixon's bold move to blockade the D.R.V.; Beijing mobilized to ensure that Le Duc Tho brought with him to the negotiating table the maximum advantage that was obtainable on the battlefield. Yet, getting him to the negotiating table had also become a priority. Despite Kissinger's half-hearted threats about the negative impact on Sino-American relations, Beijing paid no real price for its backing of Hanoi, unlike the Soviets who had their own credibility seriously diminished by not cancelling the Moscow summit. The Vietnamese were pushed into the closest collaboration they had had with China for many years, serving as a useful reminder (from Beijing's perspective) of the indispensability of Chinese co-operation and amity for their war effort. However, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), with vital tactical bombing support from LINEBACKER, had performed surprisingly well; it was now clear that the communists were never likely to get a complete victory in Vietnam as long as there were U.S. forces to support the ARVN. The time had come to let the Americans leave.

Underpinning this analysis was the belief in both Hanoi and Beijing (perhaps mistakenly) that the Vietnamese communists' best hopes for cutting a deal with Nixon would come in the period leading up to the American presidential election in early November. The Chinese had the additional incentive that freeing Nixon from other distractions would permit him to devote more time to the business of establishing full diplomatic relations with Beijing. The Spring Offensive had failed to overthrow Thieu, and the American presidential election was looming against a background of military stalemate.

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<sup>69</sup> Gilks, *The Breakdown*, p. 87.

That the North Vietnamese would not win at the negotiating table what they had not won on the battlefield was as apt in mid-1972 as it had been in 1967, so Zhou Enlai set about using his influence to create the conditions for a negotiated settlement, even if it meant Thieu staying in power. China's policy of non-interference had come to an end.

"The goal is to reach an agreement"

China's new proactive interest in a negotiated settlement was quickly demonstrated by Zhou Enlai when Kissinger returned to Beijing to update the Chinese on a range of issues, in particular the Presidential visit to Moscow. In the first session of talks between the Chinese Premier and the American National Security Adviser on June 19<sup>th</sup>, Zhou almost immediately enquired of his interlocutor whether there had "been any progress in the Paris talks with the Vietnamese." The new turn in China's approach was indicated by the specific mention given to Vietnam by Zhou, when he told Kissinger, "This time I would like to discuss this issue more with you, the issue of Vietnam." Kissinger was happy to oblige. And even though the Chinese Premier had had talks with Le Duc Tho the previous morning (something he admitted to Kissinger), Zhou seemed somewhat excited by comments made by Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny upon his return to Moscow from Hanoi, when he suggested that hostilities might stop if a ceasefire could be arranged in return for an end to the blockade. By the time Le Duc Tho left Beijing, Zhou noted, Tho "hadn't gotten news of Podgorny's statement... Because if what Podgorny said had already been accepted by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam then it seemed close to what you said."<sup>70</sup> Zhou's interest in bringing an end to the bombing and blockade was evident; not only would a cessation of hostilities relieve China of its burden of responsibility for keeping North Vietnam supplied, it would also remove the danger of American bombing of the D.R.V. accidentally evolving into a larger conflagration with China, as evidenced by several stray American bombs landing on Chinese territory. As Zhou sagely told his American guest, "[W]ar will continue along its own laws of development; there are certain things that cannot

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<sup>70</sup> Memcons, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 19, 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/97/4.



be decided by human will.”<sup>71</sup> From the very start of Kissinger’s fourth visit to the P.R.C., Zhou Enlai’s tone evidenced China’s new turn in policy.

As Kissinger noted in his report for the President, this set of discussions “constituted the first really detailed discussion of Vietnam that we have had with the Chinese. We moved beyond historical recitation and formal positions to rather precise exchanges on a solution to the war and its aftermath.” And while Zhou initially concentrated on questioning Kissinger about the opportunities for a ceasefire, the tone and content relating to the political considerations of South Vietnam marked a new departure. Zhou’s acknowledgement that “it now seems that your present Administration is determined to withdraw from Vietnam” was in essence a recognition that what had been China’s primary objective in Vietnam one year previously – an American withdrawal – was on the verge of being achieved. Kissinger’s error was to underestimate China’s new interest in a political solution in Vietnam. He correctly noted that Zhou was at pains to disassociate Beijing from both Hanoi’s offensive and the political aspects of the Vietnam negotiations, but this was a means by which Beijing could ensure that in the event of a failure to reach a negotiated settlement, China would face no fallout (and also a simple recognition of the fact that in the new geopolitical environment China could live with any dispensation in Saigon that Hanoi could.) However, Zhou now also exhibited an accentuated interest in the viability of a political settlement, and the significance of its viability for China.<sup>72</sup>

Of primary interest was the long-term outcome and the possibility that the United States might re-intervene; not only would this again complicate Sino-American relations, it would also increase the opportunities for the Soviet Union to further entice Hanoi into its orbit. Zhou sought to elicit from Kissinger a reaffirmation of the ‘decent interval solution’ that the American National Security Adviser had outlined to him almost a year previously, although he conceded that “it will probably be difficult for you to answer that.” Kissinger accorded with the Chinese Premier that it would be difficult for him to answer such a question “partly because I don’t want to give encouragement for this to happen... If the North Vietnamese, on the other hand, engage in serious

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<sup>71</sup> Memcons, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 21, 1972, *ibid*.

<sup>72</sup> Memo for the President from Henry Kissinger, June 27th 1972, “My Trip to Peking, June 19-23, 1972”, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/97/5; Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 21, 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/97/4.

negotiation with the South Vietnamese, and if after a longer [more than four months] period it starts again after we were all disengaged, my personal judgement is that it is much less likely that we will go back again, much less likely.”<sup>73</sup> This statement of Kissinger’s contrasted with that which he gave the previous July, when he told Zhou that “If [the South Vietnamese government] is overthrown after we withdraw, we will not intervene.”<sup>74</sup> No longer in pursuit of a summit visit for Nixon from the Chinese, Kissinger was more mindful of making commitments. Nonetheless, the Premier appears to have been satisfied by Kissinger’s subsequent assurance that he believed “if a sufficient interval is placed between our withdrawal and what happens afterward that the issue can almost certainly be confined to an Indochina affair;” although this was qualified – “[I]f there is no outside intervention.”<sup>75</sup> If it proved to be the case that the United States completely withdrew all its Armed Forces from Indochina, the Premier stated, “I particularly make it a point, to make it clear now we would approve this course of action. But we are China”.<sup>76</sup>

That China would agree to a ceasefire and permit an American withdrawal were it in Hanoi’s position was the second of Zhou’s main themes. Inherent in this and similar statements was, of course, an assertion of Chinese moral superiority over the Vietnamese. The Chinese could adopt the longer view, said Zhou, because they were a bigger country; in fact the C.C.P. had accepted a ceasefire proposal after the Japanese surrender because “we were confident Chiang Kai-shek would break up the agreement.” Nonetheless, “Vietnam being such a small country, how can we want them to copy from us? That would be imposing on them” noted the Chinese Premier.<sup>77</sup> Zhou made a comparison with China’s patience on the Taiwan issue, “For this it is easier for our two sides, for our minds to meet on this matter. But you cannot ask the Vietnamese to do that. To ask for that would be unfair.”<sup>78</sup> Therefore, concluded Zhou, there would have to be some sort of political settlement as well as an American military withdrawal. “Since the war in the north and south has become one, and the war in Indochina as a whole has become one, [the North

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<sup>73</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 20, 1972, *ibid*.

<sup>74</sup> Memcon, Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger, July 9<sup>th</sup> 1971, NPMP/NSC/1032/3.

<sup>75</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 21, 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/97/4.

<sup>76</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 22, 1972, *ibid*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*,

<sup>78</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 21, 1972, *ibid*.

Vietnamese] would like to see a final solution to the question before they can find themselves at ease.”<sup>79</sup>

It is in Zhou’s attitude to such a political settlement that the shift in Chinese policy can be discerned. Despite references to the fact that the Nixon administration could “shake [itself] free” of the “bitter fruits left over by Dulles” by jettisoning Nguyen Van Thieu, Zhou’s language was devoid of the doctrinaire rhetoric with which he had previously exhorted Kissinger to do precisely that.<sup>80</sup> The Chinese Premier noted with a little annoyance that “with the turn of one’s hand the matter could be settled... and now you are pegged down to a point that you say you cannot give up a certain government... [which] was set up by yourself”, but appeared resigned to America’s commitment to Thieu.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, he expressed strong doubts that even were George McGovern elected President in November, he would not be able to get rid of Thieu.<sup>82</sup> That the South Vietnamese President would have to feature in the political settlement for Saigon was now to become a feature of China’s approach to the Paris Peace Negotiations, and Zhou would seek to persuade Kissinger of the merits of a tripartite government in Saigon.

Unlike in all their previous sets of discussions, Zhou Enlai now took a very active interest in promoting a political settlement of the war, not just an American withdrawal. The reality was that Zhou believed a return to violence in South Vietnam was inevitable if Thieu were not removed from office, but he had accepted Nixon’s insistence that this was something he would not do. However, at a minimum, he felt that the resumption of the revolution in South Vietnam could be postponed if the N.L.F. were brought into a coalition government. Zhou’s analysis was clearly based on his understanding of the decent interval solution as spelled out to him by Kissinger, and an acceptance that Thieu would have to remain in place during that interval.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 22, 1972, *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 20, 1972, *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 21, 1972, *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 20, 1972, *ibid.* Interestingly, in late August/early September Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy also concluded that “maybe... McGovern will win the election [and] favourable conditions will be created for the settlement of the problem, but we should not pin too much hope on McGovern.” See Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 243.

<sup>83</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 21, 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/97/4.

Ostensibly, Beijing would be content with any settlement that Hanoi could agree to, within the now accepted parameter that Thieu was going to be a feature of the dispensation and that Vietnam would remain divided for the short-term. Kissinger and Zhou were in agreement about the desirability of limiting Soviet influence on the Indochinese peninsula; however their approach to achieving this differed greatly. Kissinger expressed the opinion that, “[I]f we are far-sighted in Southeast Asia, both the United States and the People’s Republic of China have an interest in keeping the region free from big countries.” Zhou accorded with the general sentiment, but he had a very different vision of how to achieve this from that of Kissinger. Firstly, the United States had to cease its bombing and blockade, for the reason that “it would be advantageous to us” and that it “would help to promote negotiations.” American policy was seriously mistaken if it thought that its actions were strengthening Beijing’s hand in Hanoi, Zhou averred. At the same time he refuted allegations made by the Soviets that China was behind the Easter Offensive. However, Zhou also hinted at China’s acquiescence in the military build-up and the fact that he may have done little to dissuade the Vietnamese allies from undertaking one last military effort. “We never interfered in either their military actions nor their political negotiations” Zhou insisted, “We only get notifications from them and have often received them after events have occurred”. Remarkably, Kissinger appeared to accept Zhou’s abdication of responsibility and disingenuous hints that China was mainly providing Hanoi with food. Zhou berated him. “And to try to solve the question by killing people will not bring about a settlement.”<sup>84</sup>

On July 6<sup>th</sup>, Zhou Enlai flew from Shanghai to Kunming to have talks with Pham Van Dong on the Paris peace negotiations, and to inform Dong of the content of his talks with Kissinger: an indication of Beijing’s increased eagerness to see the war in Indochina resolved, and their need to reassure their Vietnamese comrades who were still extremely uneasy about the Chinese opening to the United States. The next day Zhou flew all the way from Kunming, in China’s far south Yunnan province, to Beijing to hold further talks with Xuan Thuy and Ly Ban: the most intense round of shuttle diplomacy engaged in by the Chinese Premier since he flew to Hanoi and Pyongyang one year previous to inform allies

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<sup>84</sup> Memcons, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 21, 22, 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/97/4.

of Kissinger's secret trip. While putting the onus for progress on the United States, Zhou told Xuan Thuy and Ly Ban "whether the war in Vietnam will continue or will be solved through negotiations.... Will be determined in the four crucial months from July to October this year", the same message he had given to Pham Van Dong the previous day. While alluding to military and political realities that Xuan Thuy and Ly Ban were certainly aware of (such as the end of the rainy season and the upcoming U.S. Presidential elections), Zhou was also clearly expressing the P.R.C.'s hope that the war would be ended by October, and contrary to Hanoi's preferred outcome, that Nixon would be re-elected.<sup>85</sup>

Five days later Zhou was even more explicit during talks with Le Duc Tho, who was presumably passing through Beijing on his way to Paris for his July 19<sup>th</sup> meeting with Kissinger. Just as he had done with Kissinger, Zhou Enlai encouraged Tho and the Vietnamese communists to come to a settlement, and then bide their time for the duration of the interval until it was certain the Americans would not re-intervene. Such a course of action, counselled the Chinese Premier, would allow North Vietnam to recover "thus getting stronger while the enemy is getting weaker." It would also provide Beijing with the opportunity to mend fences with their comrades in Hanoi, and foster links with the coalition regime in South Vietnam. This gradualist approach to the reunification of Vietnam would provide an opportunity for China to wean Hanoi off its dangerous Soviet addiction. American re-intervention would in no way help; if all of Vietnam went communist, so be it. "Anyway," commented the Chinese Premier, who had recently been diagnosed with the early stages of cancer, "I won't see that, because they have already declared that it will be only after a certain period of time that Vietnam would seek to be reunified."<sup>86</sup> America's apparent obsession over the nature of the Saigon government continued to puzzle the Chinese Premier, but his solution of a tripartite government containing Thieu would prove to be unpalatable to both Washington and Hanoi, though for very different reasons.<sup>87</sup>

While admitting that "Of course how to solve this problem is your job... as comrades we would like to refer to our experience", he reminded Tho that "In

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<sup>85</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 534; P.R.C. For. Min. *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p. 636.

<sup>86</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Duc Tho, July 12, 1972, *77 Conversations*, pp. 179-182.

<sup>87</sup> Yan and Gao, *Turbulent Decade*, p. 412.

the pro-American force, Thieu is chieftain... We, therefore cannot solve anything if we only talk with other figures in his party rather than him... no result would have been gained if we insisted on talking with Jiang [Chiang Kai-shek]'s ministers but not with Jiang himself.... [W]e have to talk with the chieftains... These are historical facts."<sup>88</sup> The Premier was clearly acting under instruction from Mao, who just a few days earlier had declared to French Foreign Minister Maurice Schumann (and by extension to the Americans) that he was of the opinion that Hanoi should talk directly to Thieu. It had become clear that a military victory for Hanoi was out of reach for the time being; the broom was indeed too short, and the time had come for Hanoi to recognise the fact. In his counsel Zhou used an example from China's own Civil War to illustrate the soundness of his advice. Recounting Mao's 1945 decision to go to Chongqing to have discussions with Chiang Kai-shek, Zhou explained how many comrades in the liberated areas feared for his safety, but the Chairman told them not to consider his safety, but to prepare for battle. Thus, during the talks the communist forces managed to wipe out a division of Guomintang troops in North China, and the result was that Mao managed to return safely to Yan'an. The message was obvious: there was nothing to fear from talking to Thieu, and they may be able to turn the situation to their advantage, even if the N.L.F. proved to be overly cautious.<sup>89</sup>

The Chinese continued their 'advice' through August. While Pham Van Dong was holidaying in Kunming, Yunnan province, Zhou made another special trip there to exchange views on the status of the Paris peace talks, while another envoy was also dispatched to transmit to the North Vietnamese Premier the opinion of the Chinese Chairman. Mao's opinion was that it was correct to allow the formation of a tripartite coalition government, but that they should first and foremost allow the Americans to withdraw and have an exchange of prisoners, then form the coalition government and have direct talks with Nguyen Van Thieu. When "the talks fail, then fight again, when you reckon the American army can't come back. As for talks about a coalition government, you should strive for a period of transition and after you have rested [then] fight again and finally attain

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<sup>88</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Duc Tho, July 12, 1972, 77 *Conversations*, pp. 179-182.

<sup>89</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p. 637; Garver, 'Sino-Vietnamese Conflict', p. 460; Henri Froment-Meurice, *Journal d'Asie: Chine-Inde-Indochine-Japon, 1969-1975* [Asia Journal: China-India-Indochina-Japan, 1969-1975] (Paris:L'Harmattan, 2005), p. 82.

victory.” This was surely also the message passed on to Le Duc Tho when he passed through Beijing on August 18<sup>th</sup> his way back to Hanoi for consultations after his August talks with Kissinger, and again transmitted to the North Vietnamese ambassador Ngo Thuyen and Ly Ban when they met with Zhou three days later.<sup>90</sup>

One must be cautious, however, in drawing too many conclusions about the effects of Chinese pressure on Hanoi’s negotiating stance, for the fact remains that while Beijing and Hanoi were approaching the problem from differing angles, their goals were not completely divergent and their analyses were based on the same political and military realities; though some of those realities were of Beijing’s creation and not to Hanoi’s liking, a dialectical approach could not allow them to be ignored. By the late summer of 1972 it had become clear that George McGovern’s prospects for defeating Nixon in the presidential election were slim. For Hanoi, a second-term Nixon, with a renewed mandate for his handling of the war could prove to be a dangerous prospect; ending the war and letting the Americans leave, even if it meant compromise on the political structure of South Vietnam, was an increasingly attractive prospect. Kissinger had indicated agreement to a ceasefire in place, and while the offensive had failed to bring down Thieu, it had proved to be a relatively successful land-grab. Under these circumstances, Beijing’s objective was to permit a second-term Nixon a clean slate from which to advance the cause of Sino-American normalization.

And while the Chinese and Vietnamese comrades were by no means as close allies as they had been in the heady days of the early 1960s, the two nations continued to consult, confer and co-operate closely with each other. Thus, the fact that Le Duc Tho agreed that Nguyen Van Thieu could participate in negotiations between the P.R.G and G.V.N. two weeks after Zhou Enlai urged him to “surprise” the Americans by doing just that is not to be taken as an example of Hanoi acceding to Chinese pressure. (It is also important to note that Tho was at this point still demanding that Thieu resign after an agreement was reached.) Rather, it is more indicative of some traits of the common analysis that still existed between the two putative allies; having shared tactics and strategy for so many decades it would have been surprising had commonalities not remained.

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<sup>90</sup> Li Danhui, ‘Zhong-mei huanhe’, p. 75.

Indeed, although Beijing clearly had its own goals in mind, other than giving advice China offered no threats or inducements to Hanoi “to accept anything less than the most favourable conditions.” Besides, if “Beijing had made such a move, a Hanoi diplomat later revealed, it would have fallen ‘on deaf ears’”.<sup>91</sup> This indeed was something that Beijing had been aware of since 1968 and had always paid a part in Mao’s calculations about how to deal with his southern allies. Having risked little, and been forced to bring real pressure to bear on neither, Mao and Zhou surely looked on in satisfaction as their two tacit allies edged forward towards an agreement through the late summer and autumn of 1972.

### Endgame

Zhou Enlai had spent the summer pushing the idea of a tripartite coalition government containing both Nguyen Van Thieu and the N.L.F. on both Washington and Hanoi. Neither had been receptive to the idea, but the two sides had moved forward in their negotiations on their own bases. China kept its counsel as the negotiating positions of Hanoi and Washington edged closer together during September. Zhou met with Le Duc Tho on September 8<sup>th</sup> as he returned to Paris for further talks with Kissinger. Three days later the P.R.G. issued a statement outlining its requirements that the United States must meet in order to reach a settlement and which included a demand that the United States “stop supporting the Nguyen Van Thieu stooge administration.”<sup>92</sup> Significantly, when the P.R.G.’s statement was presented to the Chinese government it was Vice-Premier Li Xiannian who received it rather than Zhou Enlai. Notwithstanding Li’s expression of “firm support” (somewhat lower key than the normal “resolute support”), the official Chinese media organs ignored the statement until the end of the month.<sup>93</sup> Clearly Beijing did not wish to attach its name to a negotiating position it was aware could well be dropped, nor did it want to prejudice the ongoing negotiations between Hanoi and Washington. Zhou met again with D.R.V. ambassador to China Ngo Thuyen on September

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<sup>91</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1316; Robert Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1999), p. 102; see also Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 235.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Press Conference: Statement By Minister Madame Nguyen Thi Binh Chief Of the Delegation of the PRGSVN’, 14 September 1972, Folder 11/Box 16/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Statement of Support for the PRG by Peking’, September 1972, Folder 14/Box 07/DPC Unit 05/TVA-TTU.



21<sup>st</sup>, by which stage it seems Hanoi had concluded that Washington was wedded to Thieu and would not divorce itself from him – a conclusion that Mao and Zhou had reached many months previously. While it is unlikely that Hanoi had already informed Beijing of its decision to accept Thieu (it did not even inform the P.R.G. leadership beforehand), it seems likely that the Chinese leadership had a sense of where the negotiations were going. Thus, on the last day of September, in the interlude between Tho's last attempt to force Thieu's resignation on September 26<sup>th</sup> and the October 8<sup>th</sup> 'breakthrough' meeting with Kissinger when he dropped the demand altogether, China finally issued its reply to Nguyen Thi Binh's September 15<sup>th</sup> letter requesting support for the P.R.G.'s latest authoritative statement. It was less than effusive. In his reply, Foreign Minister Ji Pengfei declared "in all seriousness" the resolute support of the Chinese government for the "solemn stand of the Provisional Revolutionary Government."<sup>94</sup> In doing so, Beijing downgraded the P.R.G.'s proposal from "just" to "solemn" and effectively rejected it.<sup>95</sup>

Kissinger believed that the upcoming October 8<sup>th</sup> negotiating session with Le Duc Tho in Paris had a 50-50 chance of producing a settlement, and in anticipation of the meeting he called in on Huang Hua in New York in a further attempt to elicit Chinese support. If truth be told, Kissinger was also partly working to his own agenda: Nixon was growing cold on the idea of a settlement before the election while his National Security Advisor was in agreement with Le Duc Tho about the desirability of reaching agreement before the end of October. This time, however, it is likely that the Chinese side took seriously his warning that the forthcoming offer to Tho was final. Like Kissinger and the comrades in Hanoi, Mao and Zhou wanted America's involvement in the Vietnam War brought to an end by the end of October. As it turned out, it was unnecessary for the Chinese to pass on Kissinger's warning; an hour before Le Duc Tho sat down with Kissinger in Paris for the October 8<sup>th</sup> breakthrough session, in Beijing Zhou Enlai was sitting down with D.R.V. Vice-Premier Le Thanh Nghi who was visiting the Chinese capital to update Zhou on the status of the negotiations.

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<sup>94</sup> 'Chi Peng-fei Reply to Mme Binh Letter of PRGRSV Statement', 30 September 1972, Folder 14/Box 07/DPC Unit 05/TVA-TTU, cf. 'Press Conference: Peking Endorses PRG Seven Point Proposal: NCNA', 04 July 1971, Folder 05/Box 14/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU.

<sup>95</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp. 644, 647; Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, pp. 104-5.

Demonstrating the still high level of consultation that existed between the two communist Asian nations, he informed the Chinese Premier of Hanoi's decision to drop the demand for Thieu's resignation. Nghi stayed in the Chinese capital for at least three days, and met with Zhou again on the evening of October 10<sup>th</sup> to provide a further update on the progress being made in Paris. Zhou and Li Xiannian surely listened with satisfaction as Nghi reported to them the news that Tho and Kissinger were edging towards an agreement.<sup>96</sup> Finally, on October 15<sup>th</sup>, Le Duc Tho stopped off in Beijing on his way back to Hanoi from Paris and updated the Chinese Premier on the status of the talks. Peace was at hand. Hanoi was also surely hoping that Beijing would express its satisfaction with the outcome through a display of generosity in the 1973 aid agreement that was under negotiation at that time; so present at a banquet held in Tho's honour were vice-ministers for foreign trade Ly Ban and Nguyen Tien as well as representatives of Hanoi and the P.R.G.'s embassies in the Chinese capital. Agreement appeared to be only days away.<sup>97</sup>

The tale of Kissinger's travails in Saigon with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu is well known and does not require recounting here.<sup>98</sup> But of course, the details of Kissinger's troubled time in Saigon were unknown to Huang Hua when he received Kissinger in New York the very next day after the American negotiator arrived back in the United States from South Vietnam. It was surely with horror that the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations listened to Kissinger's presentation. Revealing the measure of the dire straits he was in, Kissinger announced he wanted "to ask something which we have not asked before – and that is whether the Prime Minister might be willing to use his good offices in the rather complicated state that our negotiations have reached with the Vietnamese." Clearly embarrassed by the situation, Kissinger was forced to admit to Huang that "I have to say on behalf of your allies that they

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<sup>96</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Thanh Nghi, October 8-10, 1973, 77 *Conversations*, pp. 189-90. Although this conversation is dated 1973 in the working paper, there is no evidence of any talks taking place between Zhou and Nghi on these dates in 1973. It is clear from the content of the conversation that it actually comes from the talks between Zhou and Nghi on October 8 and 10 1972. Cf. P.R.C. For. Min. *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p. 651.

<sup>97</sup> Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 240, 243-4; P.R.C. For. Min. *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p. 651; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp. 1341-1357; 'Press Conference: Le Duc Tho Arrives In Hanoi From Paris, Moscow, Peking', 16 October 1972, Folder 20/Box 16/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU.

<sup>98</sup> See e.g., Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi and the Making of the Paris Agreement*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002), pp.89-101.

have behaved very correctly and they have made significant concessions. I went to Saigon, but it has not proven possible to obtain agreement in every respect.” Huang listened impassively as Kissinger claimed that “there are some aspects of the agreement that have to be slightly adjusted without major changes”, while there were two issues of substance: the translation of the functions of the proposed “National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord”, and the question of the withdrawal of “some forces from the northernmost part” of South Vietnam. He failed to mention that he was going to put forward 69 such slight adjustments, but pleaded for the assistance of Zhou Enlai “to convince Hanoi that this is not a trick. We have kept every promise we have made to you” he told Huang Hua, “and we would keep a promise made to them”. Confessing that the previously agreed to October 30<sup>th</sup> deadline was now unattainable, he promised that only a few more days’ negotiation was needed, though time constraints meant that a deal would not be reached until after the presidential election. Demonstrating his desperation, he made it a matter of confidence between Washington and Beijing, pledging that “If they agree to this procedure there would certainly be peace during the month of November, and we would make an obligation towards them, but also towards you, whose relations we value so highly.” Huang Hua made little comment other than to promise to convey the information Kissinger had provided, along with a copy of the note that the U.S. side had sent to Hanoi, promptly to Premier Zhou.<sup>99</sup>

Beijing did not have to wait for Huang’s message from Kissinger to realise that the agreement had floundered in Saigon: that had been made clear by Nguyen Van Thieu in a speech on South Vietnamese television on the evening of October 24<sup>th</sup>. Clearly alarmed by both the tone and content of the South Vietnamese President’s rhetoric, the next day Zhou summoned officials from the Foreign Ministry to discuss the situation and drafted a message for transmission to Kissinger. Noting how Thieu had “poured out torrents of vicious abuse against northern Vietnam, and even cast reflections on Dr. Kissinger”, the message reflected Chinese priorities when it stated Beijing’s belief that “so long as the U.S. side is determined to effect a ceasefire and troop withdrawal, it is fully capable of halting Saigon’s sabotage schemes. Otherwise, failure to resolve at the right

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<sup>99</sup> Memcon, Kissinger, Hua et al., October 24, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

moment, to maintain consistency in its stand and to abide by the agreements already reached with the Vietnamese side would not only result in losing confidence before the world, but may also lead to unforeseeable consequences.”<sup>100</sup> Kissinger claimed in his memoirs that the Chinese also “affirmed their confidence in our good faith”; this is not quite true.<sup>101</sup> Zhou had decided to give Kissinger the benefit of the doubt, noting that “Although the Chinese side could trust that the difficulties and sabotage come from Saigon, how can the world be forbidden to have its doubts?!” It is also clear the Chinese Premier was beginning to wonder whether the United States, which Mao had long diagnosed as weakening, was in a worse condition than they had previously thought. “[W]hy can’t the United States manage the actions of that side on its own?” Knowing that the upcoming election was all but in the bag for Nixon, Beijing urged the U.S. side to “consider the problem in a broader framework, take the long view and act resolutely.” It was to be disappointed.<sup>102</sup>

On the afternoon of the 26<sup>th</sup> (local time) Hanoi went public with the details of the agreement. It alleged that “the Nixon administration is not negotiating with a serious attitude... All it is doing in fact is to drag out the talks”. It called upon “the governments and peoples of the Soviet Union, China and other fraternal socialist countries... to wage a resolute struggle to urge the U.S. government to carry out immediately what has been agreed upon”.<sup>103</sup> At midnight that evening, Zhou received the P.R.G.’s ambassador to Beijing, Nguyen Van Quang, and the North Vietnam’s chargé d’affaires *ad interim*, Nguyen Tien, who presented a copy of the D.R.V. statement to Zhou and officially requested China’s support for the D.R.V.’s stand, which he duly received. Kissinger was clearly concerned that the situation was slipping out of his grasp. As an indication of his *bona fides*, he passed along to Beijing copies of all the messages that he was sending to Hanoi in his attempts to resolve the impasse, and on October 27<sup>th</sup>, in response to the message he had received from

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<sup>100</sup> Memo, ‘Handed to J. Fazio by Mrs. Shih’, October 25, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

<sup>101</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1396.

<sup>102</sup> Memo, ‘Handed to J. Fazio by Mrs. Shih’, October 25, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Press Conference: DRV Government 26 October Statement On State Of Negotiations Relating To The Vietnam Problem’, 26 October 1972, Folder 24/Box 16/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU.

Zhou, again requested that the Chinese side “use its considerable influence in a positive direction so as to help bring about the peace that now is so near.”<sup>104</sup>

The Chinese Premier met repeatedly with his Foreign Ministry officials and others between October 25<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> in order to discuss the seeming unravelling of the peace deal and China’s response. Zhou’s answer, having taken account of Kissinger’s discussion with Huang Hua and the messages transmitted to Beijing, came on October 31<sup>st</sup>, after the passing of the originally agreed deadline for signing the agreement. The leaders in Beijing were clearly very unhappy with the turn of events, and while they placed the primary blame on Saigon for being “bent on sabotaging the agreement”, Kissinger and Nixon were sharply criticized for being unable to control their ally. While Beijing was “willing to believe that the U.S. has the tendency to keep its promises”, Zhou correctly doubted Kissinger’s claims that the issues at stake were “‘minor’, ‘procedural’, and ‘do not touch [the agreement’s] essence and can all be accommodated within its present framework’” and could be resolved in a few more days of negotiation. Since Saigon had openly rejected the nine-point agreement, the message asked, then how could the U.S. guarantee that the issues could be definitively settled with no further changes in just a few days’ talks? Alternatively, “If the U.S. guarantee is not empty words, it can only serve as proof that the U.S. side was able to negotiate and sign an agreement on behalf of Saigon in the first place, but it did not wish to do so.” Zhou noted that “As Dr. Kissinger has said, the Vietnamese side has made very significant concessions” and demanded that Washington “put a stop” to Saigon’s “creating trouble” rather than exerting pressure Hanoi. Linking the Vietnam situation to Nixon and Kissinger’s China project, the Chinese Premier concluded with a rhetorical question. If the U.S. side was unable to put a stop to Saigon’s activities, he wondered, “then how are people to view the U.S. statements about its preparedness to make efforts for the relaxation of tensions in the Far East?”<sup>105</sup> The great irony in all of this is that through all their many conversations and exchanges going back fifteen months, Kissinger had refused to take at face value Zhou’s entreaties to remove Thieu from office, opting to believe that by not

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<sup>104</sup> Memo, ‘Handed to Mrs. Shih by Fazio’, October 27, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2; P.R.C. For. Min, *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p. 653; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 561.

<sup>105</sup> Memo, ‘Handed to J. Fazio by Mrs. Shih’, October 31, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

removing Thieu, China would prefer a demonstration that the United States was a reliable ally. Now, as a result of Thieu's actions, the U.S. was being shown to be either an unreliable partner, or a weak one, or both. Kissinger needed to salvage the situation.<sup>106</sup>

In an effort to do so Kissinger again travelled to New York to see Huang Hua. America's National Security Advisor had taken objection to certain comments in the Chinese press and by Zhou Enlai that had alleged that he and Nixon were engaged in "foul play" or a "crooked game."<sup>107</sup> He wanted to clarify the situation with regard to Vietnam for the Chinese "so that if there should be a strain in our relationship we will know exactly the reasons and this strain is not caused by misunderstanding." Kissinger outlined the main points of the negotiation that he wished to see re-negotiated, "so that we could have discharged our obligations toward our ally." In his sternest warning yet to the Chinese side, he charged that should North Vietnam continue making charges of bad faith, this would have the result of "making it a matter of prestige. And to the extent the Chinese side repeats these charges this will in time affect our relations which as you know have been one of the central elements of our foreign policy."<sup>108</sup> As Jussi Hanhimäki has noted: "As a carrot of sorts Kissinger then employed the Soviet threat. In the future Washington was ready to restore its relations with the D.R.V. and offer reconstruction aid 'to prevent other big countries further away from having a foothold.' To sum it all up, Kissinger said: 'We need some assistance. We are caught between our honour and our intention. There is no sense in trying to force us into acting dishonourably. Our interest is to normalize relations in Indochina and to accelerate dramatically the normalization of our relations with the People's Republic, and we know the two are linked. We know they are related... now we are heading into a new term we

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<sup>106</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, p. 561; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1403.

<sup>107</sup> Brief, 'Talking Points, for 11/2 meeting', NPMP/NSC/850/2. It is unclear what the origin of these Chinese accusations is. The two substantive statements on the failure to reach an agreement in Vietnam in the Chinese press (an October 30<sup>th</sup> *People's Daily* 'Commentator' article and a November 1<sup>st</sup> editorial) made neither allegation, although the November 1<sup>st</sup> editorial questioned the credibility of the claim that Thieu had the ability to block a settlement if the U.S. really wanted one. See 'Press Conference: People's Daily Commentator Article On Vietnam Peace', 30 October 1972, Folder 01/Box 17/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU, and 'Press Conference: People's Daily: US Responsible For Not Signing Pact', 01 November 1972, Folder 09/Box 17/DPC Unit 04/TVA-TTU.

<sup>108</sup> Memcon, Huang Hua, Kissinger et al., November 3, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

don't want to have to begin with a war in Vietnam and disagreements between us.”<sup>109</sup>

Aside from the Soviet threat, Kissinger had another, perhaps more appetizing, ‘carrot’ up his sleeve, by means of which he sought to both underscore the continued seriousness of the Nixon administration’s attitude towards improving relations with China, and also to remind his Chinese interlocutors what was potentially at stake. He informed Huang Hua that “as a result of a number of developments” (by which he meant Operation ENHANCE PLUS, designed to beef up Thieu’s arsenal in advance of a peace agreement) the U.S. had borrowed some F-5A fighter aircraft from Taiwan and replaced them with two American squadrons of F-4’s. “These are only temporary”, he assured the Chinese ambassador, “and they will be replaced as soon as we can replace the airplanes that we have borrowed. I again wanted to inform your government that all the understandings that we have with respect to Taiwan will be rigorously carried out as soon as the war in Vietnam is concluded.” Demonstrating American goodwill, Kissinger noted that the United States would be removing other aircraft off Taiwan within a few weeks. The aircraft in question were connected with the war in Indochina, but “they will be removed regardless of the peace negotiations.” Though unprompted, his closing remark was the key to the whole conversation. “We will let you have a list of those planes” he told the Chinese ambassador, reminding him that in his dealings with Beijing the National Security Advisor had always stuck to not just the letter but also the spirit of their agreements.<sup>110</sup>

It was a masterful display from Kissinger, and he was successful in achieving his objective. China stepped back from its heavy-handed charges against Nixon and Kissinger, and public criticism ceased in the Chinese press in subsequent days (although it did continue to carry critical North Vietnamese articles). Though clearly disappointed and irritated at the failure of Hanoi and Washington to reach an agreement before the elections, the sour note that had entered into Sino-U.S. relations over this issue proved to be temporary, as demonstrated by the warmth and cordiality that characterized a dinner between

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<sup>109</sup> Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect*, pp. 251-2; *ibid*.

<sup>110</sup> Memcon, Huang Hua, Kissinger et al., November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2. The aircraft in question were 24 KC-135’s, aerial tankers, which been on Taiwan since June. See memo, ‘11/7 WL phoned Mrs. Shih’, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

Qiao Guanhua, Huang Hua, Kissinger and New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller on November 13<sup>th</sup>. Stating his “personal opinion”, Qiao expressed continued concern over recent positions put forward by Saigon that “make the whole situation insoluble.” Recalling Zhou’s parting comments to Nixon, Qiao reminded Kissinger that “Vietnam is a small country and the U.S. should assume a high profile... A high vantage point. I think a country like yours can make some concessions” he opined, before adding diplomatically, “Maybe you can’t accept this. I speak what I think.” Despite the disappointment and annoyance of late October, by mid-November the P.R.C.’s dealings with Washington on the subject of Vietnam retained the character that Zhou Enlai had encapsulated in his farewell speech to Nixon: “One should not lose the whole world just to gain South Vietnam.”<sup>111</sup>

Zhou met with Ly Ban on November 1<sup>st</sup>, during which he urged Hanoi to find a compromise with the United States, in contrast with his sharp note to Kissinger. It was later claimed by Hanoi that at this meeting, Zhou told “the Vietnamese leadership that Vietnam should make concessions on the question of withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops and the question of North Vietnam renouncing military aid, so that the agreement could be signed.”<sup>112</sup> It is very possible that Zhou did indeed think that the removal of a small number of North Vietnamese troops 20 km back across the D.M.Z. a price worth paying to attain a peace, although in his message to Kissinger of the previous day he had rejected any such change to the agreement as “unreasonable”.<sup>113</sup> The second charge is interesting, though under the circumstances unlikely to be true. The question of military aid was not a point of contention between Kissinger and Hanoi (as recounted to Huang Hua); furthermore, Kissinger himself had made it clear in a note of mid-October that the U.S. had accepted Hanoi’s demand that there be no restrictions on military aid to the D.R.V.<sup>114</sup> As such it would have been strange for Zhou to urge Hanoi to relinquish it under the circumstances, particularly when Ly Ban was in Beijing for the purposes of negotiating an aid agreement from China for 1973. Determined to demonstrate to Hanoi that its interests

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<sup>111</sup> Memcon, Qiao, Kissinger, et al., November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1413; memo, ‘11/7 WL phoned Mrs. Shih’, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

<sup>112</sup> S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p. 42.

<sup>113</sup> Memcon, Kissinger, Hua et al., October 24, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

<sup>114</sup> Memorandum for the record, October 16, 1972, *FRUS Nixon-Ford*, vol. E-13, document 168, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e13/>



would be protected after the signing of a peace agreement, and that the struggle was merely being paused, not abandoned, the agreement was signed by Zhou four weeks later; the size of China's largesse was clearly designed to push Hanoi towards being flexible in the negotiations. The provisions within it were the most generous ever given to North Vietnam by China, and American estimates believed that Chinese economic assistance to North Vietnam in 1973 outstripped that of the Soviet Union, this helping Hanoi to achieve its second priority – rehabilitation of the economy and the consolidation of socialism. Militarily, the Vietnamese comrades would receive almost 234,000 guns and 10,000 artillery pieces, as well as 120 tanks, and 36 aircraft, presumably MiG-19s, in 1973. Beijing was certainly not adopting a mantra of 'swords into ploughshares' in its dealings with Hanoi.<sup>115</sup>

Talks between Kissinger and Tho resumed on November 20<sup>th</sup>; as usual Le Duc Tho had stopped over in Beijing on his way to Paris, and it is likely he revealed to the Chinese Premier something of his new negotiating instructions. Like Nixon, Hanoi too was having problems with their South Vietnamese allies: the N.L.F. leadership had furiously objected to the lack of provision in the October agreement for the release of political prisoners in Thieu's jails, and Tho was returning to Paris with demands of his own for changes in the text. While probably sympathetic to their plight, Zhou is unlikely to have been sufficiently sympathetic to view this as reason enough to hold up the signing of a peace agreement, and it was surely with frustration that he received reports of the lack of progress being made in Paris between November 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, when Tho and Kissinger broke for a ten-day recess. Kissinger called on Huang Zhen in the wee hours of the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup>, in another attempt to get Chinese intervention with Hanoi. Kissinger identified the principal problem as being the North Vietnamese refusal to withdraw any of their troops across the DMZ. He told the Chinese ambassador, "[I]f the North Vietnamese, outside of the agreement, would withdraw some troops, or would make some gesture that indicated they understood the problem which would enable us to preserve the principle, we think we could settle quite rapidly." In effect, Kissinger was asking Mao and

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<sup>115</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou Waijiao huodong*, pp. 654, 657; '(Est. Pub. Date) Communist Military and Economic Aid to North Vietnam, 1970-1974', January 1, 1975, [www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp?pageNumber=1&freqReqRecord=nic\\_vietnam.txt](http://www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp?pageNumber=1&freqReqRecord=nic_vietnam.txt); Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 242; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 136.

Zhou to intercede with Hanoi in order to satisfy the demands of Nguyen Van Thieu. Huang was having none of it. "Now it seems very clear that you [didn't sign the October agreement] in order to suit your own unilateral needs... the Vietnamese side has been carrying on the talks with great flexibility... they have made all the concessions which they can make." However, careful to emphasize that events in Paris and Saigon would have no bearing on Sino-U.S. relations he added, "I would like to repeat again that since we are friends that is all I want to say sincerely about the Vietnam problem to you."<sup>116</sup>

When the talks resumed, little progress was made, and Tho withdrew nine of the twelve concessions he had agreed to in November. Nixon was threatening another round of bombing on Hanoi, and Tho appeared resolute. Kissinger concluded that "the only hope of averting a collapse [in the talks] would be messages to Moscow and Peking informing Hanoi's communist backers of the prospects before them."<sup>117</sup> With this in mind he paid another visit to Huang Zhen. During this meeting Kissinger, as ever, raised the spectre of Soviet hegemony, claiming that Tho was demanding Nixon accept the October agreement or a worse one. "If North Vietnam maintains its position, we will certainly break off the negotiations and we will take whatever action is necessary to defend our principles." Somewhat exaggerating, he went on, "[I]f we agree to this position of the North Vietnamese it will destroy any possibility for a long term anti-hegemonial policy for the U.S., and it will destroy the policy and the personalities." The American negotiator then warned, "If this opportunity is missed, we will face a very grave situation. This is not a manoeuvre. This is not a trick. We have proposed a schedule whereby the treaty could be signed by December 22", and then concluded with the threat that "If the North Vietnamese do not change their position on Saturday morning, I will have to break off the talks."<sup>118</sup> Despite Huang Zhen giving Kissinger the impression that he wasn't

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<sup>116</sup> Memcon, Huang Zhen, Kissinger et al., November 25, 1972, October 24, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, pp. 1415-22; P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp. 655; Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, pp. 110-1.

<sup>117</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1429.

<sup>118</sup> Kissinger postponed the negotiating session scheduled for the 5<sup>th</sup> by 24 hours, and not until Saturday December 9<sup>th</sup> as he indicated to Huang he intended to do, *ibid*; memcon 'Thursday, December 7-Friday Dec. 8, 1972, 11:25 p.m. – 12:15 a.m.', NPMP/NSC/850/2. Although this memcon is dated December 7<sup>th</sup>, when one examines its content, such as Kissinger's statement that "Last time I was here [in November] there were some changes and there were only four issues left... Today Mr. Le Duc Tho has refused every proposal and withdrawn every change that was

even pretending Beijing was doing anything, it appears that the Chinese did in fact take Kissinger's threats and warnings seriously, and conveyed them to the North Vietnamese.<sup>119</sup> They may have had some effect. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, Tho gave back six of the points, including the provision that the release of American P.O.W.s would not be linked to the release of political prisoners in Thieu's jails. By the time the talks adjourned on December 13<sup>th</sup>, the only issue of substance remaining was the definition of the D.M.Z. However, when teams of experts met the next day the North Vietnamese attempted to make substantive changes to the text through the protocols. Two days later they simply "stonewalled". Hanoi had decided to wait for the arrival of a new Congress; Nixon, on the other hand, was tired of Hanoi's stalling tactics, and wanted to demonstrate to Thieu his resolve to enforce the agreement. LINEBACKER II was to be launched, and 36,000 tons of bombs would be dropped on North Vietnam.<sup>120</sup>

In order to pre-empt the Chinese reaction to the bombings, Winston Lord was dispatched to New York to meet with Ambassador Huang Hua in order to update him on the status of the talks (Kissinger had to remain in Washington with Nixon). The U.S. side had the previous day sent a message to the Chinese stating that they believed the D.R.V. had been supplying them with an accurate account of the negotiations, and "If the Chinese side so desires, Dr. Kissinger would be prepared to provide an updated, corrected version of these negotiations to Ambassador Huang."<sup>121</sup> The Chinese side was clearly interested in hearing Washington's version of events, and so Lord lost no time in explaining that the U.S. wants "your government to have a true picture of the negotiations and the North Vietnamese tactics which represent bad faith and have prevented an agreement." Lord then detailed the "obvious North Vietnamese intent to stall and delay a settlement", citing such examples as Tho's attempts to add to the text that had been agreed upon in November regarding the D.M.Z., the very next day

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agreed to last time" (brackets in original) and "I will postpone tomorrow's talk until Saturday", it clearly indicates that this conversation actually took place on the night/morning of December 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup>. This corroborates Kissinger's statement in *W.H.Y.* that he contacted the Chinese on December 4<sup>th</sup>, along with the Vietnamese *White Book* claim that on December 5<sup>th</sup> Huang Zhen "conveyed to the Vietnamese side a warning from Kissinger" that very closely summarizes the content of Kissinger's message to Huang contained within this memcon. Cf. Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1429; S.R.V. For. Min., *White Book*, p. 42.

<sup>119</sup> Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1440; S.R.V. For. Min, *White Book*, p. 42.

<sup>120</sup> Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, p. 111; Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, p.139.

<sup>121</sup> Cable, 'Fm: Gen. Haig, To: Hood', December 15, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

renege on December 11<sup>th</sup>'s agreed modalities for the signing of the text, how the North Vietnamese were attempting to use the experts' meetings to introduce changes in the texts that had already been agreed upon by the principals, and how they had attempted to make changes to the substance of the agreements by making alterations to their drafts of the protocols. Huang listened impassively, though he did ask about the previous U.S. demand that the North Vietnamese move some troops back across the D.M.Z. Lord explained that basically this demand had been dropped in exchange for no commitment on the status of civilian prisoners in Thieu's jails. The ambassador expressed disappointment at the delay and promised to pass on Lord's comments to his government.<sup>122</sup>

Tho was indeed, as Kissinger alleged, stalling for time, however given new evidence it would appear that the cause of this was a rift in the D.R.V.-P.R.G. coalition over the status of civilian prisoners in the South. On December 8<sup>th</sup>, even after Tho had conceded the point again in the negotiations, Nguyen Thi Binh demanded that the issue be tied to the release of American P.O.W.'s. Robert Brigham's research has shown that many northerners blamed their southern comrades for the destruction that was wrought on Hanoi and other parts of North Vietnam over the Christmas period of 1972. Given that Tho had already conceded on the issue of the release of civilian prisoners, one is forced to conclude that Tho's claim that he needed to return to Hanoi for consultations was in fact true, and the issue at stake was those civilian prisoners in Thieu's jails.<sup>123</sup>

In this light, what is notable about China's response to the LINEBACKER II bombings is the attention that was showered on Nguyen Thi Binh when she visited Beijing during the last days of 1972. Beijing's condemnation of the bombings was rather *pro forma*, and pledged the usual Chinese support for the Vietnamese struggle "for national salvation until complete victory is won", while it publicly blamed Nixon for the continued delay in signing the agreement.<sup>124</sup> However, the prominence given to Mme. Binh during this visit to Beijing speaks of an effort to reassure the P.R.G. that their interests would be protected after the signing of a peace agreement. The P.R.G.'s Foreign Minister and her party were treated to two banquets during the three day

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<sup>122</sup> Memcon, Huang Hua, Lord, et al., December 16, 1972, *ibid*.

<sup>123</sup> Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, pp. 110-1.

<sup>124</sup> 'P.R.C. Foreign Ministry Statement Condemns Renewed U.S. Bombing', December 20, 1972, HAK Office Files/98/1.

sojourn, a 10,000 person rally to welcome her and condemn U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, as well as talks with P.R.C. Foreign Minister Ji Pengfei, a separate session with Zhou Enlai, and finally an audience with Chairman Mao himself: an honour normally reserved only for those whom the Chinese wanted to either wow or woo. Mao explicitly condemned absolutist attitudes the sort of which northern comrades later charged the southerners as possessing. He told Binh that “Now, some so-called ‘Communists’ say that you should not negotiate, and that you should fight, fight for another 100 years. This is revolution; otherwise, it is opportunism.”<sup>125</sup> Likewise, the next day Zhou Enlai told chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly of the D.R.V., Truong Chinh, that “It seems that Nixon is truly planning to leave [Vietnam].” Perhaps giving some recognition to the charges laid against Tho by Kissinger (who had also forwarded on to Zhou the transcripts of the final days’ negotiations so that he could judge for himself who was serious in the discussions), the Chinese Premier told his old Vietnamese friend, “Therefore, this time it is necessary to negotiate [with them] seriously, and the goal is to reach an agreement.”<sup>126</sup> In a similar vein, on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, he told Le Duc Tho (returning to Paris), “It seems that the U.S. is still willing to get out from Vietnam and Indochina. You should persist in principles while demonstrating flexibility during the negotiations. The most important [thing] is to let the American leave. The situation will change in six months or one year.”<sup>127</sup>

And so it would prove to be; but little did Zhou realise that in one year’s time the situation would have changed to the extent that Nixon would be struggling to retain not just control over his Presidency, but to retain his job. It would prove to have deleterious effects on Washington’s relations with Beijing, but provide a boon for Hanoi and its efforts to re-unify Vietnam. But that was for the future.

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<sup>125</sup> Memcons (extract), Mao Zedong and Nguyen Thi Binh, December 29, 1972, *77 Conversations*, p. 182.

<sup>126</sup> Memcons (extract), Zhou Enlai and Truong Chinh, December 31, 1972, *77 Conversations*, pp. 182-3.

<sup>127</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp. 659-60; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p. 1454; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, vol. 3, pp. 569-71; ‘PRGRSV Foreign Minister Nguyen Thi Binh Visits Peking’, 27 December 1972, Folder 14/Box 07/DPC Unit 05/TVA-TTU; Wire, ‘From: Haig, To: Hood’, December 22, 1972, NPMP/NSC/850/2.

For China, 1972 had proved to be an extraordinary year, during which its relationships with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the United States became ever more closely entwined in a curious interplay of geo- and cultural politics. For reasons of cultural affinity (or more precisely cultural paternalism), and with an eye towards a post-war Indochina Beijing stoutly rejected Kissinger's entreaties to intervene with Hanoi on Nixon's behalf; Kissinger could never quite come to terms with Beijing's continued support for Hanoi. Even as it prepared to host the U.S. President in the Chinese capital, the P.R.C. maintained its posture of non-interference while its Vietnamese allies geared up for one last attempt to swing the military balance in their favour. Beijing had hoped that Nixon would see the futility of his insistence on backing Thieu, and opt to "let the domino fall". In Mao and Zhou's calculations, such a move, occurring against a backdrop of Sino-American rapprochement would accrue long-term benefit to both the United States and the P.R.C. Not only would the Americans not countenance such a move, however, but also completely failed to understand the basic rationale underpinning the Chinese approach. As a result, right up until Nixon arrived in Beijing, Kissinger erroneously remained convinced that China was leaning on Hanoi.

Notwithstanding the evident disappointment in Beijing that the war had not been concluded in advance of Nixon's visit, both China and the U.S. refused to allow the lack of progress in ending the war to interfere in their burgeoning relationship, despite the Chinese assertion that it was the most pressing issue facing both nations. This was true even to the extent that, rather surprisingly, Nixon made practically no effort to introduce the topic into his discussions with Zhou Enlai, save to point out that the majority of American forces would be removed from Taiwan after the resolution of the Indochina conflict. It was the Chinese Premier who wanted to discuss the issue of Indochina, repeatedly returning to the theme of the advisability of an American withdrawal; without such a move a few months hence South Vietnam would be facing collapse in the face of a massive North Vietnamese invasion.

Despite Beijing's largesse in support of that invasion, Nixon's visit to Beijing was undoubtedly a fly in the ointment in Beijing's attempts to maintain the amity of Hanoi. The North Vietnamese leadership were angry and suspicious in equal measure at Mao's policy turn towards the United States, and not without

reason: it undermined their political strategy and emboldened Nixon militarily. To counter these factors, Chinese aid to North Vietnam continued to reach new heights in preparation for Hanoi's Spring Offensive. When the attack came and was accompanied by Nixon's blockade of the D.R.V., China rallied its economy behind Hanoi, and still there was no diplomatic price to pay with the United States. When Kissinger made his oft-repeated claim that there could be injurious consequences for Sino-American relations stemming from the Vietnamese communists' attack, Huang Hua swatted him away by essentially telling him he didn't want to talk about it. It was a remarkable state of affairs and spoke of the depth of the commitment of both governments' intent to forge a tacit alliance against the Soviet Union.

As the summer of '72 wore on, however, Hanoi's attack ran out of steam, and both the North Vietnamese and Chinese leaderships began to see that the war in Vietnam should be settled before the U.S. presidential election in November. China's posture subtly changed, and Zhou began constructively urging compromise on both sides. Mao, as ever somewhat more blunt than Zhou Enlai, also let it be known that he was of the opinion that the time had come for the Vietnamese communists to talk directly to Thieu. This aside, the Chinese Premier continued to resolutely deny any intercession to facilitate a peace (unlike Moscow). As well as sharing the same military and political analysis as Hanoi, however, China did have its own selfish reasons to wish to see the conflict resolved. Growing increasingly dissatisfied at the slow pace towards full normalization of Sino-American relations, and perturbed by the increasing détente between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., Mao and Zhou wanted to see Nixon in a strong position in 1973, with the albatross of Vietnam no longer around his neck, so that he could proceed with the severing of diplomatic ties with Taiwan and the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the P.R.C. It is unlikely that the V.W.P. Politburo foresaw bright prospects for their cause during a second-term Nixon presidency.

A growing sense of frustration fed increasing Chinese impatience with both Hanoi and Washington in the last three months of 1972. Nixon's inability to bring Nguyen Van Thieu to heel caused consternation and some degree of suspicion in Beijing, at a time when the political tide within the C.C.P. was beginning to run again with the radical faction of Jiang Qing. And while Zhou

continued to blame Nixon for the failure to reach an agreement in October, he also became aware of Hanoi's own difficulties with their southern compatriots in the P.R.G. Thus, in a rather curious turn of events, Zhou and Mao found themselves discretely interceding with Nguyen Thi Binh on behalf of the Hanoi Politburo, as well encouraging those same comrades in Hanoi to be flexible in their negotiations with Kissinger.

When agreement was reached, the war in Vietnam was over for a period of five to ten years, Zhou estimated, by which time the ailing Premier, and presumably his boss, would have "gone to see Marx." They had done their duty to their Vietnamese comrades, and the issue of Vietnamese unity would have to wait for another generation of leadership to deal with, or so he probably thought. China could look forward to its southern border becoming a peaceful area of non-contention and non-alignment while the P.R.C. would continue to take its rightful place on the world stage and counter Soviet hegemony in Asia. All that remained was to secure the peace in Laos and Cambodia.



## **Chapter 5**

### **January – August 1973: The Search for Peace in Cambodia**

The conclusion of America's direct involvement in the Vietnam War was received with relief and satisfaction in Beijing. China had maintained a conflicting duality in its foreign policy for over three years, as it attempted to pursue a rapprochement with the United States, while simultaneously continuing to support Hanoi's war. The conflict had become increasingly acute in the wake of Nixon's successful visit to Beijing and the launch of the Vietnamese Spring Offensive. The communist attacks in South Vietnam had, however, run into the ground, despite Chinese support; Hanoi was not going to win at the negotiating table what it had not won on the battlefield. Thieu was going to play a part in the political dispensation in Saigon, at least for the duration of the 'decent interval'. As ever, Beijing's analysis was conditioned by the Chinese communists' own civil war experience, and its applicability to the situation in the nations on China's periphery.

Notwithstanding the battlefield realities of South Vietnam, China had its own reasons for wishing to see an end to the war in Indochina. America's extraction from the Indochinese quagmire freed Nixon to comprehensively address the process of Sino-American normalization (and counter Soviet strength elsewhere in the world), and stabilized the situation on China's southern frontier. An end to the fighting in Vietnam and the release of the blockade of the D.R.V. would also reduce the strain on China's economy, southern provinces, ports, and railway system, which would facilitate measures to undo the economic dislocation caused by the Cultural Revolution. It also meant that Chinese domestic polity could fully address the fallout from the Lin Biao incident, in the form of a new Party Congress. And from Mao's perspective, the completion of a successful summit visit from Nixon and Zhou's careful handling of the Vietnamese comrades in advance of the Paris Peace Accords reduced the Chairman's dependence on the diplomatic skills of the urbane and sophisticated Premier, whose own position had been strengthened by the events of the previous eighteen months, despite his failing health.

Viewed from Beijing, the overall situation at the dawn of 1973 looked promising. Mao had found in Nixon what he believed would be a reliable partner in countering the Soviet menace, while Zhou Enlai had carefully managed the relationship with Hanoi, providing the Vietnamese comrades with unprecedented levels of material support for their struggle. Nixon's landslide win in the November election, surpassing even Lyndon Johnson's 1964 margin of victory in the popular vote, established him in a powerful position to advance the full normalization of Sino-American relations in his second term. As Zhou Enlai told senior Khmer Rouge official Penn Nouth, Thieu would be "dealt with" in time, after the completion of the American withdrawal.<sup>1</sup> The situation in Laos would be easy to bring under control, given the Pathet Lao's status as a passive client of Hanoi; and while the Cambodian situation was a more complicated tripartite arrangement, since all of Washington, Beijing, and Hanoi wanted to see the situation there resolved there was a reasonable expectation that it too would be brought under control. A new era in the international relations of the Indochinese states was about to begin.

#### Hanoi "has to be patient"

Zhou was officially informed of the initialing of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam when he received the D.R.V. and P.R.G. ambassadors at 8 p.m. on January 24<sup>th</sup> in the Great Hall of the People. Congratulating the Vietnamese comrades on their achievement, Zhou reminded them that their victory had not been easily won, but as Pham Van Dong had said, "[I]t is important to continue the struggle. What is important is that the Americans have been driven out."<sup>2</sup> This was indeed what was important to Beijing. Nonetheless, the Chinese leadership congratulated the Vietnamese comrades, north and south, on their "great victory" in signing the Paris Accords, that would enable them to achieve

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<sup>1</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Penn Nouth, February 2, 1973, *77 Conversations*, p.184.

<sup>2</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p.662; Westad et al., *77 Conversations*, p.183 n.249; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, p.575.

“peace, independence, unity, democracy, and prosperity” in a situation “free from external military interference”.<sup>3</sup>

Similar congratulations were expressed by Zhou to Kissinger when he visited Beijing on February 15<sup>th</sup> 1973 to consult with the Chinese leadership on global affairs and to discuss the recently agreed peace settlement for Vietnam and the international conference intended to guarantee it. During the course of their talks, Kissinger reaffirmed the ‘decent interval’ strategy he had previously outlined to the Chinese Premier, telling him that what was important was “that the transition between the present and what will work in Southeast Asia occur gradually... The basic problem for us is that the Agreement is kept and that the Agreement does not collapse, or if it does collapse that it does not collapse quickly.” His rationale, one which Zhou surely agreed with, was that this would affect the ability of the United States to carry out its “anti-hegemonical” (i.e. anti-Soviet) foreign policy, “and is therefore of world interest”, that is to say, Chinese and American interest. To emphasize his point he later elaborated. The D.R.V. “can either use the Agreement as an offensive weapon in the short term and constantly use it to undermine the existing structure, or it can use it in the long term... in which we both understand what will happen but in which the situation is tranquil for a period... So they have to be patient. They have to be somewhat patient.”<sup>4</sup>

The North Vietnamese leadership had good reason to be relatively sanguine, and indeed patient, about their prospects in South Vietnam. As a sweetener to encourage them to sign the Paris Accords, and to ensure that they would not be waiting interminably to unify their country, Chinese aid continued to pour into North Vietnam. Chinese aid to North Vietnam in 1973 was roughly equivalent to that delivered the previous year, which in itself had been by a large margin the greatest amount of military aid from China to the D.R.V.<sup>5</sup> During the course of 1973, North Vietnam would receive from its northern neighbour almost 10,000 artillery pieces and mortars (up 7% on 1972), 2.2 million artillery shells (no change), 234,000 guns

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<sup>3</sup> C.D.R.O., *Mao wengao*, vol. 13, pp.341-3.

<sup>4</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 16, 1973, DNSA/KT00647.

<sup>5</sup> For a note on the problems of estimating the value, in dollar terms, of Chinese aid to North Vietnam please see ch. 4, fn.18.

(up 24%), 120 tanks (100 fewer than the previous year) and 36 aircraft (probably mostly MiG-19s; China had delivered 14 in 1972).<sup>6</sup> A C.I.A. intelligence report from early 1975 incorrectly concluded that Chinese military aid to the D.R.V. in 1973-4 was “well below” that of 1972. This underestimate notwithstanding, the American intelligence analysts still concluded that Hanoi had been able to “replace the losses accruing from the [1972 Spring] offensive, and expand and modernize their armed forces...by mid-1974 the North Vietnamese had developed their most powerful force ever in the South, and aid has been sufficient to enable Hanoi to maintain this force.” While overall military aid to Hanoi from China fell by approximately one third between 1973 and 1974, this clearly did not have a deleterious effect on Hanoi’s fighting ability. Furthermore, when the total value of China’s military aid did decrease in 1974, Chinese economic aid to the D.R.V. boomed, largely as a result of Vietnamese dependence on overland supply from China stemming from Nixon’s May 1972 mining of Haiphong harbour (see table below).<sup>7</sup>

During the course of their discussions the previous June, Zhou Enlai had remarked to Kissinger that after the conclusion of the Vietnam War China hoped to be able to send its MiG-19s to Pakistan instead of Vietnam. Kissinger, once again seeking hidden meaning and nuance in Zhou’s utterances, had taken this to be Zhou’s “complicated way of saying that they will sharply reduce aid”, as he told the South Vietnamese President’s Foreign Policy Assistant, Nguyen Phu Duc, when trying to sell him the merits of the peace agreement. Duc expressed skepticism about Kissinger’s faith in allusory Chinese statements. Kissinger, however, had “more confidence in the Chinese elliptical statement than the Soviet direct statement” that

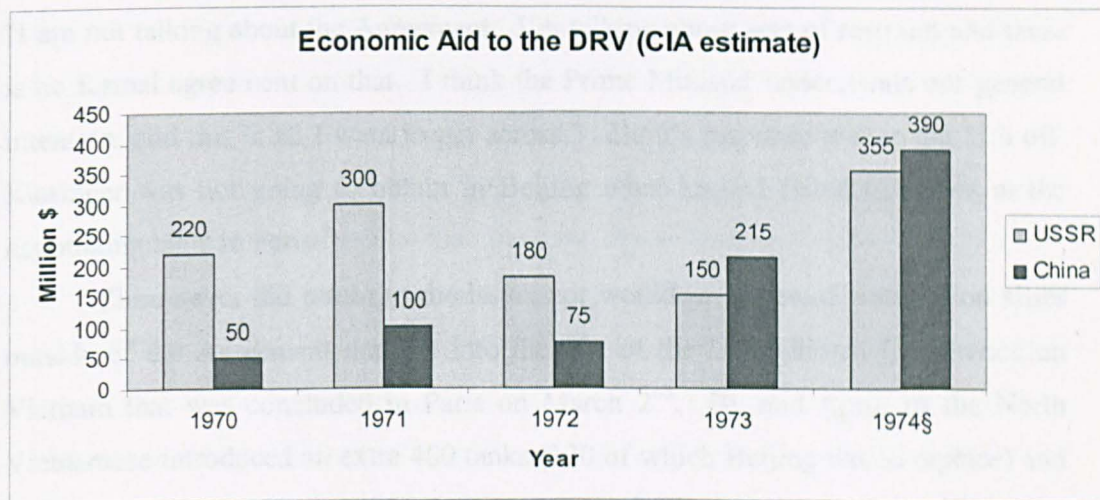
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<sup>6</sup> Zhai, *CATVW*, p.136.

<sup>7</sup> ‘(Est Pub Date) Communist Military and Economic Aid to North Vietnam, 1970-1974’, January 1, 1975, [www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp?pageNumber=1&freqReqRecord=nic\\_vietnam.txt](http://www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp?pageNumber=1&freqReqRecord=nic_vietnam.txt). The accuracy of these estimates is, of course, questionable; however, C.I.A. estimates of economic aid figures were certainly more accurate than those of military assistance since practically all imports from China and the Soviet Union were gratis or credits. Despite doubts over the absolute accuracy of the numbers provided, for purposes of comparing aid from China and the Soviet Union the relative trends should stand reasonably robust scrutiny.

he had received from Brezhnev on reducing military aid to Hanoi.<sup>8</sup> His confidence would prove to be misplaced.

Figure 2



Source: '(Est Pub Date) Communist Military and Economic Aid to North Vietnam, 1970-1974', January 1, 1975, [www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp?pageNumber=1&freqReqRecord=nic\\_vietnam.txt](http://www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp?pageNumber=1&freqReqRecord=nic_vietnam.txt).

When he visited Beijing in February 1973, Kissinger pressed the Chinese Premier on this issue. He expressed his hope that there would be “some constraint about the importation of arms by all countries in Indochina ... we are not saying that there should be no armaments sent into North Vietnam. We recognize that some will be, but now the war is over we believe that some restraint in the sending of armaments would contribute to the tranquilizing of the situation.” Zhou initially attempted to skirt around the issue; he then deflected blame onto the Soviet Union, before finally implying to Kissinger that if he had wished to restrict arms supplies to North Vietnam he should have negotiated it into the Agreement. “We support the Agreement, but it is quite another matter for North Vietnam because when they need weapons the emphasis is not here in China. You know this very clearly” replied the

<sup>8</sup> Memcon, Kissinger, Duc, et al., December 1, 1972, NPMP/NSC/859/1; Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 16, 1972, DNSA/KT00674.

§ N.B. “The imputed value of imports – based on international prices – surged forward more rapidly in 1974 than in any previous year as a result of unusually rapid worldwide inflation. The 30 percent increase in volume was considerably outdistanced by a near-doubling in value from less than \$600 million to about \$1.1 billion.” Ibid.

Chinese Premier. "Because for ordinary weapons, they were easily worn out, but as far as those sophisticated weapons, we don't have them." The American National Security Advisor realised that he had miscalculated, and for the first time in his many hours of discussions with Zhou Enlai, a tone of exasperation crept into his comments. "I am not talking about the Agreement. I'm talking about acts of restraint and there is no formal agreement on that. I think the Prime Minister understands our general intention, and this is all I want to get across." Zhou's response was to cut him off. Kissinger was not going to obtain in Beijing what he had failed to obtain at the negotiating table in Paris.<sup>9</sup>

Zhou never did return to the issue, nor would promises of restraint on allies outside of the Agreement make it into the Act of the International Conference on Vietnam that was concluded in Paris on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. By mid-April, as the North Vietnamese introduced an extra 400 tanks (120 of which Beijing would replace) and 200 pieces of heavy artillery into South Vietnam, in Washington D.C. the Watergate storm began to darken the Oval Office; the strongest protest about this Kissinger could offer Huang Hua was to state his strong belief "that it would be useful if the friends of the other side would also use their influence and not give them the means to start another offensive." Having long since laid bare before Zhou Enlai his envisioned "decent interval" solution, Kissinger was now requesting that China deny Hanoi the tools with which to achieve it. Huang Hua's response was telling: "Premier Zhou Enlai stated clearly the Chinese position during his talks with Dr. Kissinger last February." Kissinger had made the assumption that China's self-interest paralleled that of the United States, and that it would sharply reduce military aid to Hanoi after the agreement was signed. Zhou Enlai, a diplomat of many years' more experience, demonstrated to Kissinger that assumptions occupy a precarious position in diplomacy.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, China would certainly not have welcomed an immediate, or even quick, return to all-out war in South Vietnam. Zhou was serious when he envisioned a period of about five years before hostilities erupted there again. This would give

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<sup>9</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 16, 1972, DNSA/KT00674.

<sup>10</sup> Memcon, Huang Hua, Kissinger, Bruce, et al., April 16, 1973, DNSA/KT00703.

Nixon sufficient time to establish formal diplomatic relations with China before the middle of 1976, as promised by Kissinger, by which time a new leadership in Beijing would probably have had time to settle in. Nonetheless, during this envisioned five-year period of protracted struggle, Zhou promised continued support for Hanoi at the current level of around 2.5 billion yuan per year. In discussions on China's gratuitous aid for the D.R.V. for 1974, signed on June 8<sup>th</sup> 1973, the Chinese Premier made the point of reminding the other Chinese colleagues the five year pledge he was making. He stated his hope that "all other comrades present here will remember this, because I may not be here when that time comes. I do not mean that after five years we will not help you [Vietnamese] any more. We will, but the amount may be reduced." In the same conversation with the Vietnamese comrades he promised the supply of another missile battalion for the D.R.V. "We do not have to fight any more, so it will be all the same if the fourth battalion is placed either in China or in Vietnam."<sup>11</sup> Under Zhou Enlai's stewardship, China was ready to back Hanoi's preparations for the end of the 'decent interval'.<sup>12</sup>

Zhou's position in the early part of 1973 was thus to encourage the Vietnamese comrades to be patient, while simultaneously keeping up aid to North Vietnam in order to replace the wastage and losses suffered by the PAVN during 1972, and rebuild the damage suffered by the D.R.V.'s economic infrastructure. Ill with cancer and knowing that under such a timetable he would probably be dead when the question of Vietnamese reunification arose again, this policy suited his purposes well. He would die having fulfilled his personal duty to the Vietnamese comrades, but without prejudicing the policy alternatives for his successors. As the Chinese Premier would plaintively tell Le Thanh Nghi one year later from his hospital bed, "I have fulfilled my duty as far as handling the support to Vietnam is concerned. Now I am not in good health". A fence-sitter to the end, Zhou would

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<sup>11</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Duan, Pham Van Dong and Le Thanh Nghi, June 5, 1973, 77 *Conversations*, pp.184-8.

<sup>12</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p.675; Wang Taiping, ed., *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo waijiao shi*, vol. 3, p.51. This latter source states that the provision of 2.5 billion yuan in 1974 was the largest amount of aid given by China to Vietnam in any one year. This allegation is contradicted on the same page by the statement that in the 1971-73 period, Chinese aid to Vietnam surpassed 9 billion yuan, and by other sources that indicate that aid to Vietnam in 1971 was 3.6 billion yuan. Cf. Shen Zhihua 'Zhong-Mei hejie', in Li Danhui, *Zhongguo yu Yinduzhina zhanzheng*, pp.232-3,

actually live to see a communist victory in South Vietnam; however by mid-1975 his illness and Mao's machinations had debilitated him to the extent that he was no longer responsible for directing foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, it is clear from the foregoing that through the end of the summer of 1973, despite tactical differences that existed between the Chinese and Vietnamese comrades, both essentially shared the same vision with regard to the development of the situation in South Vietnam. China continued to prepare North Vietnam to take advantage of objective realities in the South, when they presented themselves, through an enormous supply of military aid, despite Kissinger's protestations. The Sino-Vietnamese aid agreement of June was supplemented by another agreement on the supply of military equipment in October. Furthermore, and contrary to Kissinger's beliefs, both Hanoi and Beijing were working towards similar ends with regard to the situation in Cambodia, i.e. securing a ceasefire.<sup>14</sup>

However, profound changes had occurred within the secretive Khmer communist movement in the three years since the ouster of Sihanouk, and few outside of the upper echelons of the Cambodian, Chinese, and Vietnamese communist movements were aware of them. Kissinger expended much time and energy in his discussions with Le Duc Tho in Paris on securing for the Khmer Republic a ceasefire similar to that achieved in Laos, in the belief that, as with the Pathet Lao, Hanoi was the puppeteer pulling the Khmer Rouge strings. And while it was clear that Beijing had considerable influence over Sihanouk, there was little recognition in Washington that the greatest hope of obtaining Khmer communist acquiescence to any peace proposal also came through the auspices of Zhou Enlai. As shall be seen, however, the Chinese Premier's diplomatic skills would face a severe test from the shadowy and clandestine leader of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, the as yet internationally unknown Pol Pot.

#### Co-operation on Cambodia

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<sup>13</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Thanh Nghi, August 3, 1974, 190-1.

<sup>14</sup> Lian Zhengbao, ed., *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo waijiao dashi ji*, vol. 4, p.100.



At the time of the signing of the Paris Agreements, however, Zhou was at the height of his authority. Domestic economic reforms implemented under instruction from Mao but on Zhou's authority that were designed to undo the damage suffered during the years of the Cultural Revolution were beginning to show positive results; likewise new policies with regard to education, science and technology. While the impetus had come from the Chairman, Zhou had successfully handled the issue of Sino-American relations, agreed an understanding on the issue of Taiwan, and negotiated for Mao a summit visit to Beijing from the President of the United States. Zhou had established a framework in which the U.S. and the People's Republic of China could, in Mao's words, "work together to deal with a bastard" – the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> As part of this framework the Premier had overseen an American withdrawal from Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had agreed to orchestrate a ceasefire in Laos through their Laotian communist clients, the Pathet Lao; all that remained to be settled was an agreement on Cambodia, where China held a much stronger hand than in Laos, and where China had long been cultivating deposed Prince Norodom Sihanouk to play a key role.<sup>16</sup>

Ever since the Cambodian Head of State had been overthrown in a coup led by Lon Nol in March 1970 and established his national front (FUNK) and national unity government-in-exile (GRUNK) in alliance with the Khmer Rouge, the Chinese government had invested large amounts of both political prestige and hard cash in promoting Sihanouk's legitimacy as the head of the Cambodian nation. \$10 million in used dollar bills went to the GRUNK each year – half for Sihanouk's government in Beijing, and half smuggled down the Ho Chi Minh trail into the Cambodian interior for the Khmer Rouge to buy weapons with. In no small part through the efforts of Zhou and the Chinese Foreign Ministry, by early 1973 Sihanouk's government was recognized by more than 30 countries. In August 1972 the GRUNK delegation was recognized as an official member of the Conference of the Foreign Ministers of Non-aligned Nations; in a clever tactical move the motion to admit the GRUNK had been paired with the admission of the South Vietnamese P.R.G. in one

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<sup>15</sup> Memcon, Mao, Kissinger, Zhou et al., February 17, 1973, DNSA/KT00677.

<sup>16</sup> Yan and Gao, *Turbulent Decade*, pp.407-412.

resolution. Of the 57 nations represented, however, only three – Malaysia, Laos and Indonesia – walked out of the conference in protest at the proceedings. Such was the P.R.C.'s interest in gaining recognition for Sihanouk's GRUNK that Chinese observers at the conference even went to the extent of personally removing the literature of Lon Nol's delegation from the other delegations' boxes in an effort to prevent it being recognized.<sup>17</sup>

The Cambodian situation, along with the ever-present Soviet threat, dominated the discussions between Zhou and Kissinger in February 1973. Zhou had outlined to Nixon one year previously his belief that if the war in Indochina was stopped “that is to say a reversion of Cambodia to Prince Sihanouk, then the North Vietnamese will surely withdraw.”<sup>18</sup> He had further elaborated to the President's National Security Adviser his vision for post-war Indochina during Kissinger's visit to China in the summer of 1972. “[N]ot only are we not a threat to you – take the case of Indochina. If an end can be put to the war then in Cambodia Sihanouk will ultimately be the head of state. And in Laos the head will be King Vattana... And in both these countries their characteristic of neutrality will be more pronounced and in South Vietnam at least for a time it will be neutral... And that area will become in a certain sense a kind of buffer.”<sup>19</sup> The Premier also voiced approval for a wider zone of neutrality in Southeast Asia, involving Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, referring to the envisioned Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) proposed by Malaysia in 1971 at a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Kuala Lumpur, reversing China's long-standing hostility to that organisation. ZOPFAN was designed to be, in the words of Sheldon Smith, “something of a security model for the Association that, if realized, would serve as an alternative to competitive military buildups within Southeast Asia and the countervailing military activities of such external powers as the United States

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<sup>17</sup> Wang Taiping, ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi*, vol. 3, pp.74-77; ‘Sihanouk Tells of Chinese Dollar Financing’, 24 October 1972, Folder 11/Box 04/DPC Unit 15/TVA-TTU; Philip Short, *Pol Pot*, p.202; briefing book, ‘Cambodia (and Laos) Discussions with the PRC’, undated – ca. February 1973, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/98/2.

<sup>18</sup> Memcon, Nixon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 24, 1972, White House Special Files/President's Office Files/box 87/Memoranda for the President Beginning February 20, 1972, NPMP.

<sup>19</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., June 21, 1972, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/97/4.

and the Soviet Union.”<sup>20</sup> In Zhou’s mind, while perhaps not a formal member of ZOPFAN, Cambodia too would play a part in this zone of neutrality.

At first glance, this task appeared not easy. Sihanouk’s GRUNK issued a statement on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1973, reaffirming its stance as contained within Sihanouk’s March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1970 five-point statement, and was further emphasized by a joint statement from three Khmer Rouge GRUNK ministers in the interior of Cambodia.<sup>21</sup> That statement had demanded the liberation of Cambodia “from the enslavement of the reactionary fascists led by Lon Nol, Sirik Matak, and Cheng Heng”, and called for “struggle against the American imperialists – who are the aggressors against Indochina”.<sup>22</sup> This did not bode well for an American-facilitated negotiation between Lon Nol’s government and the GRUNK. Likewise, Zhou forcefully rejected contact between his own government and that of Lon Nol. He also reprimanded Kissinger – “You should also not deal with such a man who carries on subversive activities against the King... we think it not very – it is not fair for you to admit [recognize] Lon Nol.” China’s disdain for Lon Nol was not entirely as a result of affection for Sihanouk, it should be noted. The Soviet Union had recognised Lon Nol’s government; getting rid of him and undermining the Soviet position was a critical factor in Zhou’s calculations.<sup>23</sup>

Undeterred by Zhou’s initial obduracy, Kissinger proposed finding “an interim solution that is acceptable to both sides”. Aware of Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge’s recent public disavowal of the Paris Peace Agreement, and their declared resolve to persevere against the Lon Nol government, Zhou expressed his conviction that neither Sihanouk nor the “Khmer resistance in the interior area in Cambodia” would agree to enter into negotiations with Lon Nol. “Well, it doesn’t have to be Lon Nol himself. It could be somebody from that government” volunteered

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<sup>20</sup> Simon W. Sheldon, ‘China, Vietnam, and ASEAN: The Politics of Polarization’, *Asian Survey*, vol. 19, no. 12 (December 1979), fn. 1, pp.1171-2.

<sup>21</sup> These ‘three phantoms’ as they were known were Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon and Hu Nim. Their very existence was subject to intense speculation as it was rumoured that Sihanouk had had them executed in the late 1960s. They were widely thought to be the leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (C.P.K.), whereas in fact even Samphan only became a Central Committee member in 1971, and merely an alternate at that. Short *Pol Pot*, pp.451-3.

<sup>22</sup> Briefing book, ‘Cambodia (and Laos) Discussions with the PRC’, undated – ca. February 1973, NPMP/NSC/HAK office files/98/2.

<sup>23</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 16, 1973, DNSA/KT00674.

Kissinger. Zhou was clearly interested by this suggestion, and unlike his previous persistent and firm refusals to act as an intermediary between Kissinger and the Vietnamese during the American's quest to end the war there, the Chinese Premier casually stated that "Of course, since Sihanouk is in China we cannot but tell him your opinion in our wording, but of course, we have our own position on this question."<sup>24</sup> Despite Zhou's protestations that they still supported Sihanouk's Five Point Declaration, some form of Chinese mediation was in the offing.<sup>25</sup>

When Kissinger returned to the issue one day later, he was told that Zhou did not have an answer yet for him because the question "is still under consideration."<sup>26</sup> On the 18<sup>th</sup>, Zhou returned to the issue, but only to tell his American guest that "[I]t seems this time during this visit it will be difficult to make further progress."<sup>27</sup> Zhou had been consulting intensively with various interested parties, including Sihanouk's Prime Minister Penn Nouth, Le Duc Tho, Nguyen Duy Trinh, and Ieng Sary in advance of Kissinger's arrival, but it appears that the temperamental Prince refused to meet the Premier while Kissinger was in the Chinese capital. Zhou did however hold talks with Sihanouk, Penn Nouth and Ieng Sary the day after Kissinger's departure, as well as with Hanoi and the P.R.G. And despite the Prince's grandstanding, in whichever form Zhou conveyed the essence of his discussions with Kissinger to Sihanouk 'in his own words', it grabbed Sihanouk's interest – for around this time the Prince officially proposed on behalf of GRUNK and FUNK "that he might have without any preconditions, some contact with the U.S. side, to study together a solution to the problem of Cambodia." While rejecting talks for a ceasefire, he announced he was willing to discuss "the question of ending U.S. interference in Cambodia", essentially aping the tactics of the D.R.V. in 1968.<sup>28</sup> If the U.S. agreed to ditch Lon Nol and enter into talks with Sihanouk, the door to negotiation was open.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, (London: Phoenix Press, 1982), p.343.

<sup>26</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 17, 1973, DNSA/KT00675.

<sup>27</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 18, 1973, DNSA/ KT00678.

<sup>28</sup> 'Wire story - NCNA Reports Sihanouk Press Conference on Inspection Tour', 16 April 1973, Folder 18/Box 04/DPC Unit 15/TVA-TTU.

<sup>29</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp.662-5.

Similarly, there seems to have been a fairly rapid evolution in Chinese thinking over this period. The previous October Zhou had asked Le Thanh Nghi to encourage the Khmer comrades to take advantage of any possibility for talks. In a rather curious request for intervention, the Chinese Premier had asked the Vietnamese to encourage the Khmers to negotiate, because China was worried about losing influence there if it did so. "We are not in a position to do so because we have talked with them a lot about fighting and encouraged them to fight. We suggest the Vietnamese Workers' Party find a suitable moment to tell them."<sup>30</sup> In early February Zhou was still concerned that the resolution of the situation in Cambodia be kept separate from the Vietnam issue, and that Beijing, not Hanoi, be the arbiter. As a result he was reticent to convey a conciliatory message to Penn Nouth. During discussions the Chinese Premier implicitly emphasised the importance of the military struggle while attending a mass rally to celebrate the signing of the Paris Accords. Conveying Mao's verdict on the agreements to the Cambodian Prime Minister-in-exile, he emphasized that "At this point the United States made concessions. If there had not been victories on the battlefield, there would not have been gains at the negotiation table."<sup>31</sup> Such advice was unlikely to encourage the Khmer comrades into compromise until the balance of forces had tilted in their favour. Yet barely two weeks later, Zhou was telling Kissinger that a coalition government was desirable in Phnom Penh. "Because it is impossible for Cambodia to become completely red now. If that were attempted, it would result in even greater problems."<sup>32</sup> Until he was certain of success and the centrality of a role for China, Zhou did not want to risk alienating the Cambodian resistance.<sup>33</sup>

What Zhou meant by the 'problematic' nature of attempting to attain a 'red Cambodia' was that continued fighting in Cambodia to attain a complete victory would create an even more complicated situation, one in which the American bombing of Cambodia would continue and Nixon would still be distracted by his

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<sup>30</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Le Thanh Nghi, October 8-10, 1973, 77 *Conversations*, p.190. See ch.4, fn.96 for comments on the date of this conversation.

<sup>31</sup> P.R.C. For. Min., *Zhou waijiao huodong*, pp.662-5.

<sup>32</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February, 18, 1973, DNSA/KT00678,

<sup>33</sup> Memcons, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 17, 18, 1973, DNSA/KT00675, KT00678; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.343.

continued travails in Indochina from dealing with the Soviet Union elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, China's influence on the outcome in Cambodia would be greatly reduced by any formula that removed Sihanouk, and there existed every possibility that the Khmer Rouge would cast him aside when his usefulness had expired (as Sihanouk publicly admitted in a newspaper interview). Finally, in early 1973 the full extent and extremes of the platform of the Communist Party of Kampuchea were probably still not well known. Over the previous two years 'Viet Khmers' had been returning from Hanoi to take part in the Cambodian revolution. Their influence on the future direction of the C.P.K.'s own revolution was still unclear; furthermore as the prospect of power grew closer tension between the 'returnees' and the Pol Pot faction were likely to intensify. All in all, it was not an auspicious time for the GRUNK to carry on their war in the face of the power of the USAF. As Zhou explained to Kissinger, "So if we wish to see Southeast Asia develop along the lines of peace and neutrality and not enter a Soviet Asian security system, then Cambodia would be an exemplar country."<sup>34</sup>

In late February, less than a week after Kissinger left the Chinese capital and after having consulted with GRUNK leaders and the Vietnamese comrades, Zhou confirmed the intentions of the Chinese government in a note sent to the Americans concerning the upcoming international Paris conference on Vietnam. Its first point was that "The Chinese side fully agrees to the provisions regarding Cambodia and Laos in Article 20, Chapter VII, of the Paris Agreement." These provisions called for the withdrawal of all foreign military forces from these two countries, a point that would later be further emphasized by Zhou in discussions with the head of the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing, David Bruce. The February note welcomed the agreement on a ceasefire in Laos, but restated China's opposition to the Paris conference discussing Laos and Cambodia: Vietnam was to be the sole topic. Zhou's fear was that an agreement on Cambodia would be reached in an international conference at which both the Soviets and Vietnamese played a major role - clearly he much preferred a deal in which China was the main broker. To be sure that the message had been understood, referring to the ongoing discussions in Paris between Kissinger

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<sup>34</sup> Memcon, Zhou, Kissinger et al., February 18, 1973, DNSA/KT00678.

and Le Duc Tho on a joint communiqué on implementing the agreement, in his inaugural discussions with David Bruce the Chinese Premier insisted that the question of Cambodia could not be solved in Paris. Zhou was making clear that he was the only person that could deliver Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge.<sup>35</sup>

Attempts at resolution of the Cambodian issue stalled during March, as Zhou was forced to take two weeks' leave to undergo treatment for his cancer and Sihanouk disappeared off into the Cambodian jungles to visit the 'liberated' areas. Upon his return in early April, at a grand state banquet to mark the occasion hosted by Zhou Enlai, the feisty prince triumphantly showed film footage of his visit to Cambodia. During his speech to mark the occasion he defiantly rejected both ceasefire and compromise: "If the U.S.A. does not stop its interference in Cambodia we will go on fighting." However, he publicly reaffirmed his February offer of talks with the U.S. (which had already been repeated by Xinhua on March 23<sup>rd</sup>) thereby not ruling out the possibility of a negotiated settlement. As Zhou reaffirmed the support of the Chinese government for Sihanouk as Cambodian head-of-state, and condemned the American "wanton bombing" of his country, listening in the audience were many of the top leadership of the P.R.C., including several of the numerous Vice-Premiers. Among them, one name stood out: Deng Xiaoping, who had been officially rehabilitated by the Politburo less than two weeks previously and who was on his first public outing since then. It was an event that would have long-term implications for China and its relations with Vietnam.<sup>36</sup>

Four days later, Kissinger met with Huang Hua in New York, a few days after the American side had passed on a note expressing "extreme disappointment" at Zhou's remarks during the banquet for Prince Sihanouk. Contrary to his claims in his memoirs, it was Kissinger himself who made the running during the meeting with

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<sup>35</sup> Note, untitled, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1973, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/94/2; memcon, Huang Hua, Kissinger et al., May 27, 1973, DNSA/KT00739.

<sup>36</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, pp.583-6; Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, pp.578, 580; 'Wire story - NCNA Reports Sihanouk Press Conference on Inspection Tour', 16 April 1973, Folder 18/Box 04/DPC Unit 15/TVA-TTU; Donald Kirk, 'Cambodia 1973: Year of the "Bomb Halt"', *Asian Survey*, vol. 14. no. 1 (Jan. 1974), p.96; Tie Ji, 'Deng Xiaoping de "fuchu"' [The Re-emergence of Deng Xiaoping] in An Jianshe, ed., *Wannian de Zhou Enlai* [Zhou Enlai in his Later Years] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 2003), p.337; 'Peking rehabilitates deposed leader', *The Times*, April 12, 1973; Lian Zhengbao, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo waijiao dashi ji*, vol. 4, p.75; C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, p.1653.

regard to Cambodia. The American National Security Adviser proactively offered to give up Lon Nol, not in response to Huang Hua's condemnation of American policy and support for the Phnom Penh government but to pre-empt it, telling Huang that "Our objective in Southeast Asia seems to us not totally dissimilar from yours." By this, of course, he meant excluding Soviet influence.<sup>37</sup>

In his reply, and speaking in a "personal capacity", Huang Hua reminded Kissinger that "the Chinese position is consistent and has been made public... Last February Premier Zhou Enlai again advised the US side not to intervene in Cambodian internal affairs any longer so that the Cambodian people could resolve the problem by themselves." He also subtly emphasized the independence of the Khmer Rouge from the Vietnamese by reminding the American National Security Adviser that "the Cambodian People's Liberation Forces are fighting absolutely alone without the aid of the North Vietnamese troops or of the South Vietnamese National Liberation Forces." He condemned U.S. policy in Cambodia by noting that Sihanouk was ready to negotiate with the U.S. side, but "[T]he U.S. side has not only refused to negotiate, but has intensified the bombing of Cambodia... [I]t will only hamper the solution of the Cambodian question, and at the same time will affect adversely Sino-US relations." However, as Kissinger later noted, Huang Hua's condemnation was "aimed at an individual and not a structure... [I]t left open the prospect discussed in Beijing in February of including other elements of the Phnom Penh government in a coalition without their present chief." It was a prospect Kissinger was not going to pass up.<sup>38</sup>

Kissinger's flexibility on the issue of the leadership in Phnom Penh did not stem, in the main, from a desire to keep the Soviets out of Cambodia, whatever he told Zhou Enlai. If there was one thing that historically united France, Vietnam, and America, it was a casual disregard for the fate of Laos and Cambodia when compared to the larger strategic prize of southern Vietnam. In this light, the growing sense of urgency with which Kissinger was addressing the problem of Cambodia was largely fuelled by a report he received from General Alexander Haig's tour of

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<sup>37</sup> Memcon, Huang Hua, Kissinger, Bruce et al., April 16, 1973, NPMP/NSC/HAK Office Files/94/3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.350.



Southeast Asia in early 1973. Haig reported that “Under Hanoi’s hegemony Cambodia disrupts the basic security premises upon which the Paris Accords were accepted. The uncovering of South Vietnam’s entire western flank... would pose a real and psychological threat to the Thieu government which it could not withstand.” This “must lead inevitably to the near term collapse of South Vietnam with all the political, psychological and strategic implications that such a collapse forebodes.” Most worryingly of all, Haig stated: “Without an immediate broadening of the current regime in the Khmer Republic, the viability of the government and the armed forces must be limited to 3 to 6 months”. To most of the leading actors, with the possible notable exception of Pol Pot, the prospect of some degree of co-operation between the Cambodian and Vietnamese communists seemed likely, if not assured. With this in mind, it was little wonder that Kissinger was so eager to discuss a formula for getting Sihanouk in place and potentially forestalling the fall of – not Cambodia – South Vietnam.<sup>39</sup>

Eager for progress, Kissinger pursued this theme in a written message passed to Zhou on April 24<sup>th</sup>, where he expressed the willingness of the United States to contemplate “a settlement which includes all political forces, including those of Prince Sihanouk.” He hoped that the Chinese would follow up the matter with David Bruce when he arrived in Beijing, which Zhou duly did. The Chinese Premier confirmed that the United States and China both sought a Cambodia that would be “more peaceful, neutral, and independent than ever before.”<sup>40</sup> This clearly precluded Vietnamese control, and even in the short-term a total Khmer Rouge victory. Encouraged by Zhou’s words, but growing impatient and increasingly concerned about the prospects for Cambodia, Kissinger decided to back down on the U.S. refusal to talk to Sihanouk and made a formal proposal to the Chinese. His hand was being forced; three days before David Bruce met with Zhou Enlai, the House of Representatives, in its first ever vote to restrict military operations in Southeast Asia,

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<sup>39</sup> Memo for: Henry Kissinger, from: General A. M. Haig, April 11, 1973, DNSA/KT 01240.

<sup>40</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.351.

had voted for an amendment to prevent funds from an appropriations Bill being used to bomb Cambodia.<sup>41</sup> In a meeting with Huang Hua in New York he told Huang that:

We are prepared to stop our bombing in Cambodia, and we are prepared to withdraw the very small advisory group we have there. And we are prepared to arrange for Lon Nol to leave for medical treatment in the United States. In return we would like a cease-fire – if necessary, say for ninety days – a negotiation between the Sihanouk group and the remainder of the Lon Nol group; and while this negotiation is going on in Cambodia, we would authorize some discussions between the staff of Ambassador Bruce and Prince Sihanouk in Peking... But it is a process that has to be extended over some time, and it must not be conducted in a way that does not take into account our own necessities.<sup>42</sup>

In return, Huang Hua had a message for Kissinger from Zhou. It reiterated Zhou's message to Bruce, re-emphasizing the Chinese Premier's personal involvement, that "the question of Cambodia could not be solved in Paris. It is imperative that the two sides [North Vietnam and the United States] respect the sovereignty of Cambodia." This message also emphasized that not only Sihanouk, but also "the resistance forces at home, are willing to conduct negotiations with the U.S. side." Zhou's goals were clear: a North Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, an end to American bombing and a coalition government with Sihanouk at its head. This was to be the first concrete test of Sino-American co-operation; in exchange for Kissinger ending the bombing and agreeing to the removal of Lon Nol from the scene, Zhou would bring Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge into the coalition. Once achieved, they could achieve their mutual goal: the withdrawal of North Vietnam from Cambodia.<sup>43</sup>

China responded speedily to Kissinger's May 27<sup>th</sup> proposal. On the afternoon of June 4<sup>th</sup>, the National Security Adviser hosted Huang Zhen in his White House office.<sup>44</sup> Huang, who had just taken his place as the head of the P.R.C. Liaison Office in Washington D.C., had two messages for Kissinger: the first noted that "President Nixon's desire to visit China again. Chairman Mao welcomes

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.188-9.

<sup>42</sup> Memcon, Huang Hua, Kissinger, et al., May 27, 1973, DNSA/KT00739; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.351-2.

<sup>43</sup> Memcon, Huang Hua, Kissinger, et al., May 27, 1973, DNSA/KT00739; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.351-2.

<sup>44</sup> In his memoirs Kissinger recalled this meeting as being between himself and Huang Hua in New York. See *Years of Upheaval*, p.352

President Nixon to visit China at an appropriate time.” The second message was of more substance and significance. It confirmed that the basic Chinese stance was that which had been outlined by Zhou in his discussions with David Bruce, and emphasised “respect [for] Cambodia’s sovereignty.” Zhou asserted that while China would convey to Sihanouk Kissinger’s general analysis, Beijing would not negotiate on his behalf and Washington would have to conduct direct talks with the prince. As an indication of the seriousness with which Zhou was taking the American initiative, the message took the unprecedented step of repeating *verbatim* “the U.S. tentative thinking”, requesting that “If there are any inaccuracies in the above, it is expected that the U.S. side will provide corrections.”<sup>45</sup>

As Kissinger correctly observed, this was an unmistakable sign that Zhou was personally engaging himself in the resolution of the Cambodian issue on the basis of Kissinger’s proposal. Likewise, “he would not act as an intermediary unless he expected to succeed.”<sup>46</sup> The message was delivered on the day that Le Duan and Pham Van Dong arrived in Beijing for an official visit; this served to emphasize that Zhou would be working both sides of the equation to ensure that all parties concerned should ‘respect Cambodia’s sovereignty’. Nonetheless, Zhou clearly believed that he could deliver Sihanouk, a ceasefire and eventually a coalition government in return for America ditching Lon Nol, direct talks with the Prince and a cessation of bombing. In fact, the Premier of the P.R.C. was staking his personal prestige on it.<sup>47</sup>

### The collapse of the plan

The situation in Cambodia was unclear and uncertain, for Mao and Zhou as much as Nixon and Kissinger. The Americans believed that Hanoi was pulling at least some of the strings of the Khmer Rouge, and that a victory for Saloth Sar (though Washington was only beginning to become familiar with that name) would mean

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<sup>45</sup> Memcon, Huang Zhen, Kissinger, et al., June 4, 1973, DNSA/KT00745; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.352.

<sup>46</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp.352-3.

<sup>47</sup> P.R.C. For. Min, *Zhou waijiao huodong*, p.674; C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, pp.597-8.

doom for South Vietnam. Beijing was obviously much more aware that the Vietnamese were not in control of the situation in Cambodia, and the Chinese had banked large assets through the careful cultivation of Sihanouk, but the future direction of C.P.K. policy was impossible to tell. It was as yet too early to gauge the impact of the Cambodian communist ‘returnees’ – Khmer cadres from the Viet Minh days who had regrouped to Hanoi – who were now returning to their homeland in the wake of the Paris Accords. Likewise, it was probably in Hanoi’s calculations that these returning Khmer communists, who accepted Vietnam’s lead role in the Indochinese revolution, would find it easier to make their voice heard in a peaceful environment rather than in a war-zone. So despite their differing perceptions, as Le Duc Tho told Ieng Sary, “China, Vietnam, and the United States all want to solve the Cambodian problem soon.” Unfortunately none of them was in a position to solve it without the acquiescence of a narcissistic Cambodian Prince, and a secretive and xenophobic Khmer communist; not for the first time, the vicissitudes of Cambodian politics would test Zhou Enlai’s diplomatic skills to the limit.<sup>48</sup>

For all Zhou and Kissinger’s careful choreography, nothing could happen without the *danseur noble*, the elusive Prince Sihanouk. The Prince, basking in the glory of his trip to the ‘liberated areas’ of his homeland had set off on an international tour, with the aim of cultivating votes in support of a GRUNK challenge for Cambodia’s United Nations seat at the annual session of the U.N. general assembly in the autumn. The process was ostensibly paralyzed without him, and it is likely Zhou dared not attempt to communicate such important matters to him while he was thousands of miles away and, more dangerously, within the earshot of dozens of international journalists and beyond the natural limits imposed by his residence in the Chinese capital.<sup>49</sup> Zhou may have been grateful for the respite, nonetheless, as he awaited the results of Kissinger’s negotiations in Paris with Le Duc Tho on the full implementation of the Paris Accords; article 20, calling for the

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Excerpts from some minutes of the meetings between Ieng Sary, a representative of the Cambodian Communist Party’s Central Committee, and several leaders of our Party’s Central Committee’. I am very grateful to Christopher Goscha for supplying me with this translated document.

<sup>49</sup> The Chinese informed Kissinger that Sihanouk had not been informed of his offer by the time he returned to Beijing on July 5<sup>th</sup>. Memcon, Huang Zhen, Kissinger et al., July 6, 1973, DNSA/KT00769.

removal of all foreign forces from Cambodia and Laos, was of particular interest to the Chinese Premier.

While in Paris, aside from once again engaging in frustrating negotiations with Le Duc Tho, Kissinger took the time to call on the Chinese Foreign Minister, Ji Pengfei, who was visiting the U.K. and France at the time. Kissinger's eagerness to implement the steps he had outlined to the Chinese was evident, and he urged Ji to act upon them. The Foreign Minister pointed out, however, that "There is only one problem, that Samdech Norodom Sihanouk is not now in China and it is difficult to contact him." Kissinger's impatience was growing, fuelled by his awareness that the passing of the Case-Church amendment in the Senate (which would cut off all funds for military operations in Indochina) meant that the window of opportunity to close a deal in Cambodia was rapidly shutting. He enquired if Ji knew when the volatile Prince would return to China. "He was supposed to be back by the end of June" laughed the Foreign Minister, "But you know his temper, and he likes to add countries when he is happy." "Maybe we should depress him!" interjected Kissinger, only half-joking.<sup>50</sup>

Kissinger also refrained from sharing with the Chinese Foreign Minister the details of the secret understandings on Cambodia he had reached with Le Duc Tho during the course of their discussions in Paris, preferring to wait until the next day to share them with the approved channel for such communications – Huang Zhen. The reticence is not surprising, nonetheless, as so secret were the understandings that the American National Security Adviser had refused to share them with Lon Nol's personal adviser, or the Cambodian President's special representative to the International Conference on Vietnam, with whom he had met a few hours after his conversations with Ji Pengfei. Kissinger told his Cambodian visitors that "What we really want to tell you is that the phrase in the Communiqué is not the whole story". Despite everything he remained hopeful "based on my conversation with the Chinese... We must await the return of Sihanouk to Peking. But after that, there will be some progress."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Memcon, Ji Pengfei, Kissinger et al., June 13, 1973, DNSA/KT00752.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.; memcon, Kissinger, Hak, Sutsakan et al., June 13, 1973, DNSA/KT00754.

Time pressures created by the Congress notwithstanding, Kissinger had reason to feel somewhat optimistic. Zhou Enlai was committed to delivering talks among the Cambodian parties if Kissinger agreed to meet with Sihanouk, and in the three secret protocols agreed to in Paris, Le Duc Tho had committed Hanoi to reaffirming Article 20 of the Paris Agreement. Specifically Tho had affirmed that “foreign troops, military advisers, and military personnel shall be withdrawn as required by Article 20 (b) of the Agreement.” Furthermore, Tho had promised that the D.R.V. would, along with the United States, “exert their best efforts to bring about a peaceful settlement in Cambodia.”<sup>52</sup> Despite Kissinger’s belief to the contrary - what he later categorized as “North Vietnam’s imperial ambitions” - Hanoi was in fact interested in achieving a settlement in Cambodia - even if on a temporary basis.<sup>53</sup> Tho himself had urged Sihanouk’s Khmer Rouge ‘minder’ Ieng Sary just four days after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords to ““consider the next step; you must take the initiative; maybe they will meet your demands, maybe they will not. But if we prepare to step forward, we will have more initiative...’ and he asked Ieng Sary: ‘why do you still hesitate in your country?’”<sup>54</sup> Sensing that the Cambodian comrades were preparing to dig their heels in, two weeks later Tho proposed that Pol Pot come to Hanoi for discussions on the issue. “It will be better if Brother Hai [Pol Pot] discusses with both us and the Chinese comrades the situation: the fighting, the solution and also the experiences of diplomatic fighting. Among Cambodia, Vietnam and China, we should be of the same mind about how to fight and how to negotiate in Cambodia in order to push America down.” Pol Pot declined Tho’s invitation; contrary to Kissinger’s belief, Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge were the puppets of neither Hanoi nor Beijing, and were determined to pursue their own chosen course. However, what Zhou Enlai and China could deliver to the Cambodians, and which the Vietnamese could not, was an American bombing halt;

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<sup>52</sup> Memcon, Kissinger, Le Duc Tho et al., June 13, 1973, DNSA/KT00753.

<sup>53</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.332.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Excerpts from some minutes of the meetings between Ieng Sary, a representative of the Cambodian Communist Party’s Central Committee, and several leaders of our Party’s Central Committee’. Translated copy in author’s possession thanks to Christopher Goscha.

whatever his misappraisal of the influence accorded by Vietnamese forces in Cambodia, on this Kissinger was correct.<sup>55</sup>

“We can’t reiterate enough that the key element in Indochina is now Cambodia, and everything else will be easy once that is settled” Kissinger told Huang Zhen back in Washington on June 14<sup>th</sup>. While perhaps rather over-optimistic that “everything else will be easy”, Kissinger was correct that Cambodia was now key. Nixon’s position was weakening by the day as a result of Watergate, and the threat of U.S. military action to uphold the Paris Agreement becoming less credible. The only cards that Nixon and Kissinger held were those of Cambodia and reconstruction aid for the D.R.V., and they were a pair: Kissinger needed Congress to at least hold out the possibility of aid for Hanoi in order to secure a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia; at the same time, successful implementation of article 20 of the Paris Agreement held out the possibility of dollar-induced leverage over Hanoi. Without the pair, Kissinger and Nixon held nothing, and their bluff would surely be called; such a situation would cause Beijing to have to reappraise the P.R.C.’s whole Indochinese strategy. But for a period Kissinger seemed to have overcome this challenge. He was “on the homestretch” to a cease-fire and Sihanouk’s return, just a few steps away from salvaging the situation in Phnom Penh and securing an extra prop under Thieu’s western flank at a time when Watergate was causing others to wobble.<sup>56</sup>

Aside from Sihanouk’s travel plans, the other factor that had the potential to disrupt Zhou and Kissinger’s plan was the U.S. Congress. On May 31<sup>st</sup>, by a majority of 69 to 19, the Senate had approved the Eagleton amendment, a measure far stricter than that which had been approved by the House of Representatives two weeks earlier. Sen. Eagleton’s measure proposed to cut off all funds “‘heretofore’ used to support military action ‘in, over or from the shores of’ Cambodia or Laos.”<sup>57</sup> Unsurprisingly, Nixon vetoed the bill, but Senate Majority Leader, Mike Mansfield, promised to attach the Eagleton amendment to every bill that came before the Senate

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.355.

<sup>57</sup> ‘U.S. Senate cuts off White House funds for continuation of bombing in Cambodia and Laos’, *The Times*, May 31, 1973.

until Nixon was forced to sign it into law. Kissinger made a bid for time on two fronts: he appealed to Nixon's Counsellor for Domestic Affairs to try and make an arrangement with the leadership of the House of Representatives to hold up the offending amendments in order to allow his Cambodian plans to proceed. To provide further impetus on the Chinese side, on June 19<sup>th</sup> Kissinger committed himself to meet with Sihanouk during his planned visit to Beijing in early August - not just meetings between their respective representatives - if a ceasefire were in place by the time of his arrival. The prospect would surely be very tempting for the Cambodia's exiled leader.<sup>58</sup>

For a period at the end of June, despite the increasing pressure coming from Congress, pronouncements from the Prince indicated that there was still hope of a deal. Speaking in Bucharest on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, the GRUNK leader announced that his "government" (of which the Khmer Rouge was a part) had "formally proposed to the U.S. government to hold bilateral negotiations in the pattern of the 'Washington-Hanoi' talks with a view to putting an honourable end to the present war in Cambodia, with no victor or loser." Nixon, continued the Prince, "refused categorically and definitively our proposal by repeating that we should negotiate with the clique of the puppet and traitor Lon Nol". The solution was simple, he added. "This problem will be solved and peace will return to Cambodia... once the United States stops giving military aid and air protection to the puppet Lon Nol regime." While resolute, Sihanouk's position was not irreconcilable with that which Kissinger was putting forward; though he did not know it yet, his demand for direct meetings had been acceded to, subject to a ceasefire. The issue left at stake was the Indochinese version of the 'chicken and the egg question': the sequencing of the talks and the bombing halt/ceasefire. While there was still room for hope, nothing could yet be settled until Sihanouk returned to the Chinese capital. Unfortunately for Zhou and Kissinger, this left the U.S. Congress with an extra few weeks to settle definitively the vexed issue of which came first.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War*, p.189; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p.359; memcon, Kissinger, Huang Zhen, June 19, 1973, DNSA/KT00760.

<sup>59</sup> 'Wire story - NCNA Reports Sihanouk's Activities in Albania', 26 June 1973, Folder 02/Box 05/DPC Unit 15/TVA-TTU.



By the time Sihanouk returned to Beijing the issue had been resolved. Nixon was beset by scandals on several fronts: allegations were being made that he “may have fiddled his house purchases, his Government-paid improvements, his income tax and even his rate assessments.” On June 25<sup>th</sup>, former White House counsel John Dean began his testimony before the Senate inquiry into the Watergate scandal and directly implicated the President. As *The Times* noted “Failing clear substantiation of the charges of criminal action against the President... it looks as if Mr. Nixon risks being, in Mr. Stewart Alsop’s cruel phrase, ‘a paraplegic President’”. And if that wasn’t enough to make Nixon feel sick, BREAKFAST, LUNCH, and DINNER were coming back to bother the President. Senator Howard Hughes’s investigation into the 1969 secret bombings of Cambodia were revealing an organised campaign of deception, including the falsification of bombing co-ordinates, designed to keep from Congress the actions being undertaken by the U.S. Air Force. To many members of Congress, legislating a cessation of the bombing of Cambodia was no longer merely about ending what Kissinger described as “bombing the bejesus” out of the Khmer Republic; the issue was now totemic “for the balance of power between the Congress and the President – as well as for its effects in cutting off bombing raids in Cambodia.” Realising that he held no cards, the expert poker player Nixon folded and agreed a cut-off date of August 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>60</sup>

In his efforts to persuade Congress that an end to the bombing was an unwise move and one that undermined the diplomacy of the administration, Kissinger had been forced to hint at what was in the offing under Zhou’s auspices. Likewise, State Department officials, perhaps overly confident of success, had conducted a little too much of the ‘briefing’ that Chairman Mao had warned Nixon about the previous year, and highlighted the anticipated role of China.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, articles appeared explicitly linking Kissinger’s planned August visit to Beijing with a negotiated settlement in Phnom Penh; at the same time, however, denials were issued that Kissinger would be meeting with Sihanouk. This time Kissinger had over-played his

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Watergate fall-out is weakening whole areas of policy making in Mr. Nixon’s seventh crisis’, *The Times*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1973; Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War*, pp.188-9; ‘Rogers: Compromise on Bombing’, 30 June 1973, Folder 07/Box 27/DPC Unit 01/TVA-TTU.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Chinese Prime Minister to visit United Nations in October and hold meeting with Mr. Nixon’, *The Times*, July 5, 1973; ‘The U.S. Turns to the Prince’, *Time*, July 16, 1973.

hand. A few days before Sihanouk returned to Beijing, Zhou transmitted a message for Huang Zhen to deliver to the White House. It complained about the stories appearing in the press that had “enraged [Sihanouk] all the more.” Charitably, Beijing put the blame for the circulating stories on the “Lon Nol clique... spreading the rumour that the Phnom Penh authorities will enter into official negotiations with the National United Front of Cambodia very soon, with the United States and the Chinese Communists serving as go-betweens... The Chinese side is of the view that such a turn of events is extremely disadvantageous to seeking a settlement of the Cambodian question and will even cause trouble.”<sup>62</sup> When Sihanouk touched down in Beijing, trouble indeed it had caused.

On arrival, Sihanouk announced that it “is useless to talk to Kissinger. There is no time for talk. Now it is too late. We will continue our armed struggle.”<sup>63</sup> The Prince announced his fear that along with Lon Nol, he too was to be cut out of the agreement. It appears he had gotten wind of the press speculation just before he left Bucharest to return to China. Mentioning his Chinese hosts in unusually negative terms, he announced that “Neither Moscow nor Peking nor Paris have [sic] the right to settle our fate in secret.”<sup>64</sup> The next evening, July 6<sup>th</sup>, he spoke in Beijing, as defiant as ever. He made repeated references to the August 15<sup>th</sup> bombing cut-off, and was now concerned that the ‘Nixon Doctrine’ meant that the United States would simply transfer responsibility for the bombing of Cambodia to South Vietnam – a prospect that had been raised by official spokesmen for the Saigon government. Anticipating the response that these actions would illicit from his Khmer Rouge allies in the ‘interior’, Sihanouk roundly condemned the “old fox” Nixon and his “genocide” against the Cambodian people in whose name the Prince significantly denounced “the hypocrisy of the U.S. Government which claims that ‘negotiations are under way and yielding results’ concerning the solution of the Cambodian

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<sup>62</sup> Memcon, Huang Zhen, Kissinger et al., July 6, 1973, DNSA/KT00769.

<sup>63</sup> ‘The U.S. Turns to the Prince’, *Time*, July 16, 1973.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Sihanouk Will Never Accept Division of Cambodia’, 06 July 1973, Folder 08/Box 27/DPC Unit 01/TVA-TTU.

problem.”<sup>65</sup> Zhou and Kissinger’s desired outcome in Phnom Penh, so recently almost within grasp, seemed to be slipping out of reach.<sup>66</sup>

In his own speech Zhou made no mention of the bombing halt; in fact, while offering the standard expression of “firmly support[ing] the just stand of the Cambodian people” Zhou significantly highlighted “Sihanouk’s historic five-point declaration” as “the clear direction for a settlement of the Cambodian question.” Furthermore, he pointed out that Sihanouk and the GRUNK “have again and again demanded that the United States immediately stop its bombing and military intervention in Cambodia.”<sup>67</sup> The clear implication from this was that now that this prospect was imminent, the Cambodian issue could indeed be settled on the basis of Sihanouk’s March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1970 declaration – up until that point the declared basis for a settlement. By contrast, Sihanouk did not even make reference to this “historic” statement in his reply; rather he laid out three demands “which constitute and will constitute unalterably the only solution of the Cambodian problem:

-First, complete and final cessation of all military (air and other) interventions by the U.S.A., its satellites in Bangkok and Saigon and other hostile countries.

-Second, complete elimination of the traitorous, illegal, anti-national, anti-popular, fascist and utterly corrupt “Khmer Republic”.

-Third, total, unconditional and irreversible withdrawal of all U.S. and pro-U.S. military personnel and all non-Cambodian personnel serving U.S. imperialism-neo-colonialism from Khmer territory.”<sup>68</sup>

In a similarly defiant vein, he made a call for “arms and particularly ammunition, again ammunition and always ammunition... so as to help them prevent the extermination of the Khmer country and people and regain national independence.” By contrast he again reiterated that China was “our No 1 supporter”.<sup>69</sup> Through these comments he was clearly taking aim at North Vietnam who had been reducing their arms shipments to the Khmer Rouge since the signing

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Wire story - Text of Sihanouk Speech at Banquet Given by Chou En-lai’, 09 July 1973, Folder 03/Box 05/DPC Unit 15/TVA-TTU.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Constitutional crisis in U.S. over Nixon veto of bombing ban’, *The Times*, June 27, 1973.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Wire story - Chou En-lai Gives Banquet Congratulating Sihanouk’, 9 July 1973, Folder 03/Box 05/DPC Unit 15/TVA-TTU.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Wire story - Text of Sihanouk Speech at Banquet Given by Chou En-lai’, 9 July 1973, Folder 03/Box 05/DPC Unit 15/TVA-TTU;

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Paris Peace Accords. As Le Duan had told the Soviet Ambassador to Hanoi in April, “[O]ur support and help to the Cambodian friends is decreasing and its scale is now insignificant.”<sup>70</sup> It is unclear to what extent Sihanouk was acting on his own initiative in an effort to get out ahead of what he anticipated to be the Khmer Rouge response, or whether he was acting under pressure from the ‘interior’. If it was a case of Sihanouk predicting which way the political wind was going to blow it was a good judgement: at some point in July at a C.P.K. Central Committee meeting Pol Pot declared that there would be absolutely no negotiations.<sup>71</sup>

While at this point Zhou had clearly not given up hope of being able to arrange a negotiation, he was manifestly annoyed at the turn of events in Washington and the Congress-imposed bombing halt. Earlier in the day he had met a congressional delegation led by Senator Warren Magnuson, during which Sen. Magnuson had discussed, at length, the situation in Cambodia and the role of Congress in forcing Nixon to end the bombing. While Zhou had offered the standard Chinese condemnation of U.S. actions in Cambodia, Magnuson – a ‘dove’ on Vietnam who had voted for both the Cooper-Church and McGovern-Hatfield amendments – had “stressed the role of Congress in cutting off the bombing and repeatedly urged Zhou to ‘Be patient. It’ll be over soon.’” According to David Bruce, “Zhou had been visibly angered by Magnuson’s attempt to engage him with the Congress against the President.”<sup>72</sup> The timing of the collapse was most inopportune for the Chinese Premier.

As the C.C.P. prepared for its Tenth Party Congress (called a year prematurely in order to exorcise the ghost of Lin Biao, whose inscription into the party constitution at the Ninth Congress in 1969 still haunted Mao) differences began to emerge between the Party Chairman and the face of Chinese diplomacy the very day Sihanouk arrived back in China. Mao began criticizing his Premier’s poor understanding of the international situation, complaining to Wang Hongwen and Zhang Chunqiao, two of the members of the ‘Gang of Four’, that the Foreign

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<sup>70</sup> Short, *Pol Pot*, p.250.

<sup>71</sup> Dmitry Mosyakov, ‘The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists: History of their Relations as Told in the Soviet Archives’, *Searching for the Truth*, number 19, July 2001, p.38.

<sup>72</sup> Memcon, Kissinger, Scowcroft et al., July 19, 1973, DNSA/KT00778; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp.363, 368.

Ministry (operating under Zhou's aegis) "doesn't discuss important matters, while daily reporting trivial issues; if this shift is not changed they will inevitably engage in revisionism, and if they do it can't be said that I didn't predict it." In almost the same breath, he spoke of his disapproval of criticism of the first Qin Emperor, and his belief that both Lin Biao and the Guomindang were cut from the same cloth: they "esteemed Confucius and opposed the Legalists."<sup>73</sup> Thus, even before Sihanouk had arrived in Beijing, Mao had planted the seeds of the 'Criticize Lin; Criticize Confucius' campaign that would lead to Zhou's eventual fall from grace at the end of the year.<sup>74</sup> Jostling for position between 'radicals' and 'moderates' intensified in the lead up to the Congress, and by the end of the first week in July even its exact start date was as yet undetermined; it now appears likely that it was brought forward by some weeks.<sup>75</sup> It was almost certainly as a result of this and not, as Kissinger presumed, the failing proposals for Cambodia that Huang Zhen was called back to China at this time.<sup>76</sup> Beijing requested a slight delay in the announcement of the date of Kissinger's visit until such times as Huang had arrived back in the Chinese capital. The soon-to-be nominated Secretary of State, however, took fright. He had leaked so much to the press about the expected August 6<sup>th</sup> visit and the anticipated results on Cambodia that a failure would deprive Nixon of a hoped-for foreign policy success at a time of great domestic difficulty, and closer to home might even give Nixon cause to reconsider moving Kissinger to take control of the State Department. His insolent response, as he later admitted, was "the defence of the weak."<sup>77</sup>

He immediately dispatched his National Security deputy, Brent Scowcroft, to express Kissinger's "surprise" at the delay of the August trip announcement, and warned that as Kissinger was the "sole architect" of U.S.-P.R.C. normalization, if he is embarrassed over the Cambodia issue it could jeopardize the U.S.-P.R.C. reconciliation. What would HAK be able to bring back from Beijing regarding

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<sup>73</sup> C.D.R.O., *Mao Zedong zhuan*, p.1656.

<sup>74</sup> C.D.R.O., *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, p.605.

<sup>75</sup> Henry S. Bradsher, 'China: The Radical Offensive', *Asian Survey*, vol. 13, no. 11 (Nov. 1973), pp.993-7.

<sup>76</sup> Kissinger had in fact been forewarned by Huang on July 6<sup>th</sup> that he was returning to Beijing on July 10<sup>th</sup>. Cf. memcon, Kissinger, Huang Hua et al., July 6, 1973, DNSA/KT00769; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.364.

<sup>77</sup> Memcon, Kissinger, Huang Hua et al., July 6, 1973, DNSA/KT00769; Kissinger, *W.H.Y.*, p.364.

Cambodia?”<sup>78</sup> Kissinger got his reply to what he could expect to bring back regarding Cambodia one week later, in the most stark of terms. On July 18<sup>th</sup> the Chinese delivered a note definitively terminating the proposed intervention; Sihanouk, and more likely Pol Pot, could not be delivered. “[T]he Chinese side holds that it is obviously inappropriate to communicate to Samdech Sihanouk the tentative thinking on the settlement of the Cambodian question as set forth by the U.S. side in late May. The Chinese side wishes to inform the U.S. side of this with frankness.”<sup>79</sup>

Zhou had called time on the proposed intervention in Cambodia because Kissinger had made its successful realisation a prior condition to his arrival in Beijing in early August. To emphasize the point, the following day another message was delivered informing the National Security Adviser that the proposed visit date in early August was now “inconvenient”. The Chinese would, however, welcome Kissinger on August 16<sup>th</sup>, the day after the bombing halt came into force. There was little anger expressed in the note, however, unlike that of the previous day that had referred to Cambodia, where the Chinese had advised that “If the United States truly desires to settle the Cambodian question, the... demands raised by the Cambodian side should be acceptable to it. It is hoped that the U.S. side will give serious consideration to this and translate it into action.” The two issues were being divorced: Zhou could not deliver on Cambodia by August 6<sup>th</sup>; however Kissinger was still welcome. As with Vietnam before it, Zhou was determined not to let Cambodia interfere with Sino-American relations.<sup>80</sup>

It is clear though that Zhou’s refusal to pass on Kissinger’s May 27<sup>th</sup> offer was in many respects as much an admission of China’s own weakness in regards to Cambodia as it was an expression of frustration over the turn of events in both that country and the U.S. Zhou’s inability to manipulate a scenario to the mutual benefit of both China and the United States was frustrating, but was by no means an irrevocable blow to the burgeoning partnership. For that reason the two separate

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<sup>78</sup> Richard H. Solomon, ‘U.S.-P.R.C. Negotiations, 1967-1984: an annotated chronology’, December 1985, DNSA/CH00757; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp.364.

<sup>79</sup> Memcon, Kissinger, Scowcroft et al., July 19, 1973, DNSA/KT00778

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Chinese messages had essentially separated the issues and vowed to move on irrespective of the failed initiative. In this manner and even at this late stage Zhou did not give up on the prospect of coming to some sort of negotiated settlement in Cambodia: as late as August, 16<sup>th</sup>, the day after the U.S. bombing of Cambodia ended and on which the Chinese had proposed Kissinger arrive in Beijing (serving as a subtle riposte to his 'insolence'), Zhou was in consultation with Pham Van Dong opining that it would be "unwise" if "these chances [for negotiation] are not exploited."<sup>81</sup> By this stage, however, the Khmer Rouge had forced Hanoi's hand. They had continued their assault on Phnom Penh throughout July and August, in the face of the most intense campaign of aerial bombardment the world had ever seen. By doing so, the K.R. had forced Hanoi to recommence their supply of Pol Pot's forces. In the latter half of 1973, in recognition of the implacability of the Khmer Rouge military assault, *force majeure* compelled Beijing, just as it had Hanoi, to throw its weight behind the forces of the C.P.K. and their search for an outright military victory in Cambodia.<sup>82</sup>

Ultimately the situation in Cambodia developed in a way that neither China nor North Vietnam anticipated, and the manner in which it was misunderstood by all of Washington, Beijing, and Hanoi speaks of the unpredictability of the Khmer Rouge, their secrecy and the lack of control that either of their patrons held over them. Just as the Vietnamese tail had to a large extent wagged the Russian and Chinese dogs, the Khmer Rouge had managed to force both its major sponsors in Beijing and Hanoi to support their chosen course of action, despite the bigger nations' preferences. Beijing and Hanoi had been working towards the same goal in the first half of 1973 – a negotiated settlement in Phnom Penh. Neither principal actor was in control of the situation however, and the combination of the cessation of U.S. bombing and the concomitant Khmer Rouge decision to eschew a negotiated settlement threw into confusion Beijing and Hanoi's strategies for a post-U.S. withdrawal Indochina. The removal of North Vietnamese forces to take part in the Easter Offensive, in

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<sup>81</sup> Memcon (extract), Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, August 16, 1973 in Westad et al., eds., 77 *Conversations*, p.189.

<sup>82</sup> Short, *Pol Pot*, p.251.

combination with the intense American bombing of Cambodia had created a boon opportunity for the Khmer Rouge that no-one had anticipated or was in a position to control. Ironically, both Hanoi and Beijing were left groping for levers of influence, but in reality neither had any effective means of control over Pol Pot and his followers, the outlines of whose brand of Khmer nativist radicalism was only beginning to become clear in the summer of 1973. The greatest irony is that, ultimately, both Hanoi and Beijing ended up backing the wrong horse. Mao and Zhou had anticipated that their best interests would be served by a coalition in Phnom Penh with Sihanouk as its fulcrum; Hanoi, though not averse to a political solution, anticipated that a strong Khmer Rouge presence in Cambodia would help keep the pressure on Nguyen Van Thieu. Nixon and Kissinger, and most outside observers shared this view, but Pol Pot would throw the conventional wisdom on its head.

The unheralded rise of the Khmer Rouge as an independent force in Indochina would prove to be a decisive factor that turned a fractious alliance between Beijing and Hanoi into one of hostility and ultimately conflict. When the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975, their anti-Vietnamese proclivities forced China into making a choice between backing them or accepting an alternative regime that by its very definition would listen more sympathetically to the ear of a Hanoi now in control of all of Vietnam. Moreover, Pol Pot's victory, when it came, coincided with the second rise of Deng Xiaoping, a Chinese leader who had given short shrift to Vietnamese pretensions a decade earlier, and who in 1979 would demonstrate to Hanoi a brutal form of Chinese pedagogy. In the middle of 1973, however, the prospect for direct armed conflict between Hanoi and Beijing, and particularly between the two fraternal communist parties, in less than six years could barely have seemed real. And while the summer of 1973 was by no means the peak of the relationship between the two, it was much improved on two years previously when Zhou had had to explain to the Vietnamese comrades Nixon's planned visit to the People's Republic of China. In the immediate aftermath of the Paris Accords agreement and co-operation defined Sino-Vietnamese relations; both parties were actively working towards a resolution of the Cambodian problem, while Chinese aid



continued to pour into North Vietnam. To be sure, the relationship between these 'comrades plus brothers' had had its peaks and troughs over twenty-five years, but the two sides had ridden it out together on the basis of intimacy and necessity. By the time of Pham Van Dong's visit to Beijing in August 1973, China and North Vietnam appeared to have entered a period of relative stability, where a major source of mutual irritation had been eviscerated. This plateau was not to last however, and what's more, its end did not mark a return to the ups and downs of the previous eight years. The plateau of the summer of '73 would actually prove to be the edge of a downward slide that would lead to rock-bottom.

## Conclusion

The war had been the glue that had held the Sino-Vietnamese partnership together, papering over the degree to which China and North Vietnam's strategic priorities had diverged in the interim. The American withdrawal harshly exposed those differences. For Mao, the Vietnamese revolution had in the 1960s had represented the embodiment of his vision of the anti-imperialist struggle, carried out by a nation on China's periphery and with Chinese support. The Vietnam Workers' Party had charted its own path through the minefield of the Sino-Soviet split; and while it differed with Beijing on several important matters of ideology, both the C.C.P. and the V.W.P. were united on the touchstone issue of resistance to imperialism. Even after 1966, when Mao deliberately completely cast his party adrift from the rest of the communist world, the ability to make revolution still overcame differences that had driven wedges between the C.C.P. and other fraternal parties such as the Japanese and North Koreans'. Abroad, as at home, Mao believed that the process of making revolution would in itself demonstrate the perils of revisionism. On this point, just as with his dreams for the Cultural Revolution, he was badly mistaken.

The irony is that by charting a course for the C.C.P. in the early 1960s independent from the Soviet Union and by firmly supporting Hanoi's struggle from mid-1962 onwards, Mao maintained the close relationship between his party and that of Ho Chi Minh that history and experience had forged. It was that same path in the 1970s that drove a wedge between them. The Vietnamese had always charted an independent course in ideological affairs, at times differing with both China and the Soviet Union on particular issues; yet, the V.W.P. had always stressed the unity of the world communist movement. This emphasis on cohesion was not simply a device for maximizing material assistance for their nation from all the countries of the communist camp, but is indicative of the place that the Vietnamese comrades saw for their nation and revolution in the larger global arena. The Vietnamese revolution had been as much a repudiation of the China-oriented past that had proved so ineffective at arriving at modernity, as it was of French and American imperialism. Socialism offered the Vietnamese comrades the opportunity to step out from China's

shadow and take its place among a community of equals; and while it may not have been possible for Vietnam to effect its revolution had China not joined that community of socialist states, the history of the P.R.C. and the D.R.V. in the 1950s was one of renewal, of enjoying shared experiences and commonalities, but a repudiation of the past, and a celebration of socialist, fraternal equality.

When the Sino-Soviet split occurred, the Vietnamese had come down on Beijing's side in reaction to Khrushchev's peaceful co-existence policies, which were anathema to the completion of their revolution. When the post-Khrushchev Soviet leadership began to provide support to their revolutionary struggle against the United States, Hanoi did not move to a more central position in the Sino-Soviet dispute; rather Moscow moved to align itself with the Vietnamese position. And while Mao's Cultural Revolution had caused irritation in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, it was a result of China's "over-enthusiasm" for revolution, rather than a departure from fraternal revolutionary solidarity. That changed after the summer of 1968.

The origin of China's Vietnam policy was ultimately tied up with Mao's perception of himself and his vision of revolution, and China's position in the world in general and in East Asia in particular. The instinctively paternalistic attitude of many Chinese towards the states on their periphery was a trait that Mao struggled to shake off, despite his reinvention as a proletarian internationalist. For traditional China, and for Chairman Mao, Vietnam and Korea were part of China's 'cultural universe'; nations whose pasts and futures were tied to that of China on the basis of historical ties, and to whom China had obligations. The failure of socialism in either of these two countries, or even a permanent schism in Beijing's relations with them, would not just be a strategic disaster for China but also a moral failure of both Mao's project and China's leadership role. The P.R.C.'s efforts to defend the integrity of North Vietnam and its revolution reflected this, as well as the strategic imperatives for China's national security.

The Vietnamese revolution also afforded Mao the opportunity to deal with a threat far more dangerous than an American military presence in Indochina: Soviet-style revisionism. The victory of People's War in Indochina would demonstrate to a

skeptical world the applicability of the Chinese (Mao's) version of revolution. The inherent fear of nuclear war that ostensibly stood behind peaceful coexistence had to be shown to be mistaken, and pleasingly (or perhaps inevitably) the place where it had become possible to demonstrate that was in Vietnam, with whose Communist Party the C.C.P. had the most long-standing and intimate relationship. Indeed, it was as a result of that intimacy that Ho Chi Minh's war against the French had proved successful; simultaneously, however, it was the closeness of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance that had enabled Zhou and Mao, ironically fearing another (perhaps nuclear) war with the United States, to persuade Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong to accept the temporary partition of their country at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. With surprising candour Zhou Enlai spoke of China's national and his personal responsibility for being deceived in 1954; the defence of the revolution in South Vietnam, so imperiled in the years following the Geneva Accords, thus became an issue that transcended simple notions of communist ideology.

The Vietnam War also informed Mao's perception of his own, Chinese, revolution, and influenced how he remedied the maladies he saw afflicting it. The American intervention in Indochina, and particularly the initial Soviet reaction to it, convinced Mao of the necessity of engaging in another attempt to radically overhaul Chinese society. Not only that, but it also enabled him to do so, by providing a catalyst for domestic mobilization. The war beyond China's southern borders engendered rampant paranoia about the threat from imperialism; Mao was then able to transform that into paranoia about revisionism and radicalize the populace, casting aside his enemies within the Party in the process. Aside from the enormous damage caused to Chinese society, the Cultural Revolution years also severely damaged China's foreign relations, including those with North Vietnam: China repeatedly refused co-operation with the Soviet Union, when united action would have manifestly helped Hanoi's war effort. However, what is most striking about the impact of the C.R. on Sino-Vietnamese relations is the apparent degree of amity that persisted between the two parties and governments, despite the excesses of the C.R. However, the appearance of Chinese irredentism that was produced by paranoia about Soviet intentions meant that Hanoi eventually tired of Chinese diplomatic

intervention to prevent peace talks, and failed to consult with Beijing over its decision to enter into the 'negotiating while fighting' stage of their struggle. Mao's approval eventually came, but only at a time when Beijing and Hanoi's strategic visions began to diverge dramatically.

Nonetheless, the degree of close co-operation between the two nations, and the extent to which China went to safeguard the integrity of North Vietnam requires a re-examination of many of the basic premises upon which our understanding of the dynamic in Sino-Vietnamese relations have been based. We now know that China's military support to the D.R.V. was much greater than previously known: 320,000 Chinese soldiers rotated in and out of North Vietnam between 1965 and 1970. China also went to great lengths to convey to the United States the seriousness of its intent to intervene if North Vietnam was subject to a land invasion or if China came under any sort of attack. Aside from an array of verbal messages to Washington through a variety of channels, the P.R.C. moved large numbers of its forces into the provinces bordering Vietnam to avoid being caught out by an American land invasion, as they had been in Korea. While Soviet technology was responsible for bolstering North Vietnam's air defences against ROLLING THUNDER, it was China that safeguarded the D.R.V. against a land invasion.

Furthermore, it was not until 1969 that the value of aid from the Soviet Union outstripped that from China. To a certain degree, by focusing on the differential in the monetary value of military aid supplied to North Vietnam from its two major sponsors, we have been blinded to its origins, quantity, and intended purpose. Because Soviet missile technology was so expensive, for most of the war Soviet military aid was estimated to be about twice that of China's. However, not only was China's economy much smaller than that of the Soviet Union (and shrinking during the 1966-1969 period), China did not possess such high-end weaponry: it could not supply what it did not have. Nonetheless, those military items the P.R.C. was capable of manufacturing were supplied to Hanoi in abundance; in the five years between 1965 and 1969 Hanoi was furnished with over 850,000 small arms and almost 25,000 pieces of artillery, along with the necessary ammunition. Much of this was channeled to the N.L.F., whose arsenal consisted almost entirely of weapons

captured from the ARVN or were of Chinese provenance. The P.R.C. was also to a large extent bank-rolling the operations of the N.L.F. in the 1960s, sending vital hard currency to the organization to the tune of several tens of millions of dollars per year. In contrast to Soviet aid, which in the 1960s was largely defensive, Chinese military aid to the Vietnamese was of an offensive nature, and was more in accordance with the Vietnamese guerrilla strategy that was prevalent until the N.L.F. was decimated during the Tet Offensive.

China did not expect the N.L.F. to engage in a permanent war of attrition: we now know that the Chinese leadership, like the Vietnamese comrades, saw 1968 as a key year for turning the war in Hanoi's favour. Chinese opposition to peace talks during this period stemmed, in part, from the fear that defeat would be snatched from the jaws of victory. Similarly, the initial Chinese reaction to Hanoi's acceptance of peace talks in April 1968 after the Tet Offensive had its origins in the view that Hanoi appeared to be easing the pressure on Johnson instead of increasing it; compromising its position and that of the N.L.F. Furthermore, the Vietnamese comrades had not informed Beijing in advance of the decision – something that undoubtedly caused grave offence to both Chinese paternalism and Beijing's sense of solidarity with an ally who they had stoutly backed for more than four years. Beijing had underestimated the psychological impact of 'Tet' in the United States, and was later forced to admit that Hanoi did, in fact, have a better grasp of the situation than the Chinese leadership had given them credit for, and perhaps indeed than the Chinese themselves, caught in the vacuum of the Cultural Revolution, understood.

As the summer of 1968 wore on, the Chinese criticism became more acute, but the origins of that criticism had evolved: Hanoi was now accused of throwing a lifeline to Lyndon Johnson (which is ironically precisely what Hanoi later accused Mao of doing to Nixon). This in itself raises questions about just at which point Mao made the decision, in his own words, to "vote for Nixon", and re-emphasizes the importance of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and its consequences for Mao's global outlook. It now appears that by the autumn of 1968 Richard Nixon's 'cold warrior' reputation was viewed by Mao as a potentially useful bulwark against

Soviet social-imperialism, setting Chinese strategic policy off in a direction at variance to that of the Vietnamese comrades: Beijing wanted Nixon elected, while Hanoi wanted to squeeze concessions out of Johnson and Humphrey. The pattern would be repeated four years later, with even more deleterious consequences for Sino-Vietnamese solidarity.

There has also existed the strong temptation to view the reduction in Chinese aid to North Vietnam in 1968-1969, and the accompanying withdrawal of Chinese support troops from North Vietnam, as a crude attempt to punish Hanoi for entering into negotiations. Once again the reality is rather more complicated. In these two years the Chinese economy was in tatters after the damage caused by the Cultural Revolution; furthermore, the P.R.C. was in the shadow of a potentially catastrophic war with the Soviet Union. This compounded the fact that Hanoi, unlike for example North Korea, had been in full support of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia that had so concerned the C.C.P. And while Chinese military aid did drop back in 1969, it was to an amount roughly comparable to that of 1967; likewise Soviet military aid in 1969 was down on that of the previous year as a result of reduced fighting in the wake of the Tet Offensive, and Johnson's bombing halt. Chinese aid, like that of the Soviets, followed the contours of the battlefield, as well as political exigencies. The most significant reduction in Chinese aid occurred from 1969-70 (despite, as previously noted, Hanoi's apparent satisfaction with the aid package agreed in 1969), and this stemmed not from Chinese objections to Hanoi's 'fighting while negotiating' strategy, but from China's own national security needs: the P.R.C. reduced military aid to Hanoi in the period when it was on the brink of war with the Soviet Union. When the immediate Soviet threat subsided, Chinese aid rebounded.

This subsequent increase in aid to Hanoi was enormous: the number of artillery pieces supplied was up 250% on the previous year, the number of shells to use in them up 400%; there were 40% more small arms, and an injection of 80 Chinese tanks and 4 new aircraft into the D.R.V.'s arsenal. And while this went in parallel with Mao's moves towards rapprochement with Richard Nixon, these changes cannot be viewed in isolation from the situation on the battlefield in South

Vietnam. The tactical disaster of the Tet Offensive had practically eliminated the N.L.F. as a fighting force – the burden of carrying on the war would now be passed onto the PAVN. Similarly, Nixon's Vietnamization plan meant that Hanoi's tactics were going to shift in the direction of taking on the ARVN in more conventional battles: for while the United States might tire and extricate itself from the war in South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government would not. Both of these factors would necessitate more men, and more heavy weaponry than the 'People's War' tactics of the 1960s had. As a result, compared to 1966-8 the 1971-3 period saw the supply of 11% more small arms, but 87% more artillery pieces, and 672% more tanks (although there were admittedly 23% fewer Chinese aircraft involved). Hanoi's tactics and needs shifted in relation to the changing circumstances in Saigon and Washington; so too, in response, did the nature of Beijing's aid.

Of course, these changes in Chinese aid policy did not exist in a vacuum from Mao's own changing strategic priorities and the manoeuvres towards rapprochement between China and the United States. During the Cultural Revolution era Mao's ideological impulses had demanded that the United States be humiliated in Vietnam, and that a revolutionary, developing nation tackled the might of imperialism without precipitating a nuclear conflagration. By the early 1970s, however, China simply sought the complete removal of American forces from Indochina, 'leaving no tail behind'. Mao made Sino-American rapprochement contingent upon the continued American withdrawal from the Indochinese peninsula, while the Sino-centric analysis of the Beijing leadership believed that improved Sino-American relations would hasten the process. Simultaneously, Beijing increased its aid for Hanoi, in anticipation of another offensive in 1972 should the peace talks in Paris fail to deliver a settlement in advance of the presidential election year's dry season: it could do nothing else without being accused of an even greater betrayal. It was on this point that Henry Kissinger most acutely misunderstood Chinese intentions, interpreting Zhou Enlai's entreaties to abandon South Vietnam as indications that he was urging restraint on Hanoi.

A negotiated settlement in the latter half of 1971 was the best possible outcome of the Vietnam War for China. Were Washington to yield on the future of



Nguyen Van Thieu in the period between Kissinger's secret visit and Nixon's summit, it would demonstrate to the Vietnamese that it would be under the Chinese aegis, and not that of the Soviets, that their revolution would be triumphant. The failure to arrive at an agreement meant that one last attempt would be made by the Vietnamese comrades to break the military stalemate, and with it the inherent contradiction in Beijing's policies towards America and Vietnam would also come to breaking point. It was now understood between Kissinger and Zhou, and Mao and Nixon, that the Vietnam War was also the Vietnamese' war, and the U.S. President was freed from the constraints of his predecessor when it came to the application of air power. China protested perfunctorily, but it was understood on both sides that there would be no confrontation between China and the United States. And yet despite this, Beijing rallied its resources to help North Vietnam survive the blockade imposed by Nixon and push on with its attacks in the South. Both Hanoi and Beijing knew that there existed an October deadline to reach an agreement between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho; the difference was that while Hanoi desired it, Beijing demanded it.

Full Chinese support for Hanoi continued until such times as it became clear that the Vietnamese communists were incapable of removing the South Vietnamese leader by force, and that Nixon resolutely refused to do it for them. By July 1972, in Mao's view, Hanoi had had its chance, and now had to accept the reality of the situation. The C.C.P. Chairman's analysis was, as always, informed by his own experience and that of the Chinese revolution. As he and Zhou Enlai repeatedly reminded visitors in the latter half of 1972, the C.C.P. had been forced to negotiate directly and compromise with Chiang Kai-shek in 1945. After having defeated a foreign invader, a period of regroupment and consolidation had been not only necessary, but to the communists' advantage. So too, preached Mao, was the case for Vietnam in 1973. To support the Chinese case, aid continued to pour into North Vietnam from China in 1973 and 1974, to the value of around RMB 5.5 billion for these two years. Simultaneously Zhou began a process of subtle mediation to try and ensure the Vietnam War was over for the second term of Richard Nixon's presidency.

China's continued aid for North Vietnam in the wake of the American withdrawal indicates that Beijing believed that it could – or perhaps had to – manage the relationship with Hanoi, and more importantly that it was by no means irreparably damaged by the events of 1972. It is as yet impossible to gauge the degree to which Hanoi blamed the Chinese for LINEBACKER, but it is clear that Nixon felt unburdened by the fear of war with China that had caused Lyndon Johnson to impose limits on the operation of ROLLING THUNDER. And while it was Chinese help that enabled North Vietnam to withstand the blockade and mining of Haiphong, it was the 'Christmas bombings' of LINEBACKER II that gravely damaged the industrial capacity of the D.R.V., and came at no diplomatic cost to Nixon from a China that was almost as eager to see the war in Vietnam ended before the start of Nixon's second term as the U.S. president himself was. Beijing wanted to see Nixon start a new term with a clean slate and a strong mandate that would enable him to navigate the rocky road to full diplomatic normalization that lay ahead. For this, Hanoi held Beijing in part responsible for the damage wrought on the industrial capacity of the D.R.V. by LINEBACKER II. This is indicated by the nature of the aid package that they requested from Beijing in early 1973: an enormous 8.1 billion yuan. Beijing was unwilling, or unable, to agree to such a package; nonetheless, the Chinese still signed agreements worth 2.5 billion yuan, accompanied by a promise from Zhou Enlai that Chinese aid would continue at that level for five years. It was a promise that would ultimately be unfulfilled. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union would write off almost all of Hanoi's outstanding debt to it, and provide resources for the reconstruction of North Vietnam that Beijing could never match.

It was, undoubtedly, the Chinese move towards a rapprochement with the United States that had the most deleterious impact on its relationship with Hanoi. Mao's burgeoning relationship with Richard Nixon did not simply hamper Hanoi's diplomatic strategy to end the war on its terms in 1972, but the tacit Sino-American alliance against the Soviet Union represented China's break with the broader global movement that Hanoi had increasingly come to view as both integral to its revolution and a path to modernity. Zhou Enlai's assertion that there was no longer any such

thing as the communist camp was something that Hanoi resolutely rejected, for the alternative was a return to being in thrall to China. China's response was to, within limits, attempt to hasten the completion of the Vietnamese revolution to ensure that Vietnam did not become an 'Asian Cuba' on its southern flank, dominating Indochina. And while the Chinese continued (admittedly declining) efforts from the signing of the Paris Peace Accords right through until Saigon surrendered, it was becoming increasingly clear that the efforts had failed. Beijing, now under the day-to-day leadership of Deng Xiaoping, had begun to focus on its own domestic economic needs, as well as on more effectively using its foreign aid budget as its overseas activities increased. China was never going to be able to match the economic might or technological advances that the Soviet Union could provide North Vietnam, but it was able to maintain some leverage through the supply of rice to Hanoi, and by satisfying the impulses of the 'revolutionary' elements in the V.W.P. through the continued supply of weaponry for the ongoing struggle in the South. The surrender of food-rich South Vietnam in April 1975, much sooner than anyone had expected, cut off both these levers. By November 1975, China had effectively decided to cut Hanoi adrift.

What permitted China to take such drastic action, and effectively write off the half of its total foreign aid budget that had been spent on Vietnam and leave that nation to fall into the Soviet orbit, was the unheralded rise of the Cambodian communists as a force in their own right. Zhou Enlai had originally hoped to put a neutralist government into power in Phnom Penh with Sihanouk at its head, and reacted with irritation at the U.S. Congress' termination of the bombing of Cambodia. However, from the summer of 1973 onwards the radically anti-Vietnamese outlook of Pol Pot's agenda became clear, as did his forces' determination to push on until victory at more or less any cost. This ran completely contrary to the expectations that had existed in Beijing and Hanoi until at least 1971, where it was anticipated that the revolution in Cambodia, as in Laos, would be secondary to, and dependent upon, the successful conclusion of the Vietnamese revolution. Barely a fortnight before Saigon surrendered, Khmer Rouge forces entered the Cambodian capital; the

need for China to pander to a Hanoi increasingly working in tandem with the Soviet Union was abrogated.

Ironically, while Kissinger may have continually misinterpreted Zhou Enlai's admonitions regarding America's Vietnam policy, he was ultimately correct about the future danger to China of a strong and unified Vietnam. It is also true, however, that Nixon's policies made his warnings something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: had Washington given up Thieu in 1971, Sino-Vietnamese relations would have been spared the trauma of the events of 1972. The final irony is, however, that it was the actions of the U.S. Congress in ending the bombing of Cambodia that ultimately provided China with a counter-weight to Hanoi, should it need it. Unfortunately, Kampuchea would prove to be an unstable ally for China, and a provocative neighbour for Vietnam; it destabilized Indochina in a manner that Zhou Enlai had sought to avoid. And while many particular factors from 1973 onwards would contribute to the outbreak of the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, its origins can be traced to Sino-American rapprochement, and from Beijing and Hanoi's diverging interests in the occupant of the White House that emerged in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

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