



Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991 by Xiaoming Zhang.

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At the end of 1978, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam invaded Cambodia and overthrew the brutal Khmer Rouge regime, which had ruled there since 1975. China was outraged and launched a substantial invasion of northern Vietnam in February 1979. Within weeks, the Chinese troops pulled back and did not again make such deep incursions into Vietnam, but significant fighting along the border recurred for another twelve years. *Deng Xiaoping's Long War* deals primarily with the thoughts and actions of the Chinese; it says much less about the Vietnamese. It targets readers seriously interested in modern China or Vietnam.

Xiaoming Zhang (US Air Force Air War College) is well qualified to write on this topic. He is the author of *Red Wings over the Yalu'* and other studies of the Korean and Vietnam wars. He makes extensive use of Chinese published sources and some archival material. Americans, even scholars, typically know little about the dramatic events of early 1979 and even less about the years of less intense conflict that followed. Most of what Zhang says about Chinese motives, combat operations, and political and logistic issues will be new to almost all readers.

China provided munitions and supplies to the Vietnamese Communists throughout the Vietnam War, and from 1965 to 1970 had even posted anti-aircraft gunners and other military personnel in the northern part of North Vietnam. The Chinese felt betrayed when, after the war ended with Communist victory in 1975, Vietnam aligned itself with the Soviet Union in the Sino-Soviet dispute. There were frequent clashes in 1978 between small military units along the border, and the Chinese were considering an escalation of the fighting. In October, they began construction of two roads leading toward the border, which would be vital for moving troops and supplies for such an operation.

When Vietnam invaded Cambodia at the end of December, Deng Xiaoping immediately decided there should be a Chinese military response. This was his personal decision; he informed his comrades, rather than consulting them on the matter. It was to be a brief and limited operation: the Chinese planned to go deeply enough into Vietnam to destroy three to five divisions of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and threaten Hanoi, but withdraw within three weeks without actually having gone near Hanoi.

The Chinese wanted to launch their attack in mid-January 1979, but the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was grossly unprepared, so the operation was postponed a month, to allow frantic efforts to bring units up to strength and teach the new personnel their jobs.

The 121st Division, which was designated to undertake a deep-penetration mission in Vietnam, focused on how to move through jungles and mountain trails against the enemy's ambushes and then how to attack the enemy positions on hilltops. At least three soldiers from each company were trained to read maps....

1. Subtitle: *China, the Soviet Union, and the Air War in Korea* (College Station: Texas A&M U Pr, 2002).

Such desperate last-minute training efforts, though somewhat helpful, were woefully insufficient because there were too many new recruits and too many of them were peasant farmers. Despite the goal of teaching military skills, most of the soldiers completed only one to two live practices on the shooting range and only one live grenade-throwing practice. Few units conducted serious tactical training exercises at the regimental or division level. (79)

The Chinese attack began on 17 February, on multiple fronts. The Vietnamese forces had expected Chinese military action, but not on such a scale. They were able to put up more resistance than expected, causing Chinese forces to fall behind their planned schedule. But, by about 4 March, the PLA had taken the last of its major objectives, the city of Lang Son, about ten miles in from the Chinese border and eighty miles from Hanoi. On 5 March, the Chinese announced that they were terminating the operation and withdrawing from Vietnam, though in fact offensive operations continued for a few more days in some areas. The withdrawal was completed on 16 March. Both sides had significant air forces, but neither tried to provide close air support to its ground troops. The Chinese devastated the area they occupied, especially Lang Son, well beyond any simple military necessity. The point was to “teach Vietnam a lesson” (120), in Deng Xiaoping’s words.

After the 1979 war, China remained determined to force a withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia. Its pressure on Vietnam led to intermittent armed clashes along the border through the 1980s. The scope of the fighting at first remained relatively small, but, in late 1984, the Chinese began an offensive at Laoshan, in a remote area of Vietnam’s northwest frontier. The territory the Chinese had taken by the spring of 1985 was not large, but it was enough that the Vietnamese launched a counteroffensive to regain it. Fighting in the area continued for years, on a sufficient scale to allow the PLA to develop its skills in reconnaissance and combined-arms warfare and practice using modern weapons and technologies, such as night-vision devices, in combat. In 1990, after the Vietnamese had left Cambodia, the Chinese once again withdrew their troops from the small area they had occupied in northern Vietnam, but the border remained tense until 1993.

Maoist doctrines of a people’s war had significant influence. Political officers played important roles in the regular military units. Tens of thousands of militia actually participated in combat; much larger numbers provided vital support, transporting supplies and ammunition to the front, evacuating wounded men, and so forth. They had not been absorbed into the PLA; they remained a militia in civilian clothing.

The war placed a heavy burden on the two Chinese provinces, Guangxi and especially Yunnan, from which the Chinese military operations were mounted. In line with people’s war doctrine, they were expected to provide not only manpower but also other resources, such as food, to support the PLA troops. The central government did not compensate them for this, preventing them from sharing in the economic growth most of China enjoyed in the 1980s.

Although Zhang has used some Vietnamese sources in English translation, his book is based predominantly on Chinese materials and consequently presents a mostly Chinese viewpoint on the war. Chinese leaders claimed the Soviets and their proxies the Vietnamese were a threat to China and Southeast Asia as a whole. The United States had made equally dubious claims a few years earlier regarding the putative threat the same Vietnamese, then depicted as Chinese proxies, posed to Southeast Asia. Zhang typically presents Chinese views without comment, as when he says Deng Xiaoping “felt that China was pinched between a Soviet threat from the north and a Vietnamese threat from the south, thereby endangering China’s ‘Four Modernizations’” (7). “Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia was regarded as a key component of a broader Soviet scheme to encircle China” (193). Sometimes the author appears to endorse Chinese exaggerations of Vietnamese aggression, referring to Vietnam’s “military invasion of Cambodia and Thailand” (150) and claiming China’s war against Vietnam “prevented

Western-oriented Thailand from falling into the Vietnamese sphere of influence” (5). He sees no inconsistency between Deng’s decision to go to war with Vietnam because the perceived Soviet threat was “both genuine and perilous” (8) and the belief of the Chinese that they could safely invade Vietnam because the Soviet Union was too weak militarily to intervene to protect its ally (50–51). Only in his concluding chapter does he clearly, if briefly, acknowledge that Chinese perceptions “exaggerated” (214) the Soviet threat.

China was offended by what it saw as Vietnamese arrogance. When Zhang refers to Vietnam as “the self-proclaimed ‘world’s third-strongest military power’” (7; see also 55, 215), his only source is a speech by Deng Xiaoping. If the Vietnamese themselves ever actually made such an unlikely proclamation, it should have been cited. Zhang does, however, reject the Chinese viewpoint on some issues. Though each side blamed the other for the increase in small clashes along the border during 1978, Zhang asserts that the Vietnamese were “probably correct” (109) about this.

Other things being equal, a force on the tactical offensive will generally suffer heavier casualties than one on the defensive, especially if the attacking troops are poorly trained and lack combat experience. Yet the Chinese claimed that, although they fought mostly on the offensive, they killed about five Vietnamese for every man they lost in the 1979 war. Even allowing for the large-scale Chinese use of artillery, this strains credulity. Zhang accepts Chinese figures for their own losses as simple fact (see especially 119). He does not explain his confidence in the accuracy of those figures. He sometimes seems to accept Chinese claims about Vietnamese casualties, but sometimes expresses doubt—“the figures claimed by the PLA forces may be inflated” (119). Then, in his concluding chapter, he writes that analysis of the fighting suggests Vietnamese casualties were “at least equal to and likely greater than those experienced by the PLA” (211), implying that the numbers in previous chapters had not only inflated but wildly inflated Vietnamese casualties.

Deng Xiaoping’s Long War is neither a perfectly balanced account of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, nor outrageously biased. It is an extremely interesting and valuable picture of China’s side of the conflict, its military, and its approach to international affairs. All serious libraries should acquire it.