

Sample term paper on contextualizing the 1979 sino- vietnamese war

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



Introduction

At the end of the 1970s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) emerged from the Mao Zedong era and started the process of opening up to the foreign world. As it initiated its reforms in 1978, it has also ventured into the international realms (Bijian, 2005). It pursued a winning policy for economic development, surged its military and political power, and made their nation a formidable player in the international arena. This phenomenon spans almost thirty years. As China's economic, military and political power has increased over the last three decades, its national leaders also sought to enhance their country's international stature. It began to be more conscious of their global status (Angang & Honghua, 2002). "Status" is defined under this term as the state's position, in the soft side of power such as the esteem, honor and respect of the international community. While this is called "soft" power, it is also highly influential in one's international standing and impact (Angang & Honghua, 2002).

This paper's thesis is that China's emergence as an international player pressured it to display its power and military might against competing communist leaders such as the Soviet Union, hence, it engaged into the infamous Sino-vietnamese War of 1979. It shall illustrate, through the more generalized theory of international relations, particularly neorealism, that China awkwardly used force to state its leadership in the region, especially when such interest was threatened by Vietnam and/or Soviet Union. Aside from realism, the paper also utilizes non-traditional factors such as status to augment the realist theory in better explaining why China engaged in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict.

Classical realists like Hans Morgenthau define the pursuit of power as the major motivator of a state in its action and behavior (Copeland, 2000). They also acknowledge the expansive power distribution in multipolar systems as the most steady form of the international system. The realist theory argues that balancing power is a positive feature of multipolar systems which assures the more or less balanced distribution of power among major states. The theory predicts war as one major state generates more wealth or power in the said multipolar system (Copeland, 2002). It also argues that states rationally develop policies and behave in ways which works towards their best advantage, i. e. more power and reduced risks. The more rational a state actor is, the better for its international stature. All these principles and assumptions shall be illustrated in depicting the context of the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979.

- Historical Background

At the onset of the Vietnam War in the early 1960's, China had already realized that the United States no longer constituted as a main threat to its national security (Khoo, 2011). The country then recognized a greater threat coming from the Soviet Union on their northern front. Hence, it fortified its defense against the Soviet Union as a national strategy. China adopted a policy of "fighting with two fists" and it was prepared for a two-front war against both the U. S. and the Soviet Union (Khoo, 2011).

Even before, China had tried to overcome Vietnam, while the latter, in turn, has strived to gear away from the Chinese fold. However, their differences began to show during post-war negotiations (Lam, 2013). But then, the Sino-

Vietnamese relations forged on during the 1950's up to the 1960's. Between 1956 and 1963, China gave North Vietnam its utmost military support. China extended the same massive aid during the Second Indochina War (1965-1973), which was also known as the famous Vietnam War against the United States. At the end of the 1960s, China was part of the construction and maintenance of defence works and infrastructure in North Vietnam. It also provided military equipment and civil materials to Vietnam (Lam, 2013).

At the onset of the 1970s, the relationship between China and Vietnam turned sour as China reduced its aid pledges to Vietnam (Lam, 2013). There were a lot of domestic and international elements which led into this radical shift. Yet, the critical point of contention for Vietnam was the reduced aid from China. This was further complicated in 1971 and 1972 when the Soviet Union's supplies and materials to Vietnam passed through China. Vietnam perceived the delay in the delivery as China's ineptitude while in fact, China had intended to partake in this inept process to instigate conflict between Soviet Union and Vietnam.

As such, China and Vietnam relations remained tense and it worsened and almost led to a military confrontation at the end of the decade. This made Vietnam to forge closer ties with the Soviet Union for help, which China did not welcome. After three years, Vietnam joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the economic bloc under the Soviet leadership. Then, after two months, Vietnam formally signed its alliance with the Soviet Union through a treaty of peace and friendship. As China wanted to limit the communist leadership of the Soviet Union in the region, this further strained Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Another major incident which colored the two Asian countries relations was their policies towards the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia by the end of the 1970's. The increased tensions eventually led to China's invasion of Vietnam in February 1979 (Lam, 2013). From the good Sino-Vietnamese relations during the start of the PRC, it has been strained throughout the decades.

- Theoretical Interpretation of the Sino-Vietnamese Conflict 1042

Neo realism, as a conventional approach, could explain why China chose to go to war with Vietnam in 1979 (Waltz, 1979). As it fought the Vietnamese forces, the Chinese state was trying to show its force directly to the Soviet Union. It was aiming to exterminate the threat the Soviet Union was posing to China. In terms of international politics, China's main security agenda in Southeast Asia was to maintain the development of a positive balance of influence which reduced or precluded the Soviet expansion or any of its allies (such as Vietnam which then solidified its alliance with the Soviet Union). After the fall of the U. S. supported governments in South Vietnam and Cambodia in 1975, a victorious communist Vietnam became less cooperative with China's security interests in Cambodia (Gill, 2005). It has also increased its close ties with the Soviet Union. This irked China as China viewed the Soviet Union as a principal threat to their security in the 1970's. While China and the Soviet Union have been aligned in the 1950's, their alliance only lasted for a decade. In 1962, the Soviet Union withdrew its technical advisors from China and expelled the Chinese embassy officers from Moscow the following year. Events in 1969 also exacerbated the Sino-Soviet division. With the 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation,

China's insecurity over the Soviet influence of Vietnam and its neighboring countries heightened. It could not contain that the Asian balance of power will be in favor of the Soviet Union. With the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, China formally bungled with its alliance with Vietnam in deference of the latter's alliance with the Soviet Union. In short, China initiated the end of this alliance simply because Vietnam strengthened its friendship with the Soviet Union. Hence, it produced hostilities between the former allies.

The growing influence of the Soviet Union in the Southeast Asian territories represented a threat to China and this served as a major and overriding concern of Chinese foreign policy-makers. China was a social state whose behavior was identified by non-materialist variables. It was a "neorealist state whose international behavior is basically defined by concepts stressed by neorealist theory" (Waltz, 1979). This also reflects a Chinese foreign policy known as "principal enemy" theory, which states that the "friend of my enemy is my enemy" (Krasner, 2001). Vietnam became China's secondary enemy since the latter has aligned itself with the primary enemy of China, the Soviet Union.

China assessed its relationship with the Vietnamese communists mainly through the prism of a failing Sino-Soviet alliance. Hence, when Vietnam and the Soviet Union consolidated their relations after the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Sino-Vietnamese relations weakened. Likewise, as the relationship between Soviet Union and Vietnam strengthened, China became more threatened. This could be analyzed as a rational reaction by the state actors since they have all methodically and strategically worked to pursue their state's interests as they so intended. Hence, as an outcome of

the events, China viewed Vietnam's tighter Soviet communist relations with disgust and displeasure (Khoo, 2011).

It eventually led to a non negotiable position on the issue of Cambodia. As obvious, China did not want to acknowledge more Soviet Union influence in Southeast Asia. To keep the

Soviets out and North Vietnam on its side, China initially tried to win Vietnam over through military aid.

In a state-centered realist analysis, Vietnam's increased alignment with the Soviet Union during a period of intense Sino-Soviet rivalry and conflict basically changed the perceptions and moods of China and Vietnam toward each other. This emphasized the Asian security environment and it pressured China to reinstate its regional power. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978 and toppled the Khmer Rouge regime (which it supported), China grew frightful of the would be security scenario against its regional interests. China then deemed it more necessary to apply force to inspect the Soviet Union's power and expansion motives.

Based on this immediate threat, China acted on its instinct and engaged in conflict with Vietnam to restore the old balance of power and to maintain its leadership in Southeast Asia. This seemed rational and aligned with the expected behavior of Chinese state. Hence, this resulted in the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 and other protracted conflict over territorial and other issues in the span of ten years. While the Sino-Vietnamese war was disastrous for the Chinese army, it demonstrated that China is willing to use force to counter Soviet Union's expansion.

The motives of China's stance to use force was to preserve its interests over

the region. It is willing to use resources and pursue territory to maximize its power. This can be rationalized by the intention to expand and consolidate its hold over a greater amount of territories to increase its potential natural resource assets. It also aimed to increase its strategic position in the region. By establishing domain over the region, China would increase its influence over the Southeast Asian countries. It shall also be able to have a great impact on the important sea lines of communication which super powers like the U. S. and Japan rely on for their trading and business. Lastly, its leadership can fill up the vacuum left by the multipolar situation during that period.

Much of China's stance is comprehended under the realist paradigm. The country is considered as the next best rival of the super powers in terms of international position (Bijian, 2005). In this context, the Chinese state is the primary actor in each and every decision and action. It also takes into consideration the anarchic international system which acts rationally in pursuit of their own agenda. The Chinese state also considers that there is really no supra power agency which takes full control of the nations.

Conclusion 252

In conclusion, the initiation of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict was a state centered action brought by different elements focused on self preservation and protection of national interests against outside threats. The Chinese state showed a short display of force as it aimed to send the Soviet Union a strong message that it has a specific interest in the Southeast Asian region and it cannot be deterred. While at that point, the force used proved to be a

failure, it nevertheless sent the message that it was willing to use might in order to defend its national interests. This very well explains the theoretical assumptions held by neorealism.

Such interpretation holds the state central to major decisions and actions and imperatives. This is regardless as to whether this action would cause further conflict or instigate a war. While some other scholars may view the Chinese actions as dependent on Mao Zedong's autocratic rule, this theory has successfully enabled us to comprehend why China acted the way it did in the said Sino-Vietnamese War. The war justified the protection of China's regional interests and its show of power to counter the growing influence of its enemy, the Soviet Union. It clarifies the contention on what drives Chinese international policy, particularly what caused the breakdown of Sino-Vietnamese alignment through the years. It somehow bridged the state actors' thoughts, particularly those of China, Vietnam and Soviet Union, and the reliable and open information on what China and Vietnam have calculated during those important times.

Interestingly, China's emergence as a global player pressured it to showcase its power and military might against the Soviet Union. While it awkwardly used force to reinstate its leadership in the Southeast Asian region, it still qualified itself in the more rational state actor's imperative as it viewed Vietnam and/or Soviet Union threatening to its interests. Hence, Deng Xiaoping's words of wisdom to the leaders of China to "observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capabilities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership," worked at that point.

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