

Materials on

The Conflict between China and Vietnam (February 1979)

On February 17, 1979, fifteen weeks after Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed a treaty of peace and cooperation, and six weeks after Vietnam invaded Cambodia, China announced a strike against Vietnam along much of the 480 mile border dividing the two nations. While President Carter and Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev condemned the Chinese action for immediate reasons of Southeast Asian destabilization, the invasion brought to light in the West a history of over 20 centuries of such incidents in which Vietnam had historically represented an obstacle to Chinese expansionist aims in Southeast Asia. (Similarly, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia highlighted the historical enmity of those neighbors.) Nevertheless, the Chinese insisted that the invasion did not aim to take over Vietnam but simply to teach the Vietnamese a lesson. The lesson appeared to be directed against Vietnam's recent invasion of China's ally Cambodia, Vietnam's treaty with China's adversary, the U.S.S.R., a crackdown on 4.2 million ethnic Chinese in Southern Vietnam that prompted an exodus of 180,000, and a dispute over the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

The Chinese penetrated only twenty five miles into Vietnamese territory while encountering heavy resistance from the Vietnamese. Villages, schools, power plants and public roads were destroyed in the process as Vietnamese claimed that 62,500 Chinese and 15,000 Vietnamese were killed in the fighting. On March 5, after three weeks of heavy fighting, Beijing announced the end of its invasion and plans to withdraw its troops to Chinese territory. The next day, the Vietnamese stated they would hold peace discussions with the Chinese if China's promise to withdraw troops was fulfilled. Thereafter, Vietnam rejected three Chinese offers to discuss peace, insisting that Chinese troops still remained in Vietnamese territory. Finally, on April 19, Chinese and Vietnamese officials met in Hanoi to discuss peace proposals but neither side would accept one. Provocations continue along the border to this day.

Prepare to Discuss the Following Questions:

1. What did Vietnam think about China in February 1979 that China wanted to change?
2. What was the educational objective of China's military effort to "teach the Vietnamese a lesson?" Its effect?
3. In what other current international conflicts or bilateral relationships are one or both sides attempting to educate the other? What is their strategy? Its effect?

CAST OF CHARACTERS
The Conflict Between China and Vietnam

Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Soviet Union Communist Party

Jimmy Carter, President of the United States

Andrei Gromyko, Soviet Foreign Minister

Li Hsien-nien, Chinese Deputy Prime Minister

Thanh Nga, popular South Vietnamese actress

Pol Pot, Prime Minister of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, ousted by the Vietnam Invasion.

Heng Samrin, Cambodian Prime Minister installed by Vietnamese after ousting of Pol Pot

Hsu Shih-yu, Commander of Chinese forces, Communist Politburo

Yang Teh-Mer, Commander of Chinese troops during Korean War

General Van Tien Dung, Vietnamese army Chief of Staff

Pham Van Dong, Vietnamese Prime Minister

Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the United Nations

Deng Xiaoping, Chinese Deputy Prime Minister

General Wu Xiuguan, Chinese Deputy Chief of Staff

CHRONOLOGY

The Conflict between China and Vietnam

- 1957** Communist parties of China and North Vietnam agree to respect boundary line and to maintain status quo.
- 1975**
- April 17 Cambodia falls to Khmer Rouge troops. Radio Phnom Penh declares, "Kampuchea's great victory is a great victory for the Chinese people," indicating friendship with China and enemy status for Vietnam.
- April 30 South Vietnam falls to North Vietnamese Army. Vietnam War ends.
- November Beijing publicly raises territorial dispute with Vietnam over Spratly Islands.
- 1978**
- April-May 50,000 ethnic Chinese cross the border in search of better living conditions in China. Exodus totals nearly 200,000.
- June China cuts off all economic aid to Vietnam, withdraws ambassador, closes all three Vietnamese consulates in China in response to crackdown on and exodus of ethnic Chinese.
- November 3 Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the U.S.S.R. sign Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.
- November 28 Thanh Nga, South Vietnam's most popular and talented actress assassinated in Saigon for playing lead roles of heroines in Vietnam's resistance to Chinese occupation.
- December 24 Vietnam invades Cambodia, commencing campaign versus Pol Pot regime.
- 1979**
- January 7 Army of Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation, led by Heng Samrin, marches into Phnom Penh, overthrows Khmer Rouge government of Pol Pot, and sets up pro-Vietnamese Government.
- January 8-12 Vietnamese charge Chinese with nine border violations in which two were killed and three wounded.

- January 25 Vietnam celebrates 190th anniversary of Vietnamese victory over Beijing in 1789.
- January 30 Chinese start lightning raids, swift military actions across Vietnamese border.
- January 31 Chinese Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping speaks of Vietnamese in Washington stating, "If you don't teach them some necessary lessons, it just won't do."
- February Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping elicits Japan's support versus Vietnam but fails to receive it.
- February 1-13 China deploys 300,000 troops to border.
- February 17 100,000 to 170,000 Chinese soldiers supported by tanks, artillery and aircraft invade Vietnam along 480 mile frontier "to teach the Vietnamese a lesson."
China calls upon Vietnamese authority to hold peaceful negotiations which Vietnamese reject as "robber's trick."
- March 5 Beijing announces end of Vietnam invasion and imminent withdrawal of troops to Chinese territory.
- March 6 Hanoi announces it will hold discussions on improving relations with China if Chinese troops implement plan to withdraw.
- March 7 China claims victory.
Vietnam claims Chinese troops badly defeated.
- March 18 End of thirty day war announced by Beijing; withdrawal of all troops to Chinese territory. Vietnam claims Chinese troops still occupy Vietnamese territory.
- April 4 Vietnam, after several rejections, accepts Chinese proposal for negotiations to restore normal relations between the two countries, insisting on complete withdrawal of Chinese troops.
- April 19 Meeting in Hanoi: China and Vietnam reject each other's peace proposals.
- May 1 Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping tells Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the U.N., that China will strike again if provocations continue.

1987

January

Fighting on Sino-Vietnamese border results in highest casualty level since month-long war in 1979.

FURTHER READING
The Conflict between China and Vietnam

Kaushik, R.P. and Susheela. *Back to the Front, The Unfinished Story in Vietnam*, New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited (1979)

Lawson, Eugene K. *The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict*, New York: Praeger Publishers (1984)

Ray, Herman. *China's Vietnam War*, New Delhi: Radiant Publishers (1983)

Tretiak, "China's Vietnam War"; see also: Eugene K. Lawson, "Comment" on Tretiak article, *The China Quarterly* 86 (June 1981)