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## THE LIMITS OF COERCIVE DIPLOMACY: THE 1979 SINO- VIETNAMESE BORDER WAR

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*In 1979, China waged a brief but bloody war with Vietnam, with the hopes of punishing Hanoi for its invasion and occupation of Cambodia the previous year. Beijing's attempt at coercive diplomacy was an embarrassing failure, however, resulting in tens of thousands of casualties for both sides. This article, using Alexander George's models of coercive diplomacy and crisis management, examines the reasons for China's failed coercion and confirms that the most important variable was the omnipresent military threat from the Soviet Union, which prevented China from successfully escalating the crisis to its advantage.*

Nations have often used threats and other forms of coercive diplomacy against their adversaries with the hopes of achieving specific deterrence or compellence objectives. Why do nations sometimes fail despite overwhelming military superiority? To answer this question and others, Alexander George and William Simons attempted to systematize the concept of "coercive diplomacy" by compiling structured, focused case studies of past U.S. policy successes and failures.<sup>1</sup> One of their main goals was to derive empirical generalizations from these cases and then operationalize a robust theory that would be applicable for government policymakers. The authors, however, did not examine any cases of coercive diplomacy by countries other than the United States.

An excellent "plausibility probe" of non-U.S. coercive diplomacy is the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, in which China unsuccessfully attempted to compel Vietnam into abandoning its recent invasion of Cambodia.<sup>2</sup> This conflict qualifies as a case of coercive diplomacy under George's definition because: (1) one party tried to force another party to stop and reverse an action; (2) it was a "limited" military action (i.e., not aimed at the adversary's total surrender); and (3) there was no zero-sum conflict between the two combatants (i.e., fighting over a common border). It is my argument that careful examination of Chinese policies shows that George and Simons's model is sufficiently flexible to analyze non-U.S. cases, and that the model's ability to explain the success or failure of coercive diplomacy across countries allows it to claim a much broader relevance.

With regard to the specific case, Chinese efforts to apply coercive diplo-

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macy to Vietnam, despite an overwhelming superiority in numbers and material, ultimately failed to achieve Beijing's two primary objectives: withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and restoration of the status quo ante-bellum. I argue that numerous factors contributed to the failure, including tactical blunders by the Chinese leadership that squandered their initial strategic advantages; a clear asymmetry of motivation during the conflict itself that worked to the advantage of Vietnam; China's unclear signaling of its objectives and the terms of compliance; China's simultaneous use of the contradictory principles of crisis management and coercive diplomacy; and as external constraints (Vietnam's military and political alliance with the Soviet Union) upon Chinese escalation of the crisis. Of these, I shall argue that the threat from Moscow was the most significant factor, for the Russians' looming presence in the war reduced the credibility of Chinese threats of escalation, undermining a key pillar of successful coercive diplomacy.

China's failure to coerce Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia establishes the robustness of George's model for explaining the success or failure of coercive diplomatic strategies in non-U.S. cases. It also confirms George's assertion that the requirements and goals of coercive diplomacy and crisis management, respectively, are often at cross-purposes.<sup>3</sup> In particular, crisis management's ambiguous signaling and pauses blur the clarity necessary for successful coercive diplomacy, and its emphasis on "limited" military action reduces the credibility of escalatory threats. With regard to the case study, I argue that the interaction of Chinese crisis management and attempts at coercive diplomacy had the effect of muting and sometimes directly contradicting their compellence goals. First, Chinese fears of provoking a Soviet response caused them to avoid actions that signaled future escalation to large-scale warfare and occupation, reducing the credibility of Chinese threats. Second, the strategic pauses that marked Chinese statements before and during the invasion relieved the diplomatic pressure on Hanoi and allowed the latter to regroup its forces. Third, movements of Chinese forces and threats of force intended to signal Beijing's limited objectives were lost amongst other diplomatic "noise" about Vietnamese border incursions and "self-defense counter-attacks." Finally, Beijing did not select diplomatic positions and military moves that provided Vietnam with a face-saving exit, thus backing Vietnam into a corner from which it ostensibly had no choice but to resist Chinese coercion.

#### *GEORGE AND SIMONS'S MODEL OF COERCIVE DIPLOMACY*

The central logic of George and Simons's model is that pressure, correctly applied, can force an adversary to comply with one's demands. Success itself depends on a number of factors, including the magnitude of the demand, matching the strategy to the situation, and effectively implementing that strat-

egy. Misapplication will lead most of the time to failure, as will misidentification of the situation. In order to avoid these pitfalls, the authors draw some preliminary conclusions from their case studies, identifying eight conditions that favor the use of coercive diplomacy: clarity of the objective, strength of motivation, asymmetry of motivation, sense of urgency, strong leadership, adequate domestic and international support, unacceptability of threatened escalation, and clarity concerning the precise terms of settlement of the crisis. While none of these are unimportant, four (asymmetry of motivation, sense of urgency, unacceptability of threatened escalation, and clarity concerning the precise terms of settlement) appear to have the most significant impact upon the outcome.

At this point, brief definitions of these four conditions are necessary. The first, "asymmetry of motivation," follows from the authors' belief that a coercive strategy is "more likely to be successful if the side employing it is more highly motivated than its opponent" and that the adversary perceives this as well.<sup>4</sup> While the authors argue that in some cases asymmetry is determined solely by circumstance, they also assert that a player can *create* an asymmetry in one of two ways: by demanding of the opponent only what is essential to protect its own vital interests and not making demands that engage the vital interests of its adversary; and by offering a carrot that reduces the adversary's motivation to resist the demands.<sup>5</sup> "Sense of urgency," like asymmetry of motivation, has both an objective and a subjective component. On the one hand, it is incumbent upon the coercing nation to create a time pressure in the conflict such that the opponent feels increasingly motivated to accede to the demands. Equally important, however, is the adversary's perception of the sense of urgency, which must be well communicated and believable. If there is no sense of urgency communicated by the coercing nation or the adversary does not correctly perceive the signals of the coercer, then all time limits set on compliance become less credible. The third condition, "unacceptability of threatened escalation," centers on the belief that the impact of coercive diplomacy is enhanced if the initial actions and communications directed against the adversary arouse his fear of an escalation to circumstances less acceptable than those promised by accession to the coercing power's demands. Finally, "clarity concerning the precise terms of settlement of the crisis" is important in two respects: first, it "assists policymakers in selecting from among several available response options;" and second, clear signaling of one's limited objectives helps convince the adversary of one's "strength of purpose."<sup>6</sup> It must also be noted, however, that clear communication of one's objectives and demands may not be sufficient for successful resolution. In many cases, it may also be necessary to signal an exit strategy to the enemy, so that he does not erase all the gains of the coercing nation through an irrational reaction.

In the remainder of this article, I shall focus on the chosen case study, the Chinese failure to coerce Vietnam in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical relationship of China and Vietnam, generally marked by mutual distrust and enmity, also had a remarkably symbiotic character. For nearly one thousand years China claimed a sphere of influence in the northern Tonkin region of modern Vietnam, and the latter imported many elements of China's cultural and political system. After its independence in the tenth century, Vietnam continued to maintain a "tributary" relationship with its large northern neighbor and the Vietnamese ruling elite drew legitimacy from the Chinese Confucian/imperial system. During the colonial period, both countries suffered at the hands of the imperialist powers, and their nascent communist parties were closely linked in the struggle for independence. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Sino-Viet Minh relations reached their peak, as the PRC recognized the embattled Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and initiated substantial military aid to Ho Chi Minh's forces.

The 1954 Geneva Conference marked the beginning of a rapid deterioration in cooperation between the two revolutionary parties, as a newly unified and powerful China sought to reassert its traditional sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. This growing split was exacerbated by the Sino-Soviet rift of the late 1950s, in which Vietnam quickly became a pawn in a struggle for influence between two increasingly hostile would-be benefactors. In the end, the Soviet Union's offer of material assistance for Vietnam's war against the United States proved more valuable than China's empty-handed moral exhortation of "self-reliance," pushing Ho's regime into the "revisionist/social imperialist" camp of the USSR.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this seemingly irreconcilable split, however, China's rapprochement with the United States in 1972 came as a great shock to the Vietnamese government, which perceived the Nixon visit as an act of fathomless betrayal and final proof of a much more insidious agenda on the part of Mao Zedong and the Chinese leadership. As William Duiker argues, "Vietnamese leaders [after 1972] had apparently become convinced that China's Vietnam policy was rooted in a desire to maintain the division of Vietnam in order to facilitate postwar domination of Southeast Asia."<sup>8</sup> This ostensible change in policy contrasted sharply with Vietnam's world view, which still saw global politics in stark Manichean terms. China, on the other hand, had come to perceive a much more complicated global balance of power, with China as a vertex of an increasingly Quid strategic triangle with the Soviet Union and the United States.

This pattern of mistrust and hostility alone, however, was not sufficient to provoke military conflict between China and Vietnam in 1979. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the events directly preceding the border conflict to ascertain its direct and indirect causes. Observers have offered a number of

theories, including explanations that point to the aforementioned “ancient enmities,”<sup>9</sup> Vietnam’s relationship with the Soviet Union,<sup>10</sup> China’s obsession with the sanctity of its borders,<sup>11</sup> or Vietnamese treatment of its expatriate Chinese population.<sup>12</sup> These issues are excellently discussed by Bruce Burton, and I fully agree with his conclusion that the real cause of the March 1979 border war was Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in Christmas 1978, an act that greatly provoked the Chinese and drove them to employ a much more aggressive diplomatic strategy.<sup>13</sup> He contends that the strategic imperatives of China and Vietnam in Indochina and the entanglements of the Sino-Soviet split combined to make Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia a flashpoint between the two countries. This conclusion is verified by a number of factors, including the fact that Chinese troop movements began only after Vietnam’s military campaign was underway.<sup>14</sup>

### *Casus Belli*

Here, some brief historical background on the role of Cambodia in Sino-Vietnamese relations is necessary. Beginning in 1954 at Geneva, China had sought to weaken Vietnam’s regional control over Indochina by refusing to permit Cambodia and Laos to attend the conference as full members.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1960s, China heavily supported Cambodia’s neutral leader, Prince Sihanouk, who had turned a blind eye to Vietnamese excursions in his country’s eastern provinces. After Lon Nol overthrew Sihanouk in 1971, China granted the latter asylum in Beijing, while simultaneously stepping up aid to the anti-Lon Nol Khmer Rouge, whose Maoist inclinations had long since soured their relations with the Soviet-oriented communists in Vietnam. The Chinese continued to aid the Khmer Rouge after their victory over Lon Nol’s forces in 1975, and they encouraged their new Maoist allies to resist Vietnamese attempts at hegemonism in the region. These agitations increased in intensity throughout the mid-1970s, as Pol Pot’s regime escalated its aggressive and often unpredictable behavior on the Vietnamese border.

At first, China and Vietnam held back from direct confrontation over Cambodia. After Beijing signed a military aid pact with Pol Pot in September 1977, however, the latter evidently felt he had the unconditional support of the Chinese regime and intensified the skirmishes on the border with Vietnam. Talks between China and Vietnam in November 1977 did not defuse the crisis, but instead drove the Chinese to demand that the Vietnamese completely withdraw their troops from eastern Cambodia.<sup>16</sup> By the spring of 1978, escalating rhetoric across the border ignited a massive refugee crisis, as thousands of ethnic Chinese streamed into southern China. The refugee exodus inflamed emotions on both sides, leading the Chinese to brand the Vietnamese as racist and the Vietnamese to accuse the Chinese of large-scale espionage within their borders.

The final blow to possible Sino-Vietnamese reconciliation was Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia on Christmas Day 1978. This act angered the Chinese for a number of reasons. First, it displayed serious determination on the part of the Vietnamese to assert hegemony over Southeast Asia, which China regarded as within its own traditional sphere of influence. Second, it involved an attack against one of China's few remaining ideological allies by a client state of its greatest enemy, the Soviet Union. Therefore, by extension, the conflict was more than just an issue of regional balance of power. From this perspective, all of China's other grievances (i.e., border disagreements, treatment of expatriate Chinese, etc.) appear to be minor issues that would never have led to large-scale conflict.<sup>17</sup>

On February 17, 1979, China invaded Vietnam with a force of more than 100,000 men and 190,000 in reserve, pitted against 60,000 to 80,000 regular Vietnamese troops and similar numbers of local militia forces. Despite some Western reportage to the contrary, it appears that the Chinese military assault was never meant to be a full-scale invasion. When one considers the size of the Chinese army and its choice of tactics in the conflict, it is easy to see the difference. At the time of the conflict, China's army totaled more than 4 million men in uniform, including twenty-nine divisions of main and local force troops stationed in the two military regions bordering Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> If they had been so inclined, the Chinese could have thrown a much larger force at the Vietnamese, completely overwhelming their border defense. Also, the visible Chinese strategy was congruent not with conquering, but with signaling. If the Chinese had intended to capture Hanoi, they would not have attacked at many places along the border as they did, but instead would have chosen one or two key entry points and driven hard to the capital, as dictated by contemporary military strategy.<sup>19</sup> Deng himself confirmed the limited nature of the attack on February 26 in statements to the international press:

Our objective is a limited one—that is, to teach them they could not run about as much as they desired.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, Deng announced a few days later that Chinese forces had no intention of capturing Hanoi.<sup>21</sup> Both of these signals were undoubtedly aimed at Moscow, which had signed a mutual defense treaty (some would say military alliance) with Vietnam only the year before.

We now turn to an analysis of China's coercive strategy over the months leading up to the invasion.

### *CHINA'S POLICY TOWARD VIETNAM*

China's tangible attempts at coercive diplomacy began after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on Christmas Day 1978. As mentioned in the

introduction, China's principal objective was to convince the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia (in essence, restore the status quo antebellum), or what George would consider a classic Type B strategy. More specifically, it resembled the variant of coercive diplomacy described by the authors as the "try and see approach," because the Chinese did not link their demand to a time limit; thus, they did not create a strong sense of urgency.<sup>22</sup> Instead, they carried out a limited military action and then waited to see if it was sufficient to persuade the Vietnamese to retreat from Cambodia.

Our remaining discussion of Chinese policy towards Vietnam centers on four variables from the George and Simons coercive diplomacy model (clarity concerning the precise terms of settlement, asymmetry of motivation, sense of urgency, and unacceptability of escalation). This analysis is further buttressed by a closing discussion of crisis management's often contradictory effects upon attempts at coercive diplomacy.

#### *Muddled Objectives and Unclear Terms of Compliance*

China's main coercive goal in 1979 was to force Vietnam to withdraw its troops from Cambodia and restore the status quo antebellum. Beijing's communication of this desire, however, was often lost in mixed signals. In November of 1978 at a Bangkok press conference, Deng Xiaoping discussed the measures that China would take in dealing with Vietnam's regional hegemonism and stated that the scale of their efforts would depend on the level of Vietnamese aggression against Cambodia.<sup>23</sup> Two days after the fall of Phnom Penh on January 7, an article by a "commentator" in *People's Daily* warned that "the capture of Phnom Penh by Vietnam does not mean the end but the beginning of war."<sup>24</sup> At the end of January, Deng Xiaoping made a well-publicized trip to the United States, where he spoke publicly of the need to punish the "Cubans of the Orient" and said that "If you don't teach them some necessary lessons, it just won't do."<sup>25</sup>

The common thread running through these statements is that China's main concern was Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. In tone and timing, these messages were strikingly reminiscent of Chinese strategies before entry into the Korean War in 1950 and their border clashes with India in 1959 and 1962. Despite these precedents, however, the Chinese objective was not clear to the Vietnamese, since the warnings about Cambodia were issued among other, equally strident notes dealing with ancillary issues such as border incursions and refugees.<sup>26</sup> For example, beginning in the summer of 1978, China began issuing stern notes to Hanoi concerning "unscrupulous provocations" along their common border. On November 7, 1978, the Chinese Foreign Ministry strongly protested an alleged border incursion by Vietnam on November 1 that left twelve Chinese civilians dead or wounded.<sup>27</sup> The second serious protest was issued on December 13, warning Vietnam's leaders

that they “should understand there is a limit to China’s forbearance” and if they “should persist in their course and continue to encroach upon Chinese territory and sovereignty they must be held responsible for the consequences.”<sup>28</sup> This warning was repeated again in notes issued on December 24. Finally, on January 18, February 12, and February 16, Beijing issued its strongest protests against Vietnamese border incursions and hinted at impending hostilities.<sup>29</sup>

Even on the day of the Chinese invasion, February 17, Beijing’s official explanation declared that the Chinese were “forced to rise in self-defensive counter-attack” because of Vietnam’s “incessant armed provocations and hostile activities” along their border.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, they announced that the “objective” of their punitive attack was to secure a “peaceful and stable border.”<sup>31</sup> The official statement did not mention Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia at all, nor did it establish conditions for Chinese retreat from Vietnam, such as immediate cease-fire in Cambodia and phased pull-out of Vietnamese regulars. Herbert Yee has argued that China’s note gave the Vietnamese a chance to withdraw troops from Cambodia without losing face and denied the Soviets an excuse to intervene on Hanoi’s behalf.<sup>32</sup> It could also be asserted that labeling the assault a “counterattack” also helped bolster domestic support and morale in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, since it was understandably difficult to explain to the populace why China’s former “fraternal socialist brother” was now a military adversary. Even if these assertions are true, however, signal ambiguity on this scale is not conducive to the success of coercive diplomacy, especially given the magnitude of the objective Beijing sought from Hanoi.<sup>33</sup> The statement gave the Vietnamese no clear indication of China’s intentions, nor did it clearly establish the terms of compliance.<sup>34</sup> Even the later statement made in the UN Security Council by China’s representative Chen Chu that China “will retreat only after meting out punishment” did not explicitly set out any terms of compliance.<sup>35</sup> For coercive diplomacy to have been successful, the Chinese should have carefully communicated their precise desires to Hanoi, as well as interim and unilateral acts of good faith the Vietnamese government could have undertaken to express their willingness to comply with the demands (full retreat of 100,000 men cannot happen overnight).

### *No Way Out: Asymmetry of Motivation*

In order to determine which side was favored by George and Simons’s asymmetry of motivation, it is necessary to gauge three factors: the coercer’s motivation to fight, the magnitude of its demand, and the target’s will to resist. In the author’s edited case studies, the analysis of these general factors has been unavoidably influenced by the outcome of the conflict itself. Here, too, it is recognized that some of the assertions that follow are colored by



hindsight, bias, and the propaganda issued by both sides; but an attempt has been made to offer aggregated preferences distilled from the actions and comments of the two participants.

According to George and Simons's criteria for asymmetry of motivation, China did not possess an advantage in the conflict with Vietnam. First, Beijing's motivation was weakened by the fact that it could not view the issue in life-or-death terms, primarily because it did not involve a zero-sum dilemma between itself and Vietnam (despite propaganda to the contrary, they were fighting over disputed territory not on their border but on that of a third party). On the other hand, Beijing seemed to perceive (incorrectly) that the Vietnamese would be easy to coerce. Statements by Chinese leaders reveal their deep confidence in the striking power of the People's Liberation Army and the expected minimal resistance of the opposing Vietnamese forces.<sup>36</sup>

Although an argument could be sustained that Vietnam's costly war in Cambodia reduced their ability to fight a war on two fronts, the brimming confidence of China's military leadership had little basis in fact. True, China had fought in a number of conflicts since their "victory" in Korea, including some skirmishes against the Russians, but they had not carried out a full-scale military operation against a competent foe in over thirty years. Their equipment was outdated, their tactics were not suited to modern combined-arms assault, and the majority of the PLA's regimental commanders had never seen battle.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the optimism of China's leaders ignored the seemingly obvious fact that Vietnam had just finished waging a victorious thirty-five-year guerrilla war against some of the world's most advanced technology. It should have come as no surprise, therefore, when initial success quickly gave way to stalemate, while casualties began to mount for the Chinese army.

Vietnam, on the other hand, had no shortage of motivation in the crisis, despite the logistical nightmare of running a war on two fronts. First, their sunk costs (investment in men and material) involved in the Cambodian operation made it nearly impossible for the Vietnamese to withdraw quickly, and effectively bolstered their resistance to Chinese coercion. In addition, Vietnam's leaders had reasons to assume that China lacked the will to fight. First of all, they were confident that China would act cautiously, lest Beijing elicit a militant response from Moscow. They may have also assumed that the elderly Chinese leadership was preoccupied with the country's nascent modernization drive, given the enormous attention it was receiving in the Chinese domestic press around the time of the Cambodian invasion. Finally, they may have (correctly) concluded that the Chinese army was ill-equipped and undertrained for such an assault and could be repelled by Vietnamese militia and frontier forces.

These internal factors aside, during the crisis itself China did not imple-

ment policies that would alter the asymmetry to its advantage, such as demanding only what was essential to their interests or offering carrots to the Vietnamese. Instead, China made demands that went far beyond what was “essential” to their interests, requiring Vietnam to make an expensive retreat from Cambodia, which would have resulted in an unacceptable loss of face and reputation in the world community.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Beijing never publicly offered Hanoi any economic or political incentive to withdraw from Cambodia peacefully, nor did they signal what mid-level steps Hanoi could take to show their desire for peaceful crisis resolution.<sup>39</sup> They didn’t even offer a flexible timetable for withdrawal, which would seem reasonable given the magnitude of the demand. All of these mistakes and omissions prevented China from enjoying a favorable asymmetry of motivation, or at the very least, reducing Vietnam’s asymmetry.

From this evidence, it may be concluded that the asymmetry of motivation favored the Vietnamese in the crisis and that this imbalance had two significant consequences. It effectively lowered the probability of Chinese military success despite overwhelming numerical superiority; and, more importantly, it weakened China’s hopes for successful coercive diplomacy.

#### *Unacceptability of Chinese Escalation*

Looming over the crisis between Vietnam and China was the specter of the Soviet Union, which had signed a mutual defense treaty with Hanoi shortly before the invasion of Cambodia. It was clearly not in China’s interests to have its heavily armed northern neighbor join the conflict, for nearly forty-three Soviet motorized rifle divisions were poised in a high state of readiness on the Chinese border, not to mention the Soviet Union’s overwhelming nuclear superiority.

To prevent this escalation, Beijing took a number of crucial steps. First, as Yee has argued, the phrasing of the note to Vietnam on February 17 was carefully crafted so as not to “give Moscow an otherwise similar excuse to intervene on Hanoi’s behalf.”<sup>40</sup> By mentioning only trivial border issues, the Chinese made it clear that they had no intention of full-scale war against Vietnam. If, on the other hand, China had declared its intent to invade and occupy the nation of Vietnam, the USSR would have been compelled to enter the crisis, probably attacking China proper. Second, the Chinese action remained relatively “limited” in scope. As noted earlier, only 100,000 troops were used in the invasion (out of a total force of 4.3 million) and the tactics used were not those associated with conquering. Deng himself, asked whether he thought Moscow would intervene, replied: “We estimate that the Soviet Union will not take too big an action. I think our action is limited, and it will not give rise to a very big event.”<sup>41</sup> As a prudent countermeasure, however, China reportedly evacuated thousands of residents from villages

near the Sino-Soviet border in the weeks preceding its attack on Vietnam, placed the entire Northern Front military region on maximum alert, and began discussing contingency plans for evacuating foreigners from Beijing.<sup>42</sup>

A third important element in China's strategy to keep the Soviet Union out of the war was their subtle application of the "U.S. card." On January 1, 1979, one week after Vietnam invaded Cambodia, the United States and China concluded the process of diplomatic normalization. At a banquet following the signing of the agreements, Hua Guofeng was frank about the value of improved Sino-U.S. ties:

I believe that the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States is a historic event in our bilateral relations, which not only accords with the fundamental interests of the Chinese and American peoples, but will *exert a favorable influence on the international situation.*<sup>43</sup> (Emphasis added.)

The next day, during a reception with Vice President Walter Mondale, Chinese Liaison Office Chief Chai Zemin was even more specific:

The normalization of Sino-U.S. relations is not only in conformity with the aspirations and interests of the Chinese and American peoples, but also will certainly play a role in combating the expansion and aggression of hegemonism.<sup>44</sup> (Emphasis added.)

The hegemon in question was clearly the Soviet Union.

As if to underscore this theme, Deng Xiaoping undertook a highly publicized visit to the United States, where he railed against Soviet hegemonism and publicly promised to "teach Vietnam a lesson."<sup>45</sup> Even though the Carter administration's statements after the fact clearly suggest that they had not explicitly approved China's invasion during Deng's trip, they were still trapped in a Chinese finger puzzle, since public criticism of Beijing would quickly sour their newly established and strategically important relations with the Chinese leadership. While stopping short of direct support, the convenient presence of the American aircraft carrier *Constellation* in international waters off Vietnam and the omnipresent American nuclear umbrella helped ensure that the Soviets did not up the ante.<sup>46</sup>

China was also extremely careful not to provoke Soviet intervention through its conduct of the war itself. After the initial hostilities had begun, Beijing assured Moscow that conquering Vietnam was not their objective: "We do not want a single inch of Vietnamese territory. . . . After counterattacking the Vietnamese aggressors as they deserve, the Chinese frontier troops will strictly keep to defending the border of their own country."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Deng Xiaoping in a public statement the next day sought to convince the Soviet Union and the world that the conflict would be limited in nature, not unlike their war with India in 1962, which lasted only a month:

“This action will be a limited one, an action reacting to provocation that will be circumspect to take care of the situation, and it will not be extended or expanded in any way.”<sup>48</sup>

China’s pledges of limited non-escalation were also borne out in the tactics that the PLA employed in the field. First, the Chinese army did not use its air force to support forward combat units, even though it had clear numerical superiority.<sup>49</sup> Second, a respected and well-informed military analyst reports that the Chinese forces were under orders not to advance more than fifty kilometers into Vietnamese territory.<sup>50</sup> Third, Chinese political and military leaders vehemently denied that the objective of PLA forces was the heavily populated Red River Valley or Hanoi, since threatening the latter would certainly provoke Soviet intervention in the conflict.<sup>51</sup>

While these attempts at crisis management saved China from a much larger conflagration with its Russian neighbor, it spelled the doom of PRC coercive diplomacy against Vietnam. Without the implied threat of escalation, Vietnam could leave its invasion force in Cambodia and fight the Chinese with regional militia and frontier troops. Furthermore, Beijing’s overriding concern with preventing Soviet armed intervention inevitably limited its own options, such as strategic strikes deep into Vietnam’s flatlands, which would have cut off supplies for forward units.<sup>52</sup> If the PLA could have expanded the war without fear of Russian reprisal, then the Vietnamese would have been forced to transfer troops from the Cambodian theater to their northern border, thus easing the pressure on the native Khmer Rouge insurgency and perhaps even raising the costs of continued occupation to the point where the Vietnamese would have complied with Chinese demands and withdrawn completely from Cambodia.

### *Conflict Between Crisis Management and Coercive Diplomacy*

In the final analysis, it seems that China’s attempts at crisis management during the invasion actually weakened their attempt at coercive diplomacy by muting and sometimes contradicting their compellence strategies in four respects. First, the Chinese avoided actions that signaled future escalation to large-scale warfare and occupation. This had the unintended consequence of weakening their coercive strategy, which required the Vietnamese to perceive that escalation was a serious and viable option. With a credible threat of escalation, the Vietnamese might have lost their asymmetry of motivation and considered some sort of negotiated settlement. Instead, they evidently felt secure in challenging the Chinese army on the battlefield and waiting for events to swing in their favor.

Second, the strategic pauses that marked Chinese statements before and during the invasion often had the unintended consequence of relieving the diplomatic pressure on Hanoi and allowed the latter to regroup its forces. If

China had instead employed a "gradual turning of the screw" policy, such as that used by the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnamese might have had a clearer idea of China's goals and the terms for compliance. For example, if Chinese threats had slowly escalated in tone, coupled with tangible increases in military readiness, then perhaps the Vietnamese would have preempted China's invasion with opening concessions. As it was, ambiguous Chinese signaling forced Vietnam to concentrate on the military aspects of the crisis and settle the dispute on the battlefield.

Third, movements of Chinese forces and threats of force intended to signal resolve were not consistent with Beijing's limited diplomatic objectives. Instead, the level of "noise," or confusing signals, was extremely high before and during the crisis. As has been argued earlier, the Chinese statements on the day of invasion made no mention of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, effectively decoupling it from Chinese aggression. If Beijing had made a clear connection between their border attacks and a desire for Vietnamese withdrawal, it would have increased the probability of successful coercive diplomacy by clarifying the terms of compliance. Instead, Hanoi was left to decipher Chinese ravings about border sovereignty and the meaning of terms like "self-defense counter-attack."

Finally, Beijing did not select diplomatic proposals and military moves that provided Vietnam with a face-saving exit. In many ways, this is a damning criticism of the entire policy. Beijing's demand that Vietnam abandon its occupation of Cambodia was clearly too large a goal. For Hanoi to write off its investment would have entailed enormous financial losses and diplomatic humiliation. Furthermore, Beijing never communicated any acceptable half-way positions, such as phased withdrawal or guarantees of Cambodian political autonomy. Instead, China adamantly maintained the politically and logistically unrealistic stance that nothing short of immediate withdrawal was satisfactory.

## *CONCLUSION*

By all accounts, the Chinese invasion of Vietnam was a stunning failure. While achieving a number of tactical objectives, the main strategic objective of compelling the Vietnamese to withdraw forces from Cambodia was thwarted by the resilience of the Vietnamese militia and the ineffectiveness of the People's Liberation Army. After a month of fighting, the Chinese army limped back across the border, leaving Vietnam to occupy Cambodia for an additional twelve years.<sup>53</sup> Pro-Beijing elements within the Hanoi government who favored retreat from Cambodia, such as party veteran Hoang Van Hoan, were either arrested or forced to defect to China.<sup>54</sup> Back at home, Deng Xiaoping trumpeted the invasion as a success to domestic critics while internally attacking weaknesses in the PLA's performance (poor coordination of

air and artillery, lack of modern equipment, serious logistical breakdowns) and implementing a major modernization drive within the armed forces. The failure also gave Deng enough political capital to purge conservative and lingering Maoist elements from the PLA and execute a sweeping cut in the military's defense budget.<sup>55</sup>

For our purposes, the failure of China to coerce Vietnam confirms the robustness of George and Simons's theoretical model in non-U.S. cases. The factors that contributed most to the failure were a clear asymmetry of motivation that favored Vietnam; China's unclear signaling of its objectives and the terms of compliance; the conflict between the demands of crisis management and those of coercive diplomacy; and the external constraints (Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet Union) upon Chinese escalation of the crisis. Of these, I would argue that the threat from Moscow was the most significant factor, for the Russians' looming presence in the war forced the Chinese to adopt principles of crisis management, such as strategic pauses and actions that did not signal large-scale escalation, thus ultimately weakening their attempts at coercive diplomacy.

In the end, it is possible that the situation itself was not really conducive to the application of coercive diplomacy, given the extensive "containing" presence of the Soviet Union. In fact, external constraints doomed it from the outset. Even if the Chinese army had fought better on the battlefield, they could not have achieved their ultimate objective, since only a full-scale invasion of Vietnam would have coerced the Vietnamese to retreat from Cambodia and such extreme escalation on the part of the Chinese would have pulled the Russians into the crisis. Thus, it must be concluded that the Chinese both misidentified the situation and misapplied the principles of coercive diplomacy.

Has China learned anything from this crisis? Its most recent projections of force have occurred in the South China Sea over the oil-rich Spratly Islands, which are claimed by a host of regional countries, including Vietnam. Again, the Chinese military has sought to coerce the defending Vietnamese forces, hoping to drive them from a prestigious conquest. This time the Chinese forces are much more modernized than they were in 1979, and the omnipresent spectre of the Soviet Union is gone. Seemingly, the Chinese could have their way in the crisis, but recent developments tell a familiar tale. ASEAN, many of whose members have pending claims, has successfully muted Chinese aggressiveness by enlisting the interest of their close ally, the United States. Although Subic Bay is closed and the Seventh Fleet is at its lowest readiness level in decades, the United States could still play a containing role similar to that of the USSR in 1979. Given the fragile nature of current Sino-U.S. relations, the potential gain of the Spratlys may be too high a price to bear and may force the Chinese to pursue more cooperative strategies, such as joint development in oil exploration.

## NOTES

1. Alexander George and William Simons, eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).
2. "Plausibility probe" is defined by Alexander George as "a case study at the preliminary stage of inquiry" that "enables the investigator to judge whether the potential validity of [one's] hypotheses is great enough to warrant a major investment in more thorough, hopefully more decisive hypothesis-testing studies." See Alexander L. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison," in Gordon Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 43–68.
3. Crisis management is defined here as the science (art?) of international conflict resolution in the nuclear age and deals with pauses and signaling that are meant to contain crises within certain limits. Crisis management is often cast in an adversarial relationship to coercive diplomacy, which seeks to achieve limited diplomatic objectives through the use of threats and force.
4. George and Simons, p. 281.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
7. At this time, Mao was expounding his "Three Worlds" theory, which identified the super-powers (the United States and USSR) as the First World, the developed countries (both NATO and the Warsaw Pact) as the Second World, and the developing countries as the Third World. In his view, the socialist camp, by virtue of the USSR's "revisionism" and "social imperialism," had ceased to exist.
8. William J. Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 61.
9. Herbert Yee, "The Sino-Vietnamese Border War: China's Motives, Calculations, and Strategies," *China Report*, January/February 1980, pp. 15–32. Also, see news reporting of Robert McFadden, *New York Times*, February 18, 1979, and Bob Oberdorfer, *Washington Post*, April 1, 1979.
10. John Gittings, "Peking Exacts a High Price for Company Hanoi Keeps," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, February 25, 1979. The same view was expressed by respected China scholar, Ross Terrill, in the *Montreal Star*, February 26, 1979.
11. Dennis Duncanson, "China's Vietnam War: New and Old Strategic Imperatives," *World Today XXV* (June 1979), pp. 241–48.
12. Michael Yahuda, "Vietnam and China—the Roots of Conflict," *China Now*, no. 82 (January/February 1979), p. 9.
13. See Bruce Burton, "Contending Explanations of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War," *International Journal*, pp. 699–722.
14. See Harlan Jencks, "China's Punitive War Against Vietnam: A Military Assessment," *Asian Survey*, vol. XIX, no. 8, August 1979, pp. 801–15; and King Chen, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, vol. III, no. 1, spring/summer 1983, pp. 232–63.
15. The Vietnamese revolutionary party, by virtue of its financial and ideological support, had a great deal of influence over the Laotian and Cambodian revolutionary parties, and their presence would have strengthened the power of the Vietnamese delegation.
16. Geng Biao, "Report on the Situation on the Indochinese Peninsula," *Zhonggong Yanjiu* (Studies on Chinese Communism), vol. 14, no. 10 (October 15, 1980), trans. in JPRS 77,074.
17. Although these border disputes and refugee problems were not the main reason for the Chinese invasion, they were very helpful later in demonizing the Vietnamese as racist and imperialist.
18. West and Southwest China included the Chengdu and Kunming Military Regions. Together, these two regions commanded 18 main force divisions (approximately 210,000 men), 8 local force divisions, and 2–3 divisions of border troops. Of course, elite units were transported to the staging areas from military regions all over the country, making the potential invasion force much more potent. See *The Military Balance 1978–79* (London: The Interna-

- tional Institute for Strategic Studies, 1978), pp. 55–57. 68–69. Estimates of Chinese and Vietnamese forces that appear in this article are averages of the figures published in the 1978–79 issue and the 1979–80 issue, since the conflict occurred halfway between the two editions.
19. For a discussion of twentieth-century military strategy and the notion of blitzkrieg warfare, see B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Meridian Books, 1991), pp. 207–361.
  20. February 26, 1979, in BBC/SWB/FE/6054/A3/2.
  21. *New York Times*, February 21, 1979 and February 27, 1979.
  22. George and Simons, *Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, p. 18.
  23. *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), November 9, 1978.
  24. "People's Daily Says Phnom Penh Capture 'Beginning of War'," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, January 9, 1979, pp. A19–20.
  25. *New York Times*, January 31, 1979. See also "SRV Needs 'Lessons,'" *Xinhua* (in Washington, DC), in FBIS, February 1, 1979, pp. A8–9.
  26. In the months leading up to the invasion, there were a number of articles in the Chinese press detailing Vietnamese attacks on the Chinese border. For examples dealing with border attacks, see "SRV's 'Frenzied Provocations' On the Border Reported," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, January 4, 1979, pp. A11–13; "Vietnam's 'War' Provocations," *People's Daily*, in FBIS, January 10, 1979, p. A22; "SRV Personnel Fire Upon Border Commune, School," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, January 12, 1979, p. A11; "Numerous SRV Border Incidents, Provocations Reported," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, January 16, 1979, pp. A7–10. For articles concerning refugees, see "Chinese Foreign Ministry Lodges Strong Protest Against Forcible Expulsion of Inhabitants of Vietnam into Chinese Territory," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, January 8, 1979, pp. A5–6; "The Dirty Business of Exporting Refugees," *People's Daily*, in FBIS, January 18, 1979, pp. A17–19; "Beijing Denounces SRV's Callous Policy of Exporting Refugees," *Xinhua Domestic Service*, January 18, 1979, pp. A16–17. As further proof, Hua Guofeng's "Report to the 5th National People's Congress on the Work of Government," issued in late January, directly mentioned the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, but joined it to border incursions and the forced deportation of refugees. See supplemental issue of FBIS, January 25, 1979, *Xinhua*, pp. 1–32.
  27. *Renmin Ribao*, November 8, 1978.
  28. *Renmin Ribao*, December 14, 1978.
  29. "Foreign Ministry Protests SRV Armed Encroachment," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, January 18, 1979, pp. A14–15; "Foreign Ministry Delivers Strong Protest to SRV Embassy," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, February 12, 1979, pp. A6–7; "Foreign Ministry Protests SRV's Encroachments," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, February 16, 1979, pp. A2–3.
  30. "Chinese Government Statement on Counterattack Against SRV," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, February 21, 1979, pp. A5–7.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. A6.
  32. Yee, p. 17. This could be true only if the Chinese had signaled their "true" intentions to the Vietnamese through other channels. Vietnamese knowledge of Chinese desires, however, does not refute my thesis. The magnitude of the demand and the containing presence of the Soviet Union still thwarted successful coercive diplomacy.
  33. It has also been suggested by Richard Baum that the conflicting signals from Beijing may have been due to elite political/military disagreements in Beijing, but I do not have the data to refute or confirm that hypothesis.
  34. Even nine days after the Chinese invasion, Deng continued to demur, telling U.S. journalists that "even if there is *good reason* to link the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the Chinese operation in Vietnam, China did not make such a link." [Emphasis added.] This is a classic manifestation of crisis management thwarting the goals of coercive diplomacy.
  35. See "UN Security Council Debates Southeast Asian Situation," in FBIS, February 26, 1979, p. A26.
  36. "Yang Dezhi Attends Meeting Of Kunming PLA Cadres," *Kunming-Yunnan Provincial Service*, in FBIS, February 16, 1979, p. J2.
  37. Yee, p. 17.
  38. "Essential" had to be defined by the Chinese themselves through their signaling to Vietnam. Failure to state precisely what they considered "essential," a principle of crisis management, was one of the reasons for their failure to coerce Vietnam.



39. Of course, given China's own shaky economic situation, they probably had very little to offer Vietnam that the latter was not already receiving from the Soviet Union; and even if China had offered aid, Vietnam would probably have refused in order to preserve their alliance with the Russians.
40. Yee, p. 17.
41. *New York Times*, February 28, 1979.
42. *New York Times*, February 12, 1979; see also "New Military Districts Set Up to Strengthen Defenses Against USSR," *Kyoto*, February 5, 1979, pp. E5-6; and "AFP Highlights General Atmosphere in Beijing, Elsewhere," *AFP*, in FBIS, February 22, 1979, pp. 13-15. On military mobilizations before the conflict, see Jencks, "China's 'Punitive' War on Vietnam," pp. 801-15. Deng also verified the precautions taken against the USSR in a statement to the *Kyoto News Service*: "We had considered certain risks in making the decision [to take military action against Vietnam] and had made *sufficient preparations*." [Emphasis added.] Quoted in "Deng Welcomes UN Call for PRC, SRV Pullouts," *Kyoto*, in FBIS, February 26, pp. A5-6.
43. "US-PRC leaders Exchange Greetings on Diplomatic Ties," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, January 2, 1979, pp. A2-3.
44. "PRC Liaison Office Holds Reception, Mondale Speaks," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, January 3, 1979, p. A3.
45. "SRV Needs 'Lessons.'" *Xinhua* (in Washington, DC), in FBIS, February 1, 1979, pp. A8-9.
46. As a gesture of goodwill, Chinese negotiators broke the deadlock on a number of long contested Sino-Soviet border issues shortly after their invasion began, as if to signal the Soviets that they still desired peaceful relations. The Soviets, for their part, limited their participation in the conflict to providing airlifted supplies and offshore electronic intelligence to their ally, the latter of which was generated by the 11 ships of the Soviet Pacific Fleet patrolling off Haiphong.
47. "Renmin Ribao Urges Expulsion of SRV Intrusion," *Xinhua*, in FBIS, February 21, 1979, p. A11-12.
48. *New York Times*, February 20, 1979.
49. *New York Times*, March 3, 1979. Another plausible explanation of Chinese reticence to use air power has been offered by military analysts. They assert that the Chinese feared the potency of Vietnam's smaller but more technologically advanced air force and did not wish to lose a large number of planes for minimal gain.
50. Jencks, p. 809.
51. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 9, 1979, p. 14.
52. Yee, p. 26.
53. As final proof of the real purpose of the invasion, however, the Chinese press declared to the domestic populace that SRV forces had been forced to withdraw from positions in Cambodia. See "SRV Forces Forced to Withdraw From Positions in Cambodia," *Xinhua Domestic Service*, in FBIS, February 27, 1979, pp. A17-18.
54. Nayan Chanda, "A Massive Shock for Vietnam," *Far Eastern Economic Review* CIII (August 10, 1979).
55. See Ellis Joffe, *The Chinese Army After Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 149-79.

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