

THE VIETNAM WAR, 1964-1969: A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

Why did the United States lose the Vietnam War? Various explanations have come from scholars with American perspectives. One popular interpretation is that American leaders feared direct Chinese entry into the war and that this concern precluded full-scale use of U.S. military power against North Vietnam.¹ Although Beijing's support of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) against the United States has been recognized, that facet of the conflict has been under-researched and little understood. Numerous studies, using information from contemporary newspapers and intelligence reports, attempt to provide detailed and plausible interpretations of the attitudes and policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC) with regard to the war, but they fail to give a comprehensive picture of China's support for the DRV.²

Because of the lack of Chinese sources of information on the Vietnam War, the PRC's role has been discussed only marginally or largely neglected. Limited understanding of China's role in the Vietnam War has led scholars to overlook the possibility of Chinese intervention. Colonel Harry G. Summers argues that American leaders' lack of appreciation of the relationship between military strategy and national policy was the major cause of U.S. defeat in the war. Such a mistake was born of Washington's fear of Chinese intervention in Vietnam to the extent that the United States limited the conflict with Hanoi. Believing that the possibility of Chinese intervention was

¹ For examples, see Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1978); Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1978); and Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1982).

² Ralph B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, 3 vols. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981-1991); Daniel S. Papp, *Vietnam: The View from Moscow, Peking, Washington* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1981); W.R. Smyser, *The Independent Vietnamese: Vietnamese Communism between Russia and China, 1956-1969* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1980); and Allen S. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1975).

just "a matter of conjecture," Summers urged American military leaders to adopt a total war strategy based on Karl von Clausewitz's classic, *On War*, in any future commitment of U.S. armed forces.³ Summers' thesis received favorable comments from military professionals and was further reinforced by the Gulf War victory in 1991.

Recent Chinese sources regarding PRC policy toward the Vietnam War suggest that China had been extensively involved in the Vietnam War throughout this period.⁴ However, China's involvement in North Vietnam did not cause a recurrence of the direct confrontation between Beijing and Washington as had happened in Korea in the early 1950s. This essay examines how China supported Hanoi's drive to unify all of Vietnam and defended North Vietnam against U.S. attacks between 1964 and 1969. It analyzes the circumstances under which China most probably would have gone to war with the United States if the strategy advocated by Summers had been implemented. But, as will be revealed, China also had reasons for doing everything possible to avoid a Sino-American confrontation.

I. China and the Vietnamese National Liberation

Hanoi's official histories have minimized China's role in the war in South Vietnam. American scholars have believed that China did not want to deal with a strong unified Vietnam under Hanoi leadership; that China preferred to deal with two independent Vietnamese states

³ Summers, *On Strategy*, pp. 17-20, 94, 96, 178.

⁴ Since the late 1980s, Beijing has published *Dangdai Zhongguo haijun* [The modern Chinese navy], (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1987); *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun* [The modern Chinese air force], and two volumes of *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou* [The military affairs of the Chinese army], (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1989), which provide previously unavailable information about China's involvement in the Vietnam War. Although these are official Chinese accounts, and sources were made available on a selective basis, their value should not be ignored. In addition, Wang Xiagen's *Zhongguo bimi dafabing: yuan Yue kang Mei shilu* [China's secret military deployment: record of aiding Vietnam and resisting America], (Jinan: Jinan Press, 1992) and Xie Lifu's *Yuenan zhanzheng shilu* [Record of the Vietnam War], (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 1993), also tell the Chinese side of the story. A better scholarly balance could be reached only with complete declassification of both Chinese and Vietnamese documents, but these Chinese materials, combined with information from American sources, will provide a fresh understanding of China's role in the Vietnam War.

instead of a unified Vietnam, 50 million strong and with a long history of antipathy toward China. China thus relied on the United States to serve its interests by preventing a decisive military victory by Hanoi. A protracted war meant continued commitment of North Vietnamese men and resources toward the South, away from China.⁵

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders had paid attention to the Vietnamese Communist revolution from the beginning. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and other Chinese leaders had developed close relationships with Ho Chi Minh. Mao especially felt a rapport with Ho because they not only shared beliefs and values, but they experienced comparable hardships during their revolutionary careers.⁶ China's determination to offer material and manpower support for the DRV was based on a mixture of strategic and ideological considerations. Chinese leaders comprehended Vietnam's strategic importance to the security of China's southern border. Beijing regarded Vietnam along with Korea and Taiwan as the most likely places where the United States might establish bases and possibly initiate military hostilities. In the meantime, the Beijing leadership was anxious to see the model of the Chinese revolution going into Indochina. During the first Indochina war, between 1950 and 1954, Chinese leaders offered moral and material support for Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh.⁷ After the 1954 Geneva conference, Beijing continued to anticipate possible U.S. intervention in the region that would turn Indochina into a U.S. military base from which to

⁵ For a Vietnamese viewpoint about China's involvement, see William J. Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict*, (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies of University of California Berkeley, 1986), pp. 42-51; Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), p. 54; Daniel S. Papp, *Vietnam*, pp. 115-16.

⁶ For Ho's revolutionary career and relationship with the Chinese leaders, see Huan Zhen, *Hu Zhiming yu Zhongguo* [Ho Chi Minh and China]. (Beijing: People's Press, 1987); and Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 33-34. For English literature about Ho, see Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 46, David Halberstam, *Ho* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 44.

⁷ For China's involvement with the first Indochina war, see Zhang Shuguang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949-1958* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 170-86; Zhai Qiang, "Transplanting the Chinese Model: Chinese Military Advisers and the First Vietnam War, 1950-1954," *The Journal of Military History* 57 (October 1993): 689-715; Chen Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War, 1950-54," *The China Quarterly*, March 1993, no. 133, pp. 85-110.

threaten China.

The great unfinished task of the Vietnamese revolution, as defined by Hanoi in the aftermath of the 1954 Geneva Conference, was to unify all of Vietnam under its rule. By 1958, it seemed apparent to Hanoi that this goal could not be achieved except by military force against the southern regime, and domestic and international conditions appeared propitious for a resumption of the armed struggle in the South, with the socialist North serving as a base of support. Thus, beginning in 1959, Hanoi's strategy of armed struggle went forward in South Vietnam.⁸

Beijing's advice to Hanoi was based on the CCP's own experiences during the Chinese revolution. The CCP leaders suggested that Hanoi conserve its military forces while maintaining close contact with the populace and awaiting opportunities for local uprisings. When Hanoi's leaders consulted with their Chinese counterparts concerning resumption of the armed struggle in the South, the CCP leaders argued that such action was premature and dangerous; it was too early to expose Hanoi's strength in the South.⁹ In 1960, revolutionary prospects in South Vietnam looked good, and Chinese leaders agreed to give Hanoi full support.¹⁰ Beijing's reassessment of the situation in South Vietnam may have led to this shift, but Beijing had its own reasons for supporting Hanoi's new strategy for the liberation of South Vietnam.

The growth of U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam, culminating in the formal establishment of the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) in February 1962,

⁸ Ralph B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War: Revolution versus Containment 1955-61* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 170-76; William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1988), 169-234.

⁹ Hoang Van Hoan, *Yue Zhong zhandou de youyi shishi burong waiqu* [The reality of Sino-Vietnamese friendship in fighting ought not to be distorted], (Beijing: People's Press, 1979), pp. 7-8. Guo Ming et al., *Zhongyue guanxi yanbian sishinian* [Forty-year evolution of Sino-Vietnamese relations], (Nanning: Guanxi People's Press, 1992), pp. 65-66.

¹⁰ In December 1962, China became the first foreign government to recognize the establishment of National Liberation Front in South Vietnam. In June 1961 Mao told Pham Van Dong, Prime Minister of the DRV, that China fully supported Hanoi's armed struggle in the South. See Du Xinyuan, "China's assistance to Vietnam during two Indochina wars" in *Yingdu Zhina yanjiu* [Indochina Studies], (supplement 1986), p. 113.

caused Chinese leaders' deep concern. They believed that the United States, which in their view had failed in Korea and Taiwan in the 1950s, was now expanding the war against China into Vietnam. From the Chinese prospective, Beijing's support for Hanoi's war of national liberation would serve to break "the ring of encirclement" by U.S. imperialism and thus increase the security of China.¹¹

Chinese perception of internationalism also determined Beijing's support for Hanoi's drive to liberate South Vietnam. Beijing perceived Ho's war of national liberation as a vital part of a world proletarian revolutionary movement. According to Mao Zedong, the success of "national revolutionary" struggles was the key to the defense of socialist states from imperialist attack and to the ultimate success of the global revolutionary struggle. Achievement of world revolutionary objectives in the 1960s required the overthrow of the U.S. -dominated international order. U.S. military intervention in Vietnam in the early 1960s put Hanoi at the center of what could become a global revolution following the Chinese model. Thus, Chinese leaders believed it their duty to assist Ho and his party in order to promote an Asia-wide or even world-wide revolution.¹²

Deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations may also have affected Beijing's policy of supporting Hanoi's war of national liberation. Mao appeared to resent Stalin's role in dividing countries at the end of World War II, and Khrushchev's lukewarm support of Ho Chi Minh and his struggle for Vietnamese unification.¹³ We still know little about how the ideological schism between China and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s affected China's role in Vietnam. Nevertheless, victory in

¹¹ In a meeting with General Chen Shiqu, Commander of the Engineering Corps, and other officers in mid-June, 1965, Zhou Enlai stressed this concern, saying that the American imperialists wanted to encircle China from three directions but had failed in their conspiracy to do so in Korea. "They now come back again from Vietnam. Our assistance to Vietnam is to break the ring of encirclement and defend the country." See Wang, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 161.

¹² Regarding Mao's view of the world revolution, see John Garver, *Chinese-Soviet Relations, 1937-1945: The Diplomacy of Chinese Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 130-40; and *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1993), pp. 114-31.

¹³ Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing* , pp. 68-9.

North Vietnam's war of national liberation could have demonstrated Mao's political correctness in adopting a more militant approach toward the United States, in contrast to the Soviet policy, which favored peaceful coexistence with what China viewed as U.S. imperialism.¹⁴ Furthermore, resolute Chinese support for the Vietnamese struggle against the U.S. could ensure Hanoi in turn to stand on Beijing's side.

Under the terms of the 1954 Geneva Agreements, the DRV could not augment its military forces. Nevertheless, Beijing continued to supply significant quantities of arms and ammunition to Hanoi. As Hanoi developed its army (The People's Army of Vietnam, or PAVN) into a fully professional modern force in the late 1950s, China stepped up its efforts to equip and train North Vietnamese soldiers.¹⁵ Between 1955 and 1963 China provided the DRV with 247 million yuan's worth of military aid, including 240,000 guns, 2,730 pieces of artillery, 15 planes, 28 naval vessels, 175 million rounds of ammunition, and other military equipment and supplies.¹⁶ In 1962 alone, Beijing supplied 90,000 rifles and machine guns to North Vietnam, for upgrading Hanoi's drive to liberate South Vietnam. These weapons were enough to equip 230 infantry battalions.¹⁷

In the early 1960s when Soviet policy toward Indochina was equivocal at best, Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese government regarded China as the only reliable source of military supplies for their revolutionary cause.¹⁸ Even though, under Brezhnev and Kosygin, Moscow adopted a more active policy of support for the DRV, Ho Chi Minh continued to look to China for

¹⁴ For Chinese and Soviet disputes over policy toward the United States, see John W. Garver, *Foreign Relationship of the People's Republic of China*, pp. 55-65.

¹⁵ In 1957, China began organizing the first tank, engineering, and fighter regiments for North Vietnam. Wang Xianguan, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing* pp. 36-37.

¹⁶ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 577.

¹⁷ See Hoang Van Hoan, *Yue Zhong zhandou youyi de shishi burong waiqu*, p. 8. *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao* [China's Today: Diplomacy], (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1987), p. 159; Du Xinyuan, "China's assistance to Vietnam during two Indochina wars," p. 113.

¹⁸ Hanoi's earlier request for Soviet support in the form of weapons received little response. In 1962, the Soviet leaders shipped 3,000 World War II German weapons to Hanoi, and Ho was very unhappy about that. Wang Xianguan, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 18.

ways to achieve unification and independence. Western analysts have long believed that there was conflict between Hanoi and Beijing over the question of united Sino-Soviet assistance in support of Hanoi.¹⁹ Ho was disheartened by the Beijing-Moscow dispute. He regarded the Soviet Union and China as Vietnam's big brother and big sister, and he hoped for united Sino-Soviet support for his revolutionary cause in Vietnam. Although divergent opinions toward China most likely existed within Hanoi's elite, Ho Chi Minh continued to seek a special relationship with China. He characterized the Vietnamese and Chinese peoples as "comrades and brothers" who go through thick and thin together.²⁰

Ho and other North Vietnamese leaders traveled frequently to Beijing, where they consulted with Chinese leaders concerning nearly every major development in their war of national liberation in South Vietnam. North Vietnamese leaders' determination to fight against U.S. aggression deeply impressed Mao and Zhou. China's leaders had great esteem for those Vietnamese leaders who were in charge of the armed struggle in the South.²¹ Appearing well-informed and following the events in Vietnam closely, Mao and Zhou showed sincere concern for Hanoi's drive to unite all of Vietnam. It was Mao's view that China must provide whatever Hanoi needed for the war in the South. He carefully studied Hanoi's request for aid from China, and even ordered mosquito nets for all North Vietnamese soldiers because he thought that the hot and humid south of Vietnam must be infected with mosquitoes and ants. When a food products factory in Shanghai began to manufacture food especially for Vietnamese soldiers, Mao instructed that the hardtack must be light and nutritious. Zhou, too, repeatedly emphasized that China's aid to

¹⁹ Regarding Sino-Vietnamese relations, see Jay Taylor, *China and Southeast Asia: Peking's Relations with Revolutionary Movements* (New York: Praeger, 1976), p. 58; Daniel S. Papp, *Vietnam: The View from Moscow, Peking, Washington*, pp. 115-17; W. R. Smyser, *The Independent Vietnamese: Vietnamese Communism Between Russia and China, 1956-1969*, pp. 90-91.

²⁰ See Ho Chi Minh's welcoming address to PRC President Liu Shaoqi at Hanoi, *People's Daily*, May 11, 1963, p. 3. Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 37.

²¹ Hoang Van Hoan, *Yue Zhong zhandou youyi de shishi burong waiqu*, p. 15. Also see Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 133.

Hanoi's war in the South was the most important job for Chinese. In March 1965, he personally went to Hanoi to arrange for shipments of supplies.²² Believing that the United States would blockade South Vietnam, he urged that Chinese supplies be shipped to Vietnam as quickly as possible. Because supplies for the most part were carried by Vietnamese soldiers and women, Zhou directed that each package of supplies should weigh less than 30 kilos.²³

In order to meet Hanoi's urgent needs, Beijing gave highest priority to supplying arms and military equipment to Hanoi. Between 1961 and 1972, China supplied Hanoi with 280 122-mm howitzers, 960 57-mm antiaircraft guns, and 20,237 mortars, while the People's Liberation Army (PLA) received 200 howitzers, 2,000 antiaircraft guns, and 17,000 mortars. The Chinese version of the Soviet-designed AK-47 automatic rifle, which was manufactured in China after 1956, was provided to nearly all the regular PAVN soldiers even before the PLA soldiers had been equipped. Often, when Hanoi's requests exceeded China's production ability, Beijing transferred arms and equipment directly from the PLA to Hanoi's inventory. In 1969, Hanoi badly needed 107-mm rocket guns, but they were no longer produced in China. Beijing then consigned all of the PLA's stock of such guns to Vietnam.²⁴

Several western studies argue that China never actually supported Hanoi's decision to employ offensive strategy in South Vietnam; that Beijing feared expansion of the fighting into China, and thus desired only that Hanoi continue an extended war of attrition.²⁵ Recently released

²² *Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong dashiji, 1949-1975* [Chronicle of Zhou Enlai's important diplomatic activities], (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 1993), p. 438; also see He Xiaolu, *Yuanshuai waijiaojia* [A marshal diplomat], (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Literature Press, 1985), p. 216.

²³ Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de remin jiefangjun* [The People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution], (Beijing: CCP Historical Materials Press, 1989), pp. 409-8.

²⁴ Li and Hao, *Wenhua dageming zhong de remin jiefangjun*, pp. 411-12; *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao*, pp. 280-81.

²⁵ Jay Taylor, *China and Southeast Asia*, pp. 58-61; Daniel S. Papp, *Vietnam*, p. 115; Jon M. Van Dyke, *North Vietnamese Strategy For Survival* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books Publishers), p. 223; Uri Ran'an, "Peking's Foreign Policy Debate, 1965-1966," and Donald Zagpria, "The Strategic Debate in Peking," both in Tan Tsou, ed., *China in Crisis*, vol. 2,

Chinese records do not support these views. In April 1967, both Chinese and Vietnamese leaders agreed that 1968 was a year of crucial importance because Hanoi would probably defeat the enemy during that dry season and force the Americans to withdraw from Vietnam. During Ho's medical treatment at Beijing that year, Mao met him, urging Hanoi to move away from guerrilla tactics toward big-unit warfare in the South. Ho promptly relayed Mao's views to the other leaders in Hanoi.²⁶ At its 14th plenum in December, the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party (North Vietnamese Worker's Party) made the final decision to launch the Tet offensive in early 1968.²⁷ To what extent Beijing's advice influenced Hanoi's decision remains unknown. Recent scholarship on the Vietnam War emphasizes that the key to Hanoi's victory was the employment of a military strategy that always reflected local realities in Vietnam and essentially differed from the strategic doctrine of the Chinese revolution.²⁸ However, few recognize that the two countries' revolutionary situations were different in one critical aspect: Beijing's support for Hanoi significantly contributed to the ultimate success of Vietnamese national liberation, whereas the CCP received no assistance from foreign countries, including the Soviet Union, during the Chinese revolution. In 1968, even though Beijing's leaders resented about Hanoi's negotiations with the Americans, they continued to provide North Vietnam with offensive weapons, hoping Hanoi to

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 23-71 and 237-68.

²⁶ Zhou Enlai *waijiao huodong dashiji*, p. 510; Huang Zhen, *Hu Zhiming Yu Zhongguo*, p. 176.

²⁷ Several other studies reveal that the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party decided in October to launch the general offensive and uprising in the South. See Tran Van Tra, "Tet: The 1968 General Offensive and General Uprising," *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh eds., (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993); and Ngo Vinh Long, "The Tet Offensive and Its Aftermath," *The American War in Vietnam*, Jayne Werner and David Hunt eds., (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1993). My citation comes from a Vietnamese official source, "Hanoi's Interpretation of U.S. strategy in War," December 19, 1984, FBIS-Asia and Pacific Daily Report, December 21, 1984, 84-247-21.

²⁸ For details, see Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huyhn, eds., *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

stick to the line of military struggle.²⁹ Between 1970 and 1972, while the pace of American withdrawal from the South accelerated, China supplied more than 300 tanks and 204 130-mm field guns, along with 450,000 rounds of shell, to enable Hanoi to continue offensive warfare. The Chinese munitions industry manufactured 20-mm antiaircraft artillery specifically for Hanoi's troops to counter U.S. helicopter warfare on the battlefields of the South.³⁰

Chinese sources suggest that Beijing did not give Hanoi everything it requested without questioning. In October 1965, during a negotiation between Chief of Staff of the PLA Luo Ruiqing and Chief of Staff of the PAVN Van Tien Dung, the Vietnamese side requested that China provide 140 million rounds of ammunition immediately. Luo questioned Dung about whether Hanoi was able to ship that amount of ammunition to the South, and he advised Dung to make a more reasonable demand.³¹ However, Beijing's close relationship with Hanoi, as well as its revolutionary ideology, ensured China as a major supporter of North Vietnam in spite of differences about strategy and aid. Hanoi's drive for national liberation put both Mao's world revolutionary strategy and China's own national security at stake.

II. China's Response to the U.S. Threat from the Air

In the mid-1960s, Chinese leaders were concerned about a possible Sino-U.S war over Vietnam. American misjudgment of Beijing's warning in Korea in 1950 remained fresh in the Chinese mind. The 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident convinced Chinese leaders that Beijing needed to deploy Chinese military forces to counter possible U.S. expansion of the war into North Vietnam. On August 5, a few hours after American bombers attacked six North Vietnamese naval bases and

²⁹ Hoang Van Hoan, *Yue Zhong zhandou de youyi shishi burong waiqu*, p. 12; Zhou Enlai *waijiao huodong dashiji, 1949-1975*, p. 524; Guo et al., *Zhongyue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, p. 68.

³⁰ This number of tanks was five times more than what China had supplied to the DRV in the preceding twenty years. Xie Lifu, *Yuenan zhanzheng shilu*, vol. 2, p. 372; Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 137.

³¹ Hanoi reduced this request to 11.4 million rounds of ammunition later. See Li and Hao, *Wenhua dageming zhong de remin jiefangjun*, pp. 412 and 416.

associated facilities, Zhou Enlai and Luo Ruiqing sent a message to President Ho Chi Minh, Premier Pham Van Dong and Chief of Staff Van Tien Dung, advising them to investigate the situation and prepare strategies and policies for action. They also proposed military collaboration between the two nations to meet the mounting U.S. threat.³² Beijing was seriously concerned about Vietnam's situation. One incident that might be closely related to China's concern about Hanoi's situation, as evidenced by the arrival of a Chinese IL-18 aircraft (the kind used for the travel of Chinese leaders), at Gia Lam airport on that same day, possibly for a meeting between North Vietnamese and Chinese leaders about the U.S. air attack.³³

Also, on the evening of August 5, an emergency war meeting was convened at the Headquarters of the General Staff of the PLA. The meeting, presided over by Deputy Chief of Staff Yang Chenwu, continued into the morning of the next day. Participants included the principal commanders from the Air Force, Navy, other armed services, and the Beijing Military Region. They studied the situation in Vietnam, and concluded that U.S. bombing of North Vietnamese naval bases did not signal an immediate war in North Vietnam, but that the threat had increased. Thus, Chinese military leaders recommended that Air Force, Navy, and Army troops in Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions be on the alert against possible invasion. Chinese commanders decided to immediately strengthen China's air power in Guangxi and Yunnan.³⁴

In 1964, China had few planes and airfields in the areas close to North Vietnam.³⁵ At an Air Force war meeting on the evening of August 6, Commander of the Chinese Air Force Liu Yalou recommended that the 7th Air Corps headquarters move from Xingning, Guangdong, to

³² For this Chinese proposal, see *Beijing Review*, no. 48, November 30, 1979, p. 14.

³³ See CIA Memorandum on the "North Vietnam Crisis," August 6, 1964, National Security Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

³⁴ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, pp. 599-600.

³⁵ According to Chinese records, there were one air corps headquarters in Kunming and two air divisions headquarters, along with three fighter regimes in four airfields. *Dangdai Zhongguo Kongjung*, p. 384.

Nanning to assume a command role in the Guangxi and Leizhou peninsula areas; and that the 12th Fighter Division and the 3rd AAA Division be transferred to Nanning from Quzhou, Zhejiang and Zhangzhou, Fujian, respectively. He suggested that the Navy also send one of its fighter divisions to Hainan Island, and that additional airfields and radar installations be constructed in Guangxi, Yunnan and Guizhou.³⁶ Mao Zedong immediately approved these measures, all of which were carried out within a few weeks.

In addition, the 17th Fighter Division (less the 49th regiment, which was transferred from Tangshan, Hebei, to Kunming) advanced from Kunming to Mengzi, while the 26th Fighter Division at Suixi and the 9th Fighter Division at Guangzhou were ordered to get ready for action at their current positions. Eight other air divisions plus one all weather fighter regiment were assigned as the second echelon to support the front line.³⁷ Construction began on three new airfields (Ningming, Tianyang and Guilin) in Guangxi, while a small airfield near the Laotian border at Simao and one near the Burma border at Xiangyun were extended to accommodate jet fighters.³⁸ New long-range early warning and ground-control-intercept radar systems was installed to provide early warning. Especially, one radar regiment moved into the airfield at Ningming, twelve miles from the Sino-Vietnamese border. This logically would also enable China and North Vietnam to cooperate in air defense.³⁹

³⁶ *Dangdai Zhongguo Kongjung*, p. 384; *Dangdai Zhongguo haijun*, 1987, p. 355.

³⁷ Navy 4th Aviation Division moved into Hainan Island on February 20, 1965. *Zhongguo remin jiefangjun junbingzhong lishi chongshu: Haijunshi* [History series of the People's Liberation Army: History of Navy], n.a., (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 1989), p. 144.

³⁸ American sources refer to the Xiangyun airfield as Pei-tun. Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 270.

³⁹ According to the memoir of Liu Yuti, Deputy Commander of the 7th Air Corps, the number of radar in Guangxi was increased from thirty-six to ninety-four, including the most advanced systems in the Chinese inventory. Liu Yuti and Jiao Hongguang, "Operations against Invading American Planes in the Chinese-Vietnamese Border Area in Guangxi," in Wang Renshen et al., *Kongjung: huiyi shiliao* [the Air Force: Memoirs and Reminiscences], (Beijing: PLA Press, 1992), p. 560.

The most significant development was the deployment to North Vietnam on August 6-7, of a fighter regiment with 36 MIG's. These aircraft were based at the newly built airfield at Phuc Yen, twelve miles northwest of Hanoi. Since the DRV had no combat air force at the time, Washington believed that the MIG's were Chinese.⁴⁰ Recently released Chinese sources indicate that these MIG's belonged to the first fighter regiment of the DRV, which was organized in September 1957 by China and trained in China.⁴¹ During 1963 and 1964, senior officers of the PLA and PAVN held several conferences to discuss military cooperation in case of U.S. invasion.⁴² Again, the details of those meetings are unknown, but it is certain that the DRV wanted China to help strengthen its air defense. A group of Chinese air force engineers was sent to help upgrade Noi Bai airfield at Phuc Yen. By the summer of 1964 that airfield was ready for use by jet fighters, and the fighter regiment of 36 Chinese-made MIGs was based there.⁴³ Although one regiment of North Vietnamese fighters posed no threat to American air power in Southeast Asia, future U.S. air raids would carry with them the risk of a challenge from the North Vietnamese air force, or even from Chinese fighters.⁴⁴

Although these military moves in China, as American scholar Allen Whiting argued, were designed to deter further U.S. expansion of the war in the South and bombardment in the North,

⁴⁰ See CIA's special reports on the "North Vietnam Crisis," December 27, 1963, and August 11-12, 1964, National Security Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

⁴¹ Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 37; Sha Li and Min Li, *Zhongguo kongjunshili* [The Actual Strength of the Chinese Air Force], (Beijing: Electronic Science University Press, 1993), p. 201.

⁴² In March 1963, a Chinese military delegation headed by Luo Ruiqing visited Hanoi, and in June 1964, Van Tien Dung made a trip to Beijing. *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao*, p. 159.

⁴³ Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 146. *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, pp. 542-43.

⁴⁴ According to Allen Whiting, Joint China-Vietnam air exercises took place in January, 1965, suggesting that Chinese planes were contemplating air defense of North Vietnam. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, p. 177. No Chinese records have been found to substantiate this account.

they also reflected Beijing's perception of the international situation.⁴⁵ By the mid-1960s, after the breakdown of the Sino-Soviet alliance, the border conflicts between China and India, Chiang Kai-shek's series of attempts to return the mainland, and the Tonkin Gulf Incident, Beijing's leaders began to believe that China was surrounded by threats to its security.⁴⁶ It seemed to them that a world war was inevitable. On August 17, 1964, Mao, at the CCP's Central Secretariat meeting, stated that the imperialists were planning to start a new war of aggression against China, and that it was therefore necessary for China to prepare for war.⁴⁷ In October, Mao stated again that China must be ready for a large, possibly nuclear war. U.S. escalation in Vietnam was viewed as the prelude to such a war. "Preparing for war" became a dominant national theme, penetrating every cell of Chinese society.⁴⁸

In early 1965 the threat was limited mainly to North Vietnam, but the Chinese military did not remain in a passive role. The PLA Air Force and Navy aircraft actively engaged U.S. intruders over Chinese air space throughout the 1960s. Washington had been concerned about a possible large-scale infusion of Chinese military strength in response to U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. U.S. aerial reconnaissance missions increasingly flew over Southwest and South China. Chinese documents reveal that Chinese radar tracked some ninety-seven reconnaissance missions flown over China by BQM-147 Drones (unmanned planes) between August 1964 and the end of 1969.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Allen Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, pp. 176-78.

⁴⁶ After the Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968, Beijing shifted its security focus from a U.S. threat in the south to a Soviet threat in the north. See Xiong Xianghui, "The Prelude to the Opening of Sino-American Relations," *Zhongguo dangshi ziliao* [CCP history materials], no. 42 (June 1992), pp. 56-96. Chen Jian, "China's Involvement with the Vietnam War." *China Quarterly* (forthcoming).

⁴⁷ Cong Jin, *Quzhe qianjin de shinian* [The decade of tortuous advance], Zhengzhou: Henan Remin Press, 1989), p. 465, cited from Chen Jian's "China's Involvement with the Vietnam War."

⁴⁸ Liao Guoliang et al., *Mao Zedong junshi sixian fazhanshi* [History of Mao Zedong's military thought development], (Beijing: PLA Press, 1991), pp. 538-39.

⁴⁹ The first drone was tracked on August 29, 1964. *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, pp. 385 and 390. Also see Liu and Jiao, "Operations against Invading American Planes in the

Beijing authorities initially restricted Chinese planes from confronting manned American aircraft that invaded China. They allowed Chinese planes to monitor the intruding American planes only, not to attack them.⁵⁰ However, shooting down unmanned reconnaissance planes was not prohibited. Chinese leaders believed that action against U.S. unmanned reconnaissance planes would demonstrate China's readiness to fight U.S. aggression, and might obviate the need to intervene more directly.

During the remainder of 1964 and early 1965, Chinese air force and navy aviation units engaged in a series of actions to intercept unmanned spy planes. Special Jian-6 and Jian-7 (Chinese MIG-19 and MIG-21) combat units were organized and deployed to airfields at Nanning, Suixi, Kunming, Mengzi and Hainan Island. Despite frustrations in early attempts to shoot down the Drones, the Chinese air force on November 14, 1964, claimed its first victory.⁵¹ China claimed that twenty U.S. pilotless reconnaissance planes were brought down during the Vietnam War.⁵² The Chinese government condemned U.S. aggression while seeking to minimize the possibility of direct action against the United States. But Chinese leaders soon discovered that such restraint did not halt American escalation of the hostilities.

On April 8, 1965, Chinese radar tracked two U.S. navy F-4B's over the Yulin naval base in Hainan Island. The Chinese military was alerted, and the intrusion was regarded as a new U.S. provocation against China. The next day when eight U.S. navy F-4B's in two groups intruded over China's Hainan Island, four Jian-5's (MIG-17) of the Navy's 8th Aviation Division were sent

Chinese-Vietnamese Border Area in Guangxi," pp. 560-61.

⁵⁰ Li and Hao, *Wenhua dageming zhong de remin jiefangjun*, p. 341.

⁵¹ According to Chinese records, one Jian-6 from the 1st Fighter Division not only failed to shoot down a drone over Guangxi on October 13, 1964, but stalled and crashed after the pilot bailed out. *Ibid.*, pp. 385-86.

⁵² Chinese records show that the Air Force claimed the shootdown of seventeen drones, of which three had been victims of Chinese ground-to-air missiles, while Naval fighters brought down three. See *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjung*, p. 385; *Haijunshi*, pp. 144-45.

to intercept the second group of F-4B's, but Chinese pilots were instructed not to fire unless fired upon. In the initial engagement, neither side fired. According to Chinese reports, during the next round an F-4B fired two AIM-7 Sparrow air-to-air missiles, which overshot and hit a Phantom.⁵³ This account cannot be corroborated in American sources. The U.S. pilots believed that they were flying thirty-six miles southwest of Hainan Island, while the Pentagon insisted that American aircraft were prohibited from flying into China's air space.⁵⁴ In any event, the incident forced Beijing to change its policy.

The beginning of sustained U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and the introduction of U.S. combat troops into South Vietnam aggravated Beijing's fear that the United States was on a course of direct confrontation with China. Beijing had quickly adopted its strategy that China would not stand idly by, but would send its military forces into North Vietnam if the U.S. launched a ground attack against Hanoi. China would not initiate direct military confrontation with the United States; but would make it clear to Washington that a ground attack would risk war with China.⁵⁵ In a four-point statement to Pakistan's leader to be forwarded to President Johnson on April 2, 1965, Zhou Enlai expressed China's policy toward U.S. aggression in Vietnam. China would not provoke a war with the United States, he said. But he stressed Beijing's continued willingness to provide aid to any country opposing U.S. aggression. Zhou warned that if the United States imposed war on China, including the use of nuclear weapons, the Chinese would not limit their response, implying that China would carry the war throughout Southeast Asia.⁵⁶

⁵³ Although Chinese sources claim no loss of their planes in the incident, the U.S. Navy nevertheless believed that one Jian-5 was probably shot down. René J. Francillon, *Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club: U.S. Carrier Operations off Vietnam*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), p. 35. For Chinese records, see *Dangdai Zhongguo haijun*, pp. 357-58; *Haijunshi*, pp. 145-46.

⁵⁴ CINCPAC to NMCC, April 9, 1965, National Security Files, LBJ. *Peking Review*, no. 16, April 16, 1965, pp. 5-6.

⁵⁵ Chen Jian, "China's Involvement with the Vietnam War."

⁵⁶ *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao*, pp. 160-61. Also see The Office of Diplomatic History of Chinese Foreign Ministry, eds., *Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong dashiji, 1949-1975*, p. 455.

As early as February, Washington had informed China that it had no intention of destroying North Vietnam, nor any desire for a direct confrontation with China.⁵⁷ However, U.S. war planes' intrusion into Hainan Island air space on two consecutive days, along with sustained bombing of North Vietnam, increased Beijing's concerns. On April 9, the PLA General Staff Headquarters made a full report about the incident over Hainan to Zhou Enlai and the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the CCP. The report stated that the American military aircraft's actions constituted a direct threat to China, and requested permission for the PLA air force to attack U.S. war planes over China's air space. The CMC immediately granted approval. Zhou Enlai pointed out that the existing policy did not suit the current situation. Mao concurred, and ordered that the best units of the air force and navy be sent to southern China to strike relentless blows at any U.S. aircraft that invaded China's air space.⁵⁸

On April 12, the Chinese Air Force stressed that its troops should not only be poised for combat over border areas but should be on standby for a possible large-scale war inside China.⁵⁹ Under this new policy, air force and naval aviation units changed their overall military posture in Yunnan, Guangxi, Leizhou peninsula and Hainan Island. PLA units began deliberately engaging U.S. war planes that overflowed China's air space during their combat operations against the DRV.⁶⁰ Beijing records show that between August 1964 and November 1968, U.S. war planes flew 383 sorties in 155 groups over China's air space. The Chinese air force in Guangxi flew more than 2,138 sorties in combat in response to the U.S. threat from the air. China claimed that

⁵⁷ For this account, see John Cabot to State Department, March 1, 1965, "Cabot-Wang Talks: Report of 124th meeting, February 24, 1965," National Security Council File: Poland, Box 202, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

⁵⁸ *Mao Zedong junshi wenji* [A Collection of Mao Zedong's Military Paper] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 1993), vol. 6, p. 403; also see *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 601.

⁵⁹ *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 385; *Kongjunshi* [History of the Air Force], by the Air Force Headquarters Compiling and Research Office, (Beijing: Jiefangjun Press, 1989), p. 188.

⁶⁰ *Kongjunshi*, p. 191.

twelve American war planes were shot down, with another four reportedly damaged.⁶¹ However, Washington confirmed only five losses.⁶²

The change in China's attitude toward incursions by U.S. war planes reflected Beijing's concern about Washington's intentions in Vietnam. China's responses demonstrated to Washington as well as to Hanoi the seriousness and firmness of Beijing's stand. The most important aspect of this new policy appeared to have more to do with the politically determined strategy of defense. Later evidence showed that Hanoi's leaders had solicited China's air support, but throughout the war the Chinese air force was never directly engaged in operations over North Vietnam. It is clear that Beijing attempted to keep the military option in low key. Beijing in 1965 drew the line of air defense at the border, hoping to give Americans no excuse to enlarge the theater of war.⁶³ When Washington increased its military pressure on Hanoi by extending air bombardments closer to the China border in Spring 1966, the Chinese began to defend their southern air frontier more vigorously. Warning radar was required to monitor the activities of enemy planes across the border, while PLA planes were ready to take off for military engagement. On several occasions, Chinese planes crossed the border to engage Americans over North Vietnam.⁶⁴ Although these actions remained primarily defensive, the possibility of Sino-U.S. clash over either North Vietnamese or Chinese air space increased. The situation became even

⁶¹ *Kongjunshi*, pp. 390-92; *Dangdai Zhongguo haijun*, pp. 359-62; Liu and Jiao, "Operations against Invading American Planes in the Chinese-Vietnamese Border Area in Guangxi," p. 566.

⁶² U.S. sources admitted the possible loss of an F-105 over China instead of an RA-3D on October 5, 1965. See Intelligence Memorandum, and September 20, and October 9, 1965, National Security Files, LBJ. Also see *Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club: U.S. Carrier Operations off Vietnam*.

⁶³ Liao Guoliang et al., *Mao Zedong junshi sixian fazhanshi*, p. 460; Liu and Jiao, "Operations against Invading American Planes in the Chinese-Vietnamese Border Area in Guangxi," p. 563.

⁶⁴ American records show that at least 13 Chinese crossings into North Vietnam were tracked during the first five months of 1966. Intelligence Memorandum, May 25, 1966, National Security Files: China, Box 244, LBJ Library.

more complicated when all North Vietnamese air bases were destroyed in 1967, forcing North Vietnamese planes to move to bases in China. Chinese records thus far published give no details about China's sanctuary policy toward PAVN air force, but Chinese commanders acknowledged that friendly operations did complicate Chinese's air defense.⁶⁵ During the same period (April 24 to August 21, 1967), the PLA claimed that seven U.S. planes were shot down over China and one American pilot was captured. However, wreckage of only two American planes was found inside China.⁶⁶ This account leaves the record somewhat confused as to whether these engagements occurred over China or North Vietnam.

III. China's Commitment to the DRV Against a Possible U.S. Invasion

Although the direct Sino-U.S. confrontation that Chinese leaders feared in the early 1960s did not occur, Chinese leaders remained on the alert to the U.S. escalation in Vietnam. Shortly after the formal establishment of MACV, Chinese and Vietnamese leaders discussed the seriousness of the situation in the South and concluded that there was a strong possibility of a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam. Beijing agreed to increase its arms supplies to Hanoi.⁶⁷ In March 1963, Luo Ruiqing was sent to Hanoi to further discuss the possibility of a U.S. attack on North Vietnam. During his stay, both sides studied the situation, determined the nature and extent of China's assistance to North Vietnam, and planned joint operations to counter a U.S. invasion.

⁶⁵ Chinese records reveal that Vietnamese aviation schools stayed at Xiangyun airfield in Yunnan and Liuzhou airfield in Guangxi for ten years (1965-1975). Liu and Jiao, "Operations against Invading American Planes in the Chinese-Vietnamese Border Area in Guangxi," p. 563; Li and Hao, *Wenhua dagenming zhong de remin jiefangjun*, p. 426.

⁶⁶ Chinese records show that the PLA Air Force shot down two F-4B's on April 24, two A-4B's on May 1, and two A-6A's on August 21, while the Navy claimed to down one F-4C on June 26. In terms of the August 21 incident, the Chinese pilot claimed that he had shot down the third plane, but did not count it because the wreckage was not recovered inside China. See *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 391; *Dangdai Zhongguo haijun*, pp. 360-61; Liu and Jiao, "Operations against Invading American Planes in the Chinese-Vietnamese Border Area in Guangxi," p. 566.

⁶⁷ It was in the summer of 1962, when Ho Chi Minh and Nguyen Chi Thanh visited Beijing, that the leaders of the two countries had the first opportunity to discuss the possible U.S. invasion of North Vietnam. See Guo et al., *Zhongyue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, p. 69.

During a visit to Hanoi in May, PRC President Liu Shaoqi claimed that the Chinese would stand firmly with the Vietnamese and that China would be Hanoi's rear base if a war erupted. In June 1964, Mao told Van Tien Dung that China would regard Vietnam's problems as her own, and urged close cooperation between China and North Vietnam in order to deal with any U.S. invasion.⁶⁸

The introduction of U.S. combat units into the South in early 1965 heightened the possibility of a U.S. ground attack on North Vietnam. It appeared that Hanoi needed more support. During the first week of April, Le Duan, First Secretary of the Lao Dong Party, and Vo Nguyen Giap, Vice-premier and Minister of Defense, made a sudden and unannounced visit to China. The Vietnamese leaders asked Beijing for more assistance, including the deployment of Chinese military forces to North Vietnam for defense, engineering and logistics work. This most important development in connection with Le Duan's visit to Beijing did not appear in any public record, leading Western scholars to speculate that Le Duan's trip to Beijing was less successful than his recent visit to Moscow. The most Le Duan received, one study incorrectly concluded, was China's conditional promise to offer volunteers.⁶⁹

On April 8, the North Vietnamese leaders met Liu Shaoqi, who was then handling the daily activities of the party and state.⁷⁰ Le Duan told the Chinese leader that the DRV wanted "volunteer pilots, volunteer fighters" and also "engineering units for constructing and repairing railroads, highways, and bridges." He noted that Chinese forces would help defend Hanoi and areas north of Hanoi from U.S. air bombardment, which would also raise the morale of the Vietnamese people. But more important, Duan emphasized that the deployment of Chinese troops would allow Hanoi to send its own soldiers to the South, while restricting U.S. bombardment to areas south of

⁶⁸ *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao*, p. 159.

⁶⁹ For example, see Smyser, *The Independent Vietnamese*, pp. 89-90.

⁷⁰ During the period of economic retrenchment, Mao Zedong spent much of his time away from the capital, disengaging himself from routine decision making.

the 20th or 19th parallels.⁷¹ Thus, Le Duan's invitation of the Chinese deployment primarily aimed at deterring the U.S. escalation of the war in Vietnam. Liu reiterated Beijing's promise that China's aid to Vietnam against the United States was "an unshakable duty of the Chinese people and the Communist Party." The Chinese, Liu continued, would do their best to assist North Vietnam with anything that Hanoi needed and that Beijing could offer. So far as sending Chinese troops was concerned, the Vietnamese leaders had the initiative in deciding what PLA units they wanted to come into Vietnam, and Beijing would send them only at Hanoi's request.⁷²

Four days later, the Central Committee of the CCP issued instructions calling upon the party, the military, and the people of China to make every effort to support the Vietnamese people in resisting U.S. aggression. Meanwhile, a military delegation consisting of forty-five high ranking officers of the PLA departed for Hanoi in response to a North Vietnamese invitation. Its mission was to prepare for the deployment of Chinese troops in the north of the DRV.⁷³ On April 17, the CMC ordered the organization of Chinese troops to assist North Vietnam against the United States. Three special division-sized units formed the first Chinese deployment. They were designated as the Corps of the Chinese Rear Services (*Zhongguo houjin budui*).⁷⁴

On April 20 and 21, further discussions were held between Vo Nguyen Giap, Luo Ruiqing and Yang Chenwu in Beijing. They hammered out the program for the PLA's deployment and mission in North Vietnam. Agreements were subsequently reached between the two sides. China's greatest concern then was that the U.S. would conduct an amphibious assault on the North, replicating Douglas MacArthur's successful Inchon landing in Korea more than a decade

⁷¹ Li and Hao, *Wenhua dageming shong de jiefangjun*, p. 415; *Beijing Review*, no. 48, November 30, 1979, p. 14.

⁷² *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, pp. 539-40.

⁷³ Shang Like, "Setting out in advance to prepare for assistance to Vietnam and fighting against America" in *Xuesha Yuenan* [Shedding Blood in Vietnam], Shang Like and Xing Ziyuan, ed., (Beijing: China Personnel Press, 1993), pp. 124-25.

⁷⁴ Xie Lifu, *Yuenan zhanzheng shilu*, vol. 2, p. 355; Wang Xianguan, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 39.

earlier. Beijing agreed with Hanoi's urgent request of April 17, agreeing to send one Chinese military unit immediately to defend the northeast islands and the coast between Haiphong and Hon Gai, while constructing defense works there.⁷⁵ Chinese railway engineering troops worked to improve the rail lines between Hanoi and China to handle the increasing flow of Chinese supplies.⁷⁶ In accordance with an agreement between the two countries in January 1965, Chinese Air Force engineering units constructed a new airfield, including hangars and parking aprons in mountain caves, at Yen Bai, some 140 kilometers northwest of Hanoi on the rail line running from Kunming to Hanoi along the Red River.⁷⁷

Shortly after Beijing's initial decision to send troops to North Vietnam, Hanoi requested an additional Chinese deployment. On May 16, 1965, Ho Chi Minh himself, accompanied by Xuan Thuy and Le Van Luong, secretly arrived at Changsha.⁷⁸ He met with Mao, who was conducting an inspection tour in Hunan, and asked that China help construct roads in North Vietnam. Ho asserted that in order to step up insurgency in the south to match the U.S. escalation, he needed to build infiltration routes and move his troops south. Ho handed Mao a sketched map of twelve roads he wanted China to build or repair, and Mao immediately telephoned Zhou Enlai in Beijing to make arrangements to do the work.⁷⁹

Prior to 1965, the land route for supplies was secondary to the sea route; 70% of Chinese

⁷⁵ Li and Hao, *Wehnhua dageming shong de jiefangjun*, p. 418; Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 48 and 67.

⁷⁶ Li and Hao, *Wehnhua dageming shong de jiefangjun*, p. 421; Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 97-98.

⁷⁷ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 543.

⁷⁸ The exact date of Ho's trip to China come from recently published extracts from the diary of his personal secretary: *Bac Ho viet Di chuc: Hoi ky cua Vu Ky* (Hanoi: Su-that Publishing House, April 1989), cited from R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. III, p. 139.

⁷⁹ Li and Hao, *Wehnhua dageming shong de jiefangjun*, p. 422; Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 7, 38 and 40; Xie Lifu, *Yuenan zhanzheng shilu*, vol. 2, pp. 354-55.

supplies was shipped to the People's Liberation Armed Force (PLAF) via this sea route. Two ports on Hainan Island were used to handle the south-bound supplies. Chinese vessels traveled to several central Vietnamese off-shore islands, from whence Vietnamese junks and fishing boats transshipped the supplies to the Viet Cong-controlled regions. Since 1965, the U.S. Navy's Operation Sea Dragon had essentially closed this route for Chinese shipments. China then built a special transport line to South Vietnam via Cambodia for supplies to the PLAF.⁸⁰ U.S. officials in Saigon in November 1968 believed that one-third of all supplies came through this route.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the rapid build-up of Communist forces in the South changed the situation somewhat; the PLAF and PAVN troops in the South could no longer get adequate supplies from the sea route and were forced to rely more on the land routes. Hanoi decided to improve the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran from southern North Vietnam via eastern Laos into South Vietnam.

On May 25, the State Council and the CMC called a meeting at the *Zhongnanhai* (the CCP's Headquarters) to discuss Hanoi's new request. The chief participants were Luo Ruiqing, Yang Chenwu, and other senior government and military officials from the Headquarters of the General Staff, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Communication, and other government agencies. The Headquarters of the General Staff believed that Hanoi's new request would engage another 100,000 troops in North Vietnam. Zhou emphasized that China's involvement in road building should concentrate on projects vital to military operations.⁸² After further negotiations between the Chinese and North Vietnamese governments, Beijing decided to send another 80,000 troops to build seven roads in North Vietnam. In June, the Road Construction Headquarters was created, commanding three engineering divisions, anti-aircraft

⁸⁰ *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao*, pp. 280-81; Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 128-29; Hoang Van Hoan, *Changhai yisu: Hoang Van Hoan geming huiyilu* [A drop in the ocean: Hoang Van Hoan's Revolutionary Reminiscences], (Beijing: PLA Press, 1987), p. 269.

⁸¹ See Jon M. Van Dyke, *North Vietnamese Strategy For Survival*, p. 43.

⁸² Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 39-42.

artillery units and other supporting units.⁸³ In the meantime, Beijing set up a seven member committee headed by Luo Ruiqing to take charge of all matters regarding assistance and military operations in North Vietnam.⁸⁴

North Vietnamese leaders appeared to be satisfied with China's response to Hanoi's requests. During his visit to Beijing in early June, Van Tien Dung told Luo Ruiqing that the Vietnamese were able to fight the war by themselves, with Chinese military and material support, because the U.S. had involved its ground troops only in the South while bombing the North from the air. However, he wanted China to send two anti-aircraft artillery divisions to defend Hanoi and the railroads between Hanoi and the Chinese border. During further discussion, Dung laid out Hanoi's need for Chinese military involvement under other contingencies. He stated that China should provide Hanoi with the services of its air force and navy if the U.S. air force and navy became involved in supporting a South Vietnamese invasion of the North. As to the form that Chinese air support could take, Hanoi believed that 1) China could send volunteer pilots to fly Vietnamese planes in combat; 2) Chinese pilots and planes could operate from Vietnamese air fields; or 3) Chinese planes could take off from air bases in China to engage Americans over Vietnam. In the event of a U.S. ground attack on the North, Chinese troops were to serve as Hanoi's strategic reserves, ready to assist in defense or to launch a counterattack to take back the strategic initiative. Again, Luo's answer was in the affirmative; Chinese troops would enter the

⁸³ They were designated as the 4th, 5th and 6th Units of the Chinese Rear Services and the Headquarters were set up at Ban Phi a few miles south of the border. Luo Hongbiao, deputy director of the Scientific Research Institute of the Central Military Commission Engineering Headquarters, was appointed as acting commander, while Sun Zheng, Political Commissar of the 47th Field Army, served as Political Commissar, and Wang Chuanxun, Deputy Commander of the 13th Field Army, was Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff. Wang Xianguan, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 164.

⁸⁴ They were Luo Ruiqing, Li Xianlien (Vice-premier), Bo Yibo (Vice-premier), Liu Xiaojun (Foreign Ministry), Yang Chenwu, Li Qiang (Foreign Trade Ministry), and Li Tianyou (Deputy Chief of Staff). After Luo's purge in December 1965, Li Xianlien became the head of this committee. When the Cultural Revolution started, it was Zhou Enlai who actually took charge of activities concerning China's assistance to Vietnam. Li and Hao, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 413; Xie Lifu, *Yuenan zhanzheng shilu*, vol. 2, pp. 356-57; Wang Xianguan, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 41-42.

war in the form and at the time Hanoi preferred, and they would be under Hanoi's command.⁸⁵

However, in 1988 Vietnamese scholars told their American counterparts that in June 1965 China had informed Hanoi that it would be unable to provide air cover for North Vietnam despite an earlier promise to do so. The Vietnamese "White Book" of 1979 also revealed that in July 1965 Beijing had refused Hanoi's request to send Chinese pilots to Vietnam because the Chinese believed that "the time was not appropriate."⁸⁶ Although the Chinese sources cited above clearly differ from these Vietnamese accounts, there are several points worth noting. Beijing appeared to have made a general promise in 1964 to provide North Vietnam with air cover. The question could be raised as to whether China would have been able to provide the kind of air support that would have been effective against the Americans at a time when the Chinese economy was such that China appeared unable to modernize its own air force. But Le Duan's visit to Moscow in the spring of 1965 appeared fruitful. The Soviet Union agreed to aid Hanoi with sophisticated air defense system, and asked China to allow the Soviet air force to use one or two airfields in southern China, on the pretext of providing aid to Hanoi with MIG-21s. Of course, the Chinese turned down the Soviet request.⁸⁷ However, this development might have forced Beijing's leaders to take a second look at their promise to provide air cover for Hanoi. Hanoi's conditions for receiving Chinese air support, set up in June 1965, offered Beijing the opportunity to decide the appropriate time for Chinese intervention. Thus, a Chinese decision about military intervention would be based not only upon Hanoi's request, but also upon U.S. actions.

Although China's military commitment to Hanoi was definite, Beijing's leaders had no intention of provoking a direct Sino-American confrontation under the current circumstances. In 1965, Zhou Enlai repeatedly told foreign leaders that China would not initiate war with the United

⁸⁵ Li and Hao, *Wehnhua dageming shong de jiefangjun*, pp. 417 and 423..

⁸⁶ Allan Whiting, "China's Role in the Vietnam War," in *The American War in Vietnam*, Jayne Werner and David Hunt eds., (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1993), p. 73; R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 2, p. 171.

⁸⁷ Hoang Van Hoan, *Yue Zhong zhandou de youyi shishi burong waiqu*, p. 11.

States, but would be ready to fight back if Washington imposed the war on China.⁸⁸ In order to avoid putting China in a politically and diplomatically disadvantageous position, Beijing did not want the Chinese military involvement in North Vietnam to receive excessive publicity. All troops deployed to North Vietnam were disguised by designating them as the Chinese Rear Services, and Chinese soldiers were dressed in PAVN uniforms, while the railway engineering troops continued to wear their blue work clothes.⁸⁹ Hanoi initially wanted the Chinese to provide air defense down to the 19th parallel, but Beijing, in spite of its strong commitment to Hanoi's cause, made it clear that Chinese AAA units in North Vietnam should not be deployed beyond the 21th parallel.⁹⁰

One consideration that might be drawn is that Beijing did not wish to give America any excuse to exploit the situation, but another view is that Hanoi did not want the outside world to know about North Vietnamese weaknesses in their war against the United States. The North Vietnamese, who had always considered themselves strong and independent, were sensitive about being in a position of dependence upon China's help.⁹¹ Traditional Vietnamese resentment against China's Han-chauvinism also prevented Hanoi's leaders from letting Chinese troops remain openly in Vietnam. Indeed, the relationship between the Chinese troops and Hanoi was not always characterized by cordiality and trust. The DRV government often prevented its nationals from fraternizing with Chinese troops during their stay in North Vietnam.⁹² Despite the negative effects of the Chinese military presence, the DRV leaders felt it necessary to get China militarily involved at a level sufficient to keep an intensive guerrilla war going in the South, to counter U.S. air attacks

⁸⁸ *Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong dashiji*, pp. 445, 456, 460, and 474.

⁸⁹ The troops deployed in North Vietnam were designated as from the 1st Unit to the 7th Unit. Each detachment consisted of 6 to 8 regiment-size units. The antiaircraft artillery divisions continued to use their regular designations under the name of the Chinese Rear-service troops. Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 217-18.

⁹⁰ Li and Hao, *Wehnhua dageming shong de jiefangjun*, p. 415.

⁹¹ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*, p. 50. Van Dyke, *North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival*, pp. 216-17.

⁹² Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 54-71.

on the North, and to deter a U.S. ground invasion of the North. However, Hanoi was careful to set the stage for a minimum of Chinese military involvement in Vietnam.

Chinese leaders were aware of Vietnamese sensitivities. Prior to their deployment to North Vietnam, Chinese troops were instructed about the "traditional friendship" between China and Vietnam and they were reminded of China's international obligations. The Political Department of the PLA issued a "discipline handbook," requiring Chinese soldiers to "respect the Vietnamese government and the People's Army of Vietnam," and "not to contend for triumphs and captures."⁹³ In short, Beijing would keep Chinese military operations in line with Hanoi's demands. There is little evidence to support the assertion that China's support was conditional or used as a bargaining device in the Sino-Soviet dispute.⁹⁴

Following intensified U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and the introduction of U.S. combat units into South Vietnam, both Hanoi and Beijing were concerned about the possibility of a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam. Few could be under any illusions, especially in the light of Washington's misreading China's signals in the Korean war and Pyongyang's ignorance of China's warnings about a U.S. landing at Inchon in 1950. This time Beijing would move forward more resolutely. On June 9, a special division-size organization of the PLA was deployed to the northeast coast of the DRV. It consisted of three combat engineering regiments, one artillery regiment, one antiaircraft artillery regiment, one motor transport regiment, one landline communications regiment, one naval transport group and one submarine cable engineering group, with more than 20,000 military personnel. Its mission, according to the CMC's order, was to assist the PAVN in defending the coast, while building defense and security works along the coast

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 69, 105; also see *Xuesha Yuenan*, Shang Like and Xing Ziyuan, ed., pp. 58-59.

⁹⁴ For this assertion, see Jay Taylor, *China and Southeast Asia*, p. 48; Douglas Pike, *PAVN*, pp. 52-53; W.R. Smyser, *The Independent Vietnam*, pp. 97, 100; Van Dyke, *North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival*, p. 218.

and on some major islands.⁹⁵

Despite their engineering mission in North Vietnam, the combat-oriented structure of Chinese troops was a clear indication of their role. The engineering regiment received a reinforcement of adding one 37-mm antiaircraft artillery battalion, one 85-mm field gun company, one 82-mm mortar company, and other service companies, numbering about 4,000 soldiers. The engineering battalions had a strength of four companies supported by antiaircraft machine gun, heavy machine gun, recoilless rifle, and signal platoons.⁹⁶ From Beijing's standpoint, this deployment would provide first line defense, along with the railway engineering units, which were also ordered to prepare for combat should the U.S. launch ground attacks.⁹⁷

After the completion of the defense work along the northeast coast in October 1966, the Chinese government continued to help Hanoi build a second defense line in the Red River Delta. That project stretched over hundreds of miles, from Phu Binh in the north to Ninh Binh in the south, and from Vinh Phu in the west to Haiphong in the east. Underground structures and defense works were built at some 121 sites throughout eight provinces of the DRV. The southernmost work site was at Dat Bang Son, only six miles from the 17th parallel. According to Chinese sources, Beijing sent another three engineering regiments, along with several AAA battalions, totaling 16,000 soldiers, to engage in construction work in the Red River Delta.⁹⁸ Prior to crossing the Yalu River in mid-October, 1950, no preparations in the form of prepositioned defense works and advance base development had been made for China's

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 51; *Haijunshi*, p. 173.

⁹⁶ Xie Lifu, *Yuenan zhanzheng shilu*, vol. 2, p. 362; Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 47-48.

⁹⁷ When the commander of the railway engineering unit received his orders to aid North Vietnam, he was asked to make ready for combat at any moment. Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 139.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 143-46. Also see Qu Aiguo, "Chinese Supporters in the Operations to Assist Vietnam and Resist America," *Junshi shilin* [The Circle of Military History], no. 6, 1989, pp. 41-42; *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, pp. 540-42.

intervention in the Korean war. Now, in 1965-1966, massive defense works, together with the Chinese deployment of troops, would permit a forceful response to U.S. attacks on North Vietnam.⁹⁹

IV. The Chinese Military Versus the Rolling Thunder Operations in North Vietnam

U.S. strategy was based on dissuading Hanoi from sending men and materiel into South Vietnam. Bombing the North Vietnamese communications and supply systems appeared to offer a sound deterrent. The Rolling Thunder operations were launched for such purposes. Beginning in April 1965, North Vietnamese railroads, highways and bridges were key targets for U.S. warplanes. At the request of the DRV government, on April 10, 1965, a Chinese military and railroad delegation departed for North Vietnam to study Vietnamese railroad conditions and to recommend how many Chinese engineering and air defense troops would be needed to keep them operational.

On April 27, 1965, the Chinese and North Vietnamese governments signed an agreement in Beijing that China would undertake some one hundred projects to increase the transportation capacity of the rail lines between Hanoi and China, including improving existing railroads and facilities, building a new link line between Thai Nguyen and Kep along with new rail yards, and widening and reinforcing bridges. The 2nd Railway Engineering Division at Changsha was assigned to take the mission and designated as the 1st Unit of the Chinese Rear Services, with a strength of six engineering regiments and one AAA regiment from the Army 63rd AAA Division. On June 23, 1965, the entire unit was deployed along the rail lines between Hanoi and Yunan and Guangxi.¹⁰⁰

Hanoi's goal of the war, William Duiker notes, was not to totally defeat the enemy but to

⁹⁹ According to Chinese records, these defense works included 239 tunnels, totaling 25,000 meters long, 138 artillery emplacements revetted into tunnels, 123 permanent bastions, 26 observation posts, etc. See Li and Hao, *Wehnhua dageming shong de jiefangjun*, p. 419.

¹⁰⁰ *Xuesha Yuenan*, p. 55; *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 545; Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 98.

foil Washington's war scheme in Vietnam up to the point where the Americans were willing to "accept a negotiated settlement of the war."¹⁰¹ However, North Vietnam was one of the world's poorest nations, possessing neither munitions plants nor industry vital to its war effort. Only a large infusion of aid from China could enable the country to survive and achieve this strategic objective. The railroads between Hanoi and China thus not only formed a vital element of North Vietnam's military-industrial complex as a channel for imports, but they substantiated Beijing's pledge that "China provides a vast rear." The existing railroads were meter gauge track in poor condition, and required transshipment for rail cars at points of entry from the standard gauge of the Chinese rail line. Improvement of the rail system was vital. Thus, the Chinese Command concentrated its manpower and resources on the construction of a rail bypass around Hanoi, a rail line between Kep and Thai Nguyen, and on converting much of the track from meter gauge to dual gauge.

Beginning in September 1965, U.S. strategy shifted to interdiction of supplies between the border and Hanoi. Rail cars, bridges and tracks were among the earliest American targets. Chinese troops were called upon to repair the 554 kilometers of railroad between Hanoi and China damaged by U.S. air attacks. In 1967, U.S. bombing of rail lines north of Hanoi reached its highest intensity. In June alone, U.S. warplanes dropped 9.6 tons of bombs on every kilometer of the rail lines, while hitting every meter of major bridges and rail yards with 4.4 tons and 1.3 tons, respectively.¹⁰² The Chinese rail engineering troops, having learned from the Korean War, were determined to maintain an uninterrupted transportation line in North Vietnam. The rail complex at Kep, for example, was bombed forty-eight times and suffered severe damage from almost every strike, but it was always quickly repaired and remained operational throughout the air war.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ William Duiker, "Waging Revolutionary War: The Evolution of Hanoi's Strategy in the South, 1959-1965" in *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huyhn, eds., p. 30.

¹⁰² *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 546.

¹⁰³ Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 106.

Probably the greatest challenge to keeping the North Vietnamese transportation system open came when U.S. leaders decided to attack targets within and near Hanoi. In the summer of 1967, the Long Bien Bridge (the Paul Doumer) became a prime target. Thus, the stage was set for a major effort against U.S. interdiction. The Long Bien Bridge, on the outskirts of Hanoi, served as the rail entry to Hanoi for the east (Haiphong) and the west (Lao Cai) lines as well as feeder lines from Kep, Thai Nguyen and Dong Dang to the north. On August 11, this 1,680-meter bridge was hit by U.S. bombers. One rail span dropped into the water and two highway spans were damaged. Chinese soldiers were ordered to complete its repair within forty days. The next day two Chinese railway engineering battalions threw themselves into the work around the clock, while a rail ferry was established to by-pass the bombed-out bridge. By September 30, the bridge was restored for traffic. Twenty-seven trains passed over the bridge during the first 24 hours. The Long Bien Bridge suffered repeated attacks by U.S. warplanes, but it was usually back in use within a month or so. In December two heavy attacks put the bridge out of action for six months, but Chinese engineers used a ferry and a pontoon bridge to provide a by-pass for the traffic across the Red River.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, U.S. air attacks on the North Vietnamese rail transportation system produced considerable damage. North Vietnamese leaders later acknowledged that the bombing destroyed virtually all transportation and communications facilities built after 1954.¹⁰⁵ However, U.S. bombing failed to coerce Hanoi into suspending its support for the revolution in the South, and the presence of Chinese railway engineering troops significantly reduced the effects of the air strikes. By February 1969, Chinese units had made 1,778 repairs, including 157 kilometers of railroad and 1,420 kilometers of telephone lines. Meanwhile, 3,100 delayed-action bombs had been either

¹⁰⁴ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 547.

¹⁰⁵ Vietnam Communist Party Central Committee Political Report, Fourth Party Congress, December 1976; and *Vietnam: Destruction, War Damage* (Hanoi: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1977), p. 28.

removed or defused.¹⁰⁶ By the time Chinese railway engineering units returned to China in July 1970, the rail system in northern North Vietnam had been impressively improved: 217 kilometers of rail lines (including 98 kilometers of lines for military purposes), along with 30 rail bridges and 14 tunnels had been built; 362 kilometers of existing railroads had been updated; and 20 railway stations and switching yards had been built or repaired. The transportation capacity of the Hanoi-Youyiguan line increased from 1.64 million to 2.80 million tons of goods annually.¹⁰⁷

Improvements and new construction of North Vietnamese railroads had provided a reliable conduit for war supplies.

Since October 1965, 800,000 Chinese troops had also been engaged in improving the road system in northern DRV. They initially concentrated on increasing transportation capacity of the highway (Route 3) from China to Hanoi via Cao Bang and Thai Nguyen, and on building bypass and alternate lines (Route 7, 8, and 10) in order to improve movement of North Vietnamese troops in the North. Chinese troops then improved Route 1 from Bien Nghi to Ban Chat in northeast Vietnam, and built two new roads (Routes 11 and 12) to ease traffic flow between the northwest and the Red River Delta. When the U.S. intensified its air interdiction campaign north of Hanoi, Chinese units were also called upon to repair Route 2 between Tuyen Quang and Thanh That. Because of U.S. bombings, most construction was undertaken under extremely difficult conditions; nevertheless, China claimed that by June 1968, Chinese troops had built 1,206 kilometers of highways, including 305 bridges and 4,441 culverts.¹⁰⁸

Improvements and new construction not only resulted in a substantially increased capacity for moving Chinese supplies to North Vietnam, and from there to the South, but also provided flexibility and better year-round movement. In an assessment of the effect of U.S. air strikes on

¹⁰⁶ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 547.

¹⁰⁷ Wang Xiangeng, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, p. 109-10.

¹⁰⁸ *Dangdai Zhongguo Jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, pp. 548 -49; Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 197-98, 256. .

North Vietnam, the Institute for Defense Analysis stated that the DRV's transportation system by the end of 1967 had become less vulnerable to interdiction than prior to initiation of the Rolling Thunder program.¹⁰⁹ It is most important to note that American policy makers were wrong in believing that bombing North Vietnam would force Hanoi to keep manpower there rather than send it south. Since thousands of Chinese troops were involved in the war against interdiction in North Vietnam, Hanoi was actually able to free a large number of its own men and thus to embark upon a further expansion of fighting in the South.

Despite early concerns about U.S. ground attack on the DRV, the Chinese deployments in North Vietnam actually engaged in a relentless anti-air warfare during the years of 1965 to 1968. Rolling Thunder's focus was on strategic persuasion, attempting to coerce the North Vietnamese into abandoning their support of the southern insurgency. Initially, Rolling Thunder strikes concentrated on targets in the southern part of the DRV. After mid-1965, the focus of Rolling Thunder switched from strategic persuasion to interdiction. The bombings were extended to attack important bridges and segments of rail lines between Hanoi and the Chinese border. On July 24, 1965, the DRV's Military General Staff Directorate formally requested Beijing to send the two Chinese antiaircraft artillery divisions to defend North Vietnam not later than August 1. The next day, Beijing informed Hanoi that two AAA divisions and one regiment would enter Vietnam immediately, and take responsibility for defending two railroads between Hanoi and China.¹¹⁰

On August 1, 1965, two army AAA divisions (61st and 63rd) of four regiments each (including the 23rd regiment from the Air Force) became the first Chinese air defense deployment in North Vietnam. They were principally responsible for protecting supply routes and facilities in

¹⁰⁹ Institute for Defense Analysis, "The Bombing of North Vietnam," December 16, 1967, National Security Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

¹¹⁰ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 552. Li and Hao, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 423. According to some other sources, the 61st AAA division received its mission order on July 20, 1965. It is possible that an informal request by North Vietnam had been made earlier, supposedly on July 16. Xie Lifu, *Yuenan zhanzheng shilu*, vol. 2, p. 366. Also see Smith, p. 171.

the north of Hanoi. Late in 1966, China added a third division (62nd), along with five independent battalions, to the Thai Nguyen iron and steel complex as a response to heavier attacks on Hanoi, Haiphong and the border area. By March 1969 (when Chinese forces were withdrawn), sixteen divisions (63 regiments), together with other support units, involving a total of 150,000 Chinese troops, had served in air defense on a six to eight-month rotation basis.¹¹¹,

According to the official history, Chinese air defense units fought their first battle on August 9, 1965, against American planes attacking the Yen Bai area, supposedly downing one F-4C jet. On August 23, another AAA unit also claimed that it had shot down one U.S. plane and damaged another over the Kep area.¹¹² But the real combat between Chinese AAA units and U.S. planes did not transpire until October when Washington escalated its bombing operations in the North.

During the Vietnam War, Chinese AAA units were mainly equipped with outdated 37-mm and 85-mm guns, which were inferior for use against modern U.S. aircraft. The Chinese troops developed the strategy of concentrating antiaircraft sites around significant targets. At Yen Bai, where Chinese engineering troops were involved in the construction of a large military complex including a long runway and cave structures, the 61st Division deployed two regiments to protect the area. Even smaller targets like the Tong Hoa Rail Bridge several miles south of Lang Son bristled with antiaircraft guns.¹¹³ As the air war continued, defenses were intensified around many important targets. For example, during the Air Force 7th AAA Division's tour of duty in North Vietnam, it used twenty-four batteries around the Kep railroad classification yards.¹¹⁴

In North Vietnam, concentrating anti-aircraft guns maximized their effectiveness and formed the heaviest AAA environment in all aerial warfare. On March 10-11, 1967, the U.S.

¹¹¹ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 550. *Kongjunshi*, p. 207.

¹¹² *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 551.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, pp. 404-5.

military flew 107 sorties in 33 groups against the Thai Nguyen Steel Complex. Chinese antiaircraft emplacements surrounded the steel plant and power plant. In two days of combat, the Chinese claimed that they shot down eighteen U.S. planes and damaged five, while capturing ten American pilots. On the Chinese side, thirteen people died and thirty five were wounded, but the steel complex was little harmed.¹¹⁵

During the battle, Chinese gunners were encouraged to aim at a particular attacker and fire at the closest possible range. According to one Chinese account, on January 5, 1968, when U.S. aircraft made systematic runs against targets along the rail line between Kep and Dap Cau, the Chinese antiaircraft units engaged the U.S. attackers eleven times. Ten times they used three to five or more AAA batteries to fire at one target. At the most intense, twelve batteries poured their fire on a single enemy plane. As a result, they claimed their victory that day, shooting down nine U.S. planes and damaging three others, while only one rail bridge under their protection suffered bombing damage.¹¹⁶

Chinese antiaircraft gun batteries shifted position from day to day to increase their effectiveness against attacking planes. Due to Washington-imposed political restraints on air warfare over North Vietnam, throughout the Rolling Thunder operations U.S. planes often used specific air corridors going to (ingressing) and departing from (egressing) a target.¹¹⁷ Chinese units adopted a "fire and move" tactic to deceive U.S. crews with dummy sites and thus to ambush attackers. Chinese statistics from nine divisions show that they shot down one hundred twenty five planes, 20 percent of their total claims, during their move and ambush operations.¹¹⁸ Antiaircraft artillery in North Vietnam provided the most effective air defense. Heavy fire from the

¹¹⁵ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 552; Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo bimi dafabing*, pp. 216, 218-20.

¹¹⁶ *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, pp. 404-5.

¹¹⁷ See *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973: An Illustrated Account*, by Carl Berger (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1984), p. 75.

¹¹⁸ *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 552.

ground often prevented U.S. warplanes from attacking their targets from low altitudes. The percentage of hits on the rail system, according to Chinese calculations, dropped from 15.9% in 1965 to 9.5% in 1968.¹¹⁹

The official DRV claim was 4,154 U.S. planes downed during the war.¹²⁰ The official number recorded by the United States is 1,096. It is impossible to reconcile this difference. However, factors which led to such disparity deserve to be noted. First, the defending sides, including North Vietnamese and Chinese AAA units, and Soviet SAM units, might all claim to have shot down the same enemy plane.¹²¹ Second, Hanoi might have lumped all downed and damaged planes together in its claims. Finally, Hanoi and the DRV leaders inflated claims to improve morale. Nevertheless, the Chinese record is impressive. During three years and nine months in North Vietnam, all Chinese antiaircraft artillery divisions, together with those units assigned to protect engineering troops, fought 2,153 battles. They shot down 1,707 U.S. planes and damaged 1,608, while capturing 42 American pilots.¹²²

Between 1965 and 1969 a total of 320,000 Chinese troops served in North Vietnam, and at the greatest number there were 170,000.¹²³ More than 1,100 Chinese died and 4,300 were wounded in Vietnam. A small number of Chinese sacrifices, as Le Duan once noted, could save two or three million Vietnamese. Hanoi's leaders might not have been completely satisfied with Beijing's support, but they acknowledged that Vietnam could not have succeeded without the vast

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 547.

¹²⁰ See Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*, p. 107.

¹²¹ Disputes over plane's wreckage were often one problem between Vietnamese and Chinese soldiers.

¹²² *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, p. 552.

¹²³ U.S. intelligence sources estimated that no more 50,000 Chinese troops were sent to North Vietnam, while Hanoi claimed that only 20,000 Chinese soldiers had served in Vietnam. See Allan Whiting, "China's Role in the Vietnam War," in *The American War in Vietnam*, Jayne Werner and David Hunt eds., (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1993), p. 74.

rear of China and its support.¹²⁴

Conclusion

In the mid-1960s, China's intention to use military force to counter U.S. aggression in Vietnam was obvious. The fundamental Chinese orientation was a combination of strategic interest and ideological commitment. The history of the People's Republic of China indicated that the U.S. threat was concentrated on three fronts: Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The Chinese leaders had not forgotten that the United States had supported the French during the First Indochina War. They thought that the United States would not easily swallow its setbacks in Korea and its failures in supporting the Nationalists in Taiwan, and thus interpreted U.S. military escalation in Indochina as evidence of actual aggressive action directed toward China. From Beijing's standpoint, the long-anticipated U.S. invasion might actually happen this time, thus China's security seemed at stake.¹²⁵ Beijing increased China's support of Hanoi's drive to liberate the South, and it responded quickly by putting its own troops on the alert, while reinforcing its air defense system in South and Southwest China. These actions were obviously undertaken with a sense of the potential risk of escalating the conflict into Chinese territory.

Mao Zedong's theory of world revolution determined China's response in aiding Vietnam and resisting the United States. Chinese leaders believed that Hanoi's war of national liberation in the South would tie down U.S. forces, thereby making less likely a military attack on China and other socialist countries. Ho Chi Minh had a close personal relationship with Mao and other Chinese leaders and he shared many of Mao's ideological beliefs. Beijing believed Ho's cause of

¹²⁴ This acknowledgment was made by Le Duan to Mao shortly after Hanoi's triumph in the South in 1975. *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao*, p. 281; *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzhou*, vol. 1, pp. 556-57.

¹²⁵ Chinese leaders in 1965-66 were very much concerned about a possible U.S. invasion of China from Vietnam. In April 1966 when Liu Shaoqi and Chen Yi, minister of foreign affairs, were called to attend an important meeting of the CCP in Hangzhou, they immediately thought it might concern a U.S. invasion. However, the purpose of that meeting was Mao's announcement of the Cultural Revolution. He Xiaolu, *Yuanshuai waijiaojia*, p. 230.

national liberation was compatible with Mao's rejection of Soviet "revisionist" orientation toward imperialism. Hanoi was putting Mao's concept of world revolution into practice.

Prior to the summer of 1964, Beijing leaders believed that Vietnamese forces, with China's support, were sufficient to defeat those of the Saigon regime. However, Washington's gradual increase of its air attacks on the DRV and introduction of combat units into South Vietnam in March 1965 convinced both Beijing and Hanoi that Washington was bent on invading North Vietnam and possibly China. Beijing felt it necessary to reinforce China's military power in the regions adjacent to North Vietnam and to take other measures to prepare for a possible war with the United States. The shooting down of U.S. planes became one manifestation of China's support for Hanoi that was also intended to convey warnings to Washington. Issues of overflight did worry American policy makers, who in return repeatedly imposed restrictions on military operations over North Vietnam.

It is impossible to say with certainty what would have happened if the U.S. had followed the Harry Summers approach and invaded North Vietnam. However, the arrival of U.S. ground troops in the South forced Hanoi to seek more concrete evidence of Beijing's pledges to support the Vietnamese struggle for national liberation. If there had been any previous ambiguity in China's commitment to the cause of the DRV's struggle against U.S. invasion, by the spring of 1965, Beijing and Hanoi appeared to have precisely defined the circumstances under which China would send troops to Vietnam. Chinese leaders were under no illusions, especially in view of lessons they had learned from the Korean war, about the implications of agreeing to commit Chinese troops to defend North Vietnam even before any American troops crossed the 17th parallel. Sending Chinese troops for supportive and security purposes was a clear indication of this. Hanoi had counted on Chinese involvement as a deterrent to U.S. intervention in the war. With assurances of military commitment from China, Hanoi had few fears of further escalation by the United States and appeared perfectly capable of defeating the Americans by relying on its own forces. This was obviously the Vietnamese leaders' preference.

Chinese leaders did not devise their Vietnam policy on the basis of hard and fast principles.

They shaped China's policy in response to Hanoi's requests and U.S. actions. Chinese leaders were well informed about Hanoi's strategy in the war of national liberation. They received Vietnamese leaders during their trips to China and discussed the war situation with them. There was enough evidence that China would enter the war on North Vietnam's side once Hanoi made its request. China's support of Hanoi's war efforts was on a scale substantially greater than that provided to the Viet Minh against the French. If there had been a need for more Chinese troops to defend the North, they would have been sent. Chinese leaders were aware of Vietnamese national pride and their sensitivity about self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Beijing let the DRV leaders take the initiative in deciding whether and when PLA troops should go into Vietnam. Hanoi made it clear that the DRV did not want massive Chinese intervention unless the United States launched a total attack on North Vietnam. Thus, a U.S. ground invasion would have forced Hanoi (as a last resort) to request that Beijing fulfill China's commitment. Then, China would have had little room to maneuver, but would have been obliged to engage the Americans directly. It is clear now-- although it was not at all clear at the time--that Washington's concern about Chinese intervention in North Vietnam saved the U.S. from repeating its Korean War mistake.

Nevertheless, Beijing made every effort to avoid a recurrence of the circumstances of the Korean War. By sending Chinese troops to the North she probably hoped to deter but not antagonize Washington. Under conditions short of a U.S. ground invasion of the DRV, China's commitment to Hanoi was limited. Beijing never allowed Chinese planes to operate over Vietnamese territory, and unwillingly deployed Chinese AAA units to the areas beyond the 21 parallel. China's weak economy and lack of military modernization may have made Beijing less committed to modern air warfare in Vietnam. However, strategic considerations may have done more to determine the nature of China's involvement in the Vietnam War. The objectives of China's strategy toward the Vietnam War were to support Hanoi with a sizable Chinese military presence in North Vietnam but to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States. This strategy have worked; there was no direct Sino-American confrontation over Vietnam. Hanoi and Washington agreed to negotiate in late 1968, and Beijing began to withdraw Chinese troops from

Vietnam in early 1969. Beijing's concern about China's security shifted to the increasing Soviet threat in the north.

During the Vietnam War, China played an important role in Hanoi's victory over the Americans. Unfortunately, since the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the late 1970s, Hanoi now attempts to deny China's role in the war. Hanoi's own part in achieving victory has been inflated while China's involvement has been down-played. Any attempt to comprehend the Vietnam War suffers from this distortion. So also do those who have raised questions concerning the wisdom of American restraint in Washington's conduct of the war. As both past tragedy and future danger lie in contemporary ignorance, today's scholarship must endeavor to construct an objective history of the Vietnam War. Toward that goal, this study offers an evaluation of the Vietnam War from a Chinese perspective.