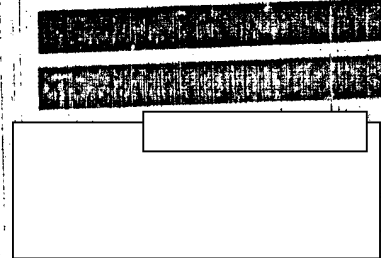




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The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute

A Research Paper

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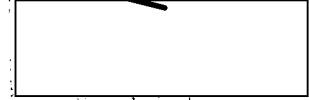


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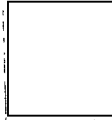


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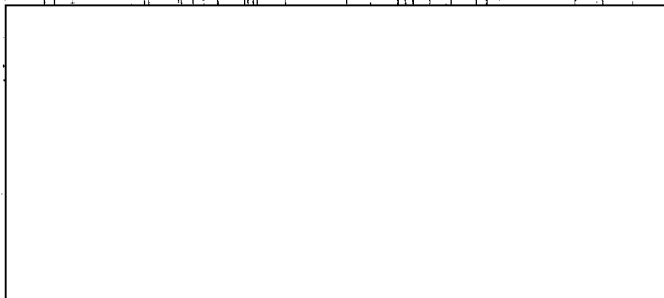


The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute



A Research Paper

**Information as of 5 March 1979
was used in preparing this report.**



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The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute

Key Judgments

The Chinese invasion of northern Vietnam has tended to obscure the fact that the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict has had its own dynamics and was a significant issue between the two countries well before the Vietnamese-Kampuchean problem exploded into open conflict. The disagreement over small sections of the border (as well as over ownership of the Paracel and Spratly Islands) was kept in private channels following the end of the Indochina war. But private talks broke down in late 1977 and it became a part of the bigger political dispute.

Emotional reactions to developments on both sides displaced cool calculations of the damage to national interests of a lack of restraint. Physical confrontations at the border decisively escalated these imprudent reactions.

Small, no-shooting clashes (mainly fistfights) along the Sino-Vietnamese border became a critical military confrontation as a result of two important developments in 1978:

- Recriminations over mistreated Chinese trying to escape from Vietnam to China. Thus the earliest border firefight in 1978 occurred as a result of refugees trying to cross illegally into China.
- Recriminations over Vietnam's newly built border defense line. The second and third border firefights in 1978 occurred when the Chinese destroyed the fences, stakes, and minefields of this line.

The Chinese were angered by Hanoi's impudence in changing the status quo on the border, and believed that acquiescence in the change would serve to reward Hanoi and lead to even more border transgressions.

In particular, Vietnam's action in building the defense line (stated by Hanoi to be protection from infiltrating Chinese agents and border guards) changed the rules of political dispute. Hanoi by this act had gone beyond verbal exchanges to unilateral demarcations in almost every section of a border that previously had been relatively open and loosely demarcated. The Chinese felt that the demarcation gave Hanoi a territorial advantage, and, in any case, was carried out without Chinese concurrence. For their part, the Vietnamese were angered by China's destruction of their newly built fences, which, they contended, were "in Vietnamese territory." The stage in this way was set for armed Chinese to confront armed Vietnamese.

Beijing, the bigger and stronger side, escalated the confrontation by instructing its border guards in late December to begin forward patrolling and to "open fire" on Vietnamese border posts and personnel. A second escalation followed when in mid-January Beijing began sending small teams of regular People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops instead of border guards to probe and reconnoiter; the number of men and the extent of the intrusions into Vietnamese-claimed territory were also increased. At the same time, the Chinese made known to the Vietnamese the nature and extent of their buildup north of the border.

Although confronted with attacks by regular PLA troops at the border and aware of the Chinese buildup nearby, the Vietnamese refused to desist. They held their positions and even fought back. By mid-January, the Chinese apparently believed that their policy of warning and intimidation had failed.

[redacted]

The total area "occupied" by the Vietnamese at that time was not large—about 60 square kilometers. But the presumption by Hanoi that it could with impunity mark off a claim to *any* amount of Chinese territory was intolerable to the Chinese. And, although only something over 300 Chinese were killed or wounded, it was the Vietnamese attitude of open defiance that made *any* casualties intolerable. [redacted]

Beijing's conclusion was that the unchecked militaristic hubris of the Vietnamese leaders would continue to be a dangerous "arrogance." In a fundamental sense, China's invasion was an effort to shatter Hanoi's self-image of invincibility. [redacted]

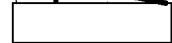
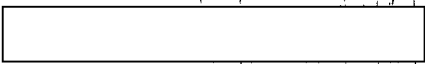
Kampuchea was a key catalytic factor in Chinese thinking. The Sino-Vietnamese border dispute escalated against the backdrop of Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea and Beijing's inability to protect its client regime there. In short, two factors—Vietnamese action against Kampuchea and Hanoi's refusal to assume a less provocative posture along the Sino-Vietnamese border—seem to have been mutually reinforcing, impelling Beijing to try to "punish" Vietnam militarily by invading the north. [redacted]

Beijing has indicated that Chinese forces eventually will be withdrawn only to a border that China (rather than Vietnam) recognizes. If this indeed proves to be the final Chinese decision, and if Hanoi refuses to negotiate a border agreement, the prospect is for a long period of border tension and conflict. [redacted]



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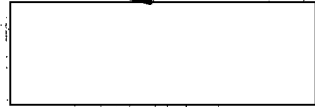
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
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


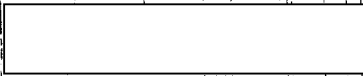
The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute


Introduction

Chinese military action against Vietnam has tended to obscure the fact that the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict has had its own dynamics and was a significant bilateral issue between the two countries well before the Vietnamese-Kampuchean problem exploded into open conflict. Their competing claims to the offshore Paracel and Spratly Islands has been a particularly contentious issue, especially since China's seizure of the Paracels from South Vietnam in 1974. The land border seems to have been less sensitive politically, but it nonetheless has been the scene of minor confrontations for more than 20 years, even during the wartime alliance. By itself, the territorial dispute clearly contributed to a general cooling of relations between the two countries, and with the general deterioration of relations over other issues, it provided a ready focus for the critical confrontation that has developed. 


The growing intensity of the border dispute must of course be seen against the backdrop of steadily deteriorating relations between China and Vietnam since the end of the Indochina war in 1975. An implicit competition for influence in Southeast Asia virtually guaranteed that problems submerged during the war would surface to cause increasing strains in the postwar period. 

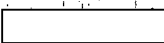
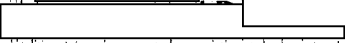
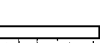
Rational and cool behavior prevailed for some time despite China's growing annoyance with Vietnam's tilt toward the USSR, and Hanoi's vexation with China's obvious desire to blunt the growth of Vietnamese influence in the region—a desire explicit in Beijing's patronage of Kampuchea, Vietnam's independent and prickly neighbor. All restraint was ended, however, by the Kampuchean conflict, which fed increasing Vietnamese anger over China's support of the Phnom Penh regime. And, China was incensed by Vietnam's treatment of its Chinese residents—double victims of prejudice and a crackdown on residual capitalism—and more significantly by what it saw as Hanoi's firm commitment to Moscow. 

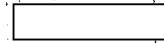


It is a demonstrable proposition that neither Beijing nor Hanoi desired to see the longstanding border dispute escalate to its present level. The Chinese worry about the Soviets while fighting with the Vietnamese; the Vietnamese fight the Chinese while fighting the Kampucheans. China is confronted with the prospect of a two-front war; Hanoi already has such a war. But the nationalistic emotions of both sides were apparently too highly charged to permit avoidance of the undesirable border dispute. 

I. Political Efforts To Prevent Escalation of the Dispute

Until recently neither China nor Vietnam has had any reason to fear a border war. Both sides had agreed in 1957 to keep differences over territorial claims along the border on the shelf, and the border remained undemarcated at many sections between widely spaced boundary pillars. Even after frictions increased over territorial issues following Communist victories in Indochina in 1975, the matter was kept in private channels. Party First Secretary Le Duan reportedly agreed in Beijing in September 1975 to begin detailed private discussions in "a special commission," using special envoys rather than Vietnamese Embassy personnel in Beijing. Substantive talks are conducted by China and the USSR only when a special envoy from Moscow comes to Beijing, and a similar practice was intended for Sino-Vietnamese negotiations. 

But the "special commission" apparently never met. Both sides tried again in 1977, and Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien's  shuttling between Hanoi and Beijing  kept 



high-level contacts on the border dispute active. That the Chinese may have been prepared to be reasonable is suggested by the statement of a Chinese official at the time that China, unlike its border-talks practice with the USSR and India, had made concessions to "smaller" countries, implying that Vietnam would fall in the latter category. These [redacted] contacts at the Deputy Foreign Minister level ceased, however, in early 1978 and the border dispute was left unresolved.

The intensification of the maritime dispute at that time further hardened the positions of each side on all territorial matters. The Chinese position was that Pham Van Dong had conceded in the 1950s that the Paracel Islands (seized by the Chinese in 1974) and the Spratly Islands (seized by the Vietnamese in 1975) belong to China, but Hanoi kept raising the issue which Beijing preferred to leave on the shelf. A more recent maritime dispute has developed over Hanoi's claim to "two-thirds" of the Gulf of Tonkin, according to the Chinese. Hanoi seems to be claiming that Nightingale Island—which is about at the midpoint between the Vietnamese mainland and China's Hainan Island in the Gulf—is the point from which Vietnam draws its 12-mile territorial limit. Beijing rejects this claim, and Chinese aircraft fly over areas considered by the Vietnamese to be Vietnam's territorial waters.

Despite these frictions and China's annoyance with Vietnam's tilt toward the USSR, an open polemic and actual shooting were avoided by both sides. Only relatively recent developments sharpened Sino-Vietnamese hostility sufficiently to impel the two governments to dispute openly and to turn to military combat.

II. The Dispute Over Refugees Escalates to a Dispute Over Territory

The earliest border firefight in 1978 occurred as a direct result of panicky and mistreated Chinese trying to escape from Vietnam to China. When groups of refugees tried to cross the border, they were pursued by Vietnamese security forces. The Vietnamese were fired upon by Chinese border guards on 13 February 1978 (near Dong Van, Ha Tuyen Province) and on 15

February (near Mong Cai, Quang Ninh Province); 30 Vietnamese were killed [redacted]

[redacted] Fleeing Chinese crossing over into South China began to arrive in large and unmanageable numbers after Hanoi's "socialization" decree in March 1978 and on 12 July, China's policy abruptly changed to that of refusing to take any more refugees. Beijing concealed this virtual no-entry policy by demanding that all refugees must have documents issued by the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and Vietnamese exit visas. Moreover, China wanted the documents to specify that the refugees had been "persecuted" in Vietnam. This blocking policy created hostile confrontations at refugee encampments at the three Beijing-designated crossing points on the Vietnamese side of the border.

The Vietnamese were less restrained than the Chinese. They forced the refugees to cross into China despite the danger of armed clashes, and later attacked Chinese officials. China's policy at the time seems to have been to confront Vietnamese armed personnel at the crossing points with unarmed and ununiformed Chinese, keeping their armed border guards back from these points. Vietnamese versions of minor clashes on 1 and 8 August at two separate crossing points indicate that armed Vietnamese border guards were used against Chinese civilian officials.

Beijing's version of a more serious incident on 25 August, although self-serving, makes a credible case that armed Vietnamese soldiers were confronted by unarmed Chinese border officials. The incident occurred at the Youyi (Friendship) Pass at the border between Lang Son, Lang Son Province, and Pingxiang, Guangxi Province (Ping-hsiang, Kwangsi). Vietnamese soldiers and security personnel stormed Vietnamese-side refugee camps, beat and stabbed the encamped Chinese, and forced more than 2,500 across the border. After the refugees were expelled, Vietnamese soldiers beat up nine "unarmed border defense workers" on China's side of the pass, but "in strict adherence to instructions from upper echelons, the Chinese side's personnel did not strike back and only lodged a serious verbal protest." Hanoi's version refers to Chinese army men "in civilian clothing" and concedes that the Vietnamese involved were "soldiers."

Although the Chinese in August apparently used unarmed personnel at the Youyi Pass checkpoint and probably at the other two designated checkpoints, elsewhere along the border they continued to patrol with armed border guards. There were confrontations between border guards of both sides, including "quarrels and fistfights" over territory [redacted] this had been the pattern for more than a year. But these were no-shooting events. There were no deaths by gunfire in August. The only shooting incident in September was the killing by a Chinese boat's crew of a Vietnamese fisherman in disputed coastal waters. Exchange of fire did not occur at the border until October. [redacted]

The 25 August incident at the Youyi Pass was also important as one source of territorial disputes that were to develop. After the incident Vietnamese troops set up barbed wire around the border checkpoint and built machinegun emplacements nearby. More than 200 soldiers were then sent to take up positions on nearby Punien (Ponien) Hill, which the Chinese claim is their territory. This hill was to become part of the overall territorial dispute. The refugee issue gradually was displaced by the territorial issue. By 26 September, when Beijing withdrew its negotiating team from Hanoi, suspending talks on the refugee issue, several points on the border already had become disputed land, and both sides complained about "encroachments." [redacted]

III. China's Effort To Intimidate Hanoi: Overflights

In response to the mass exodus of Overseas Chinese, the Chinese tried early on to intimidate the Vietnamese leaders and force them to desist from further mistreatment of their ethnic Chinese by conducting provocative overflights of Vietnam's territory in the north and, occasionally, over Vietnamese-claimed waters in the Gulf of Tonkin near Vietnamese coastal cities. At the same time, the Chinese made defensive preparations along the border. [redacted]

Beginning in May and continuing through the summer and fall of 1978, Chinese fighter aircraft penetrated [redacted] into Vietnamese airspace. Although a "top Vietnamese official" complained to foreign newsmen on 19 May that Chinese overflights were due to "a deliberate error," Hanoi made no official protest in the hope that Beijing would desist. But the deep penetration of Vietnam's airspace on 8 July by three Chinese fighters crossing over the border [redacted] into Vietnam, impelled Hanoi on 10 July to issue its first official protest regarding overflights. A Chinese official refused to accept this protest note, and on 16 July four Chinese fighters penetrated northern Vietnam's airspace. [redacted]

Hanoi's policy generally was to keep its own aircraft well back from the border and to avoid reacting in the air to the overflights. It was not until 14 September, when two Chinese fighters flew close to the border along northern Cao Bang and Lang Son Provinces that the Vietnamese, apparently for the first time, responded with a defensive reaction with their own fighters. [redacted]

[redacted] Vietnam possessed more advanced fighters and probably better pilots, but it was concerned about the superior numbers possessed by China's Air Force and wanted to limit the dispute to ground activity, especially to border guard activity. Escalation to the air or sea would have made the confrontation with China unacceptably large. Although Premier Pham Van Dong in his National Day speech on 2 September complained about violations of Vietnam's airspace and territorial waters by the Chinese, he stressed that the Chinese were taking action along "many border areas . . . where China can, at any time, commit acts of hostility and sabotage against Vietnam." Prior to the 17 February 1979 Chinese invasion, there had been no air or naval engagements, although the Chinese clearly were willing to risk escalation to air combat as early as May 1978. [redacted]



IV. Hanoi Prepares for "War"

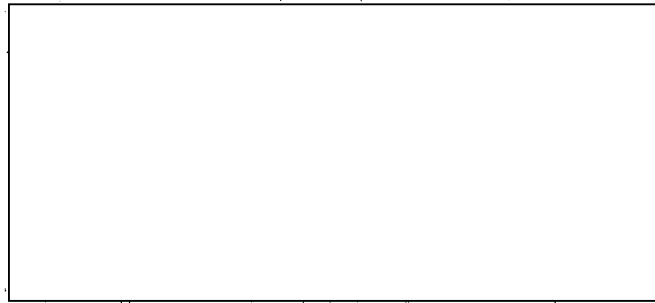
Fear of infiltration and sabotage by Chinese agents and border guards became Hanoi's immediate concern, and this fear resulted in the decision to fence off large strips of the border. The Vietnamese were also convinced that a big buildup of Chinese troops had occurred in southern China and that they must prepare for the contingency of large-scale Chinese attacks. Hoang Tung, party Central Committee member and chief editor of *Nhan Dan*, told [redacted] on 17 September that:

Recently, and as never before, China has concentrated its troops in the southern areas. We have obtained information that they are building up their positions. Nobody can be sure that China will not launch an attack on Vietnam. While making all-out efforts to prevent war, we are making full preparations to confront China.

The Vietnamese clearly had an exaggerated view of China's small improvements in border security. It was in their interest to try to gain the sympathy of other countries by expressing this view to foreigners. Nevertheless, they seem to have made a worst-case estimate and prepared for the contingency of a large-scale Chinese attack. They refused to rule out the prospect of war. [redacted]

They began to prepare their civilians and armed forces. Between late August and early September, political personnel lectured the populace in south Vietnam using material in a party Central Committee document [redacted]. The main points reportedly were:

- China is the immediate and main enemy of Vietnam.
- Vietnam will defeat China because Vietnam has 50 million people, skillful Communist party leadership, and the support of other socialist countries.
- Negotiations with China are not seriously conducted and are intended merely to buy time.
- Vietnam's two key slogans are: "Prepare for war to protect the fatherland" and "Strive to produce in order to support the front line."

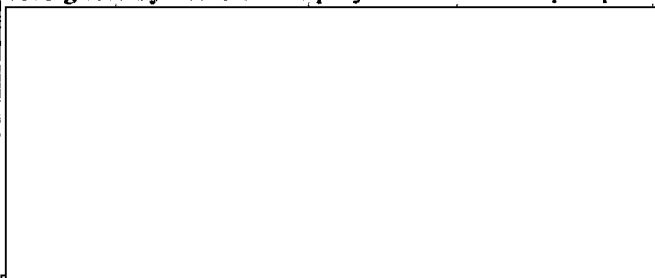


Highly emotional vituperation against the Chinese and pervasive suggestions that war with them was a likely prospect reflected Hanoi's pessimistic estimate of Beijing's military intentions. A Western observer [redacted]

[redacted] in late August noted extensive evidence of upgraded Vietnamese military preparation [redacted]

Among the Vietnamese officials with whom he met there seemed to be a strong conviction that China had hostile designs on Vietnamese territory, and many of them stated that, "We beat the French, we beat the Americans, and now we will beat the Chinese." His general impression was that the Vietnamese officials seemed to believe that war with China was "inevitable," and he commented "What's more, they (the Vietnamese) want to fight." [redacted]

By contrast, although the Chinese at the time were making some effort to prepare the populace in southern China for a continuation of the border dispute, they did not stress the prospect of war. Statements made to foreigners by the Chinese played down such a prospect.



The Chinese, being the stronger and bigger side, clearly were more relaxed about the situation at the border than the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese seem to have calculated that their prospective invasion of Kampuchea might provoke the Chinese to engage in punitive, large-scale attacks. But rather than back away, they decided to hang tough and prepare for the consequences. [redacted]

V. Vietnam's New Border Defense Line Escalates Tensions

The Vietnamese as early as July had been sufficiently alarmed by Beijing's actions to begin to fence off (with bamboo and metal stakes, barbed wire, and minefields) almost every section of the Sino-Vietnamese border, with the exception of those sections obstructed by cliffs and rivers. Entire villages along the approximately 1,285 kilometers of border were assigned the task of making thousands of stakes. Pillboxes and trenches were also built and ammunition was moved in. Patrolling of the border by PAVN soldiers as well as by regular border guards, police, and armed militia was increased. Hanoi's fear of agent and border guard infiltrators led it to create many "cleared zones"—sections of the border including nearby villages that were cleared of all Chinese civilians and then fortified. By October, Vietnam had built a border defense line which, despite its ramshackle nature, was viewed by the Chinese as a provocation. [redacted]

This line was significantly to change the nature and expand the scope of the border dispute. Most important, it created arguments over ownership of territory at many points along the border where such arguments had not previously existed. Previously, the border had been loosely defined by stone markers placed at the base of mountains and in valleys and low-lying areas along the border. The border theoretically runs along the straight line between these markers, many of them placed as far as 20 kilometers apart. There had been no definition of the border on the ground between these markers, and Vietnam's building of a border defense line led to arbitrary placement of fences, stakes, and minefields, almost certainly to Vietnam's territorial benefit. Beijing's complaint that Vietnamese "en-

croachments" into China extend to distances varying between "dozens and hundreds of meters," and even as much as "several kilometers," is credible. [redacted]

Vietnamese "arrogance" was also indicated by the unilateral building of a dam upstream on the Song Chay River (north of Lao Cai), causing 90 percent of the water to flow on the Vietnamese side of three midchannel islands, leaving the Chinese side too shallow for navigation. [redacted]

The most important areas of alleged Vietnamese encroachment were in the northeast, near the Youyi Pass north of Lang Son, and in the northwest, north of Lao Cai. Also, a strip of territory about 300 meters beyond the location of the Chinese border at the northeast railway junction at the Youyi Pass, which had been maintained since 1955 by Chinese crews with Vietnamese agreement, had become a point of Vietnamese harassment, forcing the Chinese to close the junction to further traffic on 22 December 1978.

[redacted]

For their part, the Vietnamese apparently had some valid causes for complaint. As early as mid-1977 they were briefing their cadres about the Chinese policy of moving border pillars southward into Vietnamese territory at various border points. The Chinese also carried out a policy of using border guard patrols to escort farmers into Vietnamese-claimed territory.

[redacted]

In any case, the crucial escalation was Vietnam's building of the border defense line, which forced Beijing to dispute the old and new pieces of Vietnamese-claimed territory rather than permit Hanoi unilaterally to demarcate to its advantage a previously open border. The Chinese had been reluctant to become bogged down in a border war which, like the border disputes with India and the USSR, helped to mar political relations permanently. They had hoped to intimidate the Vietnamese on the matter of Chinese refugees and to impel them to desist on the matter of claiming Chinese territory. But they acted to keep the nature and scope of these quarrels limited; they did not

want a war, and they continued the practice of maintaining local contacts between border post representatives. Although as early as 14 July the Vietnamese began small-scale trenching in the sensitive Youyi Pass area and had greatly expanded their trenching to almost every hill near the southern entrance of the pass by 14 September, the Chinese engaged in no similar activity on their side. Confronted with extensive new claims, however, Beijing changed its policy of restraint at the border. [redacted]

The total area "occupied" by the Vietnamese was not large. But the presumption by Hanoi that it could with impunity mark off a claim to *any* amount of Chinese territory was intolerable. Similarly, the number of Chinese killed by the Vietnamese was small. But it was the Vietnamese attitude of open defiance which made *any* killings intolerable. [redacted]

Beijing's conclusion was that the unchecked militaristic hubris of the Vietnamese leaders would continue to be a dangerous "arrogance." China's invasion on 17 February 1979 was an effort to shatter Hanoi's self-image of invincibility, as was stated publicly by Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-ping).^{*} The Chinese made the decision only after trying to deter Hanoi by less extreme measures. [redacted]

VI. Further Escalation: China Begins To Tear Down the Fences

The decision of the Chinese forcibly to challenge Vietnam's right unilaterally to demarcate the border probably was taken in late September, by which time they had accumulated definitive evidence of "encroachments" by examining maps made in September by border guard teams. Deputy Premier Li Xiannian [redacted] told [redacted] personnel on 1 October that the dispute had gone beyond possible conciliation and that the situation would not be helped even if China were "to cede" its two border provinces to Vietnam. China, he said, was now preparing for a nasty and protracted ordeal. Deng Xiaoping told a

^{*} Speaking to American newsmen in Beijing on 27 February 1979, Deng stated that in the course of teaching Vietnam a lesson, the myth of Vietnamese invincibility and the claim that it is the third strongest military power in the world, "would be shattered." (*Washington Post*, 28 February 1979.) [redacted]

[redacted] visitor on 8 October that China has "given up" on Vietnam, but hopes to avoid armed conflict; if the Vietnamese start the fight, they "will get into trouble." [redacted]

Li's and Deng's pessimistic assessments suggest that although the big buildup of Chinese forces was not to begin until late December, the Chinese leaders already were actively considering severely "punishing" Hanoi. [redacted]

By early October, Beijing had initiated a policy of sending armed border guards and militia to destroy the fences and minefields. While most incidents were still confined to punching, clubbing, stoning, and shouting engagements, the stage was set for armed Chinese to confront and challenge armed Vietnamese in small-scale shooting incidents. In September the Chinese used border guards and police at the border to warn the Vietnamese that "this is Chinese territory"; by 9 October, the border guards were "destroying fences and pulling up stakes." It was only a small step from such actions to the shooting by Chinese border guards of two Vietnamese border guards and the abducting of a Vietnamese cadre on 13 October at Pha Long Village, Mong Khuong District, Hong Lien Son Province. This was the first instance since February 1978 of the killing by gunfire of Vietnamese border guards. [redacted]

Hanoi's sense of outrage over this shooting incident was reflected in the outpouring of commentary in its media. The toughening of Beijing's border policy was stated with greatest detail in the PAVN newspaper:

The Chinese authorities . . . have gone from using only sticks, stones, and machetes to provoke various Vietnamese public security border defense outposts and bully our militiamen and border guards on duty inside Vietnamese territory to sending their armed henchmen to set up ambushes and barbarously kill our cadres, combatants, and people in the border area.

The Chinese waited two weeks before responding to Vietnam's official protest. On 26 October they formally complained that Vietnamese actions, such as erecting fences and other fortifications and stoning and

injuring Chinese personnel, was continuing, but on the matter of shooting, stated only that the Vietnamese, on occasion, had fired their guns "into the air" and "in an intimidating manner." There was no reference to the 13 October killings and abduction. This omission and the delay in publishing a response suggest that the Vietnamese complaint was accurate. Beijing hoped to retain its pose of restraint by avoiding media comment on the incident, letting its response be the "vague statements" made by its charge in Hanoi and the commander of the Chinese border post when confronted with the Vietnamese complaint.

The Chinese had not changed to a shooting policy, and the 13 October killings were not repeated anywhere else along the border despite border guard destruction of the Vietnamese fences. Indeed, the incidents of 25 August in which Hanoi claimed that two Vietnamese security personnel were killed, but not by gunfire, and 12 September in which Hanoi claimed that one fisherman was killed by gunfire, were isolated occurrences along a long border. Many more shooting incidents, on a larger scale and of greater duration, would have occurred if either of the two sides had issued shooting orders to their border guards and armed militiamen. When the next incident took place, it was apparent that Chinese personnel did not have orders to shoot even after they had been fired upon.

Chinese versions of the killing of six Chinese commune members and armed militiamen by Vietnamese armed personnel in the Dinghaoshan area of Jingxi County, Guangxi Province (Tinghaoshan, Ching-hsi, Kwangsi) on 1 November are more detailed than Vietnamese versions. Beijing conceded that Chinese commune members and militia had been "removing road barricades and bamboo stakes set up illegally by, and leveling trenches dug also illegally by, the Vietnamese side on Chinese territory" before an argument took place. The Vietnamese "armed personnel," apparently armed militiamen, retreated to take up positions in four outposts and, on the signal from the "commander," an armed "Vietnamese public security man," opened fire on the Chinese with machineguns, submachineguns, and rifles. Twelve Chinese were wounded and eight others were abducted. The Chinese militiamen showed "restraint and never fired a single shot in return." Chinese border guard personnel

protested to Vietnamese border guards, who agreed to a meeting on 2 November, but at the appointed time the Vietnamese suddenly called off the meeting, and the matter was referred to higher echelons. On 3 November, the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry informed the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi that six of the abducted Chinese had died "on Vietnamese soil."

Within 48 hours after the 1 November incident, Vietnamese authorities had taken all resident correspondents to the site and pointed out that the six Chinese corpses were only 18 meters from a Vietnamese police post and 275 meters from the Chinese side of the border, and that they had Chinese rifles. Hanoi's version stressed that "an AFP correspondent based in Vietnam, after visiting the scene, filed a report confirming that the area of the clash lies deep in Vietnamese territory—400 meters south of the northern border." Actually, the six Chinese were in civilian clothes and two had been shot in the back; they probably were militiamen. They may have been captured and then murdered, although Hanoi's version claims that they had "rushed forward" into Vietnamese territory, shooting as they advanced.

VII. Beijing Escalates Warnings Over Shooting Deaths

Beijing's sense of outrage over what it believed to have been murder in cold blood resulted in China's first serious warning to Hanoi. The Chinese Foreign Ministry note of 7 November stated that China's "restraint and forbearance" had been the only deterrent to serious border incidents, and for the first time Beijing used the term "warns" to convey its message:

The Chinese Government warns the Vietnamese authorities in all seriousness that they should not regard Chinese restraint and forbearance as weakness and submissiveness. Should the Vietnamese authorities willfully cling to their course and continue to intensify the anti-Chinese provocations and armed intrusions at the Sino-Vietnamese border areas, they must bear full responsibility for all the consequences arising therefrom.

Vietnam's policy, however, continued to be to build more fences and establish more minefields, and China's policy continued to be to destroy them. But in November there were no other killings of militiamen or border guards on either side from gunfire. []

In December, however, two deaths resulted from Vietnamese gunfire. The Chinese issued two warnings which were carefully calibrated, the second being slightly stronger than the first, and both stronger than that of 7 November. []

The warning of 13 December was contained in the Chinese Foreign Ministry note of that date which complained that on 9 December an "armed Vietnamese ship" fired on a Chinese fishing vessel and killed one and seriously wounded two fishermen in Chinese coastal waters off Dongxing, Guangxi Province (Tung-hsing, Kwangsi).

The Vietnamese Government should understand that there is a limit to China's forbearance and restraint toward its armed provocations against China and encroachments upon Chinese territory. If the Vietnamese authorities should persist in their course and continue to encroach upon Chinese territory and sovereignty, make armed provocations and attacks against China, and create incidents of bloodshed, they must be held responsible for the consequences arising therefrom. (emphasis supplied)

The Vietnamese [] stated [] that this was China's strongest protest since the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations. It was given additional authority by Li Xiannian's publicized statement to former Thai Foreign Minister Chatichai on the same day: "China's forbearance has its limit and the Vietnamese authorities are deluding themselves by thinking that we are weak and can be bullied." []

The warning of 25 December was contained in a Beijing *People's Daily* editorial which summarized Sino-Vietnamese territorial disputes in recent years and complained that Vietnam's "bullying of China has reached an intolerable point."

The Vietnamese authorities have gone far enough in pursuing their anti-China course. There is a limit to the Chinese people's forbearance and restraint. China has never bullied and will never bully any other country; neither will it allow itself to be bullied by others. It will not attack unless it is attacked. But if it is attacked, it will certainly counterattack. China means what it says.

We wish to warn the Vietnamese authorities that if they, emboldened by Moscow's support, try to seek a foot after gaining an inch and continue to act in this unbridled fashion, they will decidedly meet with the punishment they deserve. We state this here and now. Dor't complain later that we've not given you a clear warning in advance. (emphasis supplied)

This was Beijing's first public use of the idea of "punishment," although the editorial and all subsequent Chinese public and private statements remained ambiguous on the matters of the form and scope of Chinese retaliation. The warning was triggered by the killing of nine Chinese militiamen and civilians by "armed Vietnamese personnel" in a firefight at Xilu, Guangxi Province (Hsilu, Kwangsi) on 23 December. In its note regarding that firefight, Beijing for the first time in the course of the border dispute stated that "Chinese militiamen were compelled to return fire in self-defense and killed three armed Vietnamese intruders on the spot." The implication was that in border incidents China's policy had changed from restraint to retaliation. In fact, China's policy went beyond this; new orders apparently were issued to Chinese forces at the border not to wait for Vietnamese initiatives. []

In order to justify their more vigorous military policy, the Chinese tried to convince international audiences that the Vietnamese were the instigators of trouble in the area. The warning of 25 December—issued on the day the Vietnamese began their invasion of Kampuchea—declared that there was an "organic connection" between the Sino-Vietnamese dispute and Vietnam's aggression against Kampuchea, that in both instances Vietnam was the provocative side. []

VIII. China's "Punishment" Begins

Beijing's 25 December warning about prospective "punishment" marked the beginning of the new border policy. The evidence suggests that between 13 and 23 December, as a result of the killing of Chinese and signs of an imminent invasion of Kampuchea, a decision was made to permit Chinese personnel to:

- Open fire, not only in retaliation, but on sight of Vietnamese personnel.
- Initiate aggressive, forward patrolling up to and beyond Vietnamese border defense posts.

Chinese fire—now escalated to include hand-carried rockets and mortar rounds—was also to be directed against these defense posts, many of which had been newly built:

- On 28 December, [redacted] the Chinese were deploying small teams to attack border posts.

[redacted]

[redacted]

The Vietnamese publicly complained in their Foreign Ministry note of 1 January that in the "final days of 1978" Chinese armed forces had begun to "open fire" on Vietnamese personnel and border defense posts.

[redacted]

Chinese border guards and militia were used at the border during the beginning stage of this new policy. By mid-January, however, regular PLA units seem to have been moved into the operation to carry the principal burden. Bigger units were employed and apparently instructions were issued to operate more deeply into Vietnamese border areas, at first up to about one kilometer, and later several kilometers, beyond the point of earlier operations. Beijing put its

total casualties among border guards in the period between 23 December and 15 January at four killed, four wounded; Hanoi's figure for border guards killed between 14 and 17 January was seven. Thus, up to mid-January, the skirmishes were still on a small scale and apparently regular PLA troops were still not being used. [redacted]

By the end of the month, however, the Chinese had introduced regular PLA units into the immediate border area. Hanoi's protest note of 29 January complained that "many columns of Chinese armed forces" on 26 January had attacked a Vietnamese border defense post and that "a platoon" of Chinese troops had intruded "deep" into Vietnamese territory. On 30 January, Hanoi announced that "a company" of Chinese troops had intruded into Vietnamese territory at one point, and that Chinese armed forces had penetrated "1 kilometer deep" into Vietnamese territory at another point. [redacted]

[redacted]

By 8 February, Chinese troops were using artillery [redacted] against Vietnamese border guard posts. By [redacted]

[redacted] Thus the Chinese in less than one month's time had changed the balance of forces at the border to provide enhanced military capability for their "punishment" policy. [redacted]

IX. China's Policy of Intimidation Fails

The change from the use of border guards and militia at the border to the use of regular PLA troops in deep probes, accepting the prospect of bigger firefights, failed to intimidate the Vietnamese. Chinese overflights beginning in May 1978 as well as the destruction of Vietnamese fences beginning in October had not deterred the Vietnamese from claiming small pieces of territory and from killing Chinese personnel. Chinese warnings also had been to no avail. For

example, when on 13 December the Chinese tried to deliver a sharply worded warning to the Vietnamese that if Vietnamese provocations on the border continued, China must take strong measures "to punish" Vietnam, the Vietnamese would not even accept the note. [redacted]

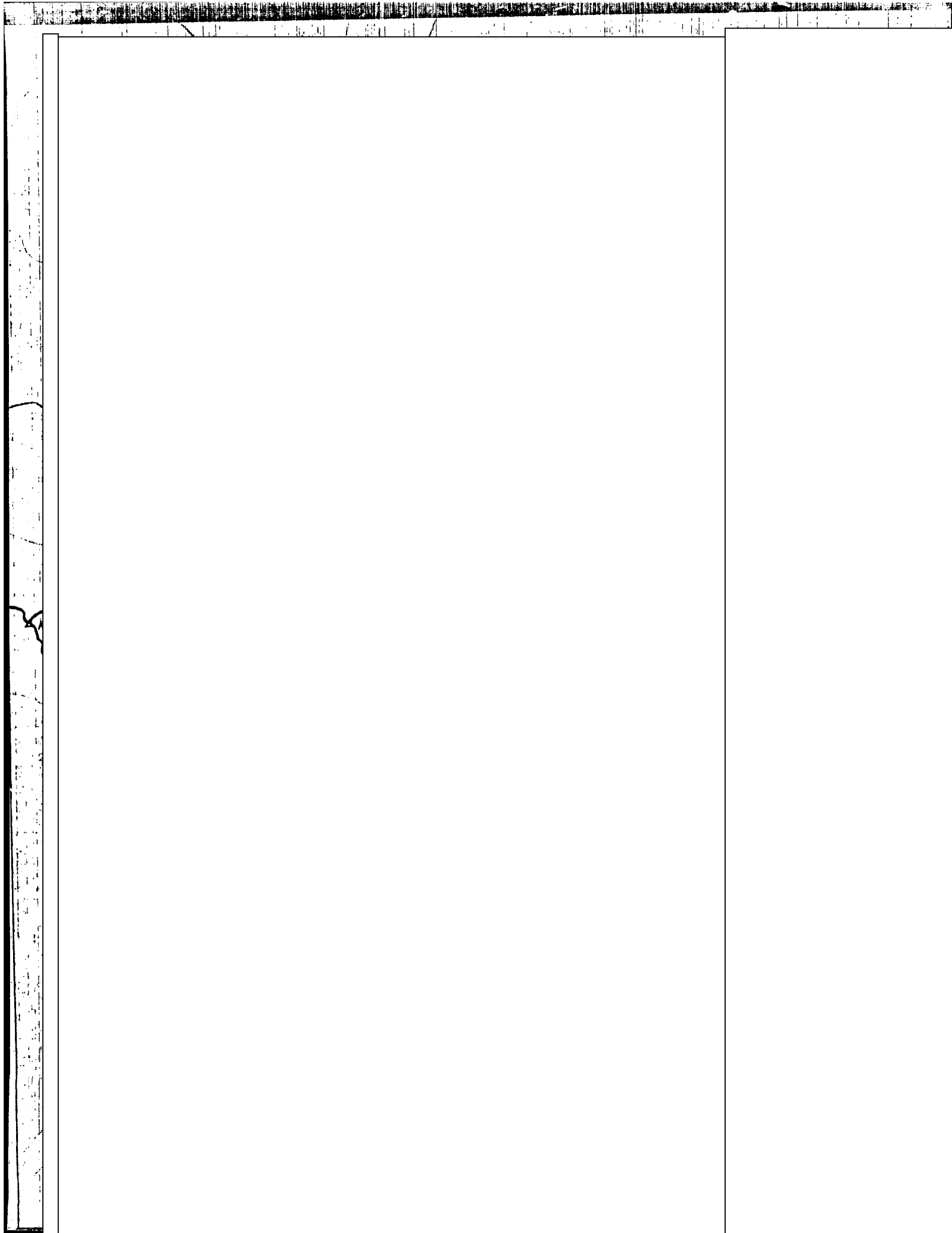
[redacted]

The large-scale buildup of Chinese conventional forces on Vietnam's northern border which began in earnest following Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea also seemed to have little intimidating effect on Vietnamese behavior along the border. That the Chinese intended the Vietnamese to learn of their buildup is suggested by a deliberate "leak" of relevant information by a Communist-controlled newspaper in Hong Kong on 22 January. The newspaper quoted an AFP report on the buildup which had attributed the figures—15 to 17 divisions totaling 150,000 troops—to "Western" military sources, but the newspaper changed the wording to "military sources in Beijing." There is evidence that Hanoi was aware of the size and nature of the Chinese buildup by 7 January. The Vietnamese nevertheless did not cease confronting Chinese forces along the border. They probably believed that the actions they were taking were not large enough to provoke a large-scale retaliatory attack. And there is some evidence that they hoped their treaty with Moscow would be a "dissuasive weapon" against such an attack. In any case, they did not appear to be greatly alarmed, and on 10 January a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry official told [redacted] officials [redacted] that the Chinese were engaging only in a war of words. [redacted]

The Vietnamese did not show alarm until 10 February when they sent a letter to the UN Security Council President appealing to the UN and the world public to take timely action to stop the Chinese from waging war. By that time, the Vietnamese probably had available not only their own intelligence information but also that provided by the Soviets regarding the nature of the Chinese military buildup. [redacted]

Kampuchea was a key catalytic factor in Chinese thinking. The border dispute escalated against the backdrop of Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea and Beijing's inability to protect its client regime there. In short, two factors—Vietnamese action against Kampuchea and Hanoi's refusal to assume a lower posture along the Sino-Vietnamese border—seem to have been mutually reinforcing, impelling Beijing to try to "punish" Vietnam militarily by invading the north. [redacted]

Beijing has indicated that Chinese forces eventually will be withdrawn to a border that China (rather than Vietnam) recognizes. If this indeed proves to be the final Chinese position, and if Hanoi refuses to negotiate a border agreement, the prospect is for a long period of border tension and conflict. [redacted]



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