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Communist China and the Vietnam War

DAVID A. RAYMOND

PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON asserted in 1965 that the “confused nature” of the Vietnam War could not mask the fact that the United States was confronting “the new face of an old enemy”—Communist China. Johnson apparently viewed the war not so much as a conflict between North and South Vietnam, but—in broader dimensions—as a struggle between Washington and Peking. In that view, North Vietnam was China’s agent. The war was testing American endurance to resist Chinese expansion.¹

This thesis, which prevailed throughout the Johnson years, was rejected by the Nixon Administration. The Nixon view held that within a multipolar Communist world, Peking was a competitor with Moscow for the allegiance of Hanoi; and that, as a corollary, Hanoi was playing each of the Communist giants off against the other in order to preserve its own relative freedom of action. China’s antagonism toward the Soviet Union now exceeded its hostility toward the United States. Hence, Washington no longer had to consider Peking as its principal adversary in Vietnam. Indeed, a rapprochement with Communist China would help the United States in obtaining a settlement of the war. It was this analysis of the Vietnam War that facilitated our extrication from the struggle, and permitted the establishment of neodiplomatic relations between the United States and Communist China.

A retrospective assessment of China’s long-time approach to Indochina helps us to understand what the Nixon Administration fathomed that Johnson did not, namely, that Peking’s policy toward the area has usually been characterized by caution, especially in dealing with the United States, by distrust of Soviet power, and—perhaps most important—by wariness over the limitations of any effort to exert influence over revolutionary allies such as the North Vietnamese.

¹ Speech at Johns Hopkins University, April 7, 1965.

II

The leaders of the Communist regime that emerged victorious in China in 1949 inevitably took a special interest in the ongoing war in Indochina—a “war of national liberation” being waged by the Communist-led Viet Minh against French colonial rule.

Throughout history, the destiny of the two countries has been closely joined. For more than a millennium, the Vietnamese nation was directly ruled by Chinese governors as an extension of the Middle Kingdom. Vietnam had served China as a buffer against barbarian incursions, as a coastal way-station on the trade routes to the south and west, as an outpost of Chinese civilization against the island peoples to the south and the Indianized kingdoms to the west. Even during the 900 years of relative independence that followed the eviction of their Chinese rulers in the tenth century A.D., the Vietnamese considered themselves a tributary people within the Middle Kingdom’s “circle of light”; and they regularly dispatched elephant tusks, brocade, and other valuables to the Chinese throne as symbols of their allegiance to the most civilized country they knew. No Chinese leadership could remain immune to that heritage.

In strategic terms, the leaders of Communist China and North Vietnam proclaimed from the first that their nations were as close as “lips and teeth.” (The imagery referred to an old saying: “When the lips are open, the teeth feel cold.”) After 1949, Peking’s policy toward Vietnam was plainly related to its desire to eliminate the American presence from the region. On historical grounds, the Chinese inevitably saw the United States as an intruder into their natural sphere of influence; and for reasons of national security, Peking must have been concerned about the long-term implications of foreign influence over potentially hostile neighboring states.

At the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, Chou En-lai sought to negotiate a firm prohibition of US military bases in Indochina, and to ensure that the three non-Communist states of Indochina did not affiliate with the American alliance system. Chou was clearly less interested in the size of the Communist states on China’s frontier than in reducing the overall American military presence in the area. He agreed to separate negotiations over Cambodia and Laos—an implicit recognition of the non-Communist royal governments; and he persuaded

the Viet Minh to give up its demand for the 14th parallel as the partition line between North and South, and settle for the 17th. In his private negotiations with Mendès-France (the new French Prime Minister who served as his own Foreign Minister), Chou was also instrumental in achieving the formula for armistice that was signed on July 20, 1954.

With these agreements, China seemed to achieve at least one of its primary goals. In a period of great national weakness, in which the overwhelming preoccupation of policy was on internal consolidation and reconstruction, the Chinese had increased their security by bringing the hostilities in Indochina, with their threat of American intervention (publicly espoused by then Vice President Nixon), to an end. Moreover, despite the concessions made by the Communist side at Geneva, the goal of security appeared to be further enhanced by what was generally regarded in the West as a Communist diplomatic triumph. "It would be an understatement to say we do not like the terms of the cease-fire just concluded," commented Walter S. Robertson, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.²

It is important to recall the public attitude in those days. It was widely assumed that the Geneva settlement had tacitly accepted the inevitability of Communist rule over all of Vietnam. The temporary nature of the demarcation line was emphasized in the agreements. The planned nationwide election to reunify the country, scheduled for 1956, it was generally acknowledged, would lead to a victory for Ho Chi Minh. The *New York Times* of June 6, 1954, in a dispatch from Geneva, asserted that the Bao Dai government was neither popular nor effective; and that if elections were held in the prevailing circumstances, the Viet Minh would secure a majority. President Eisenhower in his own memoirs later confirmed the estimate.³

But Communist China's success at the Geneva Conference was soon limited by United States support for an independent South Vietnam. Two days after the conference ended, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles remarked that "one of the good aspects of the Geneva Conference was that it advanced the truly independent status of Cambodia, Laos, and Southern Vietnam." The important thing, he said,

² *Department of State Bulletin*, August 23, 1954.

³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 337–338.

“is not to mourn the past, but to seize the future opportunity to prevent the loss in Northern Vietnam from leading to the extension of communism throughout Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific.”⁴ In fulfillment of the policy of containment in Asia, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was born on September 8, 1954, and South Vietnam, as well as Laos and Cambodia, were placed under its protection.

Subsequently, the new leader of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, refused to participate in the consultative conferences called for to organize the projected all-Vietnam elections, on the ground that his regime was not bound by the Geneva settlement.

Peking expressed deep concern over Diem's position. In a letter dated October 31, 1955, and addressed to the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference (the British Foreign Secretary and the Soviet Foreign Minister), Chou En-lai rejected his assertion that Geneva did not bind his government. This position was clearly untenable, he said, because when France signed the agreements, it had also signed on behalf of the southern part of Vietnam, which formed its regroupment jurisdiction. Furthermore, Chou asserted, the settlement “clearly stipulates that the signatories of the agreement and their successors in their functions shall be responsible for ensuring the observance and enforcement of the terms and provisions thereof.” Answering the American contention that only if conditions of freedom prevailed throughout the country could elections take place, Chou argued that those “so-called conditions of freedom” were precisely a matter to be established through consultations between the two sides. He noted that the elections were to be held under the supervision of the International Commission agreed upon by the Geneva Conference, and he urged the two Conference Chairmen to ensure the convening of the appropriate consultative sessions.⁵ Three months later, Chou called for convening another conference in Geneva.

From the outset, the Soviet Union was a major military supplier of the Communist revolutionary forces in Indochina. By late 1960, the Russians had established an airlift of war materiel through Hanoi to supply the North Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao. This strengthened

⁴ *Department of State Bulletin*, August 2, 1954.

⁵ *Documents Relating to British Involvement in the Indochina Conflict 1945–1965*. Command No. 2834 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1965), Document 59.

Moscow's leverage in Laotian affairs, but it risked a great power clash on China's sensitive periphery. Peking appeared particularly uneasy over emergency SEATO meetings and the dispatch of the US Seventh Fleet to the South China Sea. In December, as the crisis in Laos threatened war, Peking's Foreign Minister, Ch'en Yi, warned that China "has to consider measures to safeguard its security." But he did not threaten to enter into competition with Moscow and Hanoi in providing military assistance to the Pathet Lao, and thereby risk a possible confrontation with the United States. Instead, Ch'en Yi called for a negotiated settlement based upon the 1954 Geneva settlement that could restore the "neutrality" of Laos and the legal government of Prince Souvanna Phouma, who was in exile in Phnom Penh.⁶

Peking's position offered an opening to the new American President, John F. Kennedy, who also feared the outbreak of war. The result was the Geneva Conference on Laos, May 1961 to July 1962. This is not the place to review its protracted proceedings. The essential compromise agreed to between China and the United States provided for a "neutral" Laos, and non-Communist leadership of its central government, in return for guarantees for the removal of American forces. In addition, the negotiations resulted in the elimination of the Soviet presence in Laos, thereby clearing the way for greater Chinese influence in Laotian affairs. China's leading role at the Geneva Conference on Laos, notably its ability to deal successfully with the United States on an Asian security issue of great importance without relying entirely on Soviet support, reinforced Peking's self-confidence in its relations with the Soviet Union, which by the early 1960s were showing visible signs of deterioration.

In order to forestall increased US involvement in Vietnam, Peking had proposed at Geneva the creation of a neutral "peace zone" in Southeast Asia. Such a zone was to include South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia at first; and afterwards, it was to be expanded to other states, notably Thailand. The United States rejected this Chinese proposal as a device to minimize US support for South Vietnam in fighting the Viet Cong insurgency. When the insurgents began to achieve striking successes in 1963, Peking's stand shifted. The Chinese now looked

⁶ *Ibid.*, Document 79.

to a Viet Cong victory, and endorsed Hanoi's program for achieving the reunification of the country through armed insurgency. Peking soon became a major supplier of weapons to the Viet Cong.

By this time, the Peking-Moscow split was out in the open. In return for Peking's support, North Vietnam openly backed Communist China in the Sino-Soviet dispute, especially in connection with the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This was in contrast to Hanoi's previous avoidance of commitment to either side. In May 1963, the visit of Chairman Liu Shao-ch'i and Vice Premier Ch'en Yi to Hanoi occasioned warm displays of Sino-Vietnamese friendship. The inevitable joint communique emphasized that Peking "firmly supports" the Communist struggle against the United States and the Diem regime in South Vietnam.⁷

But Peking remained cautious. When Hanoi, in the following year, warned that "should the US imperialists attack North Vietnam because they want to win in South Vietnam, they not only would have to cope with North Vietnam but also with China," Peking quickly dissociated itself from the warning by deleting all references to China in its press coverage of the Hanoi statement.⁸ Instead, Ch'en Yi once again recommended strict implementation of the 1954 Geneva settlement and, if necessary, reconvening the Geneva Conference "for discussion of concrete measures" to prevent further escalation of the conflict.⁹

III

Only in June 1964, after a step-up of American military assistance to bolster the successive post-Diem regimes, did an ominous note begin to creep into Peking's commentaries on the war. Ch'en Yi warned that China would "absolutely not sit by idly while the Geneva agreements are completely torn up and the flames of war spread to their (North Vietnam's) side."¹⁰ At the end of July, an unidentified high Chinese official, allegedly Chou En-lai, in an interview with an Austrian newsman, expressed grave concern over the possibility of the United States sending its forces north, and thus threatening the stability of the Chinese

⁷ *New China News Agency*, May 15, 1963.

⁸ *Hoc Tap*, January 1964; *Vietnam News Agency*, *People's Daily*, February 11, 1964.

⁹ *People's Daily*, May 18, 1964.

¹⁰ *New China News Agency*, June 24, 1964.

border. In such circumstances, he said, China would be impelled to “intervene.” The official proposed “neutrality” for South Vietnam and Laos as the basis for peace in Indochina.¹¹

When President Johnson ordered air attacks against North Vietnamese naval stations in early August, in reprisal for attacks upon American destroyers in the Gulf of Tongking, Peking asserted that such violations of North Vietnamese territory were the same as “aggression” against China.¹² Peking was clearly concerned as to the extent to which the United States would escalate the war, and as to the preparations that would be required for the defense of China. But while Peking provided Hanoi with Mig-15 and Mig-17 jets, no obvious preparations were made to send Chinese forces into Indochina.

As late as January 1965, prior to the start of the American bombing campaign against North Vietnam the following month, the Chinese leadership was holding out for negotiations. Premier Chou En-lai, in an address to the People’s Consultative Congress in Peking, offered a settlement under the terms of the 1954 and 1962 Geneva agreements. Mao Tse-tung told Edgar Snow that he hoped the United States would withdraw and negotiate a settlement of hostilities. Asked whether China insisted upon the withdrawal of American forces prior to a conference, Mao cited several possibilities:¹³

First, a conference might be held and the United States withdrawal would follow. Second, the conference might be deferred until after the withdrawal. Third, a conference might be held but the United States might stay around Saigon, as in the case of South Korea. Finally, the South Vietnamese front might drive out the Americans without any conference or international agreement.

But as the war escalated, the Peking government turned away from a negotiated settlement. China was now in the throes of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and foreign policy pronouncements tended to be tough on all issues. Emphasis on the internal struggle against “revisionism” spilled over into vituperative external statements on “protracted warfare.” Moreover, Peking evidenced growing con-

¹¹ *Der Kurier* (Vienna), August 1, 1964; *New York Times*, August 7, 1964.

¹² *People’s Daily*, August 9, 1964.

¹³ Edgar Snow, “Interview With Mao,” *New Republic*, February 27, 1965.

cern over Moscow's increasing leverage in Hanoi at the same time that the Russians were making accommodations with the United States. In March, Peking reacted to the American intervention with threats of a counterintervention of its own, and pledged "to send our own men whenever the South Vietnamese people want them."¹⁴

But while its propaganda turned bellicose, Peking's policy remained cautious. It apparently did not regard an American extension of the war to China as unavoidable, and took pains not to provoke the United States. Peking made clear that China would intervene only if attacked, or if the United States invaded North Vietnam in an effort to overthrow the Hanoi regime. On March 10, 1965, Foreign Minister Ch'en Yi stated:¹⁵

We have no right to take the initiative. We cannot decide to send our troops today. It would be possible for us, but we do not want to send troops into Southeast Asia beyond our borders to give the imperialists the pretext to shout that the Communist threat is knocking at the door. It is only in case of legitimate defense that we use our forces and fight.

An article in *Red Flag*, the journal of the Chinese Army, criticized those who thought China should risk war with the United States.¹⁶ On the other hand, Peking did send up to 50,000 construction battalion troops to North Vietnam during 1965–66 to help repair damage caused by the American bombing.

At this point, Chinese Communist policy began to shift. On March 29, 1965, Peking for the first time flatly stated that China's "peace and security" could only be assured by the elimination of the United States presence from South Vietnam.¹⁷ An editorial in *People's Daily* on May 9, 1965, still reflected the view that, provided China's basic interests were "not violated," it would be "perfectly permissible and even necessary to conduct negotiations with imperialists and to reach certain agreements with them on certain occasions." The article cited the Korean armistice, the two Geneva settlements, and even the Nazi-Soviet pact

¹⁴ *People's Daily*, March 22, 1965.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, March 22, 1965.

¹⁶ *Peking Review*, April 9, 1965.

¹⁷ *People's Daily*, March 29, 1965.

as examples of negotiating with “imperialists” to gain beneficial results.¹⁸ But in *Red Flag* the next day, the Chief of Staff of the People’s Liberation Army, Lo Jui-ch’ing, presented a different view. While acknowledging the permissibility of negotiations with the “imperialists” on certain occasions, Lo stressed the dangers of appeasement. He reminded his readers that less than two years after Stalin had negotiated and signed his pact with Hitler, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. The United States, he added, was even more sinister than Nazi Germany.¹⁹

The Peking leadership was moving to a policy of opposition to negotiations. In June, *Red Flag* repeated Lo’s warnings about appeasement; and *People’s Daily*, reversing its position in May, joined the growing chorus against negotiations. Peking would now support only the “four-point” and “five-point” plans of Hanoi and the National Liberation Front. The “central point” of both plans, which “brooks no change,” was the withdrawal of American forces.²⁰ While Hanoi tried to convey the impression that the “four points” were meant only to comprise the agenda for peace talks, Peking maintained that their acceptance (that is, US withdrawal) was a precondition for negotiations. Some analysts speculated that this posture was a warning that a compromise solution or cease-fire accepted by Hanoi or the National Liberation Front which was not predicated on the withdrawal of American forces would meet with active opposition from China, and perhaps even induce Chinese intervention.

Peking could not prevent a sharp increase of Moscow’s influence in Hanoi in early 1965. Once the bombing of North Vietnam began, Hanoi looked to Moscow for the SAM antiaircraft missiles that were vital to North Vietnam’s defense. Kosygin’s visit to Hanoi in early February must have generated fears in the Peking leadership of a double containment. The United States might obtain Soviet cooperation for a settlement of the Vietnam War on satisfactory terms, while acquiescing in a permanent Soviet position in North Vietnam. Peking was suspicious of Moscow’s relations with the United States, and said so.

It was not surprising, therefore, that when the Soviet Union proposed “united action” with China on Vietnam, the proposal was rejected.

Ibid., May 9, 1965.

Red Flag, May 10, 1965.

People’s Daily, January 30, 1966; *Peking Review*, August 13, 1966.

According to Peking, the Soviet leaders asked for (a) transit rights for Soviet military supplies through China; (b) use of airfields in South China, including the stationing of Soviet military personnel at these bases; (c) an air corridor over China; (d) permission for a few thousand Russian technician-soldiers to pass through China; and (e) a conference of the Soviet Union, China, and North Vietnam to discuss these and other aspects of a cooperative effort.²¹

All but the transit agreement was turned down, despite the fact that Hanoi apparently supported the proposal in its entirety. Moscow's expanding role in Vietnam would, in Peking's view, increase Soviet leverage at China's expense. Peking also feared the presence of Soviet military personnel and bases on Chinese soil during a period of heightening Sino-Soviet tension. P'eng Chen, in a speech in Indonesia, warned that "unity" with the Soviet Union on Vietnam would make China susceptible to Soviet influence, and force negotiations under unfavorable circumstances.²²

As early as March 1965, China had denounced the Soviet Union for sabotaging the Communist effort in Vietnam. In a highly publicized speech three months later, P'eng Chen accused Moscow of having divulged to Washington its plans for aid to North Vietnam. He said that the Russians were "busy in Washington, London, and Paris trying to bring about peace negotiations" in a painstaking effort to find a "way out" for the United States.²³ Soviet aid to Vietnam, charged Peking, was motivated by the desire "to keep the situation in Vietnam under their control, to gain a say on the Vietnam question, and to strike a bargain with US imperialism on it."²⁴ In an interview with a Japanese reporter, Ch'en Yi repeated the charge that Soviet assistance was clearly designed to provide Moscow with leverage to control the Vietnam situation.²⁵

The Soviet Union had purposely relaxed tension in Europe, especially on the Berlin question, so that the United States could shift troops from Europe to Vietnam.²⁶ "By their collaboration in forcing 'peace

²¹ *People's Daily*, November 11, 1965.

²² *New China News Agency*, May 28, 1965.

²³ *People's Daily*, June 13, 1965.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, November 11, 1965.

²⁵ *New China News Agency*, January 4, 1966.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, January 5, 1966.

talks' through a 'pause in bombing' at the expense of Vietnam, the United States and the Soviet Union are vainly trying to bring about a new Eastern Munich so as to oppose the Vietnamese people, encircle China, and suppress the Asian national liberation movement." The "new counterrevolutionary 'Holy Alliance' is directed specifically against China."²⁷ When Kosygin and Johnson talked at Glassboro in June 1967, "they discussed their anti-China alliance as the 'most urgent question' and their greatest 'common interest,'" said Peking. "They are strenuously trying to whip up a violent anti-China campaign in the world." India, Japan, Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia were identified as countries that were to participate with the United States and the Soviet Union in the encirclement of China.²⁸

Peking's charges against Moscow and the United States mirrored the internal campaign against revisionism which, as it spilled over into external affairs, put China at odds with almost the entire Communist world as well as with most other countries. All Chinese ambassadors abroad, excepting only the envoy to Albania, were recalled, and most foreign missions in Peking were also shut down. There were times between May and August 1967 when Red Guard militants virtually ran the Foreign Ministry.

The Cultural Revolution presented Moscow with an unprecedented opportunity to erode Chinese influence in Hanoi. Moscow alleged that "adventuristic" Chinese policies in domestic and foreign affairs, characterized by a feverish emphasis on "armed struggle," disregarded other methods of promoting Communist interests. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution in China also impressed on Hanoi the limitations of Maoist revolutionary theories, and the risk that an unstable China now posed for North Vietnamese security. In mid-1967, Chou En-lai purportedly stated in an interview that China wanted a prolonged war in Vietnam. Peking denied that the interview ever occurred, and characterized the story as a deliberate effort to smear China and "disrupt fraternal relations between China and Vietnam."²⁹ But in his September 2, 1965, article on "people's war," Lin Piao stressed "self-reliance," and empha-

²⁷ *Peking Review*, October 28, 1966.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, December 25, 1967.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, June 2, 1967.

sized that local guerrillas would have to fight their own wars independently, "even when all material aid from outside is cut off."³⁰

By early 1967, the question no longer was academic, if it ever was. Factional fighting in South China had seriously obstructed China's war supplies for Vietnam, as well as Soviet supplies making their way overland through China. As early as May 1966, Chou En-lai had protested against Russian allegations that China was impeding the movement of Russian aid to Vietnam. But by mid-1968, the Peking leadership itself conceded that armed attacks against trains less than 200 miles from the Sino-Vietnamese border had "badly affected" supply shipments to Vietnam. The domestic turmoil in China drove Hanoi ever closer to Moscow. China could no longer be regarded as a "reliable rear." When, in apparent response to Moscow advice, North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh indicated on January 28, 1967, that only a cessation of bombing stood in the way of negotiations, Peking was caught off-guard and responded with a reminder to Hanoi that only US withdrawal could bring negotiations.³¹ At a celebration in the Chinese capitol on September 1, commemorating the 22nd anniversary of the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, most high Chinese officials were conspicuously absent.

China suffered a major foreign policy defeat on April 3, 1968, following the Tet Offensive and only three days after the United States halted its bombing over most of North Vietnam, when Hanoi agreed to meet with the Americans without further preconditions. This was a direct affront to the current Peking position that no negotiations were possible until the United States withdrew from South Vietnam. It clearly reflected China's relinquishment to the Soviet Union, now a bitter ideological antagonist, of its former position as Hanoi's mentor in diplomatic maneuvers leading to peace negotiations. Disconsolately, China reduced its press coverage of the war. Not until months after the talks began in May 1968 did Peking even report them, and then only by quoting briefly from Western news sources. When the talks began, Peking withdrew the press officer from its embassy in Paris. Chou En-lai, according to Moscow Radio, told Hanoi's chief negotiator, Xuan Thuy,

³⁰ *People's Daily*, September 2, 1965.

³¹ *Ibid.*, February 20, 1967.

that Mao regarded the talks as a mistake.³² Hanoi's own shift away from China was underscored by its praise for the Moscow-sponsored Karlov Vary Conference of European Communist Parties, which Peking labeled a "counterrevolutionary gangsters meeting."³³ Hanoi also publicly supported the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, while Peking condemned it. At a celebration in the North Vietnamese Embassy in Peking on August 31, to commemorate the 23rd anniversary of the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Chou En-lai acidly asserted that the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia was the result of an American-Soviet bargain, in which Washington acknowledged Moscow's authority in Eastern Europe in return for a free US hand in Vietnam.³⁴

IV

Peking could not ignore the rapidly changing international environment. Leonid Brezhnev's call in January 1969 for "collective security" in Southeast Asia sent chills up the Chinese spine.³⁵ The Brezhnev statement, less than half a year after Russian military intervention in Czechoslovakia, came at a time when Peking was also witnessing a growing Soviet deployment on China's northern and western borders. The Soviet Union now seemed to surpass the United States as the main threat to Chinese security. This required a lessening of tension on China's southern flank.

Chinese pragmatism soon prevailed. Word went out in January that China wanted to discuss "coexistence" with the United States, and to have a voice in settling the Vietnam War. In April 1969, the Cultural Revolution formally came to an end with the CCP Ninth Congress; and the Chinese leadership prepared for new initiatives. In May, after a three-year interval in which 44 foreign ambassadors had been recalled, Peking began to return them to their posts, notably the envoy to France. A month later, the Chinese openly shifted gears on Vietnam, when they officially recognized the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. Peking thus made the distinction, which Hanoi had also made,

³² *United Press International*, Paris, May 14, 1968.

³³ *Nhan Dan*, April 28, 1968; *People's Daily*, May 4, 1968.

³⁴ *People's Daily*, September 3, 1968.

³⁵ *New China News Agency*, June 28, 1969.

that—at least for the time being—North Vietnam and South Vietnam were separate entities. This position also brought Peking a step closer to the United States.

The death of Ho Chi Minh on September 2, 1969, whatever its other ramifications, brought Chou En-lai and a delegation of Chinese officials to Hanoi for discussions with the North Vietnamese leadership. Peking marked Ho's passing with extravagant ceremonies, as if he had been a close friend and ally of the Chinese regime. A reception with full honors was given for North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong on the Chinese National Day. A new Chinese aid program was negotiated.

Meanwhile, the Nixon Administration had announced on June 8 the first of a scheduled series of American troop withdrawals from Indochina. Then came a sequence of US policy changes designed specifically to improve relations with China. In July, restrictions on American travel to the mainland were lifted, and trade restrictions on noncommercial tourist imports were eased. In December, permission was granted for foreign subsidiaries of US firms to trade with China in nonstrategic goods; and in April 1970, the US government announced the selective licensing of American-made components for nonstrategic foreign goods exported to China. Further restrictions were lifted in August. While not responding directly to these measures, Peking did agree to resumption of the long-interrupted Warsaw talks. On January 20 and May 20, 1970, American and Chinese officials met to probe the possibilities for improving the Sino-American relationship.

The overthrow of Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia in April 1970 gave China an unusual opportunity to increase its political influence in Indochina at the expense of the Soviet Union. The Chinese leaders allowed Sihanouk to establish a government-in-exile in Peking, where it received immediate recognition from Hanoi. The significance Peking attached to this maneuver was dramatized by a banquet hosted by Chou En-lai on April 25 in honor of Sihanouk, Prince Souphanouvong of Laos, Nguyen Huu Tho of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, and Hanoi's Pham Van Dong, while they were attending a summit conference of the "Indochinese Peoples" on the Chinese border; and by the appearance of Mao Tse-tung on May 1, after months of absence from public life, at Sihanouk's side in Peking. The actual an-

nouncement of the government-in-exile was made in Peking on May 5. Significantly, Moscow chose to retain its embassy in Phnom Penh.

In August and September 1970, Peking dispatched ambassadors to Hungary, East Germany, and Poland (the "revisionist" Communist capitals of Eastern Europe), and to Yugoslavia (which in the past had been the target of more ideological criticism from China than any other "revisionist" Communist state except the Soviet Union itself). The detente with Yugoslavia alone constituted a significant barometer of changing Chinese policy.

In the spring of 1971, the shift in Chinese policy began to exceed even the most liberal expectations of American observers. After years of abusing the United Nations as a "tool of imperialism," Peking hinted that it now wished to join. After years of hostility toward the United States, the Chinese indicated that they now wanted better relations. Matching Washington's own reassessment of policy toward Communist China, Peking seemed to reason as follows:

—The Soviet Union had surpassed the United States as the main threat to Chinese security. "Social imperialism will never abandon its expansionist ambitions . . . Social imperialism greedily eyes Chinese territory. It has not for a single day relaxed its preparation to attack China."³⁶

—The United States was also concerned with the rise of Soviet military power.

—It might not be in the long-term interest of China to support possible North Vietnamese hegemony over the states of Indochina, especially in view of the prospect of Soviet influence exercised through Hanoi.

—There might be some advantage in keeping Vietnam divided. Peking could attempt to maintain leverage on the North Vietnamese regime by trying for a situation in which the only key to reunification would lie in Peking (just as East and West Germany are dependent upon Moscow for reunification).

—China had overlapping interests with Washington in checking the influence of both Moscow and Hanoi throughout the area.

³⁶ *People's Daily*, August 1, 1970.

China's response to American overtures now took a direct and positive form with the invitation of American ping-pong players to Peking. They arrived on April 10, and Chou En-lai addressed them on April 14 in no uncertain terms. The visit, he said, had opened the door to further improvement of United States-China relations.³⁷ The United States followed up with Dr. Henry Kissinger's spectacular secret trip to Peking in July for three days of intensive discussions with Chou En-lai, which resulted in the historic communique announcing that President Nixon would meet with the Chinese leaders in a joint effort "to seek the normalization of relations between the two countries and also to exchange views on questions of concern on the two sides."³⁸

The announcement of the Nixon visit must have come as a surprise to Hanoi, as it did to the rest of the world. Now it was the North Vietnamese turn to lash out in rage. Hanoi denounced the Nixon-Mao meeting. The specter of its Chinese ally seeking an accommodation with its major military adversary in Vietnam was alarming, to say the least. North Vietnam began to prepare for a major military campaign against South Vietnam, to coincide with or follow President Nixon's visit. In the event, however, the assault was postponed until March 31, 1972, several weeks after Nixon had completed his historic trip to China.

The final communique of the US-Chinese summit meeting stated flatly that both Peking and Washington would oppose any attempt by any power (read North Vietnam or the Soviet Union) to attain hegemony in East Asia. In an effort to dispel apprehensions in Hanoi or Saigon, the communique also said that the United States and China were not prepared to negotiate on behalf of any third party, or to enter into agreements or understandings directed at states not present. But there almost certainly was an "understanding" on Vietnam about which the communique was silent. In return for continuing American disengagement from Indochina, improved relations with Peking, and specific pressure by Washington on Saigon to compromise its position further, Peking surely agreed to apply pressure on Hanoi to allow for an early and honorable termination of the United States presence in Indochina. It is significant that Peking took no action to prevent American mining and bombing of North Vietnam in 1972, in response to the Easter

³⁷ *Ibid.*, April 15, 1971.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, July 13, 1971.

Offensive. This was a direct signal to Hanoi that Peking gave greater priority to its developing relations with the United States than to the ongoing war in Vietnam. Serious talks in Paris followed. The agreement on principles of a settlement between Washington and Hanoi was signed on October 12, leading to the final accords early in 1973.

Peking's rapprochement with the United States was a major factor influencing Hanoi to make its own peace with the United States—a peace that fell short of its maximum war aims. The Nixon Administration had counted on detente with China, rather than “victory” over China, as a means of finding peace in Vietnam; and it had been proven right.