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Deng Xiaoping's Long War

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Given the relatively small number of academics doing serious analysis of the PLAN, the introduction of a new point of view is always to be welcomed. In this case, however, naval professionals interested in Chinese naval development would be served better by going directly to the sources behind this volume.

DALE C. RIELAGE



Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991, by Xiaoming Zhang. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2015. 296 pages. \$34.95 (e-book \$33.99).

This book will be welcomed equally by historians, political scientists, and international relations specialists. It is a worthy addition to existing literature and belongs on any bookshelf dedicated to understanding modern China and Southeast Asia. Xiaoming Zhang, an associate professor in the Department of Strategy at the Air War College, has provided valuable additional information and analysis concerning the People's Republic of China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979. The Chinese invasion was planned deliberately and analytically, then for nearly a month the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fought fiercely against China's neighbor and former ally. At the end of this period, the two countries settled into a continuing active and deadly border dispute that lasted a decade. Taking advantage of recently declassified Chinese documents and an impressive number of interviews, Dr. Zhang has advanced significantly our understanding of why the Chinese chose to initiate the somewhat Orwellian-sounding "counterattack in self-defense

against Vietnam," how the war was conducted, and why the subsequent conflict along the Vietnamese-Chinese border lasted so long.

As the history of the conflict unfolds, Deng Xiaoping becomes more and more the central figure and key Chinese decision maker. By the conclusion of the book, Dr. Zhang presents a convincing case that the war of 1979 was indeed Deng's war—a war into which he entered as much to preserve and promote his plans for economic modernization as to affect the balance of power in the international political system, while simultaneously aiming to rehabilitate and start the process of modernizing the PLA.

The book explains how the recent North Vietnamese victory over the Americans and the South Vietnamese had a surprisingly deleterious effect on Vietnam's previously amiable and long-term alliance with China. Flushed with victory and boasting a hardened and well-equipped army, the Vietnamese became, to Chinese eyes, increasingly arrogant and unfriendly. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and its deepening friendship with the Soviet Union led Deng to see China's position as potentially imperiled, threatened by the USSR to the north and the Vietnamese to the south. In particular, the invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 was viewed as proof of Hanoi's ambition to make Vietnam a hegemonic power in Southeast Asia, and added significantly to Deng's concerns.

Deng, who already had determined that economic and industrial modernization was the way ahead for China, arrived at an apparently counterintuitive conclusion. Significant combat operations conducted against Vietnam, the Soviet Union's most important regional ally, would signal to the United States

and other Western powers that China was a reliable partner that could be counted on to do what was needed. In return, the West would be more likely to continue to support Chinese efforts to modernize, and the perceived Soviet threat would be reduced.

However, as Zhang explains, the Chinese army had not fought a major war in three decades. Its tactics were outdated and its logistics support was inferior, and no officer below the rank of battalion commander was battle tested. Furthermore, the PLA did not enjoy a positive reputation within China's general population. In contrast, the Vietnamese army had decades of recent combat experience, large stores of modern Soviet and captured U.S. military equipment, and the intangible benefits that come with victory.

A massive propaganda campaign to improve the image of the PLA was launched. Significant amounts of military stores were moved into the Guangzhou and Kunming military districts. Army planners prepared for a massive offensive designed to seize several major northern Vietnamese cities and wreck two Vietnamese divisions in the process. The whole campaign was designed to "teach Vietnam a lesson."

Zhang provides a detailed account of the fighting that followed. The Chinese executed their plan successfully, albeit at a much higher cost than anticipated. Zhang debunks common claims by Vietnamese that the majority of their combatants were local militia fighters. While it is true that several elite Vietnamese divisions were engaged in Cambodia, far more regular army units fought in the north than the Vietnamese indicated. The war was almost exclusively a ground war, although both the

Vietnamese and Chinese air forces carried out many reconnaissance missions.

After nearly thirty days of fairly hard fighting, Chinese forces withdrew to the border, having achieved their geographic objectives and inflicted significant casualties on enemy forces. The operation had been calibrated skillfully to "punish" Vietnam, without going so far as to bring the Soviets into the fray. Deng then directed the army to continue to fight along the border until the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia. It would take a decade—and the visible decline of the Soviet Union—but in the end Vietnamese leaders acquiesced and Deng got what he wanted. During this period Vietnam's economy suffered. China's southernmost provinces also suffered, but the nation reaped the benefits of modernization and Western engagement.

Chinese military leaders deliberately used the ensuing chronic border conflict to "blood" much of their army and local militias. The war also provided new heroes to place in the public eye. However, in one of the more poignant portions of the book, Zhang describes how China's Vietnam experience affected many of the participants in much the same manner as it had their earlier U.S. equivalents. Strategically, the war also saw the Chinese army embrace combined operations and a turn to modernization as a requirement for victory.

Zhang makes a convincing argument that Deng Xiaoping calculatingly used the Chinese military instrument to achieve strategic, domestic, and personal goals. His war was one of deliberate choice. Potential Vietnamese hegemonic ambitions were thwarted; Vietnam would be forced to leave Cambodia. China's ties to the West

were strengthened; Soviet influence in the region was weakened.

China reaped other benefits, although some were perhaps mixed. Vietnam would—and still does—view China with suspicion. Other countries in the region now know that China did, and could once again, wage offensive war, if seen to be in the interest of the state. The Chinese military, once so abysmally behind technologically, has transformed itself. Combined arms operations, performed haltingly at best in 1979, are now common.

Zhang frequently and conscientiously reminds the reader that, although knowledge of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict has increased greatly, it is important not to embrace any conclusions, even the most apparently convincing, as definitive. This is because some Chinese and all the Vietnamese records have yet to be declassified. The warning is appropriate, but should not detract from Zhang's analysis, nor from a deep appreciation of his work.

RICHARD J. NORTON

OUR REVIEWERS

Richard J. Norton is a professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College. He is a retired naval officer and holds a PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. His most recent publications include articles in the *Naval War College Review* and *Marine Corps University Journal*.

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Prior to his retirement from the U.S. Navy in 2007, Captain *Jan van Tol* served as special adviser in the office of the vice president. He was a military assistant to the Secretary of Defense's principal adviser for net assessment from 1993 to 1996 and again from 2001 to 2003. At sea, he commanded three warships, two of which, USS *O'Brien* (DD 975) and USS *Essex* (LHD 2), were part of the U.S. Navy's forward-deployed naval forces based in Japan. Captain van Tol's analytic work has focused mainly on long-range strategic planning, naval warfare, military innovation, and war gaming.