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China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict

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d to recognition of China's twelve-mile territorial waters."¹⁵ During a short visit to Beijing in April 1977, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong suggested talks about the Paracels, but China declined. Talks on the land border and the ownership of the Tonkin Gulf had also proved abortive. By 1978 no settlement of the territorial was in sight, and border clashes began to increase.

To distrustful minds in Hanoi, then, the pattern of events since the end of the Vietnam War strongly suggested that the Beijing regime was attempting to lock the SRV in a vise and force Vietnam to bend to its will. Statements by high officials compared Cambodia to "a dagger pointed at the heart of Vietnam." To the veteran leadership in Hanoi, bitter experience confirmed that only a determined attitude and an offensive strategy could enable the Vietnamese people to confront and vanquish their enemies. Thus at the Fourth Plenum meeting in February 1978, the party adopted a tough policy on both the foreign and domestic fronts to resolve the crisis.

The rationale for action in Cambodia was clear. Evidence was accumulating that Pol Pot was firmly in Beijing's camp and that the latter would attempt to manipulate the situation in Cambodia to realize its own foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia. If Hanoi hoped to prevent China from stabilizing its position in Phnom Penh, it must act soon. An open invasion by Vietnamese troops would be the most decisive solution, but it

¹⁵ See the statements by the SRV Ministry of Foreign Affairs in *Vietnam News Bulletin*, "Memorandum on Chinese Provocations and Territorial Encroachments upon Vietnamese Territory," April 10, 1979, and "White Book on Vietnamese Archipelagoes," reported in VNA, September 28, 1979, and translated in FBIS, volume 4, October 1, 1979. This source contains documentary evidence supporting Vietnamese claims to the islands. Beijing's version was reported in *Beijing Review*, March 30 and August 24, 1979. (According to the former, Pham Van Dong admitted that Hanoi had implied its recognition of Chinese sovereignty in 1958 to avoid a dispute that might lead Beijing to reduce the level of aid to the DRV.) China released documents supporting its claim in "China's Indisputable Sovereignty over the Xisha and Nansha Islands," *Beijing Review*, February 18, 1980. References to the abortive talks in September 1975 are in *Beijing Review*, May 25, 1979, and in "White Book on Vietnamese Archipelagoes." (In his secret speech in 1977, Foreign Minister Huang Hua remarked that China would not take any immediate action to recover the Spratlys. He noted that when the time was right, China would confiscate them; thus there would be no need for negotiations.)

by anti-foreign models in Cambodia and supported discreetly by the SRV was less risky and certainly less costly, but success would be less certain. (In the end, the plenum decided to proceed with plans to provoke an internal uprising led by So Phim while keeping in reserve an alternative plan to topple the Phnom Penh regime through direct intervention.)

The party moved with equal dispatch to resolve the internal crisis. Despite the opposition of moderates, the plenum approved a proposal to move rapidly to end the power of the overseas Chinese in the South. In mid-March, Hanoi suddenly announced the nationalization of all private enterprises above the family level. While the move affected the entire commercial and manufacturing sector, the primary target was the large and still economically powerful overseas Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City. After the end of the war in 1975, the revolutionary regime had seized the property of a few wealthy Chinese traders and industrialists, and a few were placed on trial for economic "crimes against the people." In general, however, the private sector had been left untouched as the regime attempted to promote economic recovery and stimulate industrial growth after the long and destructive war. Now, under the impact of twin difficulties in domestic and foreign affairs, the regime shifted course.

The Refugee Crisis

The impact of Hanoi's new strategy on regional tensions was immediate, and massive. During the spring, thousands of refugees began to cross the land border into China. The first to leave were ethnic Chinese from the North. Many complained that in the weeks preceding their flight they had been subjected to harassment because of their racial origins. Others fled as a result of rumors that they would be dismissed because of impending war with China or because they had been fired from their jobs or forced to accept Vietnamese citizenship.¹⁶ Many complained after they reached their destinations that Vietnamese officials had connived at their departure and forced them to pay extravagant sums to leave.

¹⁶ For a detailed account of refugee complaints, see Bruce Grant, *The Boat People: An "Age" Investigation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

Hanoi's move took place at a time when official attitudes in Beijing had already been inflamed as a result of the Cambodian crisis. Chinese leaders were almost certainly aware of the decisions that had been taken at the February plenum in Hanoi. Hanoi's decision to seek the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime struck directly at the heart of Chinese foreign policy objectives in Indochina. Its decision to nationalize industry and commerce also represented no less a direct challenge to Beijing. In China's eyes, the move was clearly directed against the overseas Chinese in the South; and while Beijing had encouraged ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam as well as elsewhere in the region to adopt local citizenship, it continued to show periodic solicitude for the welfare of Chinese living abroad, leading many governments in the area to suspect that the overseas Chinese were viewed in the PRC as a tool of Chinese foreign policy.

Beijing reacted quickly to the exodus of refugees from Vietnam, citing refugee accounts claiming persecution and charging that Hanoi was trying to drive all ethnic Chinese out of the country. The chairman of the Overseas Chinese Commission in Beijing lodged a strong protest against official mistreatment of the overseas Chinese, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs charged that Hanoi had reneged on the 1955 agreement calling for gradual assimilation. To back up its protests, China announced the cancellation of a number of aid projects underway in the SRV. Indeed, a number of outside observers have noted that the refugee crisis marked a significant stage in the escalation of the Sino-Vietnamese dispute and that, beginning in late May, the level of Chinese press criticism of the SRV began rapidly to intensify.¹⁷

Hanoi responded in kind, asserting that its policy was not racially motivated and that it was only attempting to do what all previous Communist regimes, including the PRC itself, had already achieved—to complete the transformation of private commerce and industry. The SRV charged additionally that much of the unrest among the local Chinese had been deliberately incited by the PRC, whose embassy in Hanoi was actively fomenting suspicion and disorder by spreading fallacious rumors among the overseas Chinese community.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Washington Post*, May 27, 1978.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, May 30, 1978. For further evidence, see Burchett, p. 181, and Paul Quinn-Judge, "The Vietnam-China Split: Old Ties Remain," *Indochina Issues*,

the truth lie among these charges and counter-charges? On the one hand, the evidence concerning the motives for Hanoi's action is ambiguous. Beijing's assertion that Hanoi from the start deliberately attempted to drive the ethnic Chinese out of Vietnam is not substantiated by the available evidence. To the contrary, there are indications that refugee departures were initially discouraged and that illegal flight was severely punished. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that the decision to nationalize private industry and commerce was motivated, in good measure, by a desire on the part of the Hanoi regime to "resolve the overseas Chinese question." Whether or not refugee reports that the party leadership had established a special bureau to deal with the "Chinese question" are valid, it is clear from statements appearing in the official press as the crisis evolved that the regime felt that it had good reason to suspect the loyalty of the local Chinese community and that Beijing was using it as a tool in its foreign policy. Comments by refugees of Chinese extraction confirm Hanoi's suspicion that many ethnic Chinese did indeed indicate their primary loyalty to China as the crisis evolved. Whatever the original intentions of the Hanoi regime, then, as the crisis developed, Vietnamese leaders became increasingly convinced that the overseas Chinese community represented not only an undigestible foreign body in the socialist society of the SRV, but also a potential threat to its national security. Once that conclusion was reached, the regime began to encourage the departure of all those ethnic Chinese who desired to leave and began to remove them from the administration and the party itself.¹⁹

Was Hanoi justified in its charge that Beijing consciously fostered the problem? There is some evidence that pro-Chinese elements were active in promoting the rumor that the Vietnamese government, in case of war with China, would treat ethnic Chinese as potential traitors, and a number of refugee accounts indicate that some groups were actively encouraged to emigrate to China. To the degree that this was true, it is likely

no. 53 (January 1985), p. 4.

¹⁹ According to one report, all ethnic Chinese have now been removed from the VCP. See Quinn-Judge, "The Vietnam-China Split," p. 4. For statements indicating that many Chinese gave their loyalty to China, see Grant, pp. 94-96, 104.

licated. That does not affect the fact, however, that many overseas Chinese were leaving because of concrete grievances over the treatment that they were receiving at the hands of the government.

During the late spring and summer of 1978, the war of words between Beijing and Hanoi rapidly escalated into a major crisis. In early June, Hanoi approved a Chinese request to send ships to pick up potential refugees at ports designated by the SRV. But problems soon developed. The PRC requested permission to open a consulate in Ho Chi Minh city to process applications for emigration, but Hanoi refused. A deadlock also developed on procedures for the landing of the ships, so they were forced to remain offshore and eventually left without permission to dock at Vietnamese ports. Finally, high-level talks opened at China's request in early August. In the meantime, the flood of refugees crossing the land border into China had increased rapidly, surpassing 140,000 by July, when the PRC tightened controls on the border, accusing Hanoi of sending spies and other "bad elements" to sabotage the Chinese effort to relocate the refugees. The talks themselves opened with bitter words on each side and soon adjourned without result.

The accelerating crisis now began to exert repercussions on the very structure of the relationship between the two countries. Tension along the mutual border increased amidst reports of a troop buildup on both sides of the frontier. In late June, Hanoi announced its intention of joining CMEA, stating that the decision had been necessitated by the cutoff in Chinese assistance. A few days later, Beijing announced that all its remaining aid projects in the SRV had been terminated and all Chinese personnel instructed to return to China. Hanoi accused China of applying "crude and blatant pressure" on Vietnam.

The Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia

At the February plenum, the Vietnamese party leadership had approved a proposal to remove the Pol Pot regime by an internal uprising. The key to the success of this strategy lay in the emergence of a resistance movement strong enough to challenge the Pol Pot regime for power. But in May, Pol Pot's forces attacked rebel headquarters, and So Phim was captured and executed. In the meantime, there were signs of strengthening ties between Phnom Penh and Beijing. In early June, Deng Xiaoping

met with Foreign Minister Ieng Sary and declared that China would adopt tougher measures if Vietnam continued to pressure the Phnom Penh regime. In July, Pol Pot's minister of defense Son Sen visited Beijing and obtained a promise of increased military aid.²⁰

In mid-summer the VCP Central Committee convened its Fifth Plenum in Hanoi. With plans for a general uprising thwarted by the death of So Phim, and growing indications of Chinese involvement in the Cambodian crisis, the party leadership approved a new plan to launch an outright invasion of Cambodia to overthrow the Pol Pot regime. Rebel forces in Cambodia would take part in the attack and provide a cloak of legitimacy for the operation, but the brunt of the attack would be borne by Vietnamese regular forces. The decision was fraught with risks, not only because of the danger of provoking a counterreaction by China, but also because it would complicate Vietnamese relations with Western nations and also necessitate an understanding with Moscow. (But party leaders must have felt a sense of urgency to resolve the problem before Beijing could consolidate its position in Phnom Penh.) The decision was undoubtedly a controversial one. A few days after the conference adjourned, *Nhan Dan* criticized party members who showed weakness in facing the crisis and warned that the party must "leave behind and discard weak elements incapable of enduring trials or bent on giving up or betraying the cause."²¹

Once the decision had been made, Hanoi's most pressing need was to seek the support of Moscow. Soviet assistance would be critical, not only to provide military equipment for the invasion but, even more important, to serve as a deterrent against a possible Chinese counterattack. Vietnamese leaders had undoubtedly consulted with the Soviet Union earlier and may have raised the issue of increased military assistance and a

²⁰ See *The Chinese Rulers' Crimes against Kampuchea* (PRK: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 1984), p. 99. Geng Biao's "Report" indicates that by December, China would have provided Democratic Kampuchea with enough equipment for three divisions, and food, medicine, and ammunition for 100,000 troops. See p. 13.

²¹ *Nhan Dan*, August 4, 1978. According to one source, some Central Committee members recommended a softer line toward China so that Hanoi could concentrate its attention on the domestic crisis. See "A hint of purges yet to come," *FEER*, September 1, 1978, p. 9.