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China's War with Vietnam, 1979-Issues, Decisions, and Implications

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Chen, King C. *China's War with Vietnam, 1979—Issues, Decisions, and Implications*. Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1987. 234pp. \$18.95

This fascinating and well-written study of China's 16-day "punitive" war against Vietnam in February 1979 has special relevance today as recent Chinese and Vietnamese naval interactions in the vicinity of the Spratly Islands have threatened once again to draw both countries into open conflict. These contemporary clashes have their roots in the same issues as the 1979 war: historic Sino-Vietnamese territorial disputes; deteriorating Sino-Vietnamese relations caused by Vietnamese treatment of its large Chinese ethnic population; the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Kampuchea (Cambodia); and expanding political and military ties between Vietnam and the Soviet Union, China's principal ideological adversary and military threat. Improving relations between China and the West, particularly the United States, also had an impact on the increasing confidence shown by the government of the People's Republic of China in aggressively pursuing their foreign policy goals with Vietnam. This assessment seems equally valid today.

In examining the causes of the 1979 conflict, Chen concisely outlines the historic claims and counterclaims of China and Vietnam concerning the various island groupings in the South China Sea, including the Spratly complex. This background relates directly to current events in the region.

Of equal relevance is Chen's discussion of the deterioration of the Sino-Vietnamese relations in the period between the "liberation" of Vietnam by the North Vietnamese in 1975 and the military clashes of early 1979. His account of the monetary and economic policies of the Vietnamese Communist Government and the impact of these policies on the relatively affluent Chinese and Vietnamese merchant and professional communities is particularly chilling. Through the seizure of personal property and a series of currency reforms and tax regulations, the predominantly Chinese business class was virtually destroyed by 1978. Soon "There were no more wealthy Chinese or Vietnamese businessmen in southern Vietnam."

Such conditions led to the flight of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam that began in the late 1970s and continues through the present. These refugees from Vietnam seek to emigrate to any country that will accept them. The plight of these "boat people" has been likened to that of the Jews during the 1930s and 1940s. While the refugee problem is still a major issue for ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) members, the

nation that has suffered most from this exodus has been Vietnam. By wiping out their merchant and professional class, the Vietnamese lost any hope they may have had for economic growth.

The issue of Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea is fairly complex, but the general conflict lies in Vietnam's desire for hegemony over all of Indochina, including Laos and Kampuchea, and China's desire for independent states in the region. Once again Chen has been able to describe the historic background and underlying issues in a concise way. Of interest at present, the Vietnamese are currently proposing to remove their troops from Kampuchea, possibly under pressure from their primary ally, the Soviet Union.

Chen views the Soviet Union as the third principal ingredient in China's decision to go to war against Vietnam. He recounts the development of Soviet-Vietnamese political and military ties that culminated in the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, concluded on 3 November 1978, which essentially formalized Vietnam's position in the Soviet camp vis-à-vis China.

Following an examination of the background of, and reasons for, the Chinese attack, Chen describes the decision-making process in Beijing that led to the war and develops a model of the process which may also be useful today. His analysis leads him to the conclusion that the decision to conduct a "punitive" war

against Vietnam was made by Deng Xiaoping and appeared to be a classic example of a limited war for limited objectives. Deng knew the risks, including the possibility that the Soviet Union might become involved, but felt that Vietnam needed to be taught a lesson.

"According to Deng, the nature of the war was as a self-defensive counterattack. It was limited in time and space, and also limited to ground fighting, similar to the Sino-Indian war of 1962. No naval or air forces would be used. . . . The main objective . . . was to give Vietnam a lesson. . . . Apart from invading Cambodia and expelling Chinese residents, Vietnam had made repeated border incursions and killed Chinese soldiers as well as civilians. China had to fight back but would not take one inch of Vietnamese territory. As soon as Chinese forces had achieved the objectives, they would unilaterally withdraw."

This is precisely what occurred. The Chinese Army moved across the border into Vietnam on 17 February 1979 and began to withdraw back into China on 5 March, 16 days later, after moving 30 to 80 miles inside Vietnamese territory and taking control of several Vietnamese border villages. While the numbers are uncertain, Chen indicates that both sides suffered about 60,000 casualties, either killed or wounded—a significant rate for such a short period of time. Both sides claimed victory: Vietnam in stopping a large-scale Chinese assault and China in "punishing" Vietnamese regular military

forces and teaching Vietnam a lesson. While China's actions did not force a change in Vietnam's position on Kampuchea or its treatment of ethnic Chinese, Chen points out that the war must have raised doubts in Hanoi about the utility of the Soviet Union as an ally against China. We may be seeing a resurgence of these doubts today as the Soviets attempt to improve relations with Beijing, possibly at the expense of their Vietnamese ally.

The remainder of this book concerns itself with the "lessons learned" by both belligerents and the consequences of the war for the international community. It is evident that the Chinese were not pleased with the performance of their fighting units. Chen makes the case that "Beijing's military authorities must have reached the conclusion that the PLA is incapable of fighting a modern war before it is modernized in both weaponry and strategy."

Chen contends that even though the war was over by April 1979, the problems that led to the war have not yet been resolved, and China did not achieve its major political objectives. Many of these issues are no longer simply bilateral concerns between China and Vietnam. The refugees, the continued Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea, and Soviet military, particularly naval, developments in Vietnam are regional concerns being addressed by international organizations such as ASEAN and the United Nations. Whether

these problems can be solved remains to be seen.

Chen concludes with his assessment that the Chinese war against Vietnam has established the pattern for future Chinese military actions: low risk operations at low cost. It will be interesting to watch the current Spratly Islands interaction with that assessment in mind. In many respects, a Chinese military option to destroy Vietnamese naval forces and force the withdrawal of the Vietnamese garrisons in the Spratlys can be considered a soft, inexpensive venture since the PRC's navy is vastly superior to that of Vietnam, and the Soviet Union probably would not want to be involved directly.

This is an interesting and timely work that concisely summarizes and clarifies the complex issues involving China and Vietnam. The next episode of the story is currently being acted out in the South China Sea. It is vitally important that we in the United States understand the historic ties and conflicts between these two communist nations if we are to remain a maritime power in the region. Professor Chen's book is an excellent source for this.

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Keegan, John and Wheatcroft, Andrew. *Zones of Conflict: An Atlas of Future Wars*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986. 158pp. \$10.95