

## CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE VIETNAM WAR: ITS STRATEGIC REASONS

## O ENVOLVIMENTO DA CHINA NA GUERRA DO VIETNÃ: RAZÕES ESTRATÉGICAS

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**Summary:** The main reason for China's engagement in the Vietnam War (VW) was deterrence. The leadership in Beijing sought to persuade the US not to escalate in the conflict, because the costs to Washington would be too high. This work attempts firstly to outline four main sources influencing Chinese strategy, secondly to present the events in 1965 that led the Chinese leadership to engage in the VW, and lastly to contrast those main sources with China's decision to enter the War, in order to test the validity of such elements.

**Resumo:** A principal razão para o envolvimento da China na Guerra do Vietnã foi dissuasão. A liderança em Pequim procurou persuadir os EUA a não escalar no conflito, porque os custos para Washington seria muito alto. Este trabalho procura, em primeiro lugar delinear quatro fontes principais que influenciam a estratégia chinesa, em segundo lugar apresentar os eventos em 1965 que levaram a liderança

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chinesa a exercer a Guerra do Vietnã, e, por último, contrastar esses principais fontes com a decisão da China para entrar na guerra, a fim de testar a validade de tais elementos.

**Resumen:** La razón principal de la participación de China en la Guerra de Vietnam fue la disuasión. El liderazgo en Beijing trató de persuadir a los EE.UU. de no escalar en el conflicto, porque los costos que pagaría Washington serían demasiado altos. Este trabajo intenta en primer lugar identificar cuatro fuentes principales que influyen en la estrategia china, en segundo lugar presentar los eventos en 1965 que condujeron a los líderes chinos a participar en la Guerra de Vietnam, y por último contrastar esas fuentes principales con la decisión de China de entrar en la Guerra, con el fin de probar la validez de tales elementos.

**Keywords:** China, strategy, Vietnam War, deterrence.

**Unitermos:** China, estratégia, Guerra do Vietnã, detenção.

**Palabras claves:** China, estrategia, Guerra de Vietnam, disuasión.

The following analysis is aimed at examining why the People's Republic of China (PRC) opted to engage in the Vietnam War (VW). The main reason for it was deterrence. Here deterrence is taken to mean the attempt by China to persuade the United States (US) not to undertake an escalation in the conflict, because the costs to Washington would be too high.

In 1965, due to security and ideological reasons, Mao Zedong and his comrades undoubtedly longed for a victory of the Vietnamese revolutionaries against the US "imperialists" and their "lackeys", and it was thus essential for Beijing to support their struggles.

However, it would be against Mao's concerns if such backing led to a direct PRC-US confrontation, hence undermining his efforts of bringing about the Cultural Revolution at home. Consequently, the war's expansion on a limited scale could, on the one hand provide Mao with an indispensable stimulus to mobilize the Chinese masses, while on the other hand avoid American escalation of the war, which in turn would threaten China's security.

The first part of this work attempts to outline four main sources influencing Chinese strategy, while the second part unfolds the events in 1965 that led the PRC leadership to engage in the VW. Finally, a third part of this work contrasts those main sources with the PRC's decision to enter the War, in order to test the validity of such elements.

### **Main Sources of Chinese Strategy**

The geopolitical situation of the PRC has an impact on China's security problems. On the one hand, its key position in the Far East, enormous population, immense and diverse territory, abundant resources, and lengthy historical and cultural experience, conferred on this country both an essential sense of security and a profile that enabled the PRC to play a prominent role in international politics. On the other hand, however, China's extended borders, both land and maritime, are quite vulnerable; what's more in 1965 China's economy in terms of the population/agricultural balance did not stand robust, and remained behind-hand in its industrial and technological base. Hence, Chinese strategists had to face these factors when confronted with the task of defense planning.

### **Physical and Human Geography**

Although geography does not determine a country's strategy, it is a constructive starting point for framing some parameters for the study of China's strategy. To start with physical geography, the PRC in 1965 was the third largest country in the world. China's more than 9 million square kilometers made it the largest country in the temperature zones. Accordingly, the defense of the PRC required safeguarding almost an entire continent. Military needs were therefore both land and sea oriented. Notwithstanding such features, China's somewhat compact form enabled it to deal with scattered neighbors and presented certain interesting topographical features related to defense<sup>1</sup>.

Another meaningful dimension of its physical geography is that of natural resources. The location of most energy sources, ferrous and non-ferrous metals could be found in an area designated as core China -or China Proper- which comprised current China except Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, northern portion of Heilongjiang, Ningxia, and Guangxi. Although the PRC was vulnerable to precise border challenges or seaborne threats, its geography made it easier to defend

rather than attack “core China”.

It was not surprising then, that Mao made it plain that in defeating an invader, geography was China’s ally: “China is a vast country, when the east is still dark, the west is lit up; when night falls in the south, the day breaks in the north; hence one need not worry about whether there is room enough to move around” (Mao Zedong, 1967).

In the second place, China’s human geography indicated in 1965 that its 715 million people did not allow foreign occupation of the PRC. For this reason, an invading power would have to cope with a combination of population plus territory. Where agriculture is concerned, it contributed 60 per cent of China’s GDP and as with minerals and population; core China contained by far the greatest concentration of such resource. If China’s agriculture was not easy to disrupt, the same cannot be stated of its industry, which was not only more directly related to war potential, but also more vulnerable to attack. This is because China’s oil resources were situated in areas near Russia and in disputed offshore waters, and power generating plants were concentrated in a few major centers and due to the location of industrial areas were in the northeast.

Not intending to assess in a deterministic way that the physical and human geography of China provided a strategy for protecting the PRC, it was still possible to outline some broad conclusions in relation to three basic types of security threats. First, there was the threat of a nuclear attack. It was clear that in the PRC’s major cities, industry and power production could be devastated in such a strike. While this would not defeat or destroy China, it could provide a smaller power with a viable minimum deterrence stance the PRC. The second major threat, large-scale conventional invasion of China seemed to be a near impossible task if geographical factors were considered. The third threat, that of a limited war along the periphery, raised more problems for the PRC, for it was clear that in the case of an attack against outside core China, the rest of the territory constituting one half of the country, was by far more vulnerable (Segal, 1985).

### **Historical Legacy**

Past events influence subsequent generations through shared recollections of those events and beliefs about their meaning. In China, each dynasty produced an official

history justifying its rise and hold to power and the morality of its domestic and foreign policies. Shared memories and beliefs were crucial elements in forging the Chinese political culture, no matter whether profound political changes occurred, such as the end of the dynastical cycle, the adoption of a Republican system and the inception of a Socialist State.

When during the 4th century B.C. an expanding China met northern tribes, the empire dealt with foreigners assuming a sinocentric worldview that ensued naturally from Chinese society. A key principle in Sinocentrism was the belief in the hierarchical nature of society. Since China was civilized and others were not, China, and within China its emperor, were poised at the pinnacle of a pyramid of power. The “barbarians” were tied to China according to a system where they paid tribute to the Chinese Emperor. Also, the tribute system resulted in China not appreciating the concept of alliances. Notwithstanding with such fact, China never faced a strong power until the 19th century. At that time, Chinese rulers were forced to take a more *ad hoc* approach to protect the empire. Thus to cope with foreign challenges, the essence of the strategy was pragmatism (Wei Rulin, 1968).

In referring to the formation of the contemporary Chinese strategic thought, it mainly results from two constituents: China's ancient thinking and Mao Zedong's contribution. Sun Zi is the only Chinese strategist who has ever been greatly acknowledged abroad. Furthermore, Sun Zi apparently had an appreciable impact on Mao, though the “Great Helmsman” did not recognize that (Tan, 1984).

The conceptual nucleus of Sun Zi's work rests on three principles: mind is superior to matter; thought is more powerful than weapons; and doctrine overcomes bare strength. The intellectual basis of such principles derives in turn from the philosophical thought of both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, the founders of the psychological element of China's military thought.

Marxism coincided with and reinforced China's long aged concern with the mandate of culture, since in Marxism, as in Confucianism, the fundamental relationship between politics and ethics is demonstrated through the study of history and culture. Lenin even went one step further by saying –like Confucius- that the right to govern lay with those people who understood the principles of humankind. In turn, Mao's “Ten Great Military Principles” form the operational guiding lines of Chinese contemporary strategic thought, stressing “strive to the utmost to

preserve one's strength and destroy that of the enemy" [保存自己消灭敌人-  
bǎocún zìjǐ, xiāomiè dírén] (Wei Rulin, 1968).

Such considerations serve to explain why, from Sun Zi to Mao Zedong, there is a stress on the importance of man over machine. As a corollary, war, in Chinese thinking, does not constitute an end in itself, but fits into a greater design dominated by politics.

### **The Impact of Ideology**

The validity of military force in Communist ideology must be affirmed at the very beginning. Mao Zedong spoke of war as "politics with bloodshed" and he did not see war as an abnormal state of affairs. He added that "...our principle is that the Party commands the gun; the gun shall never be allowed to command the Party" (Mao Zedong, 1967). However, in considering the Party-Army link, it would be erroneous to state that Mao or any of his comrades knew what point along the continuum was most suitable. Likewise, the lack of a unique view of how much Party control was required, stems from the needs of military flexibility.

Besides that, the general tendency to minimize the value of military professionalism provides the Communist leadership a rationale for favoring the human element in war, opposed to military hardware. Second, it is crucial to keep in mind that Mao's military thought is also flexible, as in order to succeed in the past, it had to adapt to changes. Because of the Communists' campaigns during the Civil War as well as against the Japanese, the strategists of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to deal with military operation designed to control all China. According to Mao's strategic thought, to keep China safe from a general invasion, three different phases should be followed:

"... The first stage covers the period of the enemy's strategic offensive and our strategic defensive. The second stage will be the period of the enemy's strategic consolidation and our preparation for the counter-offensive. The third stage will be the period of our strategic counter-offensive and the enemy's strategic retreat" (Mao Zedong, 1967).

The emphasis on the defensive in the first strategic phase is intended to reflect the Chinese assumption of their material inferiority, at least during the "early stages of

war". These phases of Mao's people's war are both flexible and logical, so they continue to serve as the focus of Chinese strategy against general invasion after 1949. In the final analysis China had not have to test this aspect of people's war as the PRC was not been invaded since its founding. However, threats of a less serious nature had been faced since the Communist revolution. But unlike the problem of total war, there were stated few strategic ideas on how to face such limited threats.

As regards China's attitude towards a nuclear threat, it draws many of its principles from the same Maoist sources that shaped the PRC's attitude towards general invasion. Therefore, nuclear war against China seems to be of limited utility because it is not effective enough to conquer the entire country (Schram, 1967).

### **Institutions**

As stated above, Party-Army relations cannot be seen as the interactions between two monolithic bodies. Neither the military nor the civil authority in China was a monolithic group. Cleavages cut across the Party-Army division. As regards of the military structure, there were strong coordinating links, for inputs flow from the Ministries and military units concerned, but final decision rested on the Politburo.

In case of general threat, China's main response is to be found in the ground forces, but the ground forces had cleavages between center and region, as well as between different regions. Central control will be difficult to assert, although somewhat easier for the air and naval forces. These institutional arrangements also explain why people's war remained the central form of defense against the general threat of invasion, thus central political judgments became dominant. In addition, more limited threats might offer greater scope for the assertion of institutional differences (Segal, 1984).

Accordingly, a few lines of institutional influence in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can be seen for shaping Chinese strategy. The evidence for this conclusion is that there were no clear lines of institutional policy in the military as a whole, or in specific services; what is more, the military was not independent enough to impose its will on the Party whether able to design one.

### **PRC's Deterrence of the US in the VW in 1965**

For Chinese foreign policy, 1965 started with some hints of an ensuing very hopeful year. Khrushchev had been overthrown, the Second Afro-Asian summit conference was scheduled to be held in Algiers by June, and in spring that year a second Chinese bomb device was exploded. In addition, US intervention in the Dominican Republic to confront a popular uprising against military dictatorship provided the Chinese anti-American campaign with fresh propaganda (Van Ness, 1970).

With respect to Vietnam, Beijing's policy towards its neighbor had turned more radical since 1963. During different high level visits, Chinese political and military authorities made general security commitments to Hanoi. The two sides, along with their Laotian comrades, mainly discussed how to co-ordinate operations in the event of an American invasion of North Vietnam. As a result, Chinese leaders promised that the PRC would increase its military and economic aid to both nearby states (Chen Jian, 1995).

Important domestic and international reasons can be found underlying China's stronger commitment in the region. To start with, the rapid radicalization of Chinese socio-political life, as well as Mao's desire to build beneficial outcomes from this process. In the second place, the deteriorating relationship between China and the Soviet Union. Lastly, Beijing's new attitude towards the Vietnamese conflict emerged from its belief of the crucial role the PRC was to play in promoting revolutionary movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Whitson, 1974).

Because of all these reasons, the Chinese leadership in early 1965 certainly hoped that the Vietnamese revolutionaries would succeed in their struggle, and it was thus necessary for Beijing to support their revolution. However, it would be against Mao's interests if such backing stemmed a direct US-PRC war, for it could ruin Mao's efforts to bring about the Cultural Revolution at home. Alternatively, the expansion of US intervention in Vietnam on a limited scale could provide Mao with a strong political stimulus to mobilize the Chinese masses (Chen Jian, 1995).

Chinese participation in the VW came up in the context of a threefold threat posed by the US to North Vietnam. First, from the spring of 1964 to early 1965 Washington indicated it would bomb the North if the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) backing went on to support Communist guerrillas in the South.



Secondly, US air attacks against North Vietnamese territory which began in early 1965 threatened to cut logistics lines from the PRC to Vietnam. Third, starting in mid-1965, the deployment of 500,000 US ground forces in South Vietnam meant a threat of invasion of the DRV. Both the prolonged US bombing of the DRV and the deployment of American troops into South Vietnam brought the US and the PRC into military confrontation. (Hinton, 1968).

From Beijing perspective, on the one hand, US actions were a threat to the PRC's own security, not only because American troops were closer to China, but also Washington might decide to strike at arsenals, rail lines or airfields in south China that were supporting DRV's war effort. On the other hand, China's credibility was at stake, for had the PRC done nothing, its regional influence would have suffered severely. Therefore, China sought to prevent American bombing on the DRV by warning the US that if attacks went too far, China would enter the war.

Warnings were followed by considerable Chinese military support for the DRV. Such backing had five main features. First, it was substantial, for in the second half of 1965, almost 50,000 Chinese troops were sent to North Vietnam to carry out rear support work, repair transport lines and take charge of anti-aircraft warfare. Also, China's air defenses in its southern land were strengthened, an integrated radar grid on PRC soil was established covering DRV's territory to provide intelligence on US Air Force (USAF) operations, and the North Vietnamese air force was permitted to use airfields in south China. Second, Chinese forces in the DRV suffered casualties from USAF attacks, as well as shot down US planes. Occasionally, PLA aircraft engaged USAF fighters that entered the PRC's airspace. Thus PLA units in North Vietnam did not remain in a passive role. Third, Chinese units constructed a heavily fortified complex some 140 kilometers northwest of Hanoi, which could serve either as a Vietnamese bunker in case of a US invasion or as a PLA headquarters in the event of a Chinese intervention. Fourth, Chinese armed forces deployments were not conducted under maximum security conditions (Wang Xiangeng, 1972).

Accordingly, Beijing wanted Washington to know PRC's moves and the seriousness of its purposes. However, in order not to lock itself into a situation that might escalate into straight war with the US, China never in this period acknowledged its military presence in North Vietnam.

It should also be noted that Beijing played a careful maneuvering in order to avoid engagement in an open war with the US: in April 1965, Premier Zhou Enlai told Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Algerian leader Ahmed Ben Bella that China would not intervene in the current conflict unless there was an American invasion north of the 17th parallel. For sure, within a short period of time, the message was known in Washington (Garver, 1993).

Furthermore, as USAF bombing of North Vietnam increased after the August 2 (1964) incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, American and Chinese Ambassadors met in Warsaw to discuss the situation in Vietnam. It has been presumed that these talks led to an understanding that, as long as US forces did not invade the DRV or attack the PRC, China would not directly enter the war. As a result, Beijing's objectives remained fairly consistent, low key and defensive. While policy debates obviously raged, the PRC tended to hold on to limited, safe policies.

As for the mentioned debates, it is worth noting that the onset of the US-Vietnam war precipitated a debate within the CCP over the nature of the threat posed by Washington and the optimal strategy for coping with that threat. After harsh discussions, by the end of 1965 the strategic debate had been resolved. PLA Chief of Staff Luo Ruiqing who supported more professionalism in the armed forces, united front with the Soviet Union and "engaging the enemy outside the gates" to deter US aggression, was purged. Thus united action with Moscow was rejected and official statements spoke of "lure the enemy in deep" as the best way to defeat an American invasion -although in practice there was a compromise between forward and passive defense- (Ra'anan, 1968).

Simultaneously, China prepared a crash program to build a military-industrial base in the PRC's mountainous interior, referred to as the Third Front, which came in response to the breakdown of the Sino-Soviet alliance and the recognition that the PRC could no longer count on USSR's backing in the event of direct confrontation with the US (Naughton, 1991).

In short, as for events of the analyzed period of the VW, in its first phase, from the spring of 1964 to early 1965, Chinese objectives seemed primarily to deter air threats to the DRV. However, Chinese signaling of its concern seemed to be inconsistent therefore Beijing's attempt at deterrence of US action failed when the US retaliated against the DRV for the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Due to the

seriousness of this challenge, Beijing did react firmly but what were most crucial were the new military rather than the verbal response. Accordingly, during the next five months China extended its air defense system. Notwithstanding this, the PRC still saw the threat as limited, and so far mainly to the DRV. Then, in the second phase of the war, when a great many US troops arrived in Southern Vietnamese territory, the PRC draw the deterrence line not at China's borders but at the DRV border.

Chinese policy up to this point was more forward than it had been in Korea, but it was hoped that Washington was being deterred, not antagonized. Consequently, by November 1965 the Cultural Revolution was under way and China seemed fairly confident that the DRV could cope with the existing level of threat. Therefore, most Chinese objectives were achieved: Beijing succeeded in deterring any threat to China, in preventing unlimited air attacks on the DRV, and in keeping the American Army south of the North Vietnamese frontier.

## **Conclusions**

How can Chinese strategy during 1965 be explained in the light of the geographical, historical, ideological and institutional elements affecting Chinese strategy?

As to what Chinese strategists learnt from their country's *physical geography*, both holding high ground in the south and the distant location of the war theatre from core China, contributed to build up a forward defensive complex, in spite of the operational topics under discussion during the strategic debate held in 1965. Only a seaborne threat could affect China's vulnerability in its southern flank, which was demonstrated when the Gulf of Tonkin incident raised concerns among the civilian and military leadership of the PRC.

Regarding the *human aspect of Chinese geography*, because of core China's high density of population, official statements on a people's war strategy made sense. Next, the unprotected condition of China's industries influenced in the development of the Third Front program. Furthermore, the PRC's plentiful natural resources supported the PRC's assistance to Vietnam between 1964 and 1968. Lastly, as a consequence of both physical and human aspects of Chinese geography, the threat of an American large-scale invasion or nuclear attack did not result in significant alarm for the Chinese leadership.

With respect to the *role played by history*, firstly it was clear the civilian control of the Chinese military all along the duration of the conflict. This aspect, concurrent with the legacy of stressing man over weapons, could be clearly seen in the posture held by the winning faction of the strategic debate. As a result, the ensuing Chinese strategy in the Vietnam War relied mainly on manpower.

In the second place, Beijing's seemingly revolutionary and idealistic policy towards Vietnam had also been penetrated, ironically, by the ancient sinocentric approach. Although the PRC ostensibly did not pursue political control in the DRV, it always had the appearance of expecting the Vietnamese recognition for the support given. As to the effect of Sinocentrism in refusing to enter into alliances, because of other stronger ideological reasons, it cannot be counted as a cause to explain Beijing's rejection of a united front with the Soviet Union.

Thirdly, the sustained tradition of emphasizing surprise and deception in Chinese military strategy was not actually put into practice, mainly because in order to avoid the escalation of the Vietnam conflict, effective communication -especially in the idiom of military action- was highly required.

With regard to the "great wall" notion that China believes in passive and static defense, although Maoist military thought provides argument for precisely the opposite, the forward defensive stronghold established in the DRV-PRC frontier, gives us some evidence of its continuity.

As for *the impact of ideology* on Chinese strategy throughout the duration of the analyzed phase of the war, in accordance to Mao's military writings, tight political control was maintained over all military operations, tactical response was a degree of military involvement in the war while staying calm in strategic terms, and potential American nuclear threat seemed not to disturb Chinese authorities -although the PRC's own nuclear program came to fruition in October 1964-.

Ideological considerations related to the domestic dimension of China's commitment to the conflict should be noted, as for boosting the Cultural Revolution domestically, a non-threatening external environment was required.

With reference to the effect of *the institutional element* on the PRC's strategy, both the general absence of a unified and independent military position and

cleavages cutting across the Party-Army division were considerable during the strategic debate of 1965. Thus military men were divided on PLA policy and joined forces with diverse political coalitions in the civil structure. In fact, the purge of Chief of Staff Luo Ruiqing was part of a more complex process involving military and civilian figures on both sides of the "red versus expert" argument. Alternatively, the three services were concerned with meeting the limited threat of the conflict, for engineering, anti-aircraft artillery and aircraft units were deployed in the war theatre.

In conclusion, although every state's strategy changes according to circumstances and the PRC should not be an exception, most of the indicated main sources of Chinese strategy were present in the PRC's moves during the conflict. Thus the latter, in the face of Chinese objectives and the limited nature of the US war effort, could be kept low key and limited -which in turn allowed Mao and his radical comrades to implement the Cultural Revolution at home-.

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