Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War

This book examines the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts of the late 1970s and 1980s, attempting to understand them as strategic, operational, and tactical events.

The Sino-Vietnamese War was the Third Indochina War, and contemporary Southeast Asia cannot be properly understood unless we acknowledge that the Vietnamese fought three, not two wars to establish their current role in the region. The war was not about the Sino-Vietnamese border, as frequently claimed, but about China’s support for its Cambodian ally, the Khmer Rouge, and this book addresses both US and ASEAN involvement in the effort to support the regime. Although the Chinese completed their troop withdrawal in March 1979, they retained their strategic goal of driving Vietnam out of Cambodia at least until 1988, but it was evident by 1984–85 that the Chinese Army, held back by the drag of its “Maoist” organization, doctrine, equipment, and personnel, was not an effective instrument of coercion.

*Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War* will be of great interest to students of Southeast Asian politics, Chinese security, and military and strategic studies in general.

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The last Maoist war

Edward C. O’Dowd
In Memoriam
Denis Twitchett (1925–2006)
Scholar, Mentor, Friend
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Part I

Introduction
1 Introduction

On February 17, 1979, more than 400,000 soldiers of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA)\(^1\) attacked across the Sino-Vietnamese border. Responsibility for the assault on the low, steep hills along the National Highway 4 in Vietnam’s Lang Son province fell in part to the Chinese 165th Division, a body of more than 12,500 men, including almost 1,300 cadres.\(^2\) As the campaign dragged on, the division tallied its losses and discovered that during the slow, painful advance it had “promoted on the firing line” – to replace casualties – 243 cadres.\(^3\) Although some of the surviving cadres attributed their casualties and battlefield problems to inadequate training or weak leadership, this study shows that the fundamental cause of their problems was the Maoist ideology that in 1979 permeated the PLA. The 165th Division, like all other PLA divisions, had followed the Maoist line, holding the requisite meetings and teaching its conscripts the key tenets of Maoist ideology. But when its poorly trained cadres led the massed formations of the 165th into the waiting guns of the Vietnamese Army in the fields near Hill 339, ideology was not enough.

The actions of the 165th Division were part of China’s response to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on December 25, 1978. The political objective of the Chinese strategy was to induce Vietnam to end its operations against the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia.\(^4\) The Chinese military plan was simple: PLA troops would, in a lightning campaign, seize the capitals of Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai provinces and thereby force the Vietnamese to abandon their Cambodian campaign or to fight a two-front war. A huge force of more than 400,000 troops was to be deployed against about 50,000 regular Vietnamese troops and a few militiamen.

Rather than the expected few days of fighting, the PLA’s capture of the three towns took a bitter three-week struggle. The political objective was not achieved: Vietnam did not abandon its occupation of Cambodia, nor did Vietnam transfer a large number of troops from the Cambodian operation to defend its northern border against the Chinese.

China withdrew from northern Vietnam on March 16, 1979, but it did not abandon its strategic goal of persuading the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia. From the end of its 1979 invasion until the last Vietnamese soldier left Cambodia in 1989, China continued to threaten Vietnam with another
attack: “a second lesson.” In 1981 and 1984, China and Vietnam engaged in large-scale battles along the border. At other times, China pursued a strategy of “artillery diplomacy,” firing massive artillery barrages at Vietnamese villages to draw Vietnamese reinforcements to the border to face the threat of a “second lesson.”

The PLA, even backed with all the elements of Chinese national power, was incapable of bringing about a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. Vietnam remained in Cambodia for ten years, departing to leave China’s ally, the Khmer Rouge, in ruins and Hun Sen, a Vietnamese ally, as head of the Cambodian state. In the end, the 1989 withdrawal of Vietnam was forced not by the PLA, but by the collapse of Soviet support for Vietnam, by the support of China, the United States, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the Khmer Rouge and other Cambodian opposition groups, and by the hunger of the Vietnamese people for a share in the region’s economic prosperity of the 1980s. The Chinese strategy was a failure.

From a longer perspective, it is now clear that the Chinese strategic failure was a small but significant part of the story of the four decades of conflict that created contemporary Southeast Asia. The Chinese attacks on Vietnam from 1979 to 1987 were part of a wider war in Indochina. In the First Indochina War, the Vietnamese fought the French from 1945 to 1954 in an effort to establish an independent socialist state under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In the Second Indochina War (1959–75), the North Vietnamese communists and their supporters in the South fought the United States and the Republic of Vietnam to unify the Vietnamese nation. In the Third Indochina War, which was fought from 1978 to 1991, the boundaries and power relationships between the Vietnamese and the Chinese were determined. In a sense, these three wars defined the shape of contemporary Southeast Asia. The Chinese incursion in 1979 and the Chinese attacks along the Sino-Vietnamese border during the following years were campaigns within the broader series of diplomatic, military, economic, and social events that made up the Third Indochina War.

If this is the case, and this dissertation argues that it is the case, then there are several important questions that must be answered. How can we best understand the Sino-Vietnamese violence of the 1970s and 1980s? Was there a “Third Indochina War”? What was the Chinese objective in this war? What events made up the war? How did the Chinese armed forces perform in the war? If they performed well, then why did they perform well? If they did not perform well, then why did they not do well?

Chinese historians have not been very helpful. They have largely ignored the history of what they call the “counterattack in self-defense on the Sino-Vietnamese border” (zhong-yue bianjing ziwei huanjizhan), disconnecting the war from its strategic objective in an effort to make the PLA appear more formidable and China appear less threatening to its neighbors. By excision, careful phrasing, and loose interpretation, China has recast the recent history of the PLA and sought to divorce itself from the Pol Pot reign of excess. Downplaying the campaign as a “border war,” historians have omitted mention that it
had the strategic objective of compelling the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia; they also have glossed over the size and strength of the invasion force, saying that the “Chinese PLA border defense troops in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces” conducted the attacks. The Chinese version of history furthermore states that the war lasted from February 17, 1979 to March 16, 1979, making no mention of the battles and barrages of the 1980s that kept the region in turmoil for almost ten years. Even the name the Chinese coined to identify the war is misleading.

Western scholars have not been any more helpful than their Chinese colleagues. Marilyn B. Young, one of the most widely read American scholars of Vietnam’s wars, said the Chinese invasion force comprised of about 200,000 men and that it met a Vietnamese force of one regular division and about 100,000 regional and militia troops. She described the war as lasting sixteen days, from February 17, 1979 to March 5, 1979, and made no reference to the fighting after 1979. Although a weak connection between the battles on the northern border of Vietnam and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was identified, she did not explore the relationship in any detail.7

Questions and arguments

A careful reading of the major works in the field reveals a series of questions.

How can we best understand the Sino-Vietnamese violence of the 1970s and 1980s? The current literature never mentions that there was a “Third Indochina War.” These studies assert that there was simply a series of small-scale, disconnected attacks in northern Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. The Chinese fought a brief border war and the Vietnamese fought a series of “Dry-Season Offensives.” There was no connection between any of these events. In fact, the most recent scholarship on the subject claims the “border war” between China and Vietnam was more closely related to Sino-Soviet competition than it was to the events in Indochina.8 The most recent Chinese treatment says the Chinese incursions of February–March 1979 were just a border war; the authors make no connection with events in Cambodia or the relationship with the Soviet Union.9

What was the Chinese objective in the Third Indochina War? As mentioned above, recent Western and Chinese authors have different views. Elleman, cited above, claims that the hostilities were a part of the broader competition between the Chinese, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The Chinese claim the attacks responded to Vietnamese border provocations.

What were the facts of the war? Were the attacks just a few border guards engaging in a series of widely separated firefights or were there regular troops engaged in large-scale operations? Where were the battles? Did the Chinese focus their attacks on a few cities or did they attack all the provincial capitals they could reach? The Chinese claim the engagements were minor encounters in which Chinese border guards defeated Vietnamese troops. Western analysts say that as many as 200,000 PLA soldiers conducted the attacks. How can these views be reconciled?
How did the Chinese do? If they did well, why did they do well? Was the PLA in 1979 another of the many “Ever-Victorious Armies” found in Chinese history books? On the other hand, if the PLA did poorly, why did it do poorly?

This volume responds to these issues in a new way. In summary, the argument it presents can be outlined as follows.

The Sino-Vietnamese violence of the 1970s and 1980s is best understood as a Third Indochina War

It lasted from the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 to the Paris Peace Accords of 1991. The last military incidents occurred in the late 1980s. China, the Cambodian factions (communist and noncommunist), and Thailand were allied against the Vietnamese and another Cambodian faction. The Soviet Union supported the Vietnamese and the United States and ASEAN supported China and her allies. The Chinese 1979 incursion was a campaign in the broader war. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 narrate the events of this regional war.

During the Third Indochina War, the most important objective of China’s national military strategy was to induce the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia

This objective remained constant. From the Chinese point of view, the developments in Indochina were all closely connected. Events in Cambodia or Thailand drew a response from China. The Chinese coordinated their military actions to meet Vietnamese military threats against their Cambodian and Thai allies. Additionally, the Chinese national military strategy sought to draw Vietnamese forces away from Cambodia and make political points by military action. Chapter 6 examines this intricate relationship.

The facts of the war have been established in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6

Chapter 5 describes the 1979 campaign. Chapter 7 explores the military operations in the years that followed. Ultimately, a military campaign depends on the success or failure of the leaders and soldiers at the tactical level. In an attempt to inform the reader about the facts of the war at this level, Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 establish the duration and scope of the war. Chapter 5 provides a detailed examination of the Battle of Lang Son.

The PLA did not perform effectively during the campaigns and battles of the Third Indochina War

There were numerous problems of every type. To understand the source of these problems, the reader must be familiar with the ideas and institutions that made the PLA a Maoist army during these years. Chapter 2 outlines the Chinese polit-
Society, ideology, and military effectiveness

The Chinese invasion of Vietnam was in reality an enormous military undertaking. But whereas in 1950 and 1962 Chinese armies had surged over their United Nations and Indian enemies in unstoppable waves, this time the onrush was that of a rivulet. What had changed? If Maoist ideology had been the key to PLA success in earlier wars, why did it not inspire the same performance in this conflict?

The PLA’s actions in this, the Third Indochina War (1978–91), raise important questions about the relationship between war and society in late twentieth-century China. All societies that choose to engage in warfare to achieve political objectives must develop the institutions – armies – through which to pursue their goals, and these institutions in many ways resemble the societies that create them. Any study of society that presumes to be comprehensive must include an examination of that society’s wars and the armies engaged in and the strategies that informed those wars. Michael Howard observed, “to abstract war from the environment in which it is fought . . . is to ignore a dimension essential to the understanding . . . of the societies which fought them.”

Society shapes the tactics that armies employ, the way that they fight, and the way that they are organized, and the sum of the actions of soldiers on the battlefield dictates the success or failure of a strategy. This study examines the actions of Chinese soldiers in the Third Indochina War, analyzes their tactics, and shows the relationship of those tactics to the Chinese society of the era. Why did the PLA employ massed infantry attacks and direct artillery fire? The PLA had an extensive political work program that was the model of Maoist institutions. What was the impact of political work on the battlefield? The PLA took pride in its cadre system: why then did it run it down to the point that it took frantic efforts to resuscitate that system on the eve of the war? The answers to these questions lie in the way Chinese society shaped the PLA.

There also are important intervening variables between society and warfare. Although Mao Zedong had died in 1976, the policy of “politics in command” continued to define almost every aspect of Chinese society and had strong and clear influences on the way China shaped and used its military forces in 1979. As a result, the PLA exhibited all the strengths and weaknesses of the society from which it came. At the lowest level of the PLA, political officers used the political sayings of Mao to motivate conscripts. At the highest level, the *Selected Military Writings of Mao Zedong* influenced every operation and strategic plan. It was not until Deng Xiaoping fully assumed power in the early 1980s that
Chinese society and the PLA gradually began to dismantle the heavily politicized army and society that was Mao’s legacy. Arthur Waldron has called the period of heaviest Maoist influence on the Chinese army and society “the Maoist detour” on the road to a modern China. The Third Indochina War was the last mile on that detour.  

The questions of the effectiveness of the PLA are central to this study, and the evidence is that the resources that the Chinese army committed to the war against Vietnam were used neither effectively nor efficiently. At the simplest level, a military unit that is capable of taking a hill in one day when exercising a three-to-one numerical advantage over the hill’s defenders is more effective than a unit that requires a ratio of ten attackers to each defender. Military effectiveness, at this basic level of analysis, can be measured by focusing on three basic criteria. First, the degree to which each unit accomplished its assigned task: did the unit take the hill or not? Second, the success the unit had in gaining or holding ground, in terms of kilometers gained per day or the length of time that it held its ground against attack. Third, the number of troops that it took to achieve these results and the number of casualties sustained.

There are of course other ways to assess military effectiveness. Kenneth M. Pollack, for example, has defined it as “the ability of an armed service to prosecute military operations and employ weaponry in military operations.” This definition emphasizes the ability of people – soldiers – to perform their military duties and usefully informs Pollack’s assessment of the recent military history of the Arabs. The unavailability of essential information means that the same definition cannot be applied to Chinese military operations, however. The commonsense explanation of effectiveness must therefore here apply.

Leadership, courage, and training are at the heart of an army’s effectiveness. In addition to these, the Maoist PLA had a political motivation system – an ideology – and the institutions that made it effective in every unit down to the level of the newest conscript. In 1979, the Chinese view was that the PLA’s political work system made its soldiers more effective than those of its opponents. Ideology can be important to an army’s effectiveness. According to Omar Bartov, the ideology of the German army in World War II made it a strong and effective fighting force despite its weaknesses in materiel and planning. The PLA’s earlier history accords with this view of ideology as the secret weapon that can enable an army to overcome a stronger opponent, but its experience in the Third Indochina War demonstrates that the opposite can also be the case: ideology can weaken an army. When an army relies too heavily on ideology and forsakes materiel, tactical, leadership, and organizational innovation, it can become ineffective.

This volume attempts to demonstrate that Maoism made the PLA ineffective in 1979. The PLA pitted about 420,000 troops against 50,000–60,000 Vietnamese soldiers. In every area of operation, the PLA outnumbered the Vietnamese. The soldiers of the two armies were armed with similar weapons, yet the Chinese failed to accomplish their objectives in an effective manner.

The PLA ultimately was ineffective as a fighting force because after the early
1960s and until about 1991, it was not intended to be a fighting force. The 1979 PLA was designed to serve as a political model for the transformation of Chinese society, not as a tool of Chinese national strategy. Chinese society and its leaders had shaped the PLA as a political tool and then used it to refashion society. As a result, the PLA had distributed its political cadre throughout the country to create Maoist factories, Maoist farms, and Maoist culture groups. During the Third Indochina War, when it was called upon to perform on a modern battlefield, the PLA paid the price in chaos and casualties.

This study is not a history of Chinese military doctrine, foreign policy, international relations, or the intricacies of Sino-Vietnamese political affairs. Nor is it about generals, diplomats, and politburo members. This study is an analysis of China’s use of force in the Third Indochina War. It is about warfare. “Western” historians have largely ignored the military history of China, and this study is an attempt to revise current interpretations of the war while filling the gap in our understanding of the Chinese military past.

The chapter brings new sources to bear on the interpretation of Chinese and Vietnamese actions during the 1979 campaign in northern Vietnam and the remainder of the Third Indochina War. Earlier studies of the conflict have been based on newspaper reports and interviews with Chinese and Vietnamese politicians and diplomats. This study draws most of its information from the Chinese PLA documents. After the war, the PLA collected and published reports from the units involved in the campaign. Although not all units are represented, the General Political Department of the PLA nonetheless was able to publish 167 reports in two volumes. The reports cover the political cadres’ attempts to implement the “three basic principles of political work” (zhengzhi gongzuo sanda yuanze) and the reaction of the troops to their efforts. These reports, which were only authorized for distribution within the PLA to the regimental level, explain the way that the Chinese soldiers performed in combat. The Guangzhou Military Region Front Political Department Cadre Section also published seventy reports about the status of the cadre system during the campaign. These reports give a picture of the problems the cadre system faced in the 1979 battles along the border.

The Vietnamese contribution to this story is based on a wide variety of Vietnamese unit histories. Unlike the Chinese, the Vietnamese have published a large number of histories of the units involved in the conflict, providing a detailed picture of the battles and battlefield movements of both sides.

Both the Chinese and Vietnamese sources are full of political jargon and, particularly in the case of the Chinese sources, claim a series of victories where there may have been only starvation, death, and defeat. The Chinese sources furthermore have a weak chronological line: they were written in the first few months after the 1979 campaign and the authors typically sacrificed chronological narrative for an assessment of the things that went right and the things that went wrong. Part II of this study accordingly gives a narrative account of the incidents and Part III looks more closely at the things that the writers found significant.
Introduction

The Third Indochina War was the “Last Maoist War” because it marked the end of an era in which a set of almost religious ideas, Maoism, had shaped China’s society and army. This study attempts to show the battlefield implications of this situation and provides new information to fill some of the gaps in the record.
Part II

Background
The PLA and the armies of the Soviet Union, North Korea, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Republic of China all at one time or another have had a political work system (zhengzhi gongzuo). Unique among these, the PLA of 1979 was Maoist, basing its system on the precepts that Mao Zedong devised during the early years of the Chinese Civil War. The PLA’s strategic concepts, operational plans, and tactical schemes may have been similar to those of the other armies, but in the eyes of its leadership it had an edge on effectiveness gained through its political work. Where other armies had political work systems to ensure the reliability of their officers or to perform psychological operations against their opponents, only the PLA had a political work system that also provided a troop motivational program to enhance military effectiveness.

The PLA of 1979 had a singular set of organizational structures and doctrines that supported a core group of interlocking concepts and that supported the spread of these concepts, without challenge, as the PLA evolved. Western armies have not employed political work systems because they violate the military premise that armies and their leaders are apolitical and that soldiers are motivated by appeals to common sense and a basic hierarchy of needs. The Chinese political work system (zhengzhi gongzuo), in direct contrast, was intended to motivate the troops by giving them a set of ideals. It defined the relationship between the army and the people and urged the soldiers to behave properly toward civilians; it defined the relationship between the leaders and the led and helped to create a bond of comradely cooperation; and it defined the relationship between the army and the enemy. War is without exception a terrible affair, but the political work system sought to mitigate the bloodiness of war to achieve faster, more decisive results.

In the Maoist PLA, every position of responsibility, from squad leader to chief of the General Staff Department (GSD), was held by a Communist Party member, thereby ensuring that political work was the only motivational program in the PLA. This chapter identifies the components of this Maoist political work system and traces the events that created them. It also examines the ways in which the political work system and the PLA interacted with the Chinese society. By exploring the role of political work, it shows why the 1979 PLA was the “first among equals” of Maoist institutions.
Political work institutions

In 1979, the PLA political work system consisted of three interlocked sets of individuals and organizations: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committee system (dang weizhi), the political commissar system (zhengzhi weiyuan zhi), and the cadre (ganbu) system. These three systems shaped the way the PLA fought and the effectiveness of PLA forces on the battlefield.

The party committees, which varied in size by the size of the unit to which they were attached, conveyed guidance, directives, and orders to lower-level party committees and collected opinions, suggestions, and information for forwarding to higher-level committees. Committee members discussed matters of emerging concern and provided recommendations to commanders, political officers, and higher-level party committees. The party committee was the ultimate source of authority in the PLA on the party political line, direction, and policy, on the national constitution, and on discipline. It was the final arbiter on all military, political, logistic, and militia questions and was the overseer of party and military leadership assignments and of the ideological conditions in subordinate units. Party committees supervised discipline until at least the early 1980s and managed the cadre system and the Communist Youth League in all subordinate units.

Although there almost certainly were party committees in the general departments of PLA Headquarters, the highest level of party committee known to the public was the military region party committee, which reported to the Central Committee of the CCP. Each successive lower level of the PLA — military district, army, division, regiment, and battalion — had its own party committee. At the battalion level, this was the “basic level” party committee (jiceng dangwei). Below the battalion level, companies had a party branch (dang zhibu) and platoons and squads a party cell (xiaozu). Each cell, branch, and committee reported upward to the party body at the next level of command.

Party committees at the higher levels had between six and twelve full members but could increase membership if additional expertise was required. A typical party committee consisted of a unit political officer, unit commander, deputy political officers, deputy commanders, director of the unit political department, and unit chief of staff. The most senior political cadre typically served as the secretary of the unit party committee.

The party committees were important to military effectiveness because they controlled the incentives and disincentives that impacted on a soldier’s career and life. Duty performance that won party recognition could help a soldier climb the ladder of assignments in the PLA. Good duty performance could bring increased responsibilities, pay, and, most importantly, party membership. Poor performance could bring criticism and dangerous or boring assignments.

The party committee was extremely important to every cadre and conscript, but it was not a battlefield organization. Rather, it was represented on the battlefield by the political workers and the cadres, and it was these individuals who acted as “first-line” supervisors of the conscripts who fought on the hills and
The Chinese political work system

along the rivers of northern Vietnam. Every unit, service, and department in the Chinese army had an individual designated to handle political work. Broadly termed by Western scholars “political commissars,” these individuals in fact operated at four different levels of responsibility. The company political worker was known as a political instructor (zhengzhi zhidaoyuan) and the battalion worker as a battalion political instructor (zhengzhi jiaodaoyuan). At the regiment or higher level, the political officer was known as a political commissar (zhengzhi weiyuan). Every unit above the level of regiment additionally had a political department (zhengzhibu) managed by a director (zhengzhibu zhuren).6

As mentioned earlier, the political commissar system intersected with the party committee system. Political commissars and the directors of political departments served on the party committees, with the political commissar usually taking the most responsible post, that of secretary. The political commissars and political directors furthermore frequently served also on the party committee at the next level of command.7

The functions of the political work system were extensive, and on March 27, 1963, they were laid out in detail in “Regulations Governing Political Work in the PLA.”8 In addition to listing the main duties of the political commissar, the regulations listed eighteen principles to guide commissars in the conduct of their work (see Appendixes 1 and 2). It is noteworthy that the commissar was responsible not to the commander at his level, but to the next higher level of command; according to Article Two of the regulations governing the commissar’s work, “In the work of the party and in political work, he obeys the higher political commissar and political organ [for example, political department]; in military work he obeys the higher military commander, the political commissar, and the higher military organ [for example, the divisional headquarters].”9

The political commissar system was far more important to the motivation of the Chinese soldier in combat than was the political committee system, because the commissar had direct contact with the individual soldier through a wide variety of meetings, work conferences, educational programs, and leisure activities. Party committees could provide policy guidance for other committees and could discipline violators in a headquarters setting, but the political commissar exercised direct supervision over cadres and troops on the line. Perhaps most important, he furthermore exercised his authority without interference from the commander of the unit to which he was assigned, or from the party committee of that unit.

The third component of the political work system, the cadre (ganbu) system, provided the means by which the goals of the political work system and the military command system were conveyed to the individual soldier. Although the political commissar had direct access to the soldier, most commonly the commissars’ guidance was transmitted through the words and actions of the cadre.

A cadre can be defined as an individual who held authority over others, such as soldiers, by virtue of his or her membership in the CCP and of service in a leadership position. The cadre is not an “officer” in the Western sense of
being an individual entitled to exercise authority because he or she has been commissioned to do so by the state. PLA cadre work in 1979 was entirely dominated by the CCP’s Central Committee and its Military Affairs Committee. The PLA General Political Office, according to the Academy of Military Science, “directs the cadre work for the entire army” (“renmin jeifang jun zhengzhibu lingdao quan junde ganbu gongzuo”).

Cadres in the PLA served in technical, political, or leadership roles. Technical roles, including those such as meteorologist or radar technician, did not usually require leading soldiers and party participation, and therefore was not an absolute requirement for service. A cadre serving in a political role typically would spend most of his or her service in some part of the political commissar system and a cadre serving in a leadership role (but not a political leadership role) in positions of command or in the staff positions that directly supported the commander, such as intelligence staff officer in the GSD. It was the cadres on track for command positions who served as the leaders of the soldiers on the line. To make the concepts of political work effective and thereby to make the unit effective in combat, the command cadres had to share the motivational concepts of the political commissars and to motivate the troops to accomplish the goals of these concepts.

**Political work concepts**

The Chinese soldier seeking to understand the core concepts of Maoism, no less so than did the attentive Chinese citizen, faced what one scholar of Chinese affairs has called a “dizzying array of slogans.” This was particularly true in the case of Maoism in PLA political work. How does one evaluate a system that urged the conscript to emulate “five good soldiers” and to accomplish the “three major tasks” and that reduced its military doctrine to the “sixteen-character formula”?

Several interlocking sets of concepts gave shape and substance to the political work system. Although these concepts were presented as slogans, their importance, comprehensiveness, and endurance shows the degree to which they made Maoism the essence of the PLA’s political work. The four concepts that share the greatest degree of influence are “the three major tasks,” “the three major principles of political work,” “the three democracies,” and “the three rules of discipline and the eight points of attention.” In the late 1920s, Mao Zedong devised these concepts to define the functions of the PLA and its relationship to society, to define the nature of relationships within the army, and to define the PLA’s relationship with the enemy. They interconnect and overlap and therefore cannot be assessed in isolation. Together, they create the basis for political work and the essence of a Maoist army.

The “three major tasks” (san da renwu) are to fight, to raise money (later changed to “to produce”), and to do work with the masses. Mao originally defined the “three major tasks” as part of his attack on the CCP members who held a “purely military point of view,” saying:
they do not understand that the Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution. . . . [T]he Red Army should certainly not confine itself to fighting, . . . it should shoulder such important tasks as doing propaganda among the masses, organizing the masses, arming them, [and] helping them to establish revolutionary political power.¹⁴

(Jiang Siyin of the PLA Political Academy reports Mao on the first two major tasks as saying these were “to fight to exterminate the enemy and to strike the landlords to raise money” [“dazhang xiaomie diren, da tuhao chou kuanzi”]¹⁵)

The “three major principles of political work” (zhengzhi gongzuo sanda yuanze) are “unity of the officers and soldiers” (guan bing yizhi), “unity of the army and the people” (jun min yizhi), and “disintegrate the enemy” (wajie dijun). Mao explained these principles in an interview with British journalist James Bertram on October 25, 1937:

Another highly significant and distinctive feature of the Eighth Route Army is its political work, which is guided by three basic principles. First, the principle of unity between officers and men, which means eradicating feudal practices in the army, prohibiting beating and abuse, building up a conscious discipline and sharing weal and woe – as a result of which the entire army is closely united. Second, the principle of unity between the army and the people, which means maintaining a discipline that forbids the slightest violation of the people’s interests, conducting propaganda among the masses, organizing and arming them, lightening their financial burdens, and suppressing the traitors and collaborators who do harm to the army and the people – as a result of which the army is closely united with the people and welcomed everywhere. Third is the principle of disintegrating the enemy troops and giving lenient treatment to prisoners of war. Our victory depends not only upon our military operations but also upon the disintegration of the enemy troops.¹⁶

The Bertram interview was the first Western notice of the “three major principles of political work,” but modern Chinese scholars have traced these principles to the PLA’s formative years between the San Wan Reorganization (san wan gaibien) in September 1927 and the Gutian Congress Resolutions (gutian huiyi jueyi) of December 1929. Wang Shuiquan and Song Baoheng, in their article on the “three major principles” in the Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu, say “The Gutian Congress Resolutions made progress in establishing a new form of relationship between officers and men and between the army and the people. The Congress also corrected the policy of leniency towards prisoners” (“Gutian huiyi jueyi jin yi bu quelile ren min budui xinxingde guan bing guanxi, junmin guanxi he zhengquede fulu zhengce”).¹⁷ Xiao Xiufu, writing in the Academy of Military Science’s Chinese Encyclopedia of Military Affairs, states, “The Gutian
Congress Resolution established a new form for the relationships between officers and men and the army and the people, and correctly handled the policy for treating enemy prisoners of war.”

The concept of “democracy in three main fields” (san da minzhu) is explained by Mao in his essay “The Struggle in the Jinggan Mountains” ("Jinggangshande Douzheng"), which addressed the reasons that the small communist army was able to survive and attract recruits in the poor mountainous Hunan–Jiangxi border region. In this essay, Mao explained that both party work and democracy were important in the army:

Officers do not beat the men; officers and men receive equal treatment; soldiers are free to hold meetings and speak out; trivial formalities have been done away with; and accounts are open for all to inspect. The soldiers handle the mess arrangements and out of the daily five cents for cooking oil, salt, firewood, and vegetables they can even save a little for pocket money, amounting to roughly six or seven coppers per person per day. All this gives great satisfaction to the soldiers. The newly captured soldiers in particular feel that our army and the Guomindang army are worlds apart. The very soldiers who had no courage in the White army yesterday are very brave in the Red army today; such is the effect of democracy. Democracy in our army is an important weapon for undermining the feudal mercenary army.

Mao later reformulated this description, and by 1948 he was calling for political democracy, economic democracy, and military democracy. Through the pursuit of “political democracy” – monitoring the class origins, duty performance, and willingness to fight of the soldiers and cadres – he sought to achieve a high degree of unity. His concept of political democracy also included organizational consolidation, ideological education, and rectification of the individual’s work style. The achievement of economic democracy would mean that representatives elected by the troops could “assist” the unit chain of command in managing unit supplies and foodstuffs. Military democracy described a process for drawing the troops into the discussion of tactical options. Mao felt meetings should be held to elicit the views of the soldier on the entire range of combat missions.

The fourth key concept of PLA political work in 1979 was the “three main rules of discipline and the eight points of attention” (san da jilu ba xiang zhuyi). The “three–eight formula” was an attempt to provide simple guidance for the fighters to use as a guide to their relationships with people in the area of operations. The “three–eight formula” applied to friendly and enemy civilians, and the political workers hoped it might lead to converting enemies into friends.

The “three major tasks” defined the nature of the PLA as a fighting force, a production force, and a political force. The PLA’s approach to fighting was in fact as much political as it was military: its ideal campaign was one in which the enemy collapsed because mass mobilization and disintegration operations had so
weakened the foe that little military effort needed to be expended. During the civil war, this ideal had on occasion been realized. The PLA had shown that it was capable of fighting (in military and political terms), had produced enough of its own rations not to be a burden, and had ensured that it was viewed favorably by the masses.

Where the “three major tasks” established the type of army the PLA was to become, the “three basic principles” clarified the way it was to accomplish these tasks. The “three democracies” and the “three–eight formula” were subordinate to the “three basic principles”: the “three democracies” merely defined the way the egalitarian relationship could be attained and the “three–eight formula” simply was a tool for indoctrinating soldiers on the concrete acts that they needed to perform to gain the support of the population. The references within the “three–eight formula” that can be likened to the broader themes of the “three basic principles” are minor. For example, the injunction “Obey all orders!” is a proposition in the dialogue between the leaders and the led. It is not very “democratic,” but it is good advice for a young soldier. The proposition “Do not ill-treat captives” is a lesser-included idea of the concept of disintegration operations.

The evolution of the Maoist PLA

The PLA was established as a response to the military failures of the Nanchang uprising on August 1, 1927, and the Autumn Harvest uprisings that followed.22 The uprisings were failures, and the communist leaders needed to undertake drastic measures to create a more effective military force. Mao and his associates made the first changes in the course of the San Wan Reorganization (sanwan gaibien) in the fall of 1927, and by December 1927 the fundamental missions of the new army had been defined. Mao, acting against party guidance, organized an army that was a fighting force, a working force, and a political force, as embodied in the concept of the “three major tasks.”23 He also established a system of political commissars and party committees at all levels of military command to draw together soldiers and officers in a close bond of comradeship. Furthering the pursuit of this goal, he eliminated the pay and ration differentials that existed between officers and men. The Guomindang system of political directors (commissars) and political departments was abandoned, with Mao’s local party committee instead guiding the new commissars and committees.

Mao’s reforms were not well received by his opponents, and the two sides contended over the idea for six months, with Mao actually conceding to the CCP Politburo in March 1928 that the commissar system be disbanded. A lenient policy toward prisoners of war and the use of the “three–eight formula” for troop education were however adopted at the Maoping Conference.24 At the Gutian Conference in December 1929, Mao reversed himself. He called for the re-establishment of a system of political commissars with a clear chain of command, at the top of which he demanded should be a restored
political department. The political department would report to the Party Front Committee, the control of which Mao would retain. The soldier’s soviets were to be scrapped, replaced by a party cell in each squad or platoon, a party branch in each company, and party committees at every level above the company. These party cells and committees were to be guided by the precepts of the “three democracies” and charged to make these precepts real in the relationships between the officers and soldiers. Like the commissars, the committees would report to Mao’s Party Front Committee. Since the army was operating in small, separated units at the time, the control at all levels of the political commissar system would guard against excesses and would bring the energy of party activists to bear on any motivational problems.

Mao had begun also to teach the need to develop better relationships between soldiers and cadres and between the army and the people. In the PLA’s straitened circumstances, conventional military operations were impossible, leaving guerrilla operations as the most prudent military option. Such operations would require more egalitarian relationships within units and excellent relations with local people. The lenient policy toward prisoners that had been adopted at the Maoping Conference was bringing volunteers to the communist cause, and was helping small guerrilla bands grow into larger forces capable of more conventional operations.

By the end of the Gutian Conference, all the elements were in place to make the “three basic principles of political work” a reality. The components of the PLA’s political work system finally were firmly established in October 1930, with the publication of the draft “PLA Regulations on Political Work” (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Tiaoli). These regulations reorganized the political work structure and the political work concepts in a manner consistent with the resolution of the Gutian Conference. Slots were established for political cadres at all levels of command from the company up to the army, a General Political Department was established to control the commissar system, and the system of party branches and committees was introduced at all levels of command. By February 1931, the new system was in place. In 1932, a new draft of the regulations extended the political work system to military districts, schools, hospitals, and all other military organs, units, and establishments. Mao’s personal power ebbed and flowed during the 1930s – the return of the “twenty-eight Bolsheviks” and other conflicts within the CCP in particular shaped the degree to which he influenced the PLA – but the foundation of the political work system had been laid and could not now be destroyed.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, the political work regulations, and the activities they were intended to guide, were expanding to match the growth of the PLA armies. Their successes notwithstanding, in 1938, the communists took the opportunity to publish political work regulations to reinforce the understanding of the political work system among soldiers of both political persuasions (CCP and Guomindang). In 1942, the regulations of the Eighteenth Group Army (Di Shi Ba Jituan Jun), which was formed when the Eighth Route Army (Ba Lu Jun) of the Chinese Communist Army was merged into the army that was organ-
ized as a result of the 1937 United Front, were reissued. Soldiers and cadres were reminded that the “three basic principles of political work” — unity of officers and soldiers, unity of the army and the people, and “disintegrate the enemy” — were key principles of war in their battle against the Japanese. A fourth principle, “unite with friendly armies” (*tuanjie you jun*), had a short but fashionable run.

**Lessons learned in the war against Japan**

During the early 1940s, while the communist forces were based in Yanan, a series of events took place that strengthened the PLA’s political work system and tested it against a foreign enemy.

In the spring of 1939, Mao Zedong had begun to call for party members and soldiers to spend more time on agricultural work, in an effort to make the communist base more self-sufficient. More importantly, this program enabled officials to improve their attitudes and leadership style by working with peasants and other manual laborers. On February 10, 1940, the Central Military Commission published a directive “Concerning the Development of the Production Movement” (“*Guanyu Fazhan Shengchan Yundong De Zhihui*”) that called for army units to participate in the Great Production Movement (*Da Shengchan Yundong*). The movement’s theme was that the PLA was more than a fighting force: it also was a production force, and that production was to be done for more than material objectives. The PLA was to develop a “close relationship with the people” (*miqie jun min guanxi*) by “uniting labor and military work, uniting the army and the people” (*lao wu jiehe, jun min jiehe*).31

In November 1942, another movement, the “respect the cadre and cherish the soldiers” movement (*zun gan ai bing*), was initiated in response to a directive in which army leaders called for the consolidation of military political work (*guanyu gonggu budui zhengzhi gongzuode zhishi*). Soldiers at all levels of responsibility were taught that the relationship between the leaders and the led had to be a close one if the army was to be effective. Tan Zheng, political commissar of the Northwest base area, observed in April 1944 that Mao intended for the troops to treat the enemy in a strong, forceful manner (*ba dao*) while treating comrades, soldiers, civilians, and friends in a humble and polite, “kingly” manner (*wang dao*).32 The campaign appears to have succeeded, but the emphasis on developing better relations between cadres and soldiers continued. Late in 1944, as reported by Jiang Siyin, Mao wrote that one of the major tasks for 1945 of the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army33 would be to unify the cadre and the soldiers: “Unity within the forces is very important. Our Eighth Route Army and New Fourth Army must always rely on the unity of officers and soldiers.”34

In October 1943, movements were launched to “support the government and cherish the people” (*yong zheng ai min*) and “support the army and give preferential treatment to the families of the soldiers fighting the Japanese” (*yong jun you kang*). As Mao envisioned the campaign:
the troops should publicly renew their pledge to support the government and cherish the people, hold meetings for self-criticism, arrange get-togethers with the local people, and apologize and give compensation for any past infringements upon the interests of the masses. . . . The masses on their side should publicly renew their pledge to support the army and give preferential treatment to the families of the soldiers fighting the Japanese.\textsuperscript{35}

This movement, perhaps more than most, helped develop unity between the army and the people.\textsuperscript{36}

In the late 1930s, the campaign to “disintegrate the enemy” (\textit{wajie dijun}) assumed a new shape. Where the original formulation of disintegration operations was based on Chinese armies fighting Chinese armies, the communists now were fighting an invading foreign army. That said, from an ideological point of view, \textit{wajie dijun} was a universal principle. It could be used against any opponent.

The first step in the new disintegration campaign was to define the type of war that was to be fought. By 1939, the Japanese already had 1,240,000 troops in China.\textsuperscript{37} These troops could be divided into two broad categories: members of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and the Chinese soldiers of local governments that had been established in Japanese-occupied areas. The Chinese communists referred to the IJA troops as “Japanese bandits” (\textit{ri kou}) and the Chinese troops as “puppet troops” (\textit{wei jun}). The communists designed their operations to exploit the ethnic differences of their opponents, defining the war as a “battle of the races” (\textit{minzu zuozhan}).\textsuperscript{38} To the communists, the enemy’s political center of gravity was its puppet army. While the PLA continued to pursue a war of attrition against the IJA, it turned its political attention to the Chinese soldiers in the puppet armies. If they could be made to surrender, flee, or perform their duties poorly, the PLA stood to gain.

New organizations were needed for the campaign. In the autumn of 1937, the CCP central leadership had directed the General Political Department to establish organizations to manage the political war. The party center already had established an “enemy area work committee” (\textit{diqu gongzuo weiyuanhui}); now the GPD established an “enemy work branch” (\textit{di gong ke}),\textsuperscript{39} and in October, the Political Department of the Eighth Route Army established its own “enemy work bureau” (\textit{di gong bu}). Each division of the Eighth Route Army had an enemy work bureau and each brigade an enemy work branch; regiments set up an “enemy work section” (\textit{di gong gu}) and companies organized “enemy work groups” (\textit{di gong xiao zu}). The New Fourth Army set up a similar set of organizations. The higher levels of command conducted training for the soldiers and cadres of these new groups, and the education of the line troops followed a short time later. Cadres and soldiers began to study Japanese phrases: at the company level – the level most likely to make contact with the enemy – the enemy work group personnel were required to know eighteen Japanese phrases and one Japanese song.\textsuperscript{40}

The political offensive was carried to the enemy by the conventional media,
The Chinese political work system

by word of mouth, and by special teams known as “armed work teams” (wu gong du). These teams undertook military, political, economic, and cultural work among the puppet troops and among Chinese civilians in the Japanese-occupied areas. They passed the message that any Chinese who worked for the Japanese were performing shameful and treasonous acts. They explained the policy of leniency toward prisoners and they explained the dangers of continuing to work for the Japanese. Where they found individuals who were willing to help organize resistance cells within the puppet units, the armed work teams provided training. They also conducted small-scale attacks.

It is difficult to say how successful were these disintegration campaigns. By the end of the war, the Chinese communists claim to have inflicted 527,422 casualties of all types on the IJA forces. Of this number, 520,463 soldiers were killed, 6,213 were taken prisoner, and 746 “crossed over” (tou cheng). The communists claim also to have inflicted 1,186,695 casualties on the Chinese puppet forces: killing 490,130 puppet troops, capturing 512,933, and accepting 183,632 tou cheng. By comparison, the PLA claims to have lost 160,000 soldiers killed in action, 87,000 missing, 290,000 wounded, and 46,000 soldiers taken prisoner. In 1945, the IJA had 2,110,000 troops deployed in China against the PLA’s 1,318,294.

The large numbers of puppet prisoners and “line-crossers” is a strong indication that there was among the puppet soldiers a belief that they would be treated humanely were they to surrender themselves to the PLA. This proposition cannot be confirmed from the statistics alone, but insofar as the data are reliable, it may be concluded that wajie dijun was effective.

The political work system under review

In July 1942, the CCP launched a “rectification of work styles campaign” (cheng feng yundong) to correct flaws in the leadership techniques of cadres and party members. With the PLA regrouping following its earlier infighting and Mao moving back to a position of dominance in the party and army, it was thought essential to purify the party and army of divergent views. The rectification campaign manipulated the rank and file to criticize divergent views and individuals against a standard set by Mao himself.

The campaign led to a renewed emphasis on ideological leadership in all aspects of military work, a strengthening of ties with the people, and an expansion of the use in the army of “democratic work styles” (minzhu zuofeng) and self-criticism. This emphasis on more egalitarian work styles was made in accordance with the PLA’s “three basic principles of political work.” Yu Yongbo pointed out that the principles assumed a renewed importance during this period.

By the time the Shaanxi–Gansu–Ningxia Border Area Senior Cadres Meeting (Yi Cheng Shan Gan Ning Bian Gu Gao Gan Hui) opened on October 19, 1942, the PLA had been in the Yanan area for six years. Those six years on the strategic defensive had taught the PLA’s leaders a great deal about the military and
political aspects of campaigning, and they commissioned Tan Zheng, the political commissar for the Northwest area, to prepare a report to summarize the successes and failures of PLA political work since the Gutian resolutions. Tan presented his report on April 11, 1944.

The report outlined the problems the party and army had faced in the fourteen years since Gutian. Warlordism (jun fa zhuyi), bureaucratic competition (benwei zhuyi), and a “mountain-top mentality” (shan tou zhuyi) had tried both the PLA and the party, Tan said. The work styles of many cadres furthermore had been marked by formalism (xingshi zhuyi), egalitarianism (pingjun zhuyi), isolationism (guli zhuyi), and empty calls instead of action (jiu shi zhong haozhao bu zhong zuzhi). The solution to these problems, according to Tan, was to create unity between the soldiers and the people, between the cadres and the troops, and between the government and the army. He recommended also that unity be sought with friendly forces and that campaigns continue to be undertaken to proselytize the enemy. Tan’s report, in essence, was a rededication of the PLA to its “three basic principles.”

The question of professionalism

On October 1, 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established, and the Workers and Peasants Red Army became the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. The PLA continued to maintain its political work system, but the final stages of the civil war, the Korean War that followed, and the contest along the Taiwan Strait made greater military than political demands. The PLA’s political work system remained its principal motivational tool, but professionalism, embodied in new divisions of authority and responsibility, was spreading. Their losses in the Korean War gave Chinese military leaders pause for thought. Perhaps, professional expertise was more important on the modern battlefield than political motivation?

Developments during the late 1940s and 1950s shaped the PLA in new ways. In the late 1940s, a series of initiatives had been launched to renew the themes of the “three basic principles,” but the PLA of the late 1940s was an institution in flux. Large numbers of cadres and troops were being lost to combat and disease, and equally large numbers of soldiers were being drafted or incorporated into the PLA’s units from nationalist units that had been defeated or had fallen apart. New cadres had to be trained and new conscripts indoctrinated. To meet this challenge, a movement was launched in 1945 to strengthen the party branch system in PLA companies, and in January 1948, a movement was inaugurated to promote the “three democracies”; also in January 1948, a conference was held to assess the policy of leniency toward enemy troops. On the eve of the founding of the PRC, on September 22, 1949, the “three main rules of discipline and eight points of attention” had been reiterated for mass study.

The rising tide of professionalism in the late 1940s and early 1950s saw a series of new regulations promulgated to regulate the political work system. In December 1949, the General Political Department published a regulation on the
work of party committees at all levels (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Dang Weiyuan Hui Tiaoli), a regulation dealing with the work done by the party branches (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Liandui Zhibu Gongzuo Tiaoli), and other guidance for the system. In April 1954, a new set of political work regulations (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Tiaoli) was published. A total of nineteen regulations together restated the form and functions of the PLA’s political work system.55

In 1954, new situations arose to further challenge the renewal of the PLA’s political work system. In September, Peng Dehuai was recalled from Korea to serve as the first Defense Minister of the PRC. The position had not existed prior to the establishment of the PRC, and in the years from 1949 to 1954 the Party Military Affairs Commission (MAC), through a GSD that had been established in 1949, had directed the PLA. The GSD had been directed by Xu Xiangqian, a college graduate and graduate of the Guomindang Whampoa Military Academy, with Nie Rongzhen as deputy. Nie had spent a year in Moscow studying military science. The most influential members of the MAC were Ye Jianying, Zhu De, and Peng Dehuai. Ye was a graduate of the Yunnan Military Academy and had spent a year studying military science in Moscow. Zhu also was a graduate of Yunnan and had studied military affairs in Germany. Peng, while he had never attended a military academy or studied military affairs overseas, had commanded at every level of the PLA. His most recent command, the Chinese People’s Volunteers in Korea, had provided an education of the highest intensity in the ways of modern warfare. Harlan Jencks, who has written extensively on the expansion of professionalism in the PLA, terms these men “professionally and technically oriented officers.”56

The rise of Peng and this small group of leaders to the highest military positions culminated in a far-reaching attack on the political work system of the PLA. In 1955, the new leaders divided the cadre into professional branches and assigned ranks, and they established a system of reserves. “Political quality and professional ability” became the new criteria for promotion: the CCP, the MAC, and the GPD lost their say, with new regulations stipulating that commanders, not commissars, had the final authority in matters of promotion – including the promotion of commissars. Salary grades were formally established. Since this was the time of China’s closest alliance with the Soviet Union, the model of the Soviet army was carefully studied, and, where appropriate, adapted to the needs of the PLA.57

These changes did not please Mao Zedong. On September 29, 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, Mao called for a campaign to “make everyone a soldier” (quan min jie bing).58 The campaign consisted of propaganda and basic military training for residents of the newly formed communes and urban work units. The propaganda extolled the virtues of defending the motherland, and the Communist Party and the military training gave each trainee the basic military skills needed to defend his or her work unit from external threats. The movement to make everyone a soldier used PLA soldiers, time, and equipment, but the militia units that were created were under local party control. Although Peng
and the other modernizers wanted to build more regular formations, they found themselves instead enlarging the militia, which was under party control and command.59 It was not lost on anyone that the militia was a potential guerrilla force: Mao had struck the first blow in his battle to reassert the primacy of the political work system, which matched well with the guerrilla military culture, over a professional military ethos and conventional military modernization.

The return of political work

In August 1959, at a series of plenary meetings in Lushan, Jiangxi province, Peng Dehuai was criticized and removed from his party and from the state post of Defense Minister. At one of the early meetings, Peng had criticized Mao’s leadership and the economic policies that had led to the disastrous Great Leap Forward of 1956–58. Although Peng’s criticism dealt with economic and political matters, there was a clear military subtext. Lin Biao, who was far from a disinterested observer, said later that Peng had resisted party control of the PLA. Peng additionally had questioned Mao’s theories of guerrilla warfare, had opposed using the PLA as agricultural labor, and had resisted the creation of the militia through the “everyone a soldier” movement.60

In September 1959, Lin Biao replaced Peng as Defense Minister, and within a year, the PLA returned to the strong political work system of its guerrilla army roots. Lin provided clear guidance to the army that a reinforced political work system was the way of the future. In October 1960, the CCP held an enlarged meeting of the MAC at which Lin presented a draft resolution that called for a strengthening of political and ideological work in the PLA. The resolution was passed and distributed to PLA units on December 21, 1960.61

Lin’s “Resolution on Strengthening Political and Ideological Work in the Army” established guidelines for political work that remained current from the early 1960s to at least the end of the 1980s. Lin’s guidelines were embodied in a set of regulations governing political work in the PLA that was issued on March 27, 1963. These regulations were amended slightly in July 1978 and again in December 1983, but their essence throughout remained that of the 1963 regulations.62

Lin’s “Resolution” returned the PLA to its Maoist course by restoring political work to the position of primacy it had held before Peng Dehuai’s reforms. His guidance called for the army to pursue the “three democracies” (san da minzhu)63 and to behave in accordance with the “three–eight” work style.64 The “three basic principles of political work,” particularly the principles defining the relationship between officers and soldiers and between the army and the masses, were reemphasized. (Since the resolution dealt with the internal political work of the PLA, the third principle, wajie dijun, was not mentioned.65) The PLA was reminded that it was a political force, a fighting force, and a production force (san da renwu).66 The cadre system was thoroughly politicized by new checks on promotion and assignment for cadres who did not meet the required degree of ideological purity.67
If Lin’s resolution had stopped here, it would have simply returned PLA political work to the state it was in before the 1954 appointment of Peng Dehuai to the post of Defense Minister. But Lin did not stop. He made political work more “Maoist” by adding several measures of his own, notably by writing out Tan Zheng from the history of the PLA by substituting Mao’s name for Tan’s. More important, however, he moved the exaltation of Mao into the forefront of PLA political discourse. He proposed a new slogan, the “four relationships” (sige guanxi), to properly guide the PLA. Finally, his “Resolution on Strengthening Political and Ideological Work in the Army” moved the PLA political work system into the party committee work of the civilian world. The October 20, 1960, letter of transmittal from the MAC of the CCP said the resolution “. . . is useful to the party organizations, government organs, schools, and enterprises at various levels, and accordingly should be distributed to organizations of the local committee level and above for their reference.”

In the years that followed, the PLA was involved in a number of movements and campaigns that made it a more important part of Chinese society. In 1961, the first People’s Armed Forces Departments (PAFD) (renmin wuzhuangbu) were established in the communes and industrial units. The PAFD had been utilized as early July 1928 to conduct the conscription program in base areas, but in 1961, it had a new mission: to conduct routine military tasks and to serve Mao and Lin by teaching Maoist political themes to the masses.

Three campaigns in the early 1960s indicated the degree to which the PLA had become the “first among equals” of the Maoist world. The first two of these started out within the military and spread to Chinese society. The third, the “Learn from the PLA” campaign, spread the lessons of the army’s political work throughout the society. First, in early 1963, the PLA launched the “Learn from Lei Feng” campaign, which was designed to improve the work style of PLA cadres and troops by asking them to emulate the deeds of a young PLA soldier, Lei Feng, who had led a life of simple, hard work and who ultimately gave his life to save a poor peasant. The Lei Feng campaign led to a campaign calling on PLA cadres and conscripts to emulate the lives of the “Good Eighth Company of Nanjing Road.” The “Maoist” qualities of Lei Feng’s life were found also in the collective character of the unit: “Their concern is not individual interests . . . but the long-range interests of the people. . . . Like Lei, the soldiers of the company were hard-working and frugal, self-denying, and loyal to duty.” Finally, on February 1, 1964, Mao launched the national “Learn from the PLA” campaign. The purpose of the campaign was “to turn all employees and workers . . . into a revolutionary modern army so that they may prevent the inroad of bourgeois ideas and the influence of modern revisionism, [and so that they may] be completely revolutionary and willing to carry out the revolution to the end.”

According to Ellis Joffe, the “Learn from the PLA” campaign was significant because the PLA actively exhibited itself as the model for the political work organization and process and actively worked to establish political work organs and roles in government and economic units. The PLA helped to establish political departments in government ministries, and these ministries quickly
ordered lower-level echelons to set up similar departments. Cadres from all levels were sent to the PLA for training, and demobilized PLA cadres were sent to the government and economic units as leaders and advisers. The PLA cadres were officially intended to supplement party political workers, but the size and strength of the shift made it clear that the Maoist revolutionary leadership of the army now dominated the situation.75

The PLA subsequently was an active force in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) (wuchan jieji wenhua da geming) that held sway from 1965 to 1975. The effects of the GPCR on the PLA, in reciprocation, were evident from the end of the GPCR until the early 1980s. The PLA entered the GPCR in good shape. Its political work system was strong, and it was actively expanding its role as the leading institution in China’s Maoist society. It also had proven itself to be a formidable fighting force, in the civil war, in Korea, in the Taiwan Straits, and in the Himalayas. Modernization of the PLA’s equipment may have fallen behind the pace of military modernization elsewhere, but its leaders believed that the revival of strong, universal political work as a motivational program compensated for any equipment deficiencies.

The almost fifteen years between the outbreak of the GPCR in 1965 and the start of the war with Vietnam in 1979 represented a long period in which political work was the highest priority of the PLA. Except for a small-scale operation to seize the Paracel Islands from the South Vietnamese government in January 1974 and small-unit exchanges along the border with the Soviet Union in March 1969, the PLA performed its political work almost to the exclusion of its military function. As a result, it grew weaker militarily.

**The military decline of the PLA**

PLA weakness grew from three areas of activity: the operational demands placed on it by the GPCR, the requirements of its production mission, and the impact of the bitter politics of the GPCR.

When the PLA was called into the GPCR to support the “left” and, later, to stop the chaos that became widespread by the summer of 1967, it was forced to make numerous large-scale unit deployments. Harvey W. Nelsen has identified fourteen major deployments by the thirty armies (jun) of the PLA during the GPCR, the longest of which was the transfer of the 50th Army from the Korea–China border to Sichuan, a distance of about 2,000 kilometers.76 Fourteen units on major deployment means that 46.6 percent of the PLA’s major combat units were neither training nor maintaining equipment for military missions.77 Nelsen additionally identified eight armies, representing another 26.6 percent of the PLA, which were deployed near their bases to curb “Red Guard” activities. If this is the case, 73.2 percent of the PLA’s units were at this time engaged in activities that were of little or no military benefit.78

Furthermore, in eleven of China’s twenty-seven provincial military districts, main force troops were called upon to seize power, oust the old military district leaders, and establish a new slate of leaders. Between February 1967 and Septem-
ber 1968, the PLA was the major participant in the movement to establish Revolutionary Committees in all of China’s provinces and cities. The dismantling of the Revolutionary Committees subsequently took more than ten years, and it was not until the after the death of Mao that the committees were gradually closed and power returned to party and state officials. 79 From a military point of view, this in its turn meant endless patrols for the PLA, guard duty, work details, and educational and training work. These activities left little time for training, maintenance, and the host of things it takes to make a unit ready for combat. Only eight armies, most of them based in the Shenyang or Beijing Military Regions along the Sino-Soviet border or near Taiwan, were not involved in the GPCR and, presumably, continued to conduct military training and operations.

Although the evidence is largely circumstantial, the production mission of the PLA also appears to have grown more important during the GPCR. The PLA, as the leader of the Revolutionary Committees, was responsible for supplying food and supplies for large parts of the population. This mission had to be performed in a nation whose economy was in a parlous state due to failed economic policies and the virtual civil war of the GPCR. Railroads had been cut, bridges barricaded and closed, and vehicles run down from constant use or parked for lack of fuel, lubricants, and parts. In some communes and enterprises, political conflicts and movements had interrupted work. As a result, the PLA had to police the economic activities of Chinese society as much as it was policing political activity.

The chaotic situation in the economy had another implication for the welfare of the PLA troops and their dependents. The PLA performed its production mission by raising its own crops and making its own small household items. Although much of the labor for these activities came from PLA dependents, a large portion also came in the form of the soldiers themselves. It was not unusual for a foreign visitor to see PLA troops tending the fields, and they could also be seen working, for example, in PLA canning factories. 80 These activities were of great importance during the GPCR because the civilian economy was in disarray and the PLA had to work harder to support itself and thus ease the pressure on the civilian economy. At the same time, however, Zhou Enlai told Edgar Snow that two million PLA men were participating in the work of restoring stability. 81 If this is true, and it is entirely plausible that it is, it means that about two-thirds of China’s 3.25 million ground troops were engaged in activities that precluded them from achieving self-sufficiency in provisions. In other words, one-third of the troops were supporting the other two-thirds. 82

Finally, the bitter politics of the GPCR also had an impact on PLA readiness. At the highest levels, the Chinese party-state was still trying to recover from the trauma of the GPCR. Lin Biao, who had taught the PLA how to fight in the civil war and how to politic in the 1960s, had died in mysterious circumstances. Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Mao Zedong, a trinity of men who were always respected in the PLA, died in 1976. But the succession of leaders in the party, the state, and military was not established, and the lack of clarity in those areas meant that new initiatives were viewed suspiciously.
After 1976, there was an extensive series of personnel reassignments, and PLA units that had been deployed piecemeal needed reconstitution. The political work system had been forced to motivate soldiers with what had become conflicting guidance and weak argument. Political cadres who had fallen on the wrong side of a GPCR political movement had been persecuted and removed from their posts, and new political workers learned that caution was the wisest course. The General Political Department of the PLA was purged because, by the end of the GPCR, many viewed it as an ally of the extreme left.

**Political work in the PAVN**

The troops of the 3rd Division of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) that waited in their bunkers and trenches in the hills near Friendship Pass in the hours before dawn on February 17, 1979, also were members of a “political” army, but it was not a Maoist army.

Like the PLA, the PAVN had a divided leadership system: commanders led their units in the performance of their military missions while political commissars monitored loyalty, reviewed operational orders, conducted political warfare, and motivated the troops. The PAVN had a comprehensive set of party committees and political departments that was similar to that of the PLA. It also had a set of concepts for guiding political work among its own troops, among the local population, and for attacking the enemy.

Here the similarity with the PLA ended. The PAVN political work system had been tempered by almost thirty years of warfare against some of the most formidable armies in the world. The PLA, in contrast, had not seen action against a foreign enemy since the war with India in 1962. Since that time, the PLA political work system had grown more Maoist, more extensive, and, if it is possible, more ideological. The PLA political cadre and its political work emerged from the GPCR stronger and even more widespread than before, with the PLA’s political work system grafted on to most other institutions of Chinese society, but the Maoist belief that men were always and in every way more powerful than machines and knowledge had not been tested in fire. The PAVN’s political work system, in contrast, had been recently and frequently tested in battle, and its ideological component and organizational arrangements were growing weaker. The divided leadership system was becoming obsolete for a modern army that faced strong foreign opponents, and where, when it was expedient to do so, commanders commonly ignored commissars and party committees. The PAVN had learned some costly lessons. On February 17, 1979, the PLA was about to learn the same lessons. 83
Part III

Narrative
3  Hanoi and Beijing on the road to war

On February 16, 1979, the US President Jimmy Carter called his National Security Council together to discuss the Chinese build-up along the Sino-Vietnamese border. The meeting lasted forty-five minutes. The Vice President, the National Security Adviser, the Secretary of State, the Director of Central Intelligence, and the Deputy Secretary of Defense assessed the situation and explored the courses of action available to the US Government. Toward the end of the meeting, President Carter observed that the American leadership had been watching the situation develop “since the first Kampuchea–Vietnam clash.” It could only continue to do so. Despite its recent history of engagement in the region, this time Washington was a mere witness to the coming collision, rather than an active participant with the means and motivation to influence its outcome.

The course toward war had been defined in the last stages of the American War in Vietnam, as Beijing, Hanoi, Washington, and Moscow had drawn their lines in the sand and forged alliances of convenience. Underlining those alliances had been significant contributions of resources, money, and arms, and these were now fueling the Third Indochina War.

The sequence of events that led to the Chinese invasion had started in the mid-1970s, when Cambodia began a series of aggressive actions against Vietnamese towns and cities along the Cambodia–Vietnam border. The Cambodian leadership sought to blunt Vietnamese expansionism, preempt Hanoi’s effort to exert influence over Phnom Penh, and reclaim soil that, in the Cambodian view of history, properly belonged in the hands of the Khmer. In response to this aggression, in December 1978, the Vietnamese invaded and occupied most of Cambodia, aiming to overthrow the Pol Pot government and replace it with a regime that would be more amenable to Vietnamese interests. China responded rapidly in defense of its Cambodian ally, attacking northern Vietnam in February 1979. Its goals were to force the Vietnamese to abandon their occupation of Cambodia and to restore the displaced Cambodian leadership.

Three factors led to the Chinese attack. First was Vietnam’s decision to solve its “Cambodian problem” by military means and second was the growing antipathy between Vietnam and China: the Vietnamese resented Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge regime, and the Chinese resented the increasing cordiality of the Soviet–Vietnamese relationship. Third was the ascendance to the central role
in the Chinese leadership of Deng Xiaoping, on the deaths of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Deng’s foreign policy was more assertive than that of his predecessors. Where Mao and Zhou had been preoccupied with the domestic manipulation of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, Deng moved to solve China’s strategic problems, including the problem of Vietnam. During the 1970s, he had watched hostility and distrust develop between the Chinese and the Vietnamese, and he believed that the time had come for China finally to act to limit Vietnamese and Soviet actions in Indochina.

The Cambodia–Vietnam War

Even as North Vietnam’s war with the United States and the Republic of Vietnam ended in April 1975, another war was erupting in Indochina. The “Third Indochina Conflict,” as David W.P. Elliot termed it in March 1979, grew out of the Cambodia–Vietnam War that had commenced in 1971. When Chinese troops charged into Vietnam on February 17, 1979, they were pursuing a clear strategic objective: to create conditions that would persuade the Vietnamese leaders to withdraw their forces from Cambodia. For most of the following decade, the Chinese maintained this same strategic objective.

Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978 because it felt threatened by the Pol Pot regime that had assumed control of the country in 1975. Le Duc Anh, the Vietnamese commander in Cambodia and a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) Politburo, wrote in 1985 that the reason Vietnam had attacked Cambodia was to “Help our friends who help us.” Pol Pot was no friend of Vietnam, and his policies threatened the peace along the border. So long as Pol Pot remained in power, the security of Vietnam and the communist revolutions in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were in danger.

The first problems had emerged in 1971 when Khmer Rouge guerrillas attempted to assert Cambodian sovereignty in areas along the border that the Vietnamese occupied. The two nations had had border disputes in the past, but these attacks did not necessarily occur in areas that had thus far been contested (the status of the territory in fact did not appear to make any difference). Since Hanoi needed these areas for bases to support its campaigns against the Saigon government, the Khmer Rouge attacks represented a serious threat to its strategic objectives. The fighting continued sporadically until 1975, when with the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in April, there was a marked escalation in the size and intensity of the border clashes. In May, naval patrols of the two nations exchanged fire in the vicinity of Phu Quoc Island, on their sea boundary, and in early June the Vietnamese attacked the Cambodian military bases on Poulo Wai Island. Poulo Wai is within the undisputed territorial sea of Cambodia, so the attack gave clear notice to Cambodia that Vietnam was prepared to react strongly to future attacks. On June 11, negotiations between Pol Pot and Le Duan, the Cambodian and VCP secretaries, brought the conflict to an uneasy peace.

The border dispute was not the most serious issue facing Vietnam and Cam-
bodia, however. Far more serious was the competition between China and the Soviet Union for the allegiance of the two nations. Since the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s, China had sought to align the Indochinese nations against the Soviets by enlisting them in an “antihegemony” united front. Still seeking to secure their favor, in April 1975, China made foreign aid grants to Vietnam and Cambodia of US$300 million and US$200 million, respectively. Given the vast disparity in the populations of the two nations (Vietnam 46.8 million; Cambodia 8.5 million), the grants forewarned of a marked bias toward Cambodia. In July 1975, China warned Vietnam that close ties with the “hegemonist” Soviet Union could only impair Sino-Vietnamese relations, and a month later, it signed a joint communiqué with Khieu Samphan, the Khmer Rouge Head of State, condemning international hegemony. The Vietnamese refrained from following the Cambodian lead, and in September the same year, VCP Secretary Le Duan declined to accept the “antihegemony” line during his visit to Beijing. China and Vietnam were growing further apart.

During 1976, the tensions between Vietnam and Cambodia remained at a high level. In April, the two countries opened border negotiations, but the talks did not make progress, and in June the Khmer Rouge suspended them. Although there is little concrete information on the differing positions of the two sides, it appears that Cambodia accused Vietnam of having a deep-seated historical tendency to seek expansion at Cambodia’s expense. The Cambodians furthermore rejected the notion that there existed a “special relationship” between the revolutionaries of Cambodia and Vietnam. The Vietnamese, reacting to what they perceived as the increasing rigidity of the Cambodian position, stated that Cambodia needed to distance itself from China and that the two sides should focus instead on their local border problems.

As 1976 rolled on, Pol Pot sought to consolidate his power by hunting down independent thinking members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). The Khmer Rouge had since 1975 targeted people of the “old society,” including intellectuals, medical workers, soldiers, and bureaucrats. In the first half of 1976, most of the prisoners at Tuol Sleng, the main Khmer Rouge interrogation center in Phnom Penh, were “old society” people, but a new category, purged members of the CPK, began now to show up with increasing frequency. The balance of victims of the Tuol Sleng torturers swung such that through the next two years most were party members. For most of these people, the crime that condemned them was a real or imagined connection to Vietnam. Any person who was sympathetic to the Vietnamese revolution, who had trained in Vietnam, or who so much as acknowledged that the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) had once worked for the communist revolution in Cambodia was a target of Pol Pot and his faction.

Confident that his purges had strengthened the unity of the Cambodian people, Pol Pot struck again at Vietnam in early 1977. During the first three weeks of January, his forces attacked towns in the six Vietnamese provinces that border Cambodia, penetrating into An Giang province up to four kilometers beyond the border. The raids had no apparent military purpose. They simply
destroyed hope on both sides of the border that the Pol Pot regime would be content to engage itself with merely internal affairs.\footnote{15}

The Cambodians continued their raids and artillery attacks on Vietnamese towns and villages. In late April and May 1977, the Vietnamese responded by moving troops into the area of the attacks, and on June 7, they proposed high-level talks between the two sides, warning the Cambodians that their attacks were killing civilians. The Cambodians responded on June 18 with a counterproposal: a call for the withdrawal of all troops from the disputed areas and the creation of a demilitarized zone between the opposing forces. Each side ignored the other side’s proposals and continued with its military preparations. The Cambodian raids and artillery attacks also continued.\footnote{16}

Cambodian antipathy toward Vietnam grew stronger. In early 1977, there had been a series of military uprisings against Pol Pot, but these were counterproductive: the purges that followed produced a senior military leadership that was even more compliant, even more pro-Pol Pot. The Cambodian army, particularly in the Eastern Military Region along the border with Vietnam, abandoned any support it might have had for negotiations between Vietnam and Cambodia and called for a violent resolution of the border dispute.\footnote{17} In July 1977, the leaders of the Eastern Military Region resolved that the problems with Vietnam “can never be resolved politically” because the Vietnamese “have a dark scheme to conquer our land and destroy the Khmer race.”\footnote{18} The Eastern Military Region, the Cambodian army force with the most exposure to the Vietnamese border, had effectively declared war on Vietnam. Other Cambodian army and party leaders fell in behind its lead.

A new wave of attacks began. In September 1977, Cambodian artillery fired at several Vietnamese villages, and Cambodian infantry struck all six border villages in Vietnam’s Dong Thap province. Three divisions from the Eastern Military Region pushed into Tay Ninh province, penetrating to a depth of ten kilometers and killing more than 1,000 Vietnamese civilians. Vietnam responded with a series of counterattacks, pursuing its assailants several kilometers back into Cambodia.\footnote{19}

This dialectic of attack and counterattack was inconclusive. In the contested areas, Cambodian infantry raids and artillery attacks continued to kill Vietnamese civilians and Vietnamese infantry sweeps continued to kill the Cambodian raiders. Vietnam finally increased the stakes, opting for a large-scale combined arms offensive against the Cambodian units that had attacked Vietnamese towns. Planning a classic offensive campaign for limited objectives, it assembled a force of between 30,000 and 60,000 troops, comprising the 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 31st, 320th, 330th, 341st, and probably the 4th infantry divisions.\footnote{20} On December 16, 1977, the assembled force crossed the border along several axes of attack.

By January 1978, the campaign had run its course. The Vietnamese had taken their objectives, but the Cambodians had counterattacked at every step of the way.\footnote{21} On December 31, Khieu Samphan, the head of the Khmer Rouge state,
had suspended diplomatic relations with Vietnam, and Cambodia remained defiant. Vietnam’s large-scale, limited-objective operation had failed.

Each time Vietnam withdrew its forces from an area that it had cleared, Cambodian troops relentlessly filtered back. In January 1978, Cambodia still held portions of Vietnamese territory in the area of Ha Tien, and at several places along the border it continued also to confront the Vietnamese with conventional forces. Vietnam shifted now to a strategy of regime change. If it could eliminate Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge and establish a friendly government in Phnom Penh, Vietnam reasoned that it could open the possibility of a negotiated resolution of the border problem. Cambodia did not change its strategy, but continued its attacks in Ha Tien and the other border provinces.

On January 27, Vietnam called for an uprising of the Cambodian army and people. On February 15, Vietnam radio repeated the appeal with a call for the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge. Some Cambodians responded, coming over to the Vietnamese. Vietnam assembled these new recruits in camps along the border, organized them, and trained them. They were to be the nucleus of a pro-Vietnam force that would return to Cambodia with the Vietnamese in December 1978.

Vietnam continued through the early part of 1978 to build the pro-Vietnam Cambodian army. It also moved large numbers of troops into positions along the border, to both defend the border provinces and to prepare for an attack on Cambodia. And all the while, it intensified its propaganda campaign against the Khmer Rouge, broadcasting into Cambodia the message, “Turn your guns around and attack the political leaders in Phnom Penh.” By the end of March 1978, it had in place most of the key elements of its regime change strategy.

Pol Pot responded on April 12 and again in May by reiterating the Cambodian position of the May 1976 talks: the Vietnamese could have peace if they would give up their territorial designs and accept that Cambodia was fully independent of Vietnam. There was another significant precondition: a seven-month trial ceasefire. If Vietnam met these conditions for the remainder of 1978, negotiations could begin in 1979. Hanoi rejected Pol Pot’s proposals, countering with a revised version of its 1976 position.

Along the border, the war continued. On April 24, two Cambodian divisions attacked the Vietnamese village of Ba Chuc in An Giang province, penetrating up to two kilometers into Vietnam and killing about 2,000 Vietnamese civilians. At the start of May, the Cambodians attacked villages in the Bay Nui district, again in An Giang province.

In June, the Vietnamese leadership assembled in Hanoi for a meeting of the Politburo, making a series of decisions that had far-reaching results. Key among these was the identification of China as Vietnam’s main enemy. China, the Politburo said, was trying to fill the power vacuum in Southeast Asia that had been created by the withdrawal of the United States. The Politburo identified the Khmer Rouge as a proxy of Beijing.

The Politburo authorized a military offensive to unseat Pol Pot. By the end of the month, Hanoi was ready to execute a strategy that combined conventional
military force, a propaganda campaign, and the introduction of pro-Vietnamese guerrillas into Cambodia to overthrow the Pol Pot regime.27

The fighting along the Cambodia–Vietnam border continued. In late June, Vietnam sent another multiple-division force of about 80,000 troops, supported by air and artillery strikes, against the Khmer Rouge troops defending the towns of Suong and Prey Veng. The strategy again was of a large assault for limited objectives, but again the Khmer Rouge reoccupied the cleared areas when the Vietnamese withdrew. Their artillery fire and raids against Vietnamese villages resumed as if the assault had never happened.28

Through the second half of 1978, the two sides devoted most of their energy to preparing for the imminent invasion. During August and September, the Soviet Union flew arms and ammunition to Vietnam, and in late September, two Soviet merchant ships docked in Cam Ranh Bay with a consignment of military hardware. To replace casualties and to improve the correlation of forces, Vietnam drafted another 350,000 men into service. While the new conscripts trained, the PAVN deployed its forces along the principal approaches to Cambodia. Ten divisions moved to the border in Tay Ninh, Long An, and Dong Thap provinces; three divisions deployed to the south, near the coast; and three divisions based in the Central Highlands turned toward Cambodia. Three further Vietnamese divisions based in Laos moved south to the area along the Laos–Cambodia border.

Late in November 1978, Senior General Le Duc Anh took command of all Vietnamese troops along the Cambodia–Vietnam border. At about the same time, Vietnam established a command and control headquarters for the forthcoming offensive.29 And on December 3, Vietnam announced the formation of the “Kampuchean United Front for the National Salvation” (KUFNS) in the “liberated” area of Cambodia.30 That the KUFNS was an independent, Cambodian communist government-in-waiting was no more than a convenient fiction, but with the establishment of KUFNS, the final piece of the Vietnamese strategy, a new political regime, was ready.

The Cambodians also were busy. China had been supplying the Khmer Rouge with limited amounts of arms for several years, and in mid-1978, it increased the number of supply routes to the Khmer Rouge and increased the volume of supplies moving down each route. Beijing additionally airlifted supplies to Cambodia and opened the port of Kompong Som for merchant shipping. Field artillery, anti-aircraft guns, trucks, tanks, aircraft, and patrol boats were moved into Cambodia, and between 10,000 and 20,000 Chinese advisers, military and civilian, gave their assistance. North Korea also sent an advisory group. By December, Cambodia had 73,000 well-armed troops in the Eastern Military Region, facing the Vietnamese.31

The Vietnamese offensive began in mid-November, when two PAVN infantry divisions moved across the border and attacked toward the Mekong River town of Kratie. Other divisions moved along local routes to cut off the Cambodian defenders from their supplies, and the Vietnamese divisions in Laos moved south. These initial attacks all took place in the northeastern theater of
the war, and Cambodia could not adequately defend them without weakening its armies that opposed the bulk of the Vietnamese forces further south. When the first phase of the offensive ended on December 13, the Cambodian forces found themselves under pressure from every direction except the rear.32

The second phase of the offensive began on December 25, when Vietnam attacked Kratie with a large force. The Vietnamese captured it five days later. The fall of Kratie allowed Vietnamese forces to cross the Mekong River and sever the supply routes of the Cambodian units in the northeastern part of the country. The seizure of the town also gave the Vietnamese the opportunity to attack south and cut off additional Cambodian forces. The pattern was thus set for all of the second-phase operations of the invasion. Vietnam applied heavy pressure against an objective and sent out a flanking column to prevent its reinforcement. When the Cambodian defense was strong, the Vietnamese bypassed the objective; when the defense was weak, the Vietnamese destroyed it. If the Cambodians could not be bypassed, the Vietnamese fought until they killed or captured the last defender. The attacks continued in every part of Cambodia that the Vietnamese could reach, frequently advancing seventy-five kilometers in a day. By January 7, 1979, the Vietnamese had swept the 120 kilometers from the border into Phnom Penh. In less than two weeks, Pol Pot’s capital had fallen.33

The seizure of Phnom Penh ended the second phase of the Vietnamese campaign. About 15,000 Khmer Rouge soldiers had died, along with about 10,000 Vietnamese.34

The next Vietnamese objective was the town of Sisophon, which lay west of Tonle Sap about fifty kilometers from the Thai border. By taking Sisophon, Vietnam could cut off the Khmer Rouge from its Chinese suppliers in Thailand. The third phase of the campaign therefore called for a rapid advance northwest from Phnom Penh. On January 8, one group of Vietnamese forces attacked along Highway 6, north of Tonle Sap, and a second attacked along Highway 5, south of the lake. Fierce fighting followed, and the Vietnamese failed to prevent large numbers of Khmer Rouge soldiers escaping to the western mountains, but by January 11, Sisophon was in Vietnamese hands. The Vietnamese had cut the Khmer Rouge’s main supply route to Thailand.35

During the fourth phase of the campaign, Vietnam consolidated its gains, resisting strong Cambodian counterattacks. By the end of January, most of the consolidation work was done, and by March, the Vietnamese were ready to attack the remaining Cambodian forces in the western and southwestern parts of the country.36

China and Vietnam move apart

The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia finally drew a line under any lingering hope of a diplomatic reconciliation between the two ruling regimes. It also gave Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese leaders a cause for war and an opportunity to settle scores that had been mounting up for a decade.

In April 1975, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De, the most prominent
Chinese leaders, had greeted Hanoi’s victory in the Second Indochina War with warm congratulations, looking forward to a future in which the Chinese people would “continue unswervingly to unite and fight together with the Vietnamese peoples.”37 Behind their congratulations, however, the Chinese leaders were frowning at an array of new problems that had been thrown up by the victory of the Vietnamese communists. As far back as 1968, Chinese and Vietnamese interests had begun to diverge. Although the two communist parties had been close allies during the Vietnamese war against the French and during the early years of the war against the United States, events in 1968 and 1969 had exposed important differences of opinion held by the two sides on several key issues.38

The primary difference between Hanoi and Beijing was the degree of cordiality they maintained in their relationship with the Soviet Union. The Chinese had moved away from the Soviets in the early 1960s when the Soviets had adopted a set of policies that, in the view of the Chinese, undermined the strength and goals of the international communist movement by accommodating the West. Hanoi, in contrast, had maintained a warm fraternal relationship with the Soviet Union because it was the Soviets who supplied the advanced military equipment that was essential to its efforts in the war against South Vietnam and the United States. While China also provided equipment, it was old and relatively unsophisticated.

The Sino-Soviet rift widened as the 1960s progressed. In 1968, the Soviet Union crushed the Czech uprising and announced that it had the right to intervene in any communist country in which socialism was under attack. China’s clear policy differences with the Soviets gave this pronouncement the tone of a threat. The relationship between the two countries deteriorated further in 1969, when the Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev called for closer relations between the Soviet Union and Asia. China interpreted this as evidence of what it perceived to be an increasing problem of Soviet expansionism, and in March 1969, there followed the first significant clashes on the Sino-Soviet border.

With Beijing and Moscow moving further apart, Hanoi found itself in the unenviable position of having to choose between the two giants. If it sided with the Chinese, the flow of advanced weapons, advice, and money from the Soviets would end. If it sided with the Soviets, the goodwill that it had built up with its powerful northern neighbor would evaporate.

Hanoi could not ignore the exigencies of its southern war and chose to preserve its relationship with Moscow. As Hanoi and Beijing unavoidably then moved apart, their differences over the conduct of the war in South Vietnam became clearer. Where China wanted the North Vietnamese to fight a protracted guerrilla war against the United States, Hanoi wanted to transition to what it hoped would be a decisive conventional war. And when after suffering great losses in the Tet offensive in 1968 Hanoi wanted to open negotiations with the United States, China argued no.39

The “unswerving” unity with the Vietnamese peoples that China promised in April 1975 was a thin wish and in September that year it was almost extinguished. When VCP Secretary Le Duan met Deng Xiaoping in Beijing he found himself facing a lecture on the dangers of the Soviet Union and the advantages
of a strong Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Deng took the position that the problems between the two countries were in part a legacy from the days of Ho Chi Minh, who had died in 1969, and implied that Le Duan needed to correct these problems. Le Duan rejected both this suggestion and the idea that Soviet expansionism was a threat to the Asian communist states. He refused outright to lead Vietnam into an anti-Soviet coalition with China. Le Duan left Beijing in haste after the discussions, failing to observe the etiquette of hosting a reciprocal banquet for the Chinese. Nor was there the customary issuance by the two sides of a joint, post-conference communiqué. At some point during the visit, China also informed Vietnam that it did not intend to maintain the levels of aid that it had promised in 1973.

While the relationship between China and Vietnam grew colder, that between China and Cambodia was warming up. When Khieu Samphan had visited Beijing a few weeks before Le Duan’s trip, he had signed a joint communiqué that in strong terms condemned Soviet hegemonism. Where Vietnam was seeking to emphasize the unity of the Indochinese peoples, China, in its discussions and propaganda, chose to reinforce the theme of Cambodian independence. In 1975, Cambodia was escalating the frequency of its border raids against Vietnam. Hanoi began to realize that it could expect no help from China in suppressing these attacks.

In December 1976, the VCP held its Fourth Party Congress. It took the opportunity to purge from the party’s leadership the pro-Beijing members, including Hoang Van Hoan, dropped from the Politburo and Central Committee. Since Hoan was a founding member of the ICP and Vietnam’s first ambassador to the People’s Republic of China, his eclipse was an important statement of the distance that Hanoi now was from Beijing. Several other individuals with long service in China also were removed. (Truong Chinh, the most important and most pro-China member of the Politburo, retained his position. It may be that Le Duan and his allies believed that overthrowing Chinh would indicate a level of disarray that could impair their ability to govern.) In the months leading up to the Fourth Party Congress, China had recalled several groups of advisers from Vietnam and slowed work on several economic assistance projects. After the Congress, Beijing notified Hanoi that it was unable to provide any new economic assistance.

In March 1977, Beijing and Hanoi signed a new trade agreement that permitted China to export US$51.7 million of goods to Vietnam while in return importing just US$27.7 million worth of goods. Since China still provided about US$300 million of aid to Vietnam under outstanding arrangements, both sides stood to benefit, and the fact that the two countries had come to such an accommodation seemed briefly encouraging. But any optimism engendered by the aid and trade programs was not to last.

On May 4, 1977, the two sides clashed violently near Friendship Pass (Youyiguan in Chinese; Huu Nghĩ Quan to the Vietnamese). According to the Chinese press, Vietnam had sent 500 troops to the area to harass a group of Chinese railroad workers. More than fifty Chinese were injured, some
This incident underlined the growing seriousness of the dispute over portions of the Sino-Vietnamese border: in 1974, there had been 179 border incidents; by 1976, the number of incidents had risen to 812; and in 1977, there were 873 incidents. The nature of the incidents also was changing. Prior to the May 4 clash, most involved just individuals or small groups. The May 4 incident indicated a new fierceness and suggested the use of a new level of organization.

The territorial disputes were not restricted to border areas. In June 1977, the Chinese Vice Premier Li Xiannian conveyed to the Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong China’s concerns about Vietnam’s claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands. China had seized the Paracel Islands from Vietnam in January 1974, but until now the dispute over the islands had been relatively quiet. The disagreement was once more back in the open.

Elsewhere more fuel was added to the fire. On July 18, 1977, Vietnam and Laos signed a twenty-five-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, inciting in Beijing suspicions of Vietnamese expansionism. Vietnam had undertaken major operations against Cambodia, disputed the Sino-Vietnamese border, and befriended the small but significant nation of Laos. It had positioned troops in Laos on a “mission of Socialist Solidarity.” To China, these observations mutated into the charge that Vietnam was engaged in the pursuit of “regional hegemony.” According to Beijing, “Kampuchea and Laos, Vietnam’s two neighbors, [had become] the first victims of the Vietnamese authorities’ aggression and expansion.”

Hanoi nonetheless continued to maintain that the situation was under control. In October 1977, the Soviet ambassador to Hanoi reported to his ministry that Vietnamese General Secretary Le Duan saw “no insoluble problems of any kind” in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The conflict with Cambodia remained a persistent and awkward problem, but Le Duan told the ambassador that it was time to solve it and time for Vietnam to focus instead on its internal problems. Referring to these, he remarked that the communists had finally moved to end the economic influence of the Hoa (Chinese) minority – a task in which neither the French nor the Americans had succeeded. Le Duan may not have realized it, but in his comments to the Soviet ambassador he had just identified the next major problem in Sino-Vietnamese relations.

To consolidate its control of southern Vietnam after the departure of the United States and the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, the Hanoi government had adopted the first of a range of measures designed to curb the economic influence of the ethnic Chinese population. In early 1977, it had launched the “Campaign against Comprador Bourgeoisie” in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). A year later, in March 1978, it launched the “Campaign to Transform Private Industry and Commerce,” declaring private enterprise illegal, and in April it revised the currency laws.

The Hoa found their way of life destroyed and their savings reduced to nothing. Large numbers of them began to leave for China: by the end of May 1978, 105,000 Hoa had crossed the border. The migration north continued until China closed its border in July, whereupon the refugees took to the sea. The
Hoa and other Vietnamese, often with the approval of Vietnamese officials, became the “boat people,” fleeing Vietnam in the tens of thousands. Beijing charged Hanoi with deliberately seeking the forced expulsion of the Hoa from Vietnam, and the crisis of trust between the two nations became deeper.55

As a consequence of these developments, China cut back its aid to Vietnam. In May 1978, Beijing cancelled aid to the first twenty-one projects, a measure that Deng Xiaoping told journalists on June 7 was in direct response to the expulsion of Chinese residents. Fifty-one more projects were quickly cancelled, and on July 3 China announced the end of all aid to Vietnam.56

The Chinese cancellation of aid projects may also have been a response to Vietnam’s announcement that it was joining the Soviet-sponsored COMECON (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance), a decision that further underlined the fact of Hanoi’s separation from Beijing and its increasing closeness to Moscow. In November 1978, Hanoi signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, and the Sino-Vietnamese relationship reached its nadir. Only armed conflict could make it worse.

**Deng Xiaoping emerges**

After Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai died in 1976, there was a period of intense maneuvering within the Chinese leadership. Hua Guofeng, Mao’s designated successor, initially took center stage as Chairman of the CCP’s Eleventh Central Committee, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Premier of the government, but his political base was weak. Hua held on to his position by striking compromises with other groups on a variety of issues, but his lack of real political power was clear. He found himself caught between the demands of the Maoists, later known as the Gang of Four, and the pragmatists, led by Deng Xiaoping.

Deng was a longstanding senior member of the CCP leadership. He had risen to CCP Politburo membership in 1958, when he ranked sixth in the Politburo hierarchy, and in the absence of Zhou Enlai he had served as acting premier. His star was dramatically eclipsed during the Cultural Revolution, when from December 1966 until April 1973 he disappeared from public view,57 but in April 1973 he reemerged as a Vice Premier. From the time of this reappearance, Deng seemed committed first and foremost to replacing the Maoist policies of the Cultural Revolution with policies that were more amenable to the modernization of China’s economy, science, agriculture, and defense.

By the time of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP in November and December 1978, Deng was back in senior positions with the party, army, and state. His return offered no encouragement to the Vietnamese. Le Duan’s recollection of Deng was that he had supported Maoist policies that had hurt Vietnamese interests. He had opposed the Vietnamese communist resistance to the Ngo Dinh Diem government and had tried to persuade the Vietnamese to downplay the revolution in the south. Le Duan recalled Deng Xiaoping saying, “In the south, since you have made the mistake
of starting the fighting already, you should only fight at the level of one platoon downward, not at a higher level." He furthermore recalled Deng later telling Hanoi that a first condition for Chinese aid was the rejection of aid from the Soviet Union. But Deng’s greatest offense, according to Le Duan, was to support Mao’s intention to expand China’s power into Southeast Asia.

By December 1978, three powerful chains of events had fatally come together. The relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia had deteriorated to the point where Vietnam had felt obliged to force the removal, through military means, of Pol Pot. Sino-Vietnamese relations, poisoned by Chinese support of the Khmer Rouge and by Vietnam’s growing cordiality with the Soviet Union, had reached a new low. And in late 1978, Deng Xiaoping had emerged as the strongest leader in China. Deng did not, as Mao had done during the 1960s, preoccupy himself with China’s domestic political conflicts and he did not, as Hua Guofeng had, doubt his ability to redefine China’s role in Asia. Deng Xiaoping was a man who got things done, and he saw both problems and opportunities in China’s difficult relationship with Vietnam. In Deng’s view, the best route to seizure of those opportunities was a military one.
The 1979 campaign

Today China claims that its 1979 incursion into Vietnam was a small defensive operation conducted by a few thousand border guards who quickly seized their objectives and withdrew.¹

This is untrue. The 1979 campaign was a massive military operation involving eleven Chinese armies (jun, the equivalent of a U.S. corps) of regular ground forces, militia, and naval and air force units, totaling at least 450,000 troops. Far from being a minor cross-border incursion, it was similar in scale to the assault with which China made such an impact on its entry into the Korean War in November 1950.² Furthermore, the unconventional warfare operations that occurred in conjunction with the 1979 campaign extended into areas far beyond the Sino-Vietnamese border.

The Chinese incursion of 1979 was in reality a major campaign of a war that ran for more than a decade, from the late 1970s until the level of violence in the Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese–Cambodian theaters at last subsided in the late 1980s and the protagonists took the first steps toward normalizing relations. This chapter deals with the Chinese incursion at the operational level, within the context of the Third Indochina War.³

At the outset, a brief word about casualties is important. The casualty figures for the 1979 campaign vary so widely as to be virtually useless. In April 1979, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, the official journal of the PAVN, estimated that China lost 62,500 soldiers in the fighting.⁴ A month later, Chinese Deputy Chief of the General Staff Department, Wu Xiuquan, acknowledged a loss of 20,000 men.⁵ Harlan W. Jencks, the most astute Western student of the conflict, accepted this latter estimate in an August 1979 article,⁶ qualifying the loss as one-half killed and one-half wounded, but in 1985 he revised his estimate upward to the much greater figure of 28,000 Chinese soldiers killed in action.⁷ Estimates for Vietnamese losses are equally diverse. Wu Xiuquan claimed 50,000 casualties among the Vietnamese defenders, but Li Man Kin, for example, while noting this claim makes his own estimate of 35,000–45,000 Vietnamese casualties.⁸

It is impossible to draw reliable conclusions from such diverse and contradictory evidence, but casualty figures are in any event not the best measure of military effectiveness, even in a campaign of attrition such as this.⁹ History is
replete with examples of effective military units that had high casualty rates and of ineffective units that had comparable casualties: measuring military performance by citing casualty figures, even where the statistics are reliable, as a result is not as helpful as assessing how a unit performed on the battlefield. Military effectiveness is best measured by assessing the speed and efficiency demonstrated by a military unit in accomplishing its tasks: did it use its mass of troops effectively to overcome resistance? Did it take its objectives in a reasonable amount of time? Were unit tactics a positive contributor to effectiveness or a hindrance?

As we shall see, viewed in these terms, the PLA’s performance in the 1979 campaign was poor. China planned for “battles of quick decision” (sujué zhan) but conducted a series of slow, indecisive operations. In the Lang Son area, one Vietnamese regiment held up two Chinese armies for a week, and another Chinese army needed up to ten days to secure Lao Cai and Cam Duong, a pair of towns that lie less than fifteen kilometers from the border. The PLA had so much difficulty securing Cao Bang that it had to commit at least two armies to a renewed assault on a city that it claimed to have already taken, and in Quang Ninh a platoon of Vietnamese delayed for five hours a Chinese regiment’s capture of Cao Ba Lanh Mountain, inflicting on the Chinese regiment the loss of 360 of its 2,800 men. Such losses, repeated all over the battlefield, were grievous and bought little. The PLA proved incapable of using its masses of troops effectively through the use of suitable tactics, and incapable therefore of attaining a tempo of operations that would translate into its desired “battles of quick decision.”

The battlefield: geography and topography

The geography of northern Vietnam played a crucial role in the 1979 campaign. Vietnamese geographer Le Ba Thao divides the northern, or Bac Bo, region into two distinct geographical entities, the northwest and the northeast, based on their geological age, the nature of their topography, and the density and type of flora. Thao postulates a dividing line between these areas that runs along the course of the Red River. The area to the south and west of the river, comprising the border provinces of Lai Chau and Hoang Lien Son, is mountainous and densely forested. Vietnam’s highest mountain, Phan Xi Pang (3,143 meters), is in this area, and travel here generally is difficult due to the elevation of the land and the steepness of the slopes. To the north and east of the Red River, in 1979 the border region comprised of a few administrative districts of Hoang Lien Son province and the provinces of Ha Tuyen, Cao Bang, Lang Son, and Quang Ninh, on the Gulf of Tonkin (VN: Vinh Bac Bo; CH: Beibu Wan). The northeastern region is a land of low hills and mountains. While less heavily forested than the northwest, it again is difficult for travel because of the numerous limestone formations (karst) that characterize the topography and shape the use of the land (Maps 1–4).

The PAVN organized its military commands in the two northern provinces to fit these geographical realities. Its regional demarcation put the border provinces
of Lang Son and Cao Bang in Military Region One and Ha Tuyen, Hoang Lien Son, and Lai Chau in Military Region Two. Quang Ninh province was designated a separate, special region for reasons of defense. Vietnam has never explained the reasoning behind this demarcation, but the most likely rationale for the structuring of the two military regions rests in the differing challenges

Map 1 The China–Vietnam border.

Map 2 The main attacks (1979).
Symbols

GRAY: VIETNAM
BLACK: CHINA

- x
  - BRIGADE/REGIMENT
- XX
  - DIVISION
- XXX
  - ARMY/CORPS

MAIN CHINESE AXIS OF ADVANCE

SECONDARY CHINESE AXIS OF ADVANCE

CHINESE ARTILLERY OR SMALL CHINESE GROUND ATTACK

CHINESE DOWN VIETNAMESE AIRCRAFT

VIETNAMESE DEFENSIVE POSITION

Map 3 Symbols.

Ground Order of Battle Comparison: 1979

Chinese Army/Corps: 11, 12, 13, 14, 20, 41, 42, 43, 50, 54, 55
Chinese Militia: Several Hundred Thousand

Vietnamese Divisions: 3, 311, 316, 345, 346
Vietnamese Brigades/Regiments: 567, 852, 677, 246, 481
Vietnamese Militia: Unknown

Estimated Chinese Troop Strength (minus militia): 472,000
Estimated Vietnamese Troop Strength (minus militia): 50,000

Map 4 Ground order of battle comparison: 1979.
they would present should their commanders be called upon to defend Hanoi against attack from the north. The sparse vegetation and low hills of Military Region One would enable forces to be moved and massed with relative ease – certainly when compared with the harsh topography and dense forestation of Military Region Two. Critical also, in defensive terms, is the short distance from the border to Hanoi: Lang Son, the key city of Military Region One, is 154 kilometers from the capital and Cao Bang 276 kilometers. The main city of Military Region Two, Lao Cai, is 295 kilometers from Hanoi. While charged to defend a more shallow front, however, the commander of Military Region One would be aided in this defense by the geography of the region and its man-made infrastructure. Highway 1A from Lang Son and Highway 3 from Cao Bang cross the Cau River, a natural defensive line for Hanoi, and connect at Yen Vien before crossing the Red River and entering Hanoi, effectively channeling any invader toward a single point of attack against the city. In contrast, the roads from the two principal northwestern cities are confined by the mountains into separate and distant river valleys, obliging Military Region Two to defend against the potential of a two-pronged assault against Hanoi.13

Geography also informed China’s invasion planning. The Chinese border provinces, Yunnan in the west and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the east, are geographically dissimilar. Yunnan lies on the high, mountainous Yun-Guei Plateau, remote and hard to access from China’s heartland, while Guangxi is an area of low mountains and river plains affording greater ease of troop movement. In the same way that Vietnam recognized the military implications of the geography of its border regions, China assigned its forces in its corresponding border areas to two different commands, the Yunnan Military District going to the Kunming Military Region and Guangxi Military District to the Guangzhou Military Region. The provincial and military district boundary line ran from approximately where the Ha Tuyen and Cao Bang provinces met on the Vietnamese side of the border.14 The differing terrain of the two regions significantly also shaped the railroad and road networks. The railroad, which was vital for keeping the Chinese invasion forces supplied, had a short, straight run from the eastern part of China, where most of the invasion force was based. By comparison, the railroad from China’s heartland to Kunming and from Kunming to Lao Cai took a long, circuitous route through steep hills and narrow valleys. The highways to Kunming were similarly confined.

China chose to make its strongest attacks in 1979 against the cities of Vietnamese Military Region One: Cao Bang and Lang Son. A major assault further to the west was deemed too perilous, because the long, narrow river valleys of the region presented an obstacle to the resupply of attacking forces and to the difficulties that attack units would face in supporting one another. Attacking through Military Region One, in contrast, China could threaten Hanoi by a relatively short route, and the low hills and less dense vegetation would permit the easier movement of troops and supplies back and forth. Of course, this was not a new plan of attack. In 1077, 1288, and 1427, Chinese forces had attacked through the same area. On each occasion, they had come to grief (Map 5).15
Troop deployments

While Chinese and Vietnamese diplomats and party leaders were posturing, negotiating, and pondering in the middle months of 1978, the soldiers of both sides were preparing for war (Map 2).

In mid-July, the Vietnamese 3rd Division moved to Lang Son and began to organize its defenses, digging in. The 3rd Division had been formed in the early 1960s during the Second Indochina War against the United States, when it had been a consistent obstacle to the “pacification” of Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai provinces in South Vietnam. Its officers and men were seasoned soldiers, and many of them, through their involvement in the major North Vietnamese offensives of 1972 and 1975, had experience in large-scale conventional operations. The division was quickly joined in Lang Son by the 166th Artillery Regiment and the 272nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment. In August, the 571st Transportation Division began to dispatch large convoys of trucks with supplies for Military Region One and Military Region Two, and throughout the second half of 1978, fuel, troops, and ammunition continued to be moved north on Highway 1 to Lang Son. Anti-aircraft guns were deployed at key locations along the border, and troops were billeted in villages along Highway 4 between Dinh Lap and Lang Son. Young Vietnamese men living in the border area also were given training in basic military skills. In November, Vietnamese tanks were observed near Friendship Pass (VN: Hu nghi guan, CH: Youyi guan), where Highway 1A crossed the border at Dong Dang.

In early February 1979, the 346th Division and the 311th Division assembled in Cao Bang, where they were joined by the 567th and 852nd regiments. At the
end of 1978 or in the first weeks of 1979, the 316A Division and the 254th Regiment deployed to the Lao Cai area,\textsuperscript{20} where according to U.S. intelligence analysts, they were joined also by the 345th Division.\textsuperscript{21}

There were no indications of Vietnamese air or naval deployments in the weeks leading up to the invasion.\textsuperscript{22}

Chinese deployments to the border began later than had the deployment of PAVN troops, but they were much more extensive, involving about thirty divisions by February 1979. The armies of the Kunming Military Region and the Guangzhou Military Region were the first to take up positions near the border, with the 55th Army and the 42nd Army of the Guangzhou Military Region deploying in October and the 41st Army in November.\textsuperscript{23} Units from outside Guangzhou and Kunming moved in by road and rail throughout November 1978 through February 1979. Some came from great distance: the 20th Army, for example, moved 1,200 kilometers from its bases in the Wuhan Military Region. Tourists as far away as central China saw trains with military equipment heading south\textsuperscript{24} and reported that portions of the road and rail network had been placed off limits to foreign travelers. One of the last units to take up position was the 13th Army, from Chengdu Military Region. The 13th deployed along the border opposite Lao Cai in January or February 1979.\textsuperscript{25}

The Chinese made every effort to conceal these troop movements. Rail and road traffic moved at night, when civilian trains were moved off the main track to allow troop trains to pass. Curfews were imposed on towns and villages along the route of the march, and during the day, troops rested in areas that were screened from public view. Much of China was closed to foreigners in 1978 and 1979, but some cities had been opened: where these were in sensitive areas they were again temporarily closed. Many travelers returned to Hong Kong with tales of disrupted travel plans and strange happenings on the routes leading to the Sino-Vietnamese border.\textsuperscript{26}

Chinese air force (PLAAF) deployments proceeded at the same time. Around January 1, 1979, the PLAAF began its war preparations in Guangxi and Yunnan, reorganizing its command structure in the Guangzhou Military Region and the Kunming Military Region, preparing airfields, and deploying anti-aircraft weapons. Political work among air force personnel also intensified. At least 700 aircraft were brought into the area, raising the deployment in the two military regions to between 800 and 1,000 aircraft, and more than 20,000 air force troops were brought in.\textsuperscript{27} To accommodate this enormous influx of equipment and personnel, the logisticians of the PLAAF built more than 43,000 square meters of bamboo sheds and repaired 23,000 square meters of old housing. They issued 10,000 mobile beds and laid 200 kilometers of electric cable, more than thirty-two kilometers of water pipe, and fifty kilometers of semi-permanent fuel pipeline to three separate airfields.\textsuperscript{28}

In the South China Sea, the Chinese Navy (PLAN) South Sea Fleet, which had its headquarters at Zhanjiang in Guangdong province, prepared for battle by organizing a new task force that included some of its strongest combatants. The Chengdu-class frigates \textit{Guiyang} (pennant number 505) and \textit{Chengdu} (507) were
deployed with a third warship, bearing pennant number 48, as part of the 217 Formation (217 biandui). The 217 Formation appears to have operated with ships of the 1st, 21st, and 91st Groups (dadui). The 207th Squadron (dadui), an element of the 21st Group, also was active in the 217 Formation’s operations. The PLA seaman and naval cadre prepared for war with political study, by performing maintenance work, and with training exercises, and when the 217 Formation was first organized, the standard of seamanship was low. Less than 20 percent of the shells fired by the gun crews on ship forty-eight hit their targets, and the ships of the formation worked poorly together: in at least one recorded instance, a signalman sent the wrong signal, throwing the formation into confusion. These problems did not augur well for the coming hostilities.

Leadership problems and command organization

By mid-December 1978, the forward command post of the Guangzhou Military Region had been established, and the headquarters political department (Guangzhou junqu qianzhi zhengzhibu) was providing guidance to its subordinate units on the problems that were emerging as preparations continued for war. But the political officers of the deploying PLA units faced enormous problems in readying their troops for combat.

On December 12, the General Political Department (GPD) of the PLA dispatched a secret circular to all units. These “Directives from the General Political Department on political work conducted by troop units during military operations” (Zong zhenzhibu guanyu zuohao budui zai junshi xingdongzhong zhengzhi gongzuode zhishi) stated that units should make immediate efforts to strengthen the unit cadre system and should fill all cadre vacancies in companies and platoons. In a cable to its subordinate units on the same day, the Cadre Bureau of the Political Department advised that individuals scheduled for demobilization could be retained if they were needed to fill specific assignments, but further advised that any units that lacked basic cadre because they had been recently established or had been reorganized could, where the situation required them to do so, begin operations. Two days later, the GPD reiterated that cadre vacancies should be filled as quickly as possible and instructed all deployed units that continued to have problems to notify the GPD. The GDP advised that it would obtain replacements by conducting an army-wide search (quan jun). The PLA, before the first shot was fired, was having difficulty filling the crucial leadership posts at the company and platoon level.

A similar problem existed in the area of technical positions. On December 12, the Guangzhou Military Region’s Forward Command Political Department and the Logistics Department issued guidance on the policy to be followed in filling technical jobs in the artillery, engineering, communications, armor, anti-chemical warfare, and “confidential” (jiyao) units. As in the case of cadre vacancies, units were told that they could retain specialists scheduled for demobilization if those specialists agreed to serve. Medical personnel at all levels of the hospital system also could be retained.
China officially launched its border campaign on the last day of 1978. Although King C. Chen, in the most thorough study of Chinese decision-making on the eve of the war, states that the final decision to go to war with Vietnam was made by the Central Military Commission between February 9 and 12, 1979, the decision to launch the campaign had in fact been made much earlier. In February, the commission reviewed the plans for the invasion and examined the implications of Deng Xiaoping’s recent trip to the United States, but the Guangzhou Military Region Forward Command Political Department had informed subordinate units on December 28 that they were to record combat service from December 31, 1978.

On the Chinese side of the border, PLA units continued to deploy to their assembly areas, and in Vietnam, the PAVN dug an endless series of fighting positions. On both sides, the senior staffs went to work turning peacetime armies into wartime armies. Staff officers and party officials reorganized their command and control arrangements and planned the operations that lay ahead.

In late December or early January, the Chinese established the Southern Front to link operations in the Kunming Military Region and the Guangzhou Military Region. The Guangzhou Military Region Commander, Xu Shiyou, assumed command of the front, with Zhang Tingfa, the Commander of the Air Force, as his Chief of Staff. Yang Dezhi moved from command of the Wuhan Military Region to take control of the Kunming Military Region and to serve as Deputy Commander of the Southern Front. According to press reports, Yang also was to be the commander of all Chinese troops in Vietnam. Xiang Zhonghua and Liu Zhijian retained their roles as political commissar of the Guangzhou Military Region and the Kunming Military Region. Wang Hai, the Guangzhou Military Region Air Force Commander, was made commander of air operations in the Guangxi theater of operations and Hou Shunjun, the director of the Kunming Military Region Air Force Command Post, became his counterpart air commander in the Yunnan theater.

At the other end of the country, the Northern Front was at the same time set up to face the Soviet Union. Comprising the Xinjiang, Lanzhou, Beijing, and Shenyang military regions, the Northern Front was led by Li Desheng, the commander of the Shenyang Military Region. The northern military regions, despite having the heaviest concentration of PLA troops, were to hold on to their forces and made no contribution to the campaign in the south.

The intended effect of the creation of the Southern Front was to produce a single organization, reporting direct to PLA headquarters in Beijing, which controlled all PLA ground and air assets in the Kunming Military Region and the Guangzhou Military Region. The front comprised two theaters: Guangxi in the east, coterminous with Guangxi Military District in the Guangzhou Military Region, and Yunnan in the west, coterminous with Yunnan Military District in the Kunming Military Region. In both cases, the military theater of operations followed the boundary of the respective province.

Command relationships on the Vietnamese side were just as simple. Military Region One, which included Cao Bang and Lang Son provinces, was designated
the Cao–Lang area, and two fronts established within it. In February 1979, the Cao Bang Front (*Mat Tran Cao Bang*) was set up to control operations in the northwest part of Military Region One, with the Lang Son Front fulfilling a similar role in the eastern part of the region. The procedure was the same in Military Region Two, where the Phong Tho–Lao Cai area of operations was established with a single front, the Lao Cai Front. The only border area that in the beginning did not include one or more fronts under a military region was the Quang Ninh coastal province, but this situation was addressed in March when the Ministry of Defense established the Quang Ninh Front in the Quang Ninh Special Region.

The overall military command of the PAVN lay with Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap, Minister of Defense since 1944. Senior General Van Tien Dung served as Chief of the General Staff Department and Senior General Chu Huy Man as Chief of the GPD. Major General Dam Quang Trung served as the First Military Region Commander and Political Commissar and Lieutenant General Vu Lap (a *nom de guerre* for Nong Van Phach) as his counterpart in Military Region Two.

**Final preparations**

In October 1978, the PLA began a series of probes of Vietnamese positions that continued until February 15, 1979. The Chinese intended for these operations to gain intelligence, to intimidate the PAVN troops, and to divert attention from China’s main operational objective of the forthcoming campaign. The first probes were conducted in the areas through which the PLA would subsequently move during the February 17 invasion. The main ground objectives of the invasion were to be in the provinces of Hoang Lien Son, Cao Bang, and Lang Son, and nine of the first ten probes were conducted against PAVN forces in these provinces. Of the nine attacks, eight were made in districts that lay across the approach routes for the invasion. (There were no recorded probes in Lai Chau and Ha Tuyen, the two Vietnamese border provinces that only suffered minor or harassing attacks in February.) The attacks built in size and frequency as more PLA units deployed along the border, reflecting the growing need of local commanders for information for their own battlefield operations. The probes in particular sought to identify enemy positions, through analysis of the PAVN’s reaction to ground and artillery attacks.

There is no record of Vietnamese probes of Chinese positions, but it is almost certain that the Vietnamese at least conducted reconnaissance of the terrain and the Chinese build-up: the border was extremely porous and patrols, agents, and others could cross it with relative ease. Whether or not the Vietnamese conducted patrols, the fact that the Chinese probes were large, well organized, and violent signaled clearly to the Vietnamese the magnitude of the force arrayed against them.

By the morning of February 17, 1979, Vietnam had about fifteen combat regiments controlled by five regular divisions on the Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang
Son Fronts. Militia and a small number of border defense units supported the defense, to create in total a force of about 50,000 men. Arrayed against the defenders, under the direction of its Southern Front, China had more than a hundred combat regiments, totaling about 450,000 troops. The correlation of forces was at least six to one, and in some areas it was much higher. In the area around Lang Son, the balance of forces was at least ten to one in favor of the Chinese.

Neither Vietnam nor China has ever published a clear explanation of its operational plans for the 1979 campaign, but something of those plans can be discerned through analysis of the locations and deployments of the opposing forces. The picture that such analysis creates is sometimes at odds with the picture that most scholars hold of the campaign; in particular, it raises serious questions about the number of attacks that China made on the Vietnamese provincial capitals. For example, King C. Chen claims that the Chinese attacked five provincial capitals in the 1979 campaign: Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Ha Giang, Cao Bang, and Lang Son. China and Vietnam, however, agree that there were no attacks on Ha Giang and Lai Chau. A careful analysis of the fighting resolves the campaign into a struggle over the three fronts identified earlier in this chapter: Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai. In the early hours of February 17, the campaign began on these three fronts (Maps 6, 7, and 8).

The Lang Son Front

The Chinese attack on Lang Son came slightly later than the assaults on Cao Bang and Lao Cai, the guns of the 55th Army opening up at around 05:00 against the Vietnamese defenders in the area of Friendship Pass, between border markers 15 and 20 (Map 6). Behind the barrage, the 55th Army was poised to move against its initial objective, the town of Dong Dang. To the southeast, between border markers 32 and 45, the 43rd Army trained its guns on the Vietnamese border guards in the hills around the town of Chi Ma. The route of the 43rd led through Chi Ma via local route 402 to Loc Binh, about ten kilometers to the southwest. From Loc Binh, the 43rd would hook northwest along Highway 4B to the ultimate objective, Lang Son.

The 55th Army and the 43rd Army, together with the 54th, which began the battle in reserve, thus were to attack Lang Son from two directions. Beyond Dong Dang, the 55th had a seventeen-kilometer approach to Lang Son along Highway 1A; from Loc Binh, the 43rd had nineteen kilometers of Highway 4B to traverse. The Chinese strategy was for its two armies to link up southwest of Lang Son, isolating the Vietnamese 3rd Division and forcing its surrender or destruction. The early capture of Lang Son, about 150 kilometers from Hanoi, would give China the use of the railroad from the border and one of the best highways in Vietnam, National Highway 1A. The Vietnamese capital would be laid open to attack. If Beijing were to move against Hanoi, Lang Son clearly was the place to start the attack. If its goal was to stop at Lang Son, the speedy seizure of the town would add to the significance of the lesson that Beijing
planned to teach the Vietnamese by exposing the vulnerability of Hanoi. For China, speedy success on this front was critical. On the battlefield, it sought insurance of victory by amassing at least nine infantry divisions against the single Vietnamese division, the 3rd that was dug in around Lang Son.

The 55th Army launched its attack by pushing the 163rd Division south through Friendship Pass, with orders to seize three initial objectives: Dong Dang; the four-kilometer line of hills to the south of the town that comprises Hill 339, Tham Mo, Hill 505, and Hill 423 and the intersection of Highway 1A and Highway 1B. These objectives all lay within five kilometers of Friendship Pass. On the western flank of the 55th Army’s attack, the 164th Division crossed into Vietnam in the vicinity of border markers 15 and 16 with orders to establish itself on Highway 4A and prevent reinforcement of Lang Son from Cao Bang. It also was to attack south toward Lang Son, seizing Hill 386, Hill 438, Con Khoang, and Khon Lang and thus closing the Chinese line south of Dong Dang. The 164th Division’s deepest initial objective was Khon Lang, about five kilometers south of its border crossing, and at its widest point the sector it was to

Map 6 The Lang Son Front (1979).
control was two kilometers across. Successful execution of these plans would give the two Chinese divisions control of the high points on either flank of their advance: Hill 438 in the west and Hill 505 in the east. Facing them, on a front 5–7 kilometers wide, was the 12th Infantry Regiment of the Vietnamese 3rd Division.53

On the eastern edge of the Lang Son Front, the Chinese 43rd Army likewise deployed two divisions, the 127th and the 129th, in its initial attack. On the right of the 43rd’s attack, the 127th Division crossed the border between markers 32 and 33 on an axis of advance that ran from the border town of Ba Son toward the town of Cao Loc. This was the most difficult approach of any that the Chinese used in their assault. The route followed a narrow, dry-weather road of loose gravel that snaked through the mountains along the bank of an unnamed seasonal stream for a distance of about thirty kilometers before intersecting with Highway 1A at Cao Loc, on the northeastern edge of Lang Son city.54 On the left flank of the assault, the 129th Division attacked through Chi Ma from its assembly areas near border markers 43 and 45, with the objective of seizing Hill 392 and Hill 623 and joining Highway 4B at the town of Loc Binh. The division would then turn north to attack its primary objective – Lang Son.55

Defending against these attacks was primarily the 141st Regiment of the Vietnamese 3rd Division. This unit faced a two-division assault force operating on two axes of advance, about fifteen kilometers apart. Separating the two prongs of the Chinese assault was the highest series of mountains in Lang Son province, including Nui Ma Son, at a height of 1,541 meters.56 The hills were steep, bereft of vegetation, and difficult to defend. Although there were some caves in the rocky hills and karst formations that the Vietnamese soldiers could use, for the most part any defensive positions would be easily visible from a distance and a comparatively straightforward target for a competent artillery–infantry team.

As the invasion unfolded, the PLA attack rapidly fell behind schedule. North of Lang Son, the Chinese 55th Army had failed after more than a week of fighting to move more than three kilometers into Vietnam. From February 17 to February 23, the 55th Army struggled to take the line of defensive positions that ran from Hill 505 on the east of its front to Hill 438 on the west. It was only on February 23 that the Dong Dang railroad station and Tham Mo were taken, and even then Vietnamese resistance in the area continued. Fighting went on in the Dong Dang area and along the Hill 505–Hill 438 defensive line until at least February 27,57 and required at some point in this ten-day period the introduction into the attack of a second Chinese army.58

On the east of the Lang Son Front, the efforts of the 43rd Army were a comparative bright spot in the fog of disasters that shrouded the Chinese attacks. The 43rd had further to go to its initial objectives than did the 55th and 54th Armies, but it moved more quickly. Within eleven days, the 43rd had moved on and taken Loc Binh, seventeen kilometers from its assembly positions, and in early March, it reached Lang Son, a further nineteen kilometers distant.59 But overall the PLA, which earlier in its history had demonstrated a remarkable ability to
conduct operations at a very high tempo, had been fought to a standstill by a vastly outnumbered force.\textsuperscript{60}

The Battle for Lang Son began on February 27 and did not end until the Chinese captured Hill 413, southwest of the city, on March 5.\textsuperscript{61} On the same day, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced China’s intention to withdraw from Vietnam.\textsuperscript{62}

**The Cao Bang Front**

The attack on the Cao Bang Front began in the dark on the morning of February 17, at four widely separated points on the border (Map 7). Chinese forces quickly moved through the tiny border crossings that lead to Trung Khanh, Quang Uyen (also known by the district name, Quang Hoa), Tra Linh, and Hoa An. All were headed for the city of Cao Bang.

China had assembled a strong force to conduct this part of the campaign. The primary attacking forces were the 41st and 42nd Armies from Guangzhou Mili-

*Map 7  The Cao Bang Front (1979).*
itary Region. Backing up these main armies were elements of the 12th Army (Nanjing Military Region), the 50th Army (Chengdu Military Region), and the 20th Army (Nanjing Military Region), contributing to a force that probably totaled over 200,000 troops. Elements of all of the five Chinese armies represented in this sector ultimately saw combat in Vietnam.

During the build-up for the invasion, the PLA had deployed to assembly areas in Longzhou and Jingxi counties, Guangxi province. These areas were barely adequate to the task. Unlike the assembly areas opposite Lang Son and Lao Cai, neither those at Jingxi nor Longzhou were served by a railroad: the Longzhou assembly area was more than eighty kilometers from the nearest railhead and the Jingxi assembly area more than 200 kilometers away. The troops as a consequence had to march or be trucked to the assembly areas over narrow dirt roads. Tanks drove to the assembly areas because there was no other means of transportation, and artillery pieces were towed. The PLA’s equipment was basic and durable, but it was not designed for this sort of treatment. Every round, every liter of gasoline, and every blanket for every man also had to be transported to the assembly area and then carried by porters or trucked to the advancing units. Rice, vegetables, and the little bit of meat that enlivened the PLA soldier’s diet could be purchased locally, but these remote areas of Guangxi province have never produced much of a surplus. Hosting an army of this size must have been a nightmare for the local commune and county officials.

The deployment of PAVN forces facing the PLA at this point of the border is little known. The 677th Regiment was positioned to defend Tra Linh, and the 246th and the 852nd Regiments defended the northwestern approaches to Cao Bang through Hoa An and Thong Nong. The 481st Regiment probably served as the 346th Division’s reserve and as the primary defender of Cao Bang. It is not clear where other units were deployed.

The Chinese 41st Army was to cross the border along a wide front before focusing its advance on Cao Bang down to two avenues of approach that led through the towns of Tra Linh and Trung Khanh. After seizing Tra Linh, about 5–6 kilometers from border markers 96 and 92, the attackers would move south on Cao Bang, twenty kilometers distant. On the other extreme of the Chinese front, the 42nd Army was to attack Cao Bang from the southeast, out of Longzhou County. On the southern flank of the 42nd’s route lay the city of That Khe; on its northern flank was an avenue of approach that started at the Shuikouguan border crossing before leading to Phuc Hoa and north to Quang Uyen. After seizing Quang Uyen, the 42nd Army would link up with the 41st Army and continue to strike west to Cao Bang.

The 42nd Army apparently was charged with sending a force south down Highway 4 to connect with Chinese forces on the extreme north of the Lang Son Front. By joining the two fronts, the Chinese both would gain the ability to transfer their own troops from one area of operations to the other and would deny their enemy the opportunity to reinforce his defense along the Thai Nguyen–That Khe road. Thai Nguyen lay just eighty kilometers to the south and had good railroad connections out of Hanoi.
The Chinese advances were slow. The attacks by the 41st Army ran immediately into the Vietnamese 677th Regiment, which stopped it in its tracks. It was not until February 22 that the PLA secured Tra Linh. The 41st Army’s advance in other areas was similarly slow, and by the end of February 22, its deepest penetration, at Trung Khanh, was no more than 10–15 kilometers from the border. Other elements of the 41st were slowed down in a series of fights near Thong Nong, northwest of Cao Bang city.

The efforts of the 42nd Army were more productive, and by the night of February 22, the 42nd had taken Phuc Hoa, That Khe, Quang Uyen, and Dong Khe, penetrating into Quang Uyen about twenty-five kilometers from Shuikouguan. Some hard lessons were learned along the way. On February 20, a PLA tank unit, moving ahead of the main force, had penetrated into Bac Son, about ten kilometers southeast of Cao Bang on Highway 4. The Vietnamese stopped this penetration with a barrage of anti-tank missiles that destroyed several tanks and forced the 42nd into a hasty reinforcement to prevent its spearhead being surrounded and eliminated. Although the Chinese broke through this resistance, they learned that, in engagements of roughly equal forces, they were no match for the Vietnamese.

Twenty kilometers of narrow road and hilly terrain now lay between the 42nd and Cao Bang, and the 41st and 42nd Armies were converging from Tra Linh, Trung Khanh, and Quang Uyen on a dangerous choke point. The Ma Phuc Pass (latitude: 2244N, longitude: 10619E) is an opening in the mountains at around 700 meters of elevation. A steep road of an estimated grade of 15 percent winds its way via several long switchbacks through the pass, creating an area that, as the Chinese were to discover, is readily defensible by even a very small force.

These difficulties notwithstanding, on February 25 Cao Bang fell. China claimed to have destroyed the 677th and 681st (probably the 481st) Regiments of the Vietnamese 346th Division and claimed by the following day to have destroyed also the remnants of the 246th Regiment. This claim does not flatter the PLA: if it is true, a single Vietnamese division had held up two full Chinese armies and elements of several other armies for almost ten days.

For the next five days, brutal fighting continued throughout the Cao Bang area of operations. On February 27, the Chinese seized Guan Tiat airfield, southwest of That Khe. The Vietnamese counterattacked, and the two sides continued to contest the field. The Vietnamese also counterattacked at Quang Uyen and Tra Linh on February 27, with Chinese control of the towns not being restored until March 2 and 3, respectively. If the 346th Vietnamese Division and its sister units truly had been destroyed, it is difficult to understand who was making these counterattacks behind the Chinese lines.

At 19:30 on March 3, a Chinese force from That Khe and a Chinese force from Dong Dang captured the town of Duet Long, on Highway 4. The Lang Son area of operations was thus linked to the Cao Bang area of operations, and the major gap between the troops of the Guangzhou Military Region closed.
The Lao Cai Front

China’s attack in the Lao Cai area of operations began before dawn with an artillery barrage against the Vietnamese positions (Map 8). Behind the barrage, elements of the PLA 11th, 13th, and 14th Armies led ground attacks along three avenues of advance. On the Chinese right, the advance was aimed at taking Phong Tho, about sixty-five kilometers from Lao Cai, to seal off the battlefield from the west. Seizing Phong Tho also would give China access to the Da River Valley, a distant but nonetheless direct geographical entry point to the Red River Valley. The central attack was against the city of Lao Cai itself, which lies less than one kilometer within the border. Lao Cai is 295 kilometers from Hanoi and is a regional nexus of rail, road, and river traffic. Control of the city would give invaders seeking to threaten Hanoi and the Red River Valley a variety of transportation arteries south and east into Vietnam. In contrast to the obvious strategic importance of Lao Cai, Muong Khuong and Pha Long, the objectives of the third prong of the Chinese assault forty kilometers to the east, have little clear military or political importance. It is likely that the attacks here were intended as distractions to prevent their Vietnamese defenders from moving to reinforce the defense of Lao Cai.

Coordinated by the Kunming Military Region Front Headquarters, probably located in Kunming city, the Chinese attack force consisted of the 11th and 13th Armies from Kunming Military Region, the 14th Army from Chengdu.

Map 8 The Lao Cai Front (1979).
Military Region. These three armies brought more than 125,000 troops to the battle. The 11th conducted the attacks in the western sector of operations, assaulting Phong Tho and hooking east toward Sapa and Lao Cai.\textsuperscript{75} A detached unit from the 14th was responsible also for the attack on Muong Khuong and probably approached Lao Cai from the east. The 13th conducted the operations against Lao Cai and went on to Cam Duong, immediately to the south of Lao Cai.

The order of battle of the Vietnamese defenders is more difficult to assess. Li Man Kin, who has done the most to estimate the strength of the PAVN during the 1979 campaign, believes that the Vietnamese 316th Division and the 345th Division were deployed in the area and identifies among the defenders the 192nd, 148th, 147th, 254th, 121st, and 95th Regiments. Six regiments are consistent with a two-division force, but of the regiments that Li identifies only the 148th appears to be connected to the 316th Division. It is entirely possible that Li has his order of battle correct at the divisional level but that it is less accurate at the regimental level.\textsuperscript{76} A two-division force of PAVN would imply that there were about 20,000 Vietnamese defenders near Lao Cai when the Chinese attacked.

The first objectives on February 17 were Lao Cai and the small towns of Bat Xat, Muong Khuong, and Pha Long. The main assault was aimed at Lao Cai, with those against Bat Xat, about fifteen kilometers northwest of the city, and against Muong Khuong and Pha Long probably intended to divert Vietnamese attention from the attack on Lao Cai. There do not seem to have been any attacks against Phong Tho on the first day of the campaign.

The 345th Vietnamese Division took the brunt of the Chinese attacks and fought back hard. It took the 13th PLA Army until 14:00 on February 19 to capture Lao Cai. The Chinese movement against Muong Khuong and Pha Long continued on February 19, but on February 20, the PLA found itself still fighting in the area south of Lao Cai and engaged still in mopping up operations in Lao Cai City. By February 22, when the 316th Vietnamese Division was first engaged, the two PLA armies had been fighting for more than five days against a single division of defenders, yet had moved only about two kilometers into Vietnam.

The shape of the attack nonetheless at last began to come into focus. One group of PLA, probably the 13th Army, moved south along the Red River to attack Cam Duong, a town about ten kilometers from Lao Cai that was defended by the remnants of the 345th Division. Another group, probably the 14th Army, moved southwest along the Lao Cai–Sapa road (Highway 4D) to attack the 316th Division. The 316th moved out from Sapa, thirty-eight kilometers from Lao Cai, to meet the advancing Chinese, making contact on February 22 somewhere along the secondary road that links Lao Cai to Sapa.

After three days of fighting, on February 25, the Chinese took Cam Duong. Problems were by now manifesting themselves in the rear of the invading forces, however, and the PLA had to spend the next two days clearing out pockets of resistance in Lao Cai and other towns that it thought it had secured.
To the southwest, Chinese troops were slowly closing in on Sapa, and at 14:45 on March 1, the town fell. A Chinese force slipped around Sapa to cut off the retreat of the defending PAVN 316th Division by attacking toward Binh Lu. This enveloping force apparently skirted around Vietnam’s highest mountain, Phan Xi Pang, and crossed part of the Hoang Lien Son mountain range to accomplish its mission. Binh Lu, which is forty-four kilometers west of Sapa, was a significant objective because it prevented reinforcements from reaching the 316th Division by blocking the best road from Lai Chau. Although there is no indication that the Chinese got all the way to Binh Lu, this blocking position was at least forty kilometers from the Chinese border and was to prove the deepest Chinese penetration of the war.

While the western elements of the Chinese attack on the Lao Cai Front were thus attempting to end resistance by the 316th Division, the eastern elements of the invasion force attempted a night attack against Khoc Tiam. Launched at 20:00 on March 2, the attack secured its objective at 17:15 the following day.

The situation meanwhile was becoming critical for the Vietnamese 316th Division. At 19:00 on March 3, the Chinese approached the town of Phong Tho, cutting the roads into the town from Binh Lu and Pa Tan and severing its access to reinforcements and resupply from Lai Chau. This maneuver simultaneously put another blocking force between the 316th Division and the Lai Chau supply route. On March 4, the Chinese attacked and captured Phong Tho.

Although Sapa had fallen on March 1, the 316th Division had continued to hold out against the 14th Army in the surrounding areas. It resisted for one more day, its fight ending finally on March 5. The Chinese claimed to have killed 1,398 Vietnamese soldiers, wounded 620, and captured thirty-five. At what price is unknown. The PLA used “human wave” assaults to attain even the most minor of tactical objectives. One Vietnamese infantryman told French newsman, Jean-Pierre Gallois, during the fighting: “The Chinese infantry advance shoulder to shoulder to make sure the minefields are cleared... When they moved out of Lao Cai they were as numerous and close together as rice in the paddy fields.”

The attack on Quang Ninh

China concentrated its offensive on the three provincial capitals of Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son, but it also undertook numerous attacks on other small towns in the northern Vietnamese provinces (see Map 2). Reports indicate that the PLA attacked in at least company strength against thirty-nine points along the 1,281-kilometer border. But if the largest of these, the PLA attacks on the province capitals, went poorly, how did the smaller attacks fare?

The PLA attacks in Quang Ninh are illustrative of these smaller attacks. Quang Ninh is at the eastern edge of Vietnam’s border with China and, sparsely populated, is the smallest of the provinces that China attacked. A long, narrow province that runs roughly from northeast to southwest, Quang Ninh consists primarily of a mass of hills and low mountains and a narrow coastal plain. It has only two significant towns: the provincial capital, Hong Gai, on Ha Long Bay,
and Mong Cai, the border point for entry into China’s Guangxi province at Dongxing. Three Quang Ninh counties border China; from east to west, these are Hai Ninh, Quang Ha, and Binh Lieu. The road network in the province is poor. National Highway 4B runs from Mong Cai to Lang Son, but as late as 1998 it was narrow, muddy, and difficult to traverse in even a four-wheel drive vehicle. Highway 18, Quang Ninh’s other major road, runs north along the narrow coastal plain from Haiphong to connect with Highway 4B. The province’s main industries are fishing, agriculture, and mining.

Except as an alternative route to Lang Son or a starting point for a long thrust at Hanoi, there is virtually nothing in Quang Ninh that would be of strategic importance to China. The effort that the PLA put into attacking the Quang Ninh border counties might therefore appear to have been wrong and wasteful. It likely was simply an attempt to distract the Vietnamese. China attacked the border town of Mong Cai, but the attack failed to draw Vietnamese reinforcements to the area. The PAVN held what it could and recaptured what it lost. The attack was a complete failure.

The attack on Quang Ninh preceded the major Chinese invasions further to the west, beginning sometime after 23:00 on February 16 with shelling and an infantry assault on the border point at Hoanh Mo in Binh Lieu County. The attack suggests the possible intention of the Chinese to attack down the Hoanh Mo–Binh Lieu road to cut Highway 4B at Tien Yen. The only way to resupply or reinforce Mong Cai would as a result have been by sea. On February 17, the Chinese shelled Mong Cai and the Xuan Hoa state farm to the west of the town. Later in the day, Chinese infantrymen attacked along a six-kilometer front in the vicinity of Mong Cai, and a second Chinese force attacked Quang Ha County near Po Hen. The Chinese attacked Mong Cai again on February 20 and 21 from assembly areas in Dongxing.

At this point, the assaults stopped. Although fighting continued along the border, the next large-scale Chinese attack occurred on March 2, when a Chinese force attacked Hill 781 in Binh Lieu County; one day later, the Chinese attacked Hill 1050. Both attacks failed, with the loss, according to the Vietnamese, of 750 men.

China continued to shell Vietnamese positions at least until March 10, conducting also limited ground attacks. On March 10, the PLA fired around 3,000 shells at Mong Cai and other Vietnamese border points.

One anecdote illustrates the problems that the Chinese encountered in Quang Ninh. At some point in the fighting, a Vietnamese platoon was assigned to defend a mountain known as Cao Ba Lanh. The mountain was significant from a military point of view because it looks down from a distance of about nine kilometers on the border crossing at Hoanh Mo. The side that controlled Cao Ba Lanh could limit the enemy’s use of the crossing. The Vietnamese platoon dug defensive positions and placed mines and booby traps along the most likely avenues of approach. The first Chinese attack involved two platoons and was beaten back. Later in the day, an entire company attacked, and this again was beaten back, with fifteen Chinese casualties. The following day, two Chinese
battalions attacked en masse. After losing forty-seven men to the mines and rifle fire, they retreated. The next Chinese attack, which was conducted after an extensive artillery barrage, consisted of three battalions – an entire Chinese regiment. This assault came at the Vietnamese platoon from three directions but again failed, Vietnamese mines and booby traps taking a terrible toll of the attacking infantrymen. The three battalions regrouped and, following another artillery barrage, tried again to seize Cao Ba Lanh. At the end of five hours of attacks and for the loss of 360 men, the Chinese regiment captured the mountain.\textsuperscript{87}

This vignette illustrates the problems that the PLA encountered the length of the Quang Ninh border. Attempts to divide the Vietnamese effort failed because small Vietnamese units routinely handled much larger Chinese forces. In the case of Cao Ba Lanh, the assault parties of the PLA lacked the military skills to take their objective, and as a consequence failed as planned to draw down upon themselves Vietnamese reinforcements. Beaten back repeatedly, the Chinese commanders knew no better than to resort to ever-larger attacks, and the political exhortations of the commissars and party members resulted only in more catastrophic “human wave” assaults. The Chinese recognized that their attacks on Quang Ninh were a failure. When Beijing announced its “great victory” over the Vietnamese, it mentioned every town where its forces had fought with success. But it never mentioned any of the towns in Quang Ninh province.\textsuperscript{88}

**The Vietnamese response**

The Vietnamese divisions that had met the Chinese assault, although badly mauled, continued to fight as China began its withdrawal on March 5. Only in the Lang Son theater were new units deployed to relieve the battered units of the front line: the 337th, 327th, and 338th Divisions, which had been held near Chi Lang, south of Lang Son, to contain a Chinese breakthrough, were finally committed to the battle. The 337th had made contact on March 2, when it had attempted to stop part of the Chinese advance on Lang Son in the area of the Khanh Khe ford. Its arrival had come too late to influence the battle for Lang Son, but now the Vietnamese counterattack had begun. The 337th, renamed the 390th Division, and the 338th Division attacked the Chinese as they retraced their steps to the border crossing point at Chi Ma.\textsuperscript{89}

**Navy and naval air operations**

The Chinese South Sea Fleet’s mission in the war was to support the ground forces in Yunnan and Guangxi, to defend against possible Soviet naval incursions and to defend the Paracel archipelago against a Vietnamese island grab.\textsuperscript{90} To perform these missions, it had created the 217 Formation and charged it to patrol the waters of the Tonkin Gulf and the South China Sea. The 217 Formation reported that it sailed 38,971 nautical miles and remained on alert for 2,151 hours (ninety days) while performing these missions.\textsuperscript{91}
The 217 Formation was ill-prepared for this mission, however. Organized to attack Vietnamese naval ships, it found on arrival on station that its enemy had changed: the 217 Formation was up against the Soviet navy. Predictably, the Chinese crews, who appreciated the advantages the Soviets held in ship size, firepower, and communications, were concerned. The PLA naval commanders and political officers conducted a new series of political meetings to motivate the skeptics among their crews, but a perceived lack of fighting spirit below decks may have been the least of their problems. The ships and crews of the 217 Formation were experiencing engineering plant failures, a lack of drinking water, seasickness, and difficulties in communicating with each other. Their gunnery skills also were found out to be inadequate. The task of stopping an incursion by the Soviet Pacific Fleet must have seemed formidable indeed.

The battle with the Soviets never came. The Guiyang and Chengdu investigated reports of Soviet Alligator class (e yu ji) amphibious ships (deng lu jian) entering the area, but there is no record of an exchange of fire or even an interception. And when the commander of 217 Formation changed the operational plan from one of “deploy and fight hard” (bai kai ying da) to “rely on the islands and shores, from a defensive stance launch surprise attacks from hidden positions” (yituo dao an, yinbi tuji...zai fangyu zhong), the likelihood of a clash receded. He had, in other words, assessed the strength of his Soviet opponents and decided to avoid a battle. The crews naturally felt the new plan better suited the practical demands of the war.

The naval air force followed a similar course of action. The Chinese naval aviation units anticipated a response by the Soviet naval air force and looking at their equipment from this new perspective found it to be glaringly inadequate. As in the case of the crews of the ships, the political officers and naval air force commanders found themselves facing the difficulty of motivating their airmen to participate in a one-sided fight. In 1979, the Chinese naval air force was still flying large numbers of Mig-19 aircraft, which were so old as to have fallen out of production. Even the most sophisticated fighter in the Chinese inventory, the Mig-21 (F-6), was being phased out of the Soviet air force. The Soviet replacement aircraft, the Mig-23, Mig-25, and Mig-27, were up to three generations in advance of the best Chinese plane.

If the first problem of the naval aviators was the relative obsolescence of their aircraft, the second problem was the magnitude of the task they were assigned. To monitor Soviet naval activity in the South China Sea and to defend the Paracel archipelago would require longer-range aircraft, aircraft carriers, or an aerial refueling capability. The Chinese had none of these capabilities. Although they had moved the aircraft of Unit 37262 to bases close to Vietnam and the South China Sea, their longest-range bomber or reconnaissance aircraft, the H-5 (the II-28, or Beagle), could only fly 550 nautical miles (about 1,000 kilometers) to its target and return. The longest-range fighter in the Chinese naval air order of battle was the Mig-19, which had a range of 530 nautical miles. The Paracels are about 150 nautical miles from the nearest Chinese airbase, on Hainan Island. While China could comfortably reach and overfly the islands, it...
did not have the ability to provide the constant cover that would be needed to intercept and deter Soviet interlopers.

Limited by the quality of their aircraft, the Chinese naval aviators conducted the only operations that were practicable to them: they photographed Soviet naval electronic intelligence ships that were monitoring the conflict. Presumably, if the war had come to them, they would have acquitted themselves as well as their equipment would allow.

**Air force operations**

Neither the Chinese nor the Vietnamese air force flew any air-to-ground support operations during the 1979 campaign, nor did the two sides engage in any air combat. The practical contribution of the two air forces was effectively limited to a resupply role. On the first day of the campaign, the PLA air force flew 567 sorties, using 170 groups of aircraft. Over the course of the entire campaign, from February 17 to March 16, it flew 8,500 sorties using 3,131 groups of aircraft. It also flew 228 transportation sorties, carrying 1,465 troops and 151 tons (153.5 metric tons) of materiel.

The real reason that the Chinese air force did not clash with the Vietnamese was probably found in a sober calculation of the possibilities of winning. The PLA air force had a significant numerical advantage over its Vietnamese counterpart but little edge on the area of front-line fighters. Where China possessed 4,000 Mig-17/Mig-19s to Vietnam’s 210, it could field only eighty of the newer Mig-21s to Vietnam’s 70. The Chinese undoubtedly were aware that the Vietnamese Mig-21 force had proven formidable in its war against the United States (during Operation Rolling Thunder, from October 1, 1967, to March 31, 1968, the Vietnamese Mig-21s shot down three times as many U.S. aircraft as they lost) and knew that a battle against the Vietnamese Mig-21 fighters was one to be avoided.

China’s Mig-19 pilots in particular were skeptical about their chances. One low-level political discussion in Unit 39530 was probably typical of those among PLA aviators. The unit’s political report recorded: “Shortly after the orders [for the campaign] were received, some comrades were unconvinced that the [Vietnamese] Mig-21 could be defeated” (“Zuo zhan renwu gang xia da shi, youxie tongzhi duineng fou da sheng Mig-21 xinli mei di”). The discussion between political officers and pilots apparently went on for some time. The aircrews argued that the Mig-21 was faster, better armed, and more capable at higher altitudes than their Mig-19s. The political officers argued that the crews did not understand that “weapons are an important but not decisive factor in war, man is the decisive factor” (“wuqi shi zhanzheng de zhongyao yinsu, dan bushi jueding de yinsu, jueding de yinsu shi ren”). The political officers additionally appealed to the patriotism of the crews and their sense of the PLAAF’s “glorious history” in the Korean War.

The pilots were only satisfied when the political officers changed their line of argument and argued that it was possible to defeat the Mig-21 by emphasizing...
the capabilities of the PLAAF’s Mig-19s at medium altitudes and in defensive maneuvers. Citing examples of successful Pakistani Mig-19 operations against Indian Mig-21s, the political officers lectured the pilots on the need to carefully select their tactics when they engaged the Mig-21. The Political Department of Unit 39530 claimed that these practical arguments carried the day – but no fighter sweeps were reported, and there were no contacts with the Vietnamese air force.

Of course, there were many other excellent reasons for the Chinese not to conduct aggressive air operations. The use of air power might have escalated the conflict to an unmanageable level and could potentially have drawn the Soviet Union into the war. The Vietnamese air defenses, particularly around the Red River Delta, were, in the 1970s, among the best in the world. Finally, the PLAAF was not trained to conduct attacks on ground forces, and it may have been that the PLA leadership felt it had enough problems on its hands without adding the nightmare of air-to-ground coordination to the mix. For all these reasons, and in spite of the fact that China had flown an additional 700 fighters to its air bases along the border, the PLA elected not to conduct an aggressive air operation during the 1979 campaign.

Twenty years after the 1979 campaign ended, General Wang Hai of the PLAAF published his memoirs of what had been a long and distinguished career. Wang, who ended his career as the Commander of the PLAAF and a member of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee, had commanded the air force units deployed against Vietnam during the 1979 campaign. He did not devote a single page to or make a single mention of the campaign in his memoirs. Perhaps he simply had no good memories of those days.108

The unconventional warfare campaign

Away from the noise and confusion of the fight between the conventional forces of the PLA and PAVN, both sides conducted violent and intense campaigns of unconventional warfare. These operations ranged from the dispatch of cross-border intelligence agents and raiders to the development and direction of large-scale guerrilla movements. They spread the war far from the Sino-Vietnamese border and laid the basis for the conflict to continue for at least ten more years.

In 1979, the Sino-Vietnamese border was highly porous. Groups of Tai, Nung, Yao, and Hmong tribesmen routinely moved back and forth among the homes of their extended families, and Vietnamese (Kinh), Lao, and Chinese traders moved to and fro across the border in pursuit of money. Nor was the border a barrier to the intelligence officers and special operations officers109 of either side.

The Vietnamese had conducted cross-border intelligence and raiding operations since before the 1979 campaign and persisted with them through the fighting. The goal of these operations was to delay and disrupt the attackers. Chinese Unit 35218 noted that the Vietnamese had a consistent set of missions that they conducted in the Chinese unit’s area of operations. According to the Political
Department of Unit 35218, the Vietnamese conducted raids using small groups of soldiers who blended in with the local population and sought to collect information on or disrupt PLA activities. The infiltrators entered Chinese territory at night to observe military deployments, sometimes also sabotaging command posts and supply bases. These Vietnamese infiltrations happened frequently enough for the political sections of large Chinese units – the staff offices responsible for the security of the units’ most sensitive areas – to record the lessons learned from their efforts to counter them. The Chinese press also reported on the infiltrations and was sufficiently aware of the nature and the frequency of the crossings to sometimes report several incidents in a single article; Xinhua, for example, reported on March 2, 1979, that Vietnamese infiltrators had been caught crossing into Guangxi province on February 17, 24, and 27 and on March 2. Chinese Unit 53701 that was responsible for defending the seven bridges that China had built across the Zuo River at Shuikouguan (in Vietnamese, the Bang River) reported seeing infiltrators in the vicinity of the bridges on twenty occasions in a single month. Near Cao Bang (CH: Gaoping) Unit 33970 additionally faced a threat from Vietnamese special forces units, reporting that on thirty-one separate occasions, it fought off Vietnamese saboteurs that were seeking to attack the city’s river bridges. The unit claimed that it killed fifty-six of these raiders without the loss of a single Chinese soldier.

The Vietnamese also attacked important “high-value” targets. When the PLAAF emplaced a radar unit on Punian Ridge near Friendship Pass, for example, the Vietnamese made every effort to knock the station out of the war, launching ground and artillery attacks on it during the day and sabotage raids at night. The station was put out of action by artillery on February 22. When the unit was repaired, the Vietnamese attacks resumed.

Although the available information is sketchy, the best demonstration of the Vietnamese willingness to bring the war to the Chinese rear areas was a raid that it conducted on Ningming airfield in Guangxi province, a full forty kilometers from the border. On March 1, 1979, “informed Vietnamese sources” told Agence France Presse (AFP) reporters in Hanoi that, shortly after the invasion was launched on February 17, the Vietnamese had conducted a “commando” raid in Chinese territory. According to AFP, the Chinese Xinhua news agency confirmed that there had been a raid in Ningming County, and possibly on the airfield.

The Chinese conducted similar intelligence and raiding operations, with the dual goals of creating agent networks to report on Vietnamese political cohesion and military activities and of disrupting the logistical support of the Vietnamese units blocking the Chinese advance. The success of these operations is questionable. The 571st Truck Division, one of the principal logistics units supporting the Vietnamese forces in the conflict, does not mention in its official history a single attack by Chinese raiders. Where Chinese infiltrators were uncovered, however, the Vietnamese response was uncompromising. The Yunnan Military District, during its brief occupation of Vietnamese villages across the border, conducted extensive political work among the minorities in those villages, with
the hope of developing agents to report on the situation after the Chinese had left, to conduct acts of sabotage and to organize guerrilla raids. After the Chinese political cadres withdrew, the Vietnamese arrested and killed their agents.

While Vietnamese unconventional warfare operations were largely tactical, the operations by their Chinese opponents bordered on the strategic. Beijing’s political objective in launching the 1979 campaign was to induce the Vietnamese to leave Cambodia, and to this end it supported the main military campaign with a number of political, diplomatic, and lesser military initiatives.

Seeking to increase the military pressure on Vietnam, for example, China launched or resurrected a series of guerrilla movements throughout Indochina. The goal of these movements was to tie down the Vietnamese army and to erode the political power of the Hanoi government and its allies in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In the 1970s and 1980s, Beijing gave military and political assistance to the Khmer Rouge in its resistance against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. (Thailand and the United States similarly supported the noncommunist resistance in Cambodia in the 1980s.) On occasion working through its Thai allies, Beijing also supported, guided, or manipulated several other guerrilla operations that it hoped would tie down and weaken the Vietnamese. Some of these wars predated the 1979 campaign and had their origins in groups, such as FULRO (Le Front Unifie de Lutte des Races Opprimes), that had opposed the Saigon government before its collapse in 1975. Others, such as the Hmong insurgency in Laos, had their origins in American attempts to create an anti-Hanoi resistance during the Second Indochina War. And in a few cases, such as that of the United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, the combatants were remnants of the old South Vietnamese army, resurrected by refugees to take advantage of the stress the Chinese invasion was putting on the Vietnamese military. These guerrilla bands temporarily tied down some Vietnamese troops, but in the end they were never able to transition into widespread popular insurgencies.

Logistics

Throughout the 1979 campaign, the Chinese effort suffered from chronic logistical problems. Units frequently noted that they were required to operate without food and water. Even the GPD, which could always be depended on to put a gloss on any problem, admitted that the army had difficulties meeting its need for provisions. For example, three days after the invasion began, the 150 men of the 3rd Company of PLA Unit 53203 were down to a total, across the company, of eight individual meals. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency calculations indicate that the unit should have had more than 1,000 rations on hand at that point in the operation. Many Chinese soldiers also lacked water. The same 3rd Company of Unit 53203 reported that it ran out of water on the second night of the campaign: after marching eighteen kilometers in a single night, its soldiers were so thirsty that they licked the dew off the grass.

The trials of Unit 53203 were not unusual. There are so many examples in
unit histories of shortages such as these that the reader begins to believe that the hunger and thirst of individual soldiers was a metaphor for the greater sacrifice of the army. In truth, it is likely that the PLA suffered a massive failure of its logistics system. First, it was fighting in hostile territory, where there was no friendly population to provide food and water, as had happened during the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. Second, the supply cadres clearly failed to issue basic rations before the attack, because they were unable to move the rations forward fast enough, because they thought the war would end rapidly, or because they thought the rations would catch up with the advancing troops when the action slowed. And third, it may have been that the troops discarded their rations when stress of combat, lack of experience, and poor discipline convinced them that they had bigger problems to worry about. The net result, whatever the reason, was that the logisticians failed to ensure that Unit 53203 and many other units had the basic food rations that the soldiers needed. The provision of water was at least as bad. The hills of northern Vietnam in the dry season simply did not provide the water the PLA expected to find there.127

In contrast, there is scarce mention in Vietnamese unit histories of a lack of any supplies other than ammunition. Directed by the General Staff Department, the 571st Truck Division had as early as August 21, 1978, begun to make supply runs to the PAVN units of the First Military Region and the Second Military Region. By the end of 1980, the division was supporting Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, Laos, and on the Chinese border. The unit exceeded the northern border supply requirement by fulfilling 104 percent of the planned requirement.128

Hanoi at war

As the 1979 campaign unfolded, Vietnam had behind its thin screen of soldiers in Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son rapidly begun to construct a defense that was similar to the one that had stopped the Chinese in the past: a “Nhù Nguyet” defense.129 In 1077, the Vietnamese had defeated an invading Chinese army by fighting a delaying and harassing action that finally fell back on defenses along the Cau River (see Map 5). The Cau River flows from northwest to southeast across the Red River Delta, about 30–40 kilometers north of Hanoi. In the northwest, the river flows from the area around Thai Nguyen, gaining strength from the runoff of the Tam Dao Mountain range, a series of low, steep mountains near Hanoi. The river continues just north of Bac Ninh, before emptying into the lowest part of the Red River Delta. If it could hold the southern bank of the Cau River, Vietnam reasoned that it could stop the PLA from threatening Hanoi from the Cao Bang and Lang Son theaters because the main highways (Highways 3, 1A, and 1B) cross the river at just two points: the Soc Son Bridge and Bac Ninh. The strategy had worked in 1077, and Vietnam thought it would work again in 1979.

To execute the Nhù Nguyet strategy, the Vietnamese had first to reconfigure their forces.130 On March 2, the General Staff in Hanoi established the 5th Corps
in Military Region One. The corps, which consisted of the 3rd, 337th, 338th, 327th, and 347th Divisions and their supporting arms, was created out of units that were at or near Lang Son.\textsuperscript{131} Between March 3 and 5, the 1st Corps, including the 320B Division, the 338th Division (returned from assignment to the 5th Corps), and the 209th Regiment of the 312th Division, joined with the divisions of the 5th Corps in moving against the Chinese retreating through Chi Ma and Dong Mo.\textsuperscript{132} From March 1979 to July 1979, Hanoi continued to reconfigure its military, establishing or moving seven corps to the northern theater of operations.\textsuperscript{133}

Few of these troops were moved from Cambodia, as Beijing had hoped. Instead, Hanoi expanded its conscription campaign. On March 5, the Vietnamese Communist Party announced a new set of conscription criteria, and local party committees began screening volunteers and potential conscripts. Men from the age of eighteen to forty-five and women from the age of eighteen to thirty-five were eligible for service.\textsuperscript{134} In another form, conscription had already begun. In February, young men who had performed military service were called up to do labor service. The PAVN now sent these men north. The draftees, mostly from Hanoi and the Red River Delta, moved to camps along the Cau River to perform the backbreaking work of building Hanoi’s defenses.\textsuperscript{135}

Vietnam also needed weapons and equipment to make up for the enormous Chinese advantage in manpower and turned to the Soviet Union for help. Between April and July 1979, the Soviets refitted the 308th Division of the 1st Corps and other units with new equipment, including 111 BMP-1 armored personnel carriers.\textsuperscript{136} The BMP-1 was a significant advance over the armored personnel carriers that had so far been available to either side. If the Chinese were to resume their attack on Vietnam, these vehicles would enable the Vietnamese to move the 308th Division and other elements of the 1st Corps at high speed around the battlefield. The Soviets additionally provided advisers\textsuperscript{137} to the units that received the new vehicles, and these advisers presumably taught their students more than just the best way to change the oil or fix a short in an electric lamp. Presumably, the Soviets also taught the Vietnamese the lessons of the battlefield debut of the BMP-1 in the 1973 Arab–Israeli wars.

**Conclusion**

The 1979 campaign, at least for the PLA, was a failure. China launched its attack in an effort to force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. The Chinese withdrew from Vietnam on March 16, 1979, but the Vietnamese did not leave Cambodia until 1989.

The Chinese leadership in Beijing had believed the PLA to be strong enough to force Hanoi to divert its forces from the Cambodian occupation, but it clearly was not. Vietnam diverted some troops but conscripted many more, and the PLA had no further effect on life in Vietnam. Its campaign, which was intended to teach Hanoi that it could not keep its military forces in Cambodia, had taught the Vietnamese instead that, at least in the short term, they could comfortably
support military operations not only in Cambodia, but also in Laos and along the border with China. The PLA had amassed an enormous force and planned a war of “quick decision,” but it had failed utterly to make progress against the better-trained and more experienced PAVN. In the Korean War, a similar-sized PLA force had moved farther in twenty-four hours against a larger defending force than it moved in two weeks against fewer Vietnamese. Furthermore, in November 1950, the PLA had made its advances against forces that were far better equipped; in 1979, its enemy was the rough equivalent in the area of technology. The PLA air and naval forces were stalemated, with neither arm contributing to the campaign, and the logistical support of the ground operation was weak and intermittent. When the last PLA soldier returned to China on March 16, 1979, two things were clear: the PLA had failed as a pedagogical instrument; and, if the Chinese were to continue to try to force the Vietnamese out of Cambodia, changes had to be made. The last Maoist war was not over, but the Chinese had been taught a major lesson.

Before moving on to the events that followed the Chinese 1979 campaign in Northern Vietnam, it is illuminating to look closely at the war at the tactical level of operations. This chapter has given the reader a broad view of the strategy and operations the Chinese employed during the campaign. The next chapter gives the reader a closer look at the tactical problems the cadres and conscripts faced during the most important battle of the campaign: the Battle of Lang Son.
The Battle of Lang Son, February–March 1979

“Friendship Pass. How bitter the name . . .”

Nguyen Duy, “Lang Son, 1989”

Friendship Pass, a narrow gap between low hills and karst outcroppings, is a route frequently used by Chinese armies seeking to invade Vietnam. When PLA tanks rolled south through the pass in February 1979 toward Lang Son, the small city about eighteen kilometers south of the border that is the first significant town on the road, they followed a route the Sung, Yuan, Ming, and the Qing armies all had used. In each invasion in the past, the Chinese had encountered defeat or, at best, a costly victory. History was about to repeat itself (Map 9).

When the Chinese and Vietnamese armies clashed at Lang Son in 1979, the flaws of the PLA’s Maoist training were brutally exposed. During the Chinese Civil War, the first campaigns in Korea in 1950 and 1951, and the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Chinese army had fought “battles of quick decision.” At Lang Son, the PLA fought a slow, indecisive battle using tactics better suited to the nineteenth century than the late twentieth century. Its logistics failed it, and the advance as a result was spasmodic rather than the planned series of smooth, focused thrusts. And it did not use its artillery effectively, failing repeatedly to clear the way for the assault waves of Chinese infantry. Time after time, the infantry rushed into a storm of automatic gunfire that precise artillery fire might have silenced.

The relationship between the leaders and the led (guan bing yizhi) in the Chinese armies nonetheless was good, and the strong bond between cadres and conscripts kept the morale high: the soldiers enthusiastically followed the orders of their leaders, and even when repeated attacks failed they were ready to attack again. But this combination of high individual motivation with weak artillery support, a flawed logistics system, and the misplaced trust of the Chinese leadership in the tactics of massed infantry formations was a fatal mix. In 1979, the PLA demonstrated that, after almost twenty years of Maoism, it was a catastrophically ineffective army.

This chapter examines in detail the battle of Lang Son that was first mentioned in Chapter 4 and identifies the problems the PLA encountered in that
bitter fight. To both sides, Lang Son was the most important battle of the campaign, and the force that attacked Lang Son was as good as or better than the forces that China threw into the assaults against Cao Bang and Lao Cai. The conduct of the campaign in the Lang Son area and its results are as a result a good indication of the best that the PLA could do in 1979.

The build-up

From a military point of view, Lang Son, 18 kilometers south of Friendship Pass and a mere 154 kilometers north of Hanoi, is the most important point on the 1,281-kilometer border between China and Vietnam. During the Sung Dynasty, Vietnamese strategists estimated that it would take the Chinese army only four days to cover the distance between the pass and Hanoi (then known as Thang Long) using the route through Lang Son.⁴ In 1979, it took less than a day to drive the route in a truck or car.⁵

Lang Son’s history as an invasion route for Chinese armies and its proximity
to Hanoi were important factors in the Chinese selection of the city as the primary axis of attack for the 1979 invasion. One other factor made it irresistible, however: Lang Son is the meeting place for Vietnam’s national highways 1A, 1B, 4A, and 4B and the railroad for China. (The Vietnamese were so sensitive about these lines of communication that the *Atlas of Land Routes*, a “secret” volume published by the PAVN General Logistics Department in 1980, does not show the road and rail lines that ran to the border.)

In late 1978, the PLA General Staff Department assigned to the Chinese 55th, 54th, and 43rd Armies the crucial mission of seizing Lang Son. The 55th Army, a Guangzhou Military Region unit, had a relatively short distance to travel to the border area. The 54th and 43rd Armies, Wuhan Military Region units, in contrast came 1,000 kilometers by rail and road to their jumping-off points. Each of these armies had three infantry divisions, an artillery regiment, and an antiaircraft artillery regiment. At full strength, each army would comprise about 43,000 fighters and cadres. The Chengdu Military Region also contributed to the assault force, at a minimum supplying three regiments, identified only as Unit 56037, Unit 56039, and Unit 56229. In total, the PLA deployed about 130,000 soldiers to ensure a quick decision at Lang Son.

South of the border, the Vietnamese General Staff Department had in mid-1978 assigned the defense of the town to the 3rd PAVN Division. The division, commanded by Nguyen Duy Thuong, had been established in September 1965 in Binh Dinh province, in the former Republic of Vietnam. It had been a constant problem for the Americans and South Vietnamese during the Second Indochina War, and in April 1975 it ultimately had spearheaded the attack against Saigon. At full strength, the 3rd Division had about 9,950 men on its rolls, in large part members of the division’s three founding North Vietnamese regiments that had infiltrated into South Vietnam in the early 1960s. For the defense of Lang Son, the local force battalions of Lang Son City, Van Lang, and Cao Loc districts had been assigned to the 3rd Division, and the 166th Artillery Regiment and 272nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment additionally had been sent from the First Military Region reserve. The total number of defenders probably was about 13,000. They were outnumbered ten to one. Although the Vietnamese could count on a friendly local population, the odds were heavily against them.

Striving to make the best of its chances, the 3rd Division dug in. By January 1979, its soldiers had built almost 20,000 field fortifications, including sixty kilometers of defensive trenches, and had shifted an estimated 113,500 cubic meters of dirt. Camouflage, minefields, and a variety of cleverly placed obstacles made the fortifications even more formidable. The soldiers of the division also sweated through technical and tactical training and all the while were instructed and cajoled by their commanders and political officers to be ruthless on the battlefield.

There are five natural approaches to Lang Son from the north, east, and south, each with its own road. The Chinese planned to attack along all of these routes, filling them with fast-moving forces of two, three, or more divisions. The attack was to be an application of Mao’s dictum that Chinese armies should fight
“battles of quick decision on external lines” (wai xian de su jue de jin gong zhan). There was to be a quick, decisive victory at Lang Son.16

In the extreme northwest, the 163rd Division of the 55th Army, supported by an additional tank battalion, was to move from its attack position on the border at markers 15 and 16 to cut Highway 4A. This would deny Lang Son resupply or reinforcement from Cao Bang.17 Having secured the highway, the 163rd was to turn south to seize Hill 386 and Hill 438. Highway 4A is less than 150 meters west of the border at marker 16 and the straight-line distance from marker 16 to Hill 438 just 3.5 kilometers.

The 164th Division of the 55th Army and an additional tank battalion were to attack south from Friendship Pass to seize the town of Dong Dang (CH: Tong Deng), less than four kilometers away. Having achieved this intermediate objective, it was to move on to Lang Son, a further fifteen kilometers to the south. The 164th’s route was to take it directly down the road and rail lines in the long valley to Lang Son.18

The third division of the 55th Army, the 165rd, was not scheduled to participate in the first phase of the operation and was most probably held in reserve.

To the east of the 55th Army’s positions, the 54th Army of the Wuhan Military Region assembled near border markers 19 and 20. The 54th was to send a force on a wide flanking movement to the east of Dong Dang, to seize the hamlet of Tham Lung that lies astride Highway 4A and thus to isolate Dong Dang from Lang Son.19 The straight-line distance from border markers 19 and 20 to Tham Lung is no more than eight kilometers, but the intervening terrain comprises a series of hills with elevations in the range of 600 to 800 meters. To arrive at Tham Lung in time to place an effective block on the highway, the men of the 54th Army would need to move very fast. In support of this attack, another Chinese unit was to attack and seize the hamlet of Ban Roi to open a route, according to the Vietnamese, via which a pack-horse unit would resupply the soldiers around Tham Lung.20

About twenty or thirty kilometers to the southeast, responsibility for the second major drive toward Lang Son was given to the 127th Division of the 43rd Army. Launching its attack from a position between border markers 32 and 33, the division had the hardest approach to its objective of any of the Chinese units deployed against Lang Son. Ahead lay thirty kilometers of narrow, unpaved road, winding from the Chinese border through the tiny villages of Ban Xam and Luc Quyen and eventually to an intersection with Highway 1A at Cao Loc. If it succeeded in pressing this far, the division would gain a route into Lang Son through the city’s northeastern subdistrict of Ky Lua.21

The third Chinese assault on Lang Son was to come up from the south of the city. Striking out from their assembly areas near border markers 43 and 45, the 43rd Army’s 128th Division and 129th Division were to push through Chi Ma (CH: Zhi Ma) and assault Loc Binh (CH: Lu Ping), about ten kilometers distant and a key town astride Highway 4B.22 Capturing Loc Binh would isolate the Lang Son battlefield from the coast. Once the town was secure, the Chinese divisions would drive north to attack Lang Son from its southern quarter.
Command of the Chinese operations on the Lang Son Front was given to Xu Shiyu, the commander of the Guangzhou Military Region and the man responsible for all Chinese forces that were attack out of Guangxi province. Xu was a prominent member of the Chinese military aristocracy. Seventy-three years old in 1979, he had served in the army during the Civil War and the Anti-Japanese War, commanding a cavalry regiment on the Long March and in 1937 serving briefly with the same 129th Division that he was to command in 1979 as part of the 43rd Army. He had commanded the Nanjing Military Region from 1954 to 1974 and the Guangzhou Military Region since 1974.23 The CCP had recognized the political value of Xu’s service in 1969 by elevating him to the Politburo of the Central Committee.

Xu’s last combat service had been in 1949, but in his role as commander of the invasion force he was in any case far from autonomous. He had an enormous amount of supervision and assistance, first and foremost from Deng Xiaoping, the Chief of the PLA General Staff Department and Vice Chairman of the CCP Military Affairs Commission. Deng controlled every aspect of PLA operations on all fronts,24 and according to Ruan Ming he believed the Vietnam invasion would go as quickly and as smoothly as had Chinese attacks in the past.25 During the Civil War, Deng had served as the political commissar of Liu Bocheng’s Second Field Army, when he had participated in battles in central China that truly had been “battles of quick decision.” Serving in senior party and government posts in the 1950s and 1960s, he again had watched the PLA conduct quick, decisive campaigns: during the 1962 conflict with India. For example, the Chinese had conducted two separate attacks, each of a few days’ duration, in the Northeastern Frontier Agency and on each occasion had penetrated about 100 kilometers into the Indian territory.26 Deng additionally could not fail to note the speed with which foreign armies had conducted recent campaigns. In 1945, the Soviet army had rapidly defeated the Japanese in Manchuria in a decisive campaign that lasted from August 9 to 16, 1945.27 The 1973 Arab–Israeli war had seen Israeli armies making thirty- and forty-kilometer gains in a day; the North Vietnamese had conquered South Vietnam in less than sixty days; and, most recently, the contentious Vietnamese offensive in Cambodia had achieved its objectives with just a few days of fighting. Deng Xiaoping was aware of the many problems that faced the PLA, but he clearly felt that a rapid, decisive attack on Vietnam remained within the capabilities of the Chinese armed forces.

Deng’s oversight of operations may have been welcome. In many ways, Xu needed all the help he could get. His command included two major areas of operations, Lang Son and Cao Bang, and in the Cao Bang area alone, he probably had five armies or major elements of armies in action, drawn from two or three separate military regions. Only a little more than a third of the Chinese forces that were to invade Vietnam from their assembly areas in Guangxi belonged permanently in Xu’s Guangzhou Military Region. Additionally, if the war lasted longer than a week, the soldiers would need to be resupplied – and the resupply of a huge, heterogeneous force is a complex problem for any army.28
Xu’s counterpart on the Vietnamese side was the much younger Nguyen Duy Thuong. Thuong had fought in South Vietnam in the early 1960s, but his first engagement of note did not come until 1969, when he served as Deputy Commander of the 12th Regiment of the 3rd Division in fighting against South Korean troops in Binh Dinh province. Thuong came to command the 12th Regiment, and during the North Vietnamese offensive in early 1972 he had led the regiment in an attack that blocked National Highway 19, isolating South Vietnamese forces fighting in the Central Highlands. In 1975, Thuong was promoted to Chief of Staff of the 3rd Division, from which position he led the division’s attacks along National Route 1 that led to the fall of the Saigon government. When the Second Indochina War ended in 1975, he commanded the 3rd during its service as a garrison division in southern Vietnam. By February 1979, Thuong had more than ten years of combat experience with the 3rd Division.

Like Xu, Thuong undoubtedly received advice and supervision. In 1979, Vietnam’s most celebrated general, Vo Nguyen Giap, was in the last year of his service as the Minister of Defense. The Chief of the PAVN General Staff Department was Van Tien Dung, the architect of “The Great Spring Victory” that had decisively ended the Second Indochina War, and Chu Huy Man, an important leader in the final offensive of the war against the Saigon government, was chief of the General Political Department. Both Dung and Man visited the 3rd Division in late 1978, and while there is no record of any high-level meetings they may have held, it is almost certain that their visits were more than simply morale builders for the troops. Thuong nonetheless had a good record as a field commander, and the Hanoi generals seemed content to let him make his own decisions.

The plan for the Vietnamese defense was simple. The 3rd Division’s 12th Regiment would defend the area north of Lang Son and stop the Chinese advance from Friendship Pass along Highway 4A. The 141st Regiment would defend the eastern and southeastern approaches to the city. In Lang Son itself, the 2nd Regiment was held as the divisional reserve, supported by the 68th Artillery Regiment. The division was additionally supported in Lang Son by elements of the First Military Region’s 166th Artillery Regiment and the 272nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment, by three local force battalions, and by a few militia. The only organized militia operations in the Lang Son area otherwise were in the vicinity of Loc Binh and in Mau Son and Long Dau, along what was to be the Chinese 128th Division’s line of march.

The attack from the north

At 05:00 on February 17, while morning mist still covered the hills and streams along the border, the first Chinese artillery shells fell in the Lang Son area (Maps 10 and 11). Overnight, the Chinese had infiltrated the border, cutting telephone lines and sabotaging important buildings in Dong Dang. Sometime before midnight, Lao Majiu, a member of the 165th Division’s Reconnaissance Company, had become perhaps the first Chinese soldier to die in the battle of
Lang Son. Now, as the Vietnamese returned the Chinese artillery fire, the battle began in earnest.

The first objective of the Chinese 55th Army was Hill 386, about 1.5 kilometers south of border Marker 16. The PAVN soldiers defending the hill said that they “were surprised to see rank after rank of enemy troops surging toward their positions like a swarm of ants.” The Chinese soldiers poured across the flat open area between border marker 16 and the defenders on the hill “like a massive flood,” shouting “Da, da!” (“Hit, hit!”) as they ran. The sound of bugles and sirens accompanied the charge. This human wave swept toward the Vietnamese defenders and crashed over their defensive positions. Resistance on Hill 386 ended quickly, with 118 Vietnamese killed. The survivors faded away south to more defensible terrain.

The Vietnamese continued to hold out in isolated pockets near Friendship Pass and in the town of Dong Dang, but the bulk of the Vietnamese force had dug in further south, along a series of low hills that crosses the valley about three kilometers south of Friendship Pass and 1 kilometer south of Dong Dang. At the center of this line lay Tham Mo hamlet, on a low hill a few hundred meters south of the intersection of Highways 4A and 1B and the railroad tracks...
that run from Lang Son in Vietnam to Nanning, in China. One kilometer to the east of Tham Mo is Hill 423 and beyond that the commanding hill in the east, Hill 505. About 750 meters to the west of Tham Mo, across a gap through which run Highway 1B and the railroad, is Hill 339. A long, low spur runs off to the northwest from Hill 339 for about 1,000 meters, affording a commanding view of the low-lying land before Tham Mo and across Dang Dong. A further 1,000 meters to the west of Hill 339 is Hill 438, and beyond that is a forbidding series of steep hills intersected by narrow trails and box canyons. The Vietnamese 12th Regiment had set up its headquarters on Hill 438. The Tham Mo line was not a perfect defensive position, but it was very close.

After taking Hill 386, the Chinese moved against the Tham Mo line, several battalions of the 165th Division testing the Tham Mo fortifications, while soldiers of the 164th Division attacked the French Fort, a collection of stone structures on Tham Mo Hill and Hill 339. In the same way that they had assaulted Hill 386, the PLA troops raced up the slopes in waves. This time they were supported also by tanks, arriving in small groups of two or three from the north on Highway 4A.

The Chinese soldiers were repulsed with heavy losses and responded by attempting two envelopment maneuvers. To the east, an ambitious move to cut around behind the Vietnamese line was already underway, in the form of the wide hook toward the village of Tham Lung. Unit 33980 of the 54th Army had been charged with crossing the ten or twelve kilometers of sawtooth hills to seize Tham Lung. The second attempt involved a strike at the hamlet of Con Khoang, in the rear of Hill 339, and was altogether less imaginative, requiring as
it did that the attacking force drive between Hill 438 and Hill 339. If Con Khoang could be taken, however, the Chinese would be able to assault each hill in the line in sequence with an attack from three sides.

The Vietnamese spotted the Chinese enveloping force. Regimental Commander Nguyen Xuan Khanh and Regimental Political Commissar Dong Si Tai ordered the last uncommitted company on Hill 339, the 3rd Company of the 6th Battalion (63rd Company) to move to Con Khoang to stop the envelopment. When the 63rd attacked, at around 09:00, it caught the Chinese in the open in low ground and rice fields. Although fighting at odds of four and five to one, the Vietnamese had the advantage of cover and drove the Chinese soldiers back toward a Vietnamese platoon that had moved into a blocking position astride their route of retreat. The outcome was devastating. According to the Vietnamese, a Chinese prisoner later admitted that “on 17 February one of our battalions was almost completely annihilated at the foot of Hill 438.”

The battle along the Tham Mo line continued until 20:00 on February 22, with the Chinese fighting ferociously to break through. The Vietnamese 3rd Division history reports, “Each day they [the Chinese] launched seven to ten separate assaults, sometimes using almost an entire division to attack positions held by less than two battalions of our troops... When we crushed one of their regiments they simply sent in a new regiment to take its place.” Every available soldier was thrown into the attack. Although the Chinese militia usually performed transportation or police roles in rear areas, in the battle on the Tham Mo line, they found themselves in the center of the action. In just one example, militia deputy platoon leader Lu Tiangui found himself leading combined patrols of 55th Army soldiers and militiamen on Hill 339.

Enemy gunfire was not the only trial for the Chinese soldiers in the line. Less than one week into the campaign, when fighting north of Lang Son was at its most fierce, Chinese units began to report shortages of food and water. Unit 53514, a 55th Army unit engaged in the attack on Hill 339, reported that its higher unit had not sent food for several days and that its soldiers had not eaten in two. Unit 53515, another 55th Army unit, also reported a food and water shortage. Cadres acted “heroically” to ensure that the troops and the wounded got the last scraps of food and the few drops of water that remained, but the Chinese supply line, despite extending just four or five kilometers into Vietnam and less than thirty kilometers from the railhead at Pingxiang (VN: Bang Tuong), had failed.

The resilience of the Vietnamese defenders forced a change of tactics upon the Chinese, and on February 22, these bore fruit when the 163rd Division, the 55th Army’s reserve division, finally broke through the Tham Mo line. The Deputy Divisional Commander, Song Baoshun, and Deputy Divisional Political Commissar, Li Shengfu, conceded that massed frontal attacks were failing and directed their units to instead make small-unit assaults around the flanks of the Vietnamese positions. The Vietnamese immediately noticed the change, remarking that the Chinese had “lost their enthusiasm” for large group assaults.

The new Chinese tactics were not universally applied, however. To the rear
of the Tham Mo line, the Chinese units attacking Tham Lung persisted with the massed infantry attacks. The enveloping Chinese force had arrived near Tham Lung late on February 17 and from positions on Hill 409 immediately attacked several hills near the hamlet. On February 18, a Vietnamese counterattack by the 3rd Division’s reserve regiment, the 2nd Infantry Regiment, pushed the Chinese back to their assembly areas on Hill 409, Hill 611, and Hill 675, thus setting the pattern for the next few days. Artillery fire from both sides continued at all hours.

The Vietnamese, however, were able to strengthen their positions by reinforcing a pair of tiny settlements, Ban Phan and Phai Mon, to the immediate north and east of Tham Lung. They also emplaced a battery of rapid-fire eighty-five-millimeter guns on Hill 417, in an elevated position a little more than 1,000 meters south of the hamlet. On February 23, the Chinese tried to seize Phai Mon, with initial disastrous results: hundreds of PLA soldiers troops were sent forward in six waves, and every attack failed. After twelve more attacks during the course of the day, Tham Lung and the surrounding hills fell, but the Chinese losses were appalling. According to a Vietnamese intercept of Chinese communications traffic on the evening of February 23, more than 1,000 Chinese soldiers died that day in the Tham Lung attacks.

For the next three days, from February 24 to 26, there was little combat in the Lang Son area. Despite the breaking of the Tham Mo line, Vietnamese 3rd Division troops continued to hold out in pockets in Dong Dang and the hills around Highway 4A, launching harassing attacks on the Chinese line of communications. The invading Chinese forces were obliged to hold back and seek them out, but in the meantime they also regrouped. The 160th Division and 161st Division of the 54th Army appear to have moved up to lead the attacks, with the 55th Army prepared to move against Lang Son. The Vietnamese withdrew those of their troops that could be disengaged and set up a new defensive line from Coc Chu to Hill 417, on the western side of Highway 4A at Tham Lung. The defenders on this line were charged with limiting Chinese egress from Tham Lung and ensuring that the highway remained closed.

At 06:05 on February 27, the Chinese assaults resumed. Fighting during the early part of the day was tentative and inconclusive, as the Chinese sought to assimilate the change from massed attack columns to small assault groups, but at 14:00, the Chinese found a weakness in the Vietnamese defenses. Whether by luck or through skill and a formidable resolve, a Chinese unit, probably Unit 53503, broke through the Vietnamese lines and seized Khau Ma Son (CH: Koumashan), a vital 800-meter peak about four kilometers west-northwest of Lang Son. From Khau Ma Son, almost all the key road junctions near the city can be observed and interdicted. The peak also overlooked the Vietnamese 12th Regiment’s defensive line from Coc Chu to Hill 417, about five kilometers to the northeast, and its defensive positions near Choc Vo, about five kilometers to the northwest.

The seizure of Khau Ma Son put Chinese infantry behind the Vietnamese main line of defense, and a mere three kilometers from Highway 4A. If the
Chinese had acted quickly, they could have marched down the slopes from Khau Ma Son, cut the highway, and left the 12th Regiment stranded behind Chinese lines. Lang Son would have lain open to assault. But it was the Vietnamese who reacted first. The 3rd Division commander moved troops from the Coc Chu–Hill 417 line, which was now exposed and of no tactical value, to a new set of positions that linked Quan Ha and Keo Cang. The new positions once again blocked Chinese access to the highway.  

The Vietnamese commanders were also reconfiguring their forces elsewhere on the Lang Son Front. On February 28, the 42nd Regiment of the 327th Division was moved up into the line. The 327th had until this time been held in reserve near Chi Lang, south of Lang Son, to contain any possible Chinese breakthrough. The 42nd deployed around the district of Ky Lua, about one kilometer north of Lang Son City and five kilometers from its center, to defend against the approaching forces of the Chinese 43rd Army that was by now approaching from Ban Xam and Luc Quyen. Dug in around Ky Lua, the 42nd also supported the badly weakened 12th Regiment in its defensive positions on the Quan Ha–Keo Cang line, about two kilometers further north.  

This reconfiguration of the Vietnamese defenders left only the 3rd Division and the freshly installed 42nd Regiment to protect Lang Son. All other Vietnamese units on the Lang Son Front were now positioned below and to the west of the Ky Cung River, the waterway that wraps around the city to its south. The 1st Corps, comprising the 308th, 312th, and 320B Divisions, was assembled along Highway 1A, on the road to Hanoi. To the rear of the 1st Corps, PAVN units in Hanoi were placed on alert and the people of Hanoi set to building fortifications along the Cau River and in the Tam Dao hills. The Vietnamese leaders had not lost sight of their strategic goal: defend Hanoi.  

From February 28 to March 4, the two sides fought a series of ferocious battles as the Chinese tried to break through to Lang Son. After the fall of Khau Ma Son, the battle along the Dong Dang–Lang Son axis broke down into a series of seemingly disconnected fights, but it did not get easier for the Chinese. Although the 12th Vietnamese Regiment was by now greatly reduced in strength, it continued to actively contest the hills along Highway 1B: one battalion ambushed a Chinese unit on the highway on March 2, and other battalions and companies fought on for Hill 607 and Hill 649. Further west, in what would prove to be the deepest point of Chinese penetration in the battle, PLA troops near Ban Lan continued to face tactical and logistical problems. Defending an unidentified hill against repeated Vietnamese attacks, one company of Unit 56037 lost one-third of its men over the period March 2–10. The Chinese soldiers were moreover fighting without support, as the company’s parent unit had stopped sending food to its beleaguered troops. The company quartermaster had to resort to making a round trip of ten kilometers, twice a day, to bring in the 25–30 kilograms of supplies that kept his men fed.  

On March 2, the General Staff in Hanoi reconfigured the defending units in the Lang Son region into the 5th Corps and ordered the 3rd Division to abandon the defense of the city. The battered 3rd was made the corps reserve and on
March 4 was instructed to reorganize for future operations. The 12th Regiment, however, which remained cut off from its parent unit, was ordered to hold its position in the hills along Highway 1B.53 Few details are known of the fate of the 42nd Regiment in Ky Lua, but it may be presumed that it had been instructed to withdraw from Lang Son at the same time as the 3rd Division.54

The attack from the south

Attacking from the south and east of Lang Son, the Chinese 43rd Army traversed a greater distance to the same objective than did the 55th and 54th, but its experiences in the two and a half weeks after February 17 were otherwise all too similar (Maps 12 and 13). The 43rd had two routes into Lang Son from the border; straddled across these and with almost limitless opportunities for ambush waited the Vietnamese 141st Regiment.55

Moving west on the northernmost of the two routes, a fair-weather, loose surface road that ran from border markers 32 and 33 to Highway 4A in Ky Lua, the Chinese 129th Division immediately ran into trouble. By February 27, it had been fought to such a crawl by the 141st Regiment that it had progressed only five kilometers to Ban Xam. By March 2, and having committed its last reserves,
the 129th arrived in the Ky Lua district of Lang Son, but too late to influence the
battle. The Vietnamese had already begun shifting the 3rd Division out of
the city.56

On the southern approach to Lang Son, the 127th Division and 128th Divi-
sion crossed the border at Chi Ma (CH: Zhi Ma), pushing ten kilometers along a
fair-weather road to the small town of Loc Binh (CH: Lu Ping).57 As was the
experience of the 129th Division, progress was slow: Loc Binh fell only on Feb-
uary 28, after eleven days of fighting. Lang Son still lay twenty-two kilometers
away, north on Highway 4B.58 Vietnamese resistance remained strong, but it
was imperative for the Chinese units that they increase the tempo of their
advance, and they sought to do so with persistent massed, frontal attacks. They
attacked in such tight bodies of soldiers that as one man fell another would
immediately appear in his place (qian pu hou ji).59

The Chinese advance crossed the Ky Cung River at Phieng Phuc
(CH: Pianfu), following a line through the hills to the west of Highway 4B. The
Vietnamese defenses on Me Mai hill (CH: Mimaishan) eventually succumbed to
the Chinese offensive; Mai Pho airfield and Hill 391, to the southeast of Lang
Son, fell on the night of March 4; and the two divisions entered the city on
March 5.60 The Vietnamese defenders had begun their withdrawal three days
previously.
The resistance of the badly outnumbered Vietnamese on the approach to Lang Son had been so effective and Chinese losses so great that the PLA had been compelled to make early reinforcement of its front-line units. Among the units unexpectedly thrown into the battle were the cadets of the Guangzhou Military Region Infantry School (guangzhou junqu bubing xuexiao), who joined the 43rd Army near Loc Binh and fought on to Lang Son. The soldiers from the school made at least one notable contribution to the operation.

Artillery instructors Zhang Shulin and Shi Ling noticed that artillery support of the Chinese infantry was poor. The PLA artillerymen fired their guns with little awareness of the exact location of their targets. Their fire direction on occasion was simply based on observation of where the infantry appeared to be shooting. At other times, they would simply lay down a general barrage, in one example recorded as 250 rounds in seven minutes, and would then cease firing. Sufficient defenders invariably survived these barrages for the Vietnamese to resume their defense almost undiminished. The PLA furthermore had little understanding of how best to deploy its artillery on the battlefield. Artillery is least effective when fired at close range without the use of sights and without proper target selection, yet the Chinese gunners, citing Mao’s enthusiasm for “exterminating the enemy at close range” (jin zhan jian di), commonly would push their guns to within 150–200 meters of the Vietnamese. Not only did this limit the accuracy of the gunners, but it also put them within easy range of the small arms fire of their targets. In its enthusiasm for Mao’s military principles, the PLA had reduced the effectiveness of its artillery to that of Napoleon’s artillery 160 years earlier. Zhang and Shi, from their vantage point in the front lines of the Chinese assault, showed the gunners how to calculate firing data and thus, in the later stages of the battle for Lang Son, to provide precision support to the hard-pressed infantry.

The Vietnamese defense
The February 28 deployment of the Vietnamese 42nd Regiment to the defense of Ky Lua marked a significant development in the defense of Lang Son. It was evidence that the Vietnamese had begun to build a defense in depth between Lang Son and Hanoi; it was also the first deployment of a reserve Vietnamese unit, foretelling the arrival of new divisions in the areas south and west of Lang Son.

The Ministry of Defense in Hanoi, having reassessed the Chinese threat, began to review its defense. On March 2, it established the 5th Corps in Military Region One, pulling together under a single umbrella the 3rd, 327th, 337th, 338th, and the 347th divisions. On the same day, it ordered the 3rd Division to abandon the defense of Lang Son and to fall back as the corps reserve. Two days later, the new corps headquarters ordered the 3rd Division to begin reorganizing itself for future operations.

Rather than throw additional divisions into the battle for Lang Son City, the leadership in Hanoi clearly had decided to limit the Chinese penetration.
into the city. Lang Son was sacrificed to the PLA in return for the opportunity to build a much stronger defense, using fresh divisions, to the south and west of the Ky Cung River. As part of this defense, the remainder of the 327th Division was moved to the area south of Lang Son, and the 337th Division was ordered to set up defensive positions south of the Ky Cung River near the Khanh Khe Bridge.66

The fresh divisions also deployed in defensive positions along Highway 1A in the vicinity of Dong Mo, 37 kilometers south of Lang Son. Steep mountains border the highway at this point as it passes through a valley about four kilometers long and up to one kilometer wide. Dong Mo is the modern name for Chi Lang, which in 981, 1076, and 1427 had proven its worth as a defensive position. Three invading Chinese armies had already been ambushed in Chi Lang, and there was every reason for the Vietnamese to believe that a fourth could fall to ambush in 1979.67 Finally, further south, the 308th Division of the 1st Corps took position south of the Cau River, along the Nhu Nguyet line.68

The lessons of Lang Son

For the Chinese, Friendship Pass has become a “bitter” name. Although the PLA had a ten-to-one advantage in numbers of troops and had comparable weaponry to the PAVN, and although it had established an extraordinary ability to fight “battles of quick decision,”69 it had failed to fight an effective and efficient campaign. It was ineffective because its tactics did not translate into rapid advances, and it was inefficient because it lost large numbers of troops to attain small gains.

At the root of the PLA’s inefficiency was the inefficiency of the subsystems of the PLA “machine.” The artillery doctrine of the PLA was stuck in the age of centralized area targeting, denying the infantry precision artillery support and wasting ammunition in barrages against dispersed Vietnamese fortifications. The logistics system was a failure: in the PLA’s most important battle for more than twenty-five years, its troops were within days of crossing the border short of food, water, and clothing. And the personnel system was flawed: restaffing depleted troop units with militiamen or cadets, regardless of the quality of the individual, was a sign of a broken system.

The political system, in contrast, worked well. The assaults on the Tham Mo line and on Tham Lung demonstrated the effectiveness of the cadres in motivating their soldiers, who repeatedly would pour forward in human waves (CH: ren hai zhan shu; VN: chien luoc bien nguoi) against resolute and equally committed Vietnamese defenders. Despite the evidence to the contrary, the Chinese troops continued to believe that their massed attacks could overcome any odds. It is the final irony of the battle of Lang Son that this Maoist indoctrination of the Chinese soldier – the key to motivating him – was also the root cause of battlefield inefficiency and ineffectiveness. When the political system worked, the PLA did not.
6 Artillery diplomacy
Waiting for the “second lesson”

The Sino-Vietnamese conflict did not end when China withdrew its troops from Vietnam in March 1979. Beijing had not abandoned its strategic goal of persuading Vietnam to withdraw its troops from Cambodia and made this perfectly plain on July 26, 1979, when Vice Premier Geng Biao warned that China would teach Vietnam a “second lesson.” But although hostilities were to continue in Cambodia and along the Sino-Vietnamese border for almost ten more years and guerrilla wars, supported by Beijing, were to smolder in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos for most of those ten years, China’s “second lesson” never came.

Many scholars see the 1979 Chinese campaign in northern Vietnam as an isolated outbreak of violence over border boundaries, refugee issues, or Vietnam’s alignment with the Soviet Union. This definition is too narrow. Indochina was wracked by armed conflict from 1978 to 1991, and China was a significant player throughout, constant in its strategic objectives of forcing the Vietnamese to leave Cambodia and of resurrecting the regime of Pol Pot. While the second lesson never came, it was repeatedly threatened, with the implication that it would entail another massive military campaign against northern Vietnam. Beijing in the end failed to achieve its strategic objectives, because the PLA was incapable of backing up China’s rhetoric with action. The 1979 campaign in northern Vietnam had exposed the PLA as ineffectual. From 1979 to 1987, the Chinese repeatedly conducted large-scale operations against Vietnam, but the Vietnamese army in Cambodia continued to root out and destroy the Cambodian resistance camps along the Thai–Cambodian border.

The other protagonists in the Third Indochina War were similarly obdurate. While Vietnam continued to pursue its strategy of replacing the Khmer Rouge government with a friendlier administration, Thailand, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the United States maintained their own strategies of isolating Vietnam and trying to prevent it destroying the Cambodian resistance camps. The Soviet Union likewise stood by its strategic policy in the region, in its case of surrounding China and distracting Beijing from its modernization program. But in the end, the war became as protracted as it did because China, the most powerful player in the region and the only one that alone conceivably had the resources to resolve the situation, proved unable to achieve its diplomatic objectives and unable militarily to impose its will on the Vietnamese.
When diplomacy failed and military force failed, a long, indecisive war was the result.

The Third Indochina War was not an unregulated spasm of violence. The war followed a pattern dictated by politics, the weather, and a host of other factors. Politics shaped the pattern of the war because the belligerents all were inflexible in their political goals, and all were prepared to use force to attain those goals. At times when violent action was seen to have a political or propaganda benefit, the conflict thus grew more intense. For example, the April 1984 visit to China of the U.S. President Reagan presented to the Chinese leadership the opportunity to remind the United States that Beijing was protecting America’s Thai ally against the “expansionist” Vietnamese. China accordingly launched its most intense attacks along the Sino-Vietnamese border since the 1979 campaign. Other visits or statements by important Chinese, Vietnamese, American, Thai, Cambodian, and Soviet officials elicited similar actions from the Chinese.

The weather also shaped the pattern of the war. The hostilities generally were at their most intense in the months around the turn of the year, when in the cooler, dry weather Vietnam would conduct its annual offensives against the resistance bases and refugee camps on the Thai–Cambodian border. In December, when the last storms of the rainy season died away, Vietnam would renew its attacks on the Cambodian bases; in April, when the rains returned, military operations would grind once more to a halt. On the Sino-Vietnamese border, the dry season begins in mid-October and runs to mid-April, and again it was in this period when the Chinese assaults on Vietnamese border positions would reach their peak. Fighting also took place in the hot, rainy months of the year, but typically at this time, it would take the form of Khmer Rouge guerrilla attacks or spontaneous border skirmishes.

1979: the impasse takes shape

When the Chinese withdrew from northern Vietnam on March 16, 1979, far from pulling out from Cambodia, Hanoi tightened its grip on the country. In late March, in an action that was a symbolic slap to the Chinese, Vietnam launched another offensive in the western Cambodian province of Battambang, sending three divisions of approximately 50,000 troops against the Khmer Rouge bases around Pailin and Poipet. By mid-May, 15,000 of the 30,000 Khmer Rouge troops in the area had been killed, wounded, or captured.

The 1979 dry season had been disastrous for Beijing: its ally in Cambodia had lost control of all but a tiny area of the country, and its own efforts to induce Vietnam to quit Cambodia had shown few signs of success. The Vietnamese, despite being pressed by hostile forces on two fronts, had deposed the Pol Pot regime and replaced it with the more sympathetic government of Heng Samrin. Other than a few scattered bands of Khmer Rouge guerrillas and an enormous number of refugees along Cambodia’s border with Thailand, the only significant remnant of the Pol Pot regime was the seat in the United Nations that, with strong U.S. support, the Khmer Rouge continued to hold.
Despite Beijing’s objections, Vietnam continued to expand its area of control in Cambodia, but the two sides were at least talking to one another. On March 15, the day before China completed its withdrawal from Vietnam, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs had notified Beijing that it was willing to open negotiations one week after the last Chinese soldier left Vietnam. Less than a month later, Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Han Nianlong arrived in Hanoi for discussions about the state of Sino-Vietnamese relations. The discussions continued throughout 1979, with the two sides meeting on numerous occasions, but by the end of the year, there had been little progress made toward resolving their differences.⁵

Away from the negotiating table, Beijing persisted in its efforts to free Cambodia from the influence of Hanoi. When China withdrew from northern Vietnam in March, the Chinese leadership claimed that it “did not want one inch of Vietnamese territory.”⁶ On the ground, however, its troops held onto about sixty square kilometers of disputed territory that Vietnam had controlled before the incursion. In a few places, such as the area around Friendship Gate, near Lang Son, the Chinese retained territory that was symbolically but not militarily important. In other cases, the terrain retained had military significance for future Chinese operations against Vietnam.⁷

China’s withholding of these areas angered Hanoi, and a series of clashes occurred as the two sides fought for their control. Beijing also instigated guerrilla attacks against Vietnam’s allies. On March 7, 1979, the government of Laos, which had entered into a Laos–Vietnam Friendship Treaty on July 18, 1977, denounced the Chinese attack on Vietnam. But later that month, Western journalists traveling in Laos learned that the Chinese had formed guerrilla groups among the Meo tribesmen of Phong Saly province and heard reports of Chinese troop movements along the Sino-Lao border.⁸

Alerted to Beijing’s intentions and forewarned of a “second lesson,” Vietnam dramatically expanded its military forces along its northern border. But instead of moving troops from Cambodia, as China had hoped, Hanoi organized a series of drafts of men aged between eighteen and thirty-five, assigning the conscripts to several new or enlarged units.⁹ It also undertook a major reorganization of the PAVN. On March 9, identifying the unique defensive needs of Quang Ninh province, it established the Quang Ninh Special Front (Mat Tran Quang Ninh), assigning to it the 328th Division, the 323rd Division, and local forces.¹⁰ Quang Ninh, the coastal province on the extreme east of the Sino-Vietnamese border, is vulnerable to both ground assault and amphibious landings. On March 30, Hanoi next set up the 379 Front (Mat Tran 379) to control Regional Corps 678 (Binh Doan 678).¹¹ On April 16, Military Region Two, comprising Ha Tuyen, Hoang Lien Son, and Lai Chau provinces, established Strategic Army Corps 6 (Quan Doan 6) of the 345th, 335th, and 316th Divisions. On the same day, the Capital Military Region (Quan Uy Trong) established Strategic Army Corps 7, comprising the 341st, 342nd, and 343rd Divisions.¹² On July 16, Military Region One set up Strategic Army Corps 8, with control of the 346th, 311th, and 322nd Divisions and the 188th Artillery Regiment, 814th Anti-Aircraft Regiment, and
the 522nd Engineer Regiment. This, done on September 10, the VCP Politburo established provincial military headquarters in each of the provinces along the Sino-Vietnamese border. At full complement, the eleven divisions and three regiments of the border regions would have a troop strength of between 94,000 and 116,000 men.

The Chinese also were busy. In addition to providing arms, ammunition, and medical supplies for the Khmer Rouge resistance in western Cambodia, China expanded its support of the anti-Vietnamese insurgents in Laos, providing materiel support to insurgents in Phou Bia province and recruiting new fighters from the non-Meo minority tribes of Khmu, Lu, and Zao. In Vietnam’s extreme northeast, Chinese ships and aircraft were reported to be making frequent intrusions along the coast of Quang Ninh province and near Haiphong. Beijing clearly was trying to stretch the PAVN to its limits, perhaps with a view to improving the prospects of its promised second lesson.

1980: the beginning of artillery diplomacy

In early 1980, Vietnam began a small-scale dry-season offensive, with the aim of clearing out the few Khmer Rouge guerrillas that remained huddled against the Thai border. China had yet to bring its aid to full flow, and the resistance groups were weak, but Beijing persisted in its belief that the combination of the Cambodian resistance and its own pressure on the Sino-Vietnamese border would be sufficient to persuade the Vietnamese to leave Cambodia. In April 1980, Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Han Nianlong, told reporters, “I don’t think it will take long to force a Vietnamese pull-out in Cambodia.”

Han was wrong. The Chinese forces and the Cambodian resistance were just barely capable of restraining the Vietnamese. Even if China had retained the eleven armies (about 472,000 troops) that it had employed in the original 1979 campaign, it would have an advantage of not much more than four soldiers to each of the expanded force of 116,000 Vietnamese that now defended the border. It had fared badly when the balance of forces was much more heavily biased in its favor in 1979 and could not expect to do better with less favorable odds – particularly given that its PLA units were still recovering from their losses of a year earlier.

Force ratios furthermore were only part of the picture. The PLA had exhibited major weaknesses in the 1979 campaign that had surprised even their Vietnamese opposition. How had a much smaller Vietnamese force held off a massive Chinese force for seventeen days? Vietnamese military analysts concluded that a combination of factors had together rendered the PLA ineffective. In September 1979, Nhuan Vu, writing in Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, the official publication of the PAVN, identified problems in the ground, air, and naval arms of the PLA. Some of these he attributed to the flawed policies of the Cultural Revolution.

A month later, Quyet Thang wrote a follow-up, wide-ranging critique of Chinese economic, military, and political affairs. Thang claimed that China had
deployed 14 percent of its armed forces and 24 percent of its ground force divisions against the Vietnamese, a total of 600,000 troops, but that it had had little prospect of success because China, and by extension the PLA, was not strong, healthy, nor vigorous (in the Vietnamese, manh). In February 1980, on the eve of the anniversary of the Chinese offensive in northern Vietnam, Thang wrote a further piece in which he reflected that the Chinese continued to be plagued by the military problems bequeathed to them by Mao Zedong and more than ten years of Cultural Revolution. If the Chinese could overturn “Mao Zedong Thought” (Than Tuong Mao Trach Dong), he said, “they might be able to modernize. If not, they would never achieve their goals.”

The Vietnamese clearly were not impressed by the PLA. Unfolding events suggest that the Chinese leadership by now also was aware that the PLA was not a credible military force. During the last week in June 1980, Vietnamese army units entered Thailand in “hot pursuit” of fleeing Cambodian guerillas. Vietnam had struck a potent blow against China’s Cambodian and Thai allies, and the Khmer Rouge appeared to be close to its end. With Vietnamese soldiers operating, however briefly, in Thailand, China was obliged to act.

But there was to be no “second lesson.” Instead, the Chinese chose a strategy that could be called “artillery diplomacy.” Beijing’s response to the Vietnamese offensive was an outburst of criticism through diplomatic channels and the press, backed up by a rain of shells on the Vietnamese provincial capital of Cao Bang. The shelling, which lasted from June 28 to July 6, had no military utility and no impact on Vietnamese operations in Cambodia. Beijing’s actions were little more than symbolic. Hanoi’s analysis of the PLA’s problems seemed vindicated: effective military action against the Vietnamese was beyond the PLA’s ability. Knowing this now to be the case, Vietnam pursued its strategic objectives in Cambodia without restraint. The Chinese response in 1980 set the pattern for the next ten years.

Chinese efforts to pressure Hanoi continued throughout 1980. China continued to recruit and arm Laotian guerrillas and by December was training 5,000 troops in Yunnan province. By the end of the year, the Lao guerrillas had spread their attacks to the area around Moung Sing in northwestern Laos near the Chinese border. On December 18, Deng Xiaoping increased the tension by threatening another punitive strike should Vietnamese troops cross into Thailand, and on December 28, Hua Guofeng, Chairman of the Military Affairs Commission, underlined the constancy of Chinese war aims by reaffirming China’s support of the Khmer Rouge.

1981: Fakashan and guerrilla operations

The fighting in 1981 followed a slightly different pattern. In Cambodia, the Vietnamese once again conducted a dry-season offensive, but this time without provoking the typical violent reaction from China. However, as the season approached its end and the first rains returned to the Thai–Cambodian border, several important political events occurred whose significance China underlined...
by raising the level of violence on its southern border with Vietnam. In May, the Chinese and Thais were working on a plan to unify the three main Cambodian resistance groups into a united front.29 Also in May, the U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig was scheduled to visit Beijing, in the first high-level visit of the new Reagan administration. The Haig visit was the perfect time for China to increase the tempo of the war on the Sino-Vietnamese border, and thereby to show to the world that the Vietnamese were a threat to peace in Southeast Asia.

In May and June, the Chinese therefore launched two attacks against Vietnam. Along the Guangxi–Lang Son provincial border, a regiment assaulted Hill 400 (known to the Chinese as Fakashan) in the Cao Loc district to the east of Lang Son (Map 14). Much farther to the west, a second Chinese assault across the Yunnan–Ha Tuyen provincial border targeted several Vietnamese-held peaks around Hill 1688 in the vicinity of the tiny Chinese hamlet of Koulin. The two sides fought for these hills with a ferocity that had not been seen since the 1979 campaign. When the fighting waned in June, each side had lost several hundred men.30

Map 14 The Fakashan area (1981).
The Chinese apparently wanted to make the point that the PLA was capable of conducting conventional attacks along the border. The Vietnamese, in fighting back, wanted to show to China that it would have very little chance of conducting a successful large-scale operation against the expanded PAVN deployments in the border region. One Vietnamese source told journalist Nayan Chanda that China had 390,000 troops within 250 kilometers of Vietnam, but that it would need at least 1 million soldiers to deliver its threatened “second lesson.”

The attacks also played a role in China’s continuing attempts to compel the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia, by adding to the costs to Vietnam of protecting its borders. In Laos, where Vietnam had 50,000 troops supporting the pro-Vietnamese government, China sought to raise the pressure on Hanoi by again stepping up its assistance to anti-government guerrillas. In July, John McBeth, a correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, visited a large guerrilla training camp in Simao, on the Chinese side of the Laotian border, and reported that the camp’s 100 “civilian” Thai instructors had already trained between 2,000 and 3,000 Laotian guerrillas. The Vietnamese army newspaper *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* elaborated on the Chinese guerrilla war. In an August article, the newspaper claimed that China had set up several training camps in Yunnan province to train fighters for the Lao resistance groups, recruiting from the ethnic Chinese populations of India, Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The training given to these would-be guerrillas included military strategy, technology, psychological warfare, intelligence, and Maoist philosophy.

Vietnam remained unbending in the pursuit of its Cambodian strategy. Neither the Khmer resistance groups, nor the conventional Chinese attacks on Vietnam’s northern border, nor the Lao guerrilla bands could force the Vietnamese to give ground. By the end of 1981, Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang could only remind Hanoi that no political solution was possible in Cambodia without military withdrawal.

**1982: a lull as Beijing looks inward**

In 1982, domestic politics distracted the PLA and the Chinese leadership from their war with Vietnam: while there were frequent small skirmishes along the Sino-Vietnamese border, there were no large-scale attacks. Hanoi continued its strategy of attacking the Cambodian resistance during the dry season and the Khmer Rouge, where it could, and sometimes supported by other resistance groups, continued to harass the Vietnamese. Vietnam also had to contend with the Chinese-supported guerrillas in Laos and on a new front in its own Central Highlands. For the Chinese leadership, however, the biggest issues of the year were in the domestic political arena. The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) Twelfth Party Congress was in 1982, and the debates of September 1–11 would see the people and policies of the Maoist era ushered out and the reforms of Deng Xiaoping begin.

The relationship between the leaders of the PLA and the men and women surrounding Deng Xiaoping had been strained since Deng returned to power in
late 1978. The PLA had been a strong supporter of the Maoist political program, and even when it acted against Mao’s policies during the Cultural Revolution, it had couched its actions in terms of following the Maoist line. It had been the model institution of China’s Maoist society, and a large number of its cadres were deeply imbued with a belief in the Maoist program. Deng, however, now felt that much of the Maoist program had to be abandoned and that the PLA had to be severed from its Maoist roots. His adherents pointed to the PLA’s usurpation of power during the Cultural Revolution as evidence that the PLA was a danger to CCP rule, and they pointed to the failure of the PLA in its operations against Vietnam as evidence that it no longer was a reliable guarantor of China’s sovereignty. As Zheng Shiping has noted, “The Vietnam campaign was to Deng Xiaoping what the Korean War was to Mao Zedong – proof that PLA combat readiness had eroded to the point where China’s national security was at risk.”

From June 1981, and the battle for Fakashan, to the end of 1982, the PLA and Deng wrestled with the problems of their relationship. A “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party” that the Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee had passed in June 1981 criticized many of Mao’s policies during the Cultural Revolution, but it did not directly criticize the PLA’s actions. In contrast, Deng’s comments that the Cultural Revolution had “greatly detracted from the army’s prestige” could not have failed to have been noted as criticism of the military leaders.

As 1981 gave way to 1982, the party and the army had to negotiate the numbers and names of the PLA cadres who were to serve on the CCP Central Committee and Politburo. Since Deng had directed that the PLA reduce the age of its leaders, there furthermore was a scramble to replace the aging cadres who had led the army for the last two decades. After preliminary meetings in July 1982 and during the series of meetings that led up to the 12th Party Congress in September, it became clear that Deng had succeeded in replacing almost the entire senior leadership of the PLA. By September 13, when the Congress issued its final report, ten of the eleven military region commanders, including those of Kunming and Guangzhou, and all eleven military region political commissars had been replaced. In the military districts, twenty-two of the twenty-eight military district commanders had been reassigned or had retired.

Those cadres that had a direct connection to the army’s role in the Vietnam campaign in particular fared badly. Wei Guoqing, the PLA’s senior “Vietnam expert” and the director of the PLA General Political Department, was chief among those who lost their job in the fallout from the Party Congress. One notable survivor of this mass personnel overhaul was Yang Dezhi, who having served as commander of the Chinese forces in Vietnam transferred to Chief of the General Staff Department in February 1980.

1983: Hanoi keeps up the pressure

While the PLA and the CCP spent most of 1982 maneuvering against each other in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, the guerrilla war against Hanoi had
been spreading. In addition to the troubles in Cambodia and Laos, the PAVN found itself confronting a growing insurgency movement in the Vietnamese Central Highlands. The Front Uni pour la Lutte des Races Opprimées (FULRO), a long-standing anti-Vietnamese union of the Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade, and Koho tribes of Vietnam’s central provinces, had attacked isolated police and military posts in Gai Lai, Kontum, and Dac Lac provinces. It is not clear the extent to which China actively supported the FULRO movement with money and material,40 but the tensions that FULRO created in the Central Highlands unquestionably suited China’s interests. The Vietnamese provincial forces in Song Be reportedly captured several FULRO agents heading toward the highlands from Cambodia,41 and it is plausible that there may have been an “underground railroad” allowing agents to move from training bases in China to Cambodia and on to the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

The quiet that had otherwise characterized China’s cross-border relations with Vietnam for the past year was in any case soon to end. In February 1983, Yang Dezhi, Chief of the PLA General Staff Department, visited Thailand, where he stated that China would come to Thailand’s aid if Vietnam ever were to attack the Thais. Events were to severely test Yang’s promise.42

By the time Yang returned home to China on February 17, it was clear that Vietnam had started its annual dry-season offensive against the Cambodian resistance forces.43 In late February, the Vietnamese seized the resistance camp at Nong Chan, and from April 4 to 7, the Vietnamese forces took their pursuit of the guerillas into Thailand. China responded by delivering a note to the Vietnamese embassy in Beijing to protest unspecified “provocations and border intrusions.” On April 16, citing “attacks of intolerable proportions,” the PLA once again opened fire in the vicinity of the Vietnamese border town of Lang Son. A few days later, on April 20, there was a clash of ground troops on the border between Vietnam’s Ha Tuyen province and Yunnan province in China.44

Still there was no “second lesson.” Beijing continued to harangue the Vietnamese and the world about the evils of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, but it did not take major military action along the Sino-Vietnamese border or anywhere else. Sporadic and ineffectual shelling seemed to mark the limit of China’s military ambitions. Nayan Chanda, citing a Western military analyst, reported that “[the Chinese] don’t seem to be attempting to hit any particular target, they are just firing shells as far as they go. The purpose is purely to make a political point.” According to Chanda, the Chinese response to the Vietnamese attacks in Cambodia was a “symbolic offensive.”45

China nonetheless continued to pledge its support for the Thais. In late April 1983, Politburo member Li Xiannian, who was to be elected President of the People’s Republic in June, had warned Vietnam that the Chinese would “never stop our support [for Thailand] as long as Vietnam does not stop such aggression.”46 In 1984, China was to be compelled to once again cross Vietnam’s border in force, this time to honor its pledge to its Thai ally.
1984: a turning point for the PLA

The early months of 1984 were to mark the beginning of the end of the conventional military conflict of the Third Indochina War. They also saw the largest and most wide-ranging engagements since the 1979 campaign, and some of the bitterest fighting. When the guns finally fell silent this time, it would be clear once again that China had failed in its military operations against the Vietnamese, but there also would be signs that change was taking place. The PLA was to show the first indications that it was beginning to adapt to the requirements of late twentieth-century warfare.

In October and November 1983, the Vietnamese 95th Regiment had begun a series of training exercises in Cambodia, about thirty kilometers south of the Phra Palai Pass, a major border crossing point to northeastern Thailand. The purpose of the training became clear when the Vietnamese began their dry-season offensive. While some Vietnamese units attacked the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF) headquarters in Ampil, on March 24, 1984, the 95th Regiment moved into Thailand to seize the pass. This action cut the escape route of the Khmer Rouge from its northern headquarters, but predictably also provoked a military response by the Thais, who attacked the Vietnamese positions near the pass. On the Sino-Vietnamese frontier, China also reacted angrily, shelling towns in the border provinces of Lang Son, Cao Bang, Ha Tuyen, and Hoang Lien Son. The Chinese assault was the fiercest since the 1979 invasion: between April 2 and 27, the PLA fired more than 60,000 shells into sixteen districts in the four border provinces.

On April 5, the Vietnamese withdrew from their positions in Thailand and returned to Cambodia. The remaining Khmer Rouge fighters moved in the opposite direction, abandoning their northern headquarters and fleeing as best they could north and west into Thailand. On April 6, China responded to the assault on its Khmer allies by launching battalion-sized infantry attacks against the Vietnamese provinces that it already was shelling. The largest of these attacks occurred in the Trang Dinh district of Lang Son province, where several Chinese battalions seized Hill 820 and Hill 636 near their old invasion route at Friendship Pass. Despite the scale of these infantry attacks, by the evening of the next day, they all had been either repulsed or abandoned. In Cambodia, Vietnam continued its seasonal offensive undeterred, and on April 15 captured the KPNLF headquarters in Ampil. In three weeks of fighting, the Vietnamese had captured or disrupted the major headquarters of the two main Cambodian resistance forces, had entered and held a significant piece of Thai territory, and had withstood large and violent attacks by China. On the Chinese side, the results were less encouraging. The PLA had shown again that it was incapable of changing the strategic equation.

By late April, the fighting in Cambodia had begun to wane. On the Sino-Vietnamese border, however, the temperature was rising. In the wake of its setbacks at the start of the month, China was increasing the scale of its operations against Vietnam. Beijing was host from April 26 to 29 of a state visit from the
U.S. President Ronald Reagan; whether the increased tempo of operations was merely the PLA lashing out, having failed to influence the situation in Cambodia, or whether it was to advertise to the president the danger posed by an “expansionist” Vietnam is impossible to say.53

April–July 1984: the Battle of Laoshan

Laoshan is the name given by the Chinese to a range of hills that straddle the Sino-Vietnamese border between Yunnan and Ha Tuyen province (now Ha Giang). Located between border markers 11 and 14, they lie in Maguan and Malipo counties in China and in the Vi Xuyen district of Ha Tuyen (Map 15). The Pan Long River, which forms the boundary between the two Chinese counties, flows into Vietnam near border marker 13, where it is known to the Vietnamese as the Song Lo (Clear River). The Vietnamese town of Thanh Thuy is about four kilometers southeast of the border, and Ha Giang, the provincial capital, lies a further sixteen kilometers to the southeast. On the Chinese side of the border, the nearest significant town is Malipo, about twenty-five kilometers to the northwest. Wenshan is about sixty kilometers further northwest of Malipo, and Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, another 320 kilometers distant. In 1984, the military headquarters for Chinese operations in the Laoshan area was based in Kunming.

The Laoshan hills run approximately west to east in this area of the border, from Hill 1800 in the west to a hill on the eastern end of the range that is about 1,200 meters in elevation. This easternmost peak is sometimes referred to by the Chinese as Dong Shan, but it seems probable that it also is the hill that Chinese press reports of the time refer to as Zheyin Shan. It is the only hill in the contested area to the east of the Song Lo. Between these two points lie hills 1688 (Koulin Shan), 1545, 1509, 772, and 226.

It is unclear why China chose the Laoshan hills as the scene of its biggest attack since 1979. The Song Lo valley gives access to Ha Giang between Hill 226 and Hill 1200, and Ha Giang provides access to National Highway 2, but it is a twisty, hilly, 318 kilometers to Hanoi from the provincial capital: the three neighboring provincial capitals of Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son that fell to the 1979 offensive all give readier access to the national capital.54 Viewed from the other end of Highway 2, of course, Ha Giang is a distant and difficult place to reach from Hanoi, and it may be for this reason that China made it the target of its 1984 offensive. Even should the PLA fail to break through and threaten Hanoi, by deploying large numbers of troops on the Laoshan hills, it might have been able to force Vietnam to reinforce this distant point, hopefully with troops drawn from along the border or even from Cambodia. And at the least, China would have calculated the fall of a provincial capital to have a major psychological impact on the Vietnamese. This thinking lay behind the 1979 strategy, and Beijing still believed it might work.

The Chinese attack on Laoshan began on 05:00 on April 28 after an extensive artillery preparation. The 40th Division of the 14th Army crossed the border along the west side of the Song Lo, and the 49th Division, probably a unit of the 16th Army from the Nanjing Military Region, attacked and seized Zheyin Shan.55 The Vietnamese defenders, comprising the infantrymen of the 313th Division and the batteries of the 168th Artillery Brigade, made a fighting withdrawal from the hills.56

The Chinese forces secured the hamlet of Na La and hills 233, 685, and 468,57 creating a salient that at Hill 468 extended about 2.5 kilometers into Vietnamese territory. Protected by steep, jungle-covered slopes to the west and the Thanh Thuy River in the south, the salient was in practice approachable only across the dangerously open ground of the Song Lo valley to the east and was thus readily defensible.58 Elsewhere, however, the fighting flowed back and forth between April 28 and May 15, and hills 1509, 772, 233, 1200 (Zheyin Shan), and 1030 (unlocated) were repeatedly won and lost. After May 15, there was a lull in the battle, but on June 12 and again on July 12, there were further fierce outbreaks of fighting in the hills. At the end of July, the fighting died down, and the two sides returned to skirmishing and the small-scale exchange of artillery fire.

The 1984 Battle of Laoshan59 was as close to being a “second lesson” as anything that China attempted during the Third Indochina War, but despite outnumbering the Vietnamese defenders, the PLA failed to seize Ha Giang and at no point penetrated deeper than about five kilometers into Vietnam. And, once
again, the Chinese attacks did not draw off any Vietnamese forces from Cambodia, and they did not force any change in Vietnamese policy toward the Cambodian resistance.

**Stalemate**

The PLA continued to conduct division-sized attacks for tactical objectives, and from 1984 to 1986, the Laoshan hills changed hands several times. Overall, however, these attacks were progressively less successful, and China in the end reassessed its options. The large-scale infantry attacks dried up, and the artillery units began to dominate in the cross-border exchanges. While after 1986 the Vietnamese continued to pursue the Cambodian resistance fighters and crossed repeatedly into Thailand, the only Chinese response was artillery fire.

The scale of the fighting in the Laoshan area in 1984–86 nonetheless should not be downplayed. The Third Indochina War was much more than a mere border war. The first place to look for clues about the scale of the conflict is in the cemeteries of the region. For example, the Vietnamese military cemetery in the Vi Xuyen district near Ha Giang houses the remains of soldiers who fought in the Laoshan area from 1984 to 1986. It is not the only cemetery in the area, and it is not the only cemetery that holds the remains of the Vietnamese casualties sustained during those years. This particular cemetery has the graves of more than 1,600 soldiers from seven divisions and one separate infantry regiment. If, as seems likely, these units were deployed together to Laoshan in the mid-1980s, the Vietnamese would have had between 56,000 and 70,000 troops in the area.

China also sent tens of thousands of soldiers to the Laoshan area in 1984–86. Throughout this period, the Chinese operated a consistent pattern of deployments along the border. The Laoshan theater was divided into a front-line area around the town of Malipo and a reserve area around Wenshan. A unit would move from its home base, usually in a distant Chinese province, to the reserve area, where it would spend five months acclimating and training. When it was deemed ready for combat, the unit would move to the front near Malipo. From here, it would conduct ground or artillery attacks against the Vietnamese positions or would simply perform a defensive role. The unit would stay on the front for six months, after which it would move back to the Wenshan rear area for a month before returning to its home base. To give an idea of the numbers involved, in March 1986, the 67th Army from Jinan Military Region, comprising five infantry divisions and an artillery division, deployed to the border. The 47th Army from Lanzhou Military Region, comprising two infantry divisions and two artillery brigades, occupied the reserve area around Wenshan. In total, the two armies put at least 94,000 troops into the area. China deployed troops in similar strengths to the area from 1984 through 1989. During these five years, at least fourteen of China’s armies rotated through the positions on the hills of Laoshan.

The typical deployment during the years 1984–86 probably was similar to the situation described. The PLA never reached the force ratio of three to one over
the Vietnamese that it considered to be the minimum number for a successful offensive campaign, and probably seldom even reached a ratio of two to one. It seemed that Beijing either was unable to bring a sufficient mass of troops to the border or that it had decided against attempting to deliver its threatened “second lesson.”

1984: the year of reassessment

In the immediate post-1979 period, the PLA failed to address the many problems that the first campaign had exposed. The PLA’s human wave assaults had been painfully shown to have no place in modern warfare, and the inability of its artillerymen to use their weapons accurately from a distance had been found out. While the political work system continued to motivate most PLA soldiers (guan bing yizhi), the program of winning over civilians (jun min yizhi) had failed as word had spread of atrocities carried out by Chinese soldiers. Efforts to demoralize and “disintegrate the enemy” (wajie dijun) had also failed. Finally, the organizational structure of the PLA was not suited to the demands of the modern battlefield. War had changed dramatically since China’s last campaign under the guidance of Mao Zedong.

The Chinese infantry tactics at Laoshan incomprehensibly were the same as the mass tactics that had proven so disastrous in 1979. The official history of the Vietnamese 168th Artillery Brigade reveals that the first Chinese attack on the morning of April 28, 1984, was a massive frontal assault on the Vietnamese 313th Division’s defenses. On July 28, the same unit reported breaking up an assault by firing on a Chinese infantry battalion that had massed for an attack on a Vietnamese outpost. Although in 1979 some PLA units had shown signs of developing more effective fire-and-movement and fire-and-maneuver tactics, in 1984 the tactics of mass assault seem to have remained in widespread use.

PLA artillery operations at least showed some signs of improvement. The author of “Dui Yue Ziwei Zhanzhongde Wofang Paobing” (“Our Artillery Forces during the Counterattack in Self–Defense against Vietnam”) reports that several times during his service in the Laoshan area in 1984, the PLA artillery broke up attacks or exacted heavy casualties from the Vietnamese by firing directed fire on the enemy from long range. A few examples illustrate this point. On June 11, the Vietnamese sent a company of troops against a Chinese position. The author of the article claims that he calculated the firing data and obtained many hits on the Vietnamese unit. Later, he reports seeing another Chinese artilleryman make firing calculations with such precision that he hit an enemy position with a mere three rounds from a distance so great that it required binoculars to see the Vietnamese defenders. The PLA did not in 1984 replace the artillery barrage entirely with precision fire, but there is convincing evidence that at least some Chinese artillerymen were thinking differently about their craft. The artillerymen of 1984 took as much pride in calculated, aimed fire as the artillerymen of 1979 took in getting close and unleashing unaimed fire at point-blank range.
There were thus some signs that the PLA was adapting its infantry tactics and artillery operations, but its political program was less easy to change. At the core of the PLA political work program during the Maoist years was the “three basic principles of political work” (zhengzhi gongzuo sanda yuanze). The principle that was most closely related to the military thought of Mao Zedong was that of demoralizing and “causing the enemy troops to disintegrate” (wajie dijun). In 1937, Mao had told British journalist James Bertram, “Our victory depends not only upon our military operations but also upon the disintegration of the enemy troops.”

The principle of wajie dijun had failed in 1979. The Vietnamese soldiers fought to their deaths or, when the Chinese overwhelmed their positions, retreated in good order or escaped individually or in small groups. As a result, the Chinese only captured about 1,600 of the 50,000 Vietnamese troops committed to the defense of Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son. If the Chinese had been successful in their disintegration operations, they would presumably have captured many more prisoners. By comparison, while the U.S. Army and Marine Corps had no special program for obtaining the psychological, social, and disciplinary collapse of their enemies in World War II and the Korean War, data show that on average each division could expect to take 3,500 enemy prisoners during a month of offensive operations. The 1,600 Vietnamese captured by the thirty Chinese divisions in the month-long 1979 campaign speaks of an entirely different level of operation.

By 1984, it was becoming evident to some Chinese soldiers that the “three basic principles” of the Maoist political work system had failed and that it offered no answers to the PLA’s problems on the battlefield. One political officer recalled that he had had great difficulty persuading the junior political work cadres in his classes in 1984 that the three principles gave them an advantage over their Vietnamese opponents. His students simply found absurd the notion that the PLA had a unique and infallible philosophy of war; to them, war was a cruel, rational activity and no magic weapons could change the outcome. In the years following the 1981 publication of the Party’s “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party,” this attitude became more widespread, with young Chinese soldiers growing cynical about the party’s evident fallibility and their chances for success in the changing economic China of the early Dengist years. The younger cadres in the political officer’s class had no confidence that they could convert the conscripts on the front lines to the belief that a few memorized phrases of Vietnamese and Maoist principles would bring them success on the hills of Laoshan.

There are many other indications that in the years 1979–84 the three principles started to lose their hold on the PLA. Xu Meihong’s Daughter of China, for example, deals with the sense of betrayal felt by young women in the intelligence cadre in the early 1980s. When Xu left her village in rural Jiangsu province and entered the PLA in mid-1981, she joined an elite group of twelve female soldiers who were selected to enter careers that focused on intelligence work against American targets. Xu was not a dissident, she was a young woman...
selected for the best things her society had to offer, yet the corrosive force of the 1979 campaign and the subsequent deterioration of the PLA made her cynical of the army leadership and led her ultimately to abandon a promising career. On her first day in the PLA, Xu said of herself and her classmates, “We were young and red and we believed we could do anything.” By the time they graduated from the training program at the Institute for International Relations in Nanjing, they felt that their dreams had collapsed: “The longer we served in the PLA, the more our patriotic passion cooled. When we witnessed firsthand the sham machinations and corruption of the gods of our youth – the Communist Party and the PLA – our crisis of faith commenced.”

At home in her village, Xu had heard stories of the war from demobilized veterans, who spoke frequently of events that had created within them bitterness and anger. In 1981, a “hero” of the 1979 campaign had addressed Xu’s class, praising the self-sacrifice of the soldiers, the brilliance of their commanders, and the key to success that had been adherence to the Maoist way of war. This was the official line, but when the visiting hero began to speak extemporaneously, he told a story that more closely resembled those Xu had heard back in Jiangsu. In his own account, both sides had killed prisoners and the PLA had destroyed villages. Some of the Chinese soldiers “[had gone] crazy and attacked our own officers.” Their exposure to the official and unofficial accounts of the 1979 campaign led Xu and her classmates to question the legitimacy and effectiveness of the PLA. The PLA evidently had failed in the conflict with Vietnam and the political work program had proven unworkable, so how could Xu and others like her accept the ideological system that was the basis for the party, the army, and the political work program? Years later, one Chinese soldier who participated in the PLA operations against the Vietnamese in the mid-1980s reflected, “it is hard to credit that we believed that stuff during the Maoist times. We began to learn the differences in the war with Vietnam.”

1985: empty threats of a second lesson

By 1985, there was still nothing to suggest that Hanoi was ready to withdraw from Cambodia. Although the PLA had yet to correct the problems exposed in the 1979 campaign and although its political work system was clearly flawed and weakened, the Chinese leadership once more threatened a “second lesson.” On January 10, 1985, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the Vietnamese would “eat bitter fruit” if Hanoi continued its attacks in Cambodia. On January 29, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wu Xueqian, speaking in Singapore, said China would “teach Vietnam a second lesson [if Vietnam did not] accept the lesson we taught the first time.” In Bangkok later in the week, he again made the threat.

None of these threats swayed the Vietnamese leadership, and in March 1985, the PAVN attacked and captured the last of the major resistance camps in Cambodia. For the remainder of the year and into 1986, the Vietnamese continued to hunt down Cambodian resistance fighters on the Thai–Cambodian border, and
China and Vietnam continued to exchange artillery fire and fight regimental sized infantry engagements. Chinese support for guerrilla operations in other parts of Indochina continued.

While the fighting was underway on Laoshan in 1984, however, Chinese policy had begun to change. In May 1983, Deng Xiaoping had laid the first foundation stones for a significant redirection of Chinese strategy, telling the Communist Party leaders that the threat from the Soviet Union had dissipated and that China needed to deal with its internal problems and adopt a new defense policy. The new policy was to be one of jingji fangyu, or “active defense.” The Chinese leadership set to studying the strengths and weaknesses of the PLA as they related to the new program. According to a Western reporter citing a “highly classified Western intelligence report,” this study, which ran from mid-December 1984 to March 1985, included an analysis of the PLA’s ability to conduct the by-now infamous “second lesson.” The study concluded that the second lesson was beyond the capability of the PLA and that if Beijing attempted it and failed, the failure could hurt Chinese international prestige and weaken public support for the Deng regime. To even attempt such an endeavor furthermore would undermine China’s drive for military modernization. Beijing has never made this study public, but its timing – the year after the bitter fighting began on Laoshan – strongly suggests that the Chinese leaders understood the problems that the PLA had encountered at Laoshan. In December 1985, an Enlarged Meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Communist Party told the PLA to plan the modernization of the Chinese armed forces. The PLA began to work at improving its hardware, remolding its personnel programs, and rebuilding its logistics system.

1986–87: last throes

The effects of the modernization program took time to filter down to the PLA units deployed on the Sino-Vietnamese border, where business continued as usual (Map 16). The Vietnamese continued to press the Cambodian resistance, and around Laoshan, the PLA artillery responded by increasing its shelling of the border region. In 1985, the Chinese had fired more than 800,000 rounds into Vi Xuyen district alone and on October 14, 1986, in one of the periodic increases in the tempo of shelling, fired 35,000 artillery rounds into the tiny Vietnamese village of Thanh Thuy in a single day. The Chinese still launched occasional large-scale infantry attacks, but it was the ferocity and focus of their artillery attacks that had most notably changed. Three months after the Thanh Thuy barrage, on January 8, 1987, the PLA fired 60,000 artillery rounds into Vi Xuyen district. At the same time, it launched a series of division-sized, infantry attacks on hills 233, 685, 1509, and 1100. These were to be the last major attacks in the Vi Xuyen area.

The final noteworthy incident of China’s involvement in the Third Indochina War was its shooting down of a Vietnamese Mig-21 over the Chinese county of
Longzhou, on October 5, 1987. The PLA air force had fired not one shot to this point during the war, but in some ways, this incident was a fitting last act. The PLAAF, which was to become the foundation for the Chinese armed forces of the future, fired the last shot of the war that ended the Maoist PLA.

Diplomacy and the end of the war

During the early 1980s, the military events along the Sino-Vietnamese border and the Thai–Cambodian border had to a large extent masked the diplomatic maneuvers of the belligerents. A full assessment of the diplomatic dialogue is beyond the scope of this study, but several of the trends that shaped the military events cannot be ignored.

In 1982, the organization in Cambodia of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) had established a united front, albeit a weak one, against the Vietnamese invaders. The CGDK, however, significantly served as a focus for the systematic support to the resistance of China, the United States, and ASEAN, thus frustrating Vietnamese hopes of a quick victory and drawing out the war.

On the other side of the diplomatic fence, Vietnam had underlined its deepening relationship with the Soviet Union by joining the Council of Economic and Mutual Assistance (CEMA) and signing a treaty of friendship with the Soviets. Vietnam thus symbolically chose its side in the Sino-Soviet rivalry and was rewarded for its decision between 1978 and 1986 with US$500 million to US$1 billion of economic aid and about US$1 billion of military aid.
In September 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev, seeking to secure better relations with the nations of Asia, signaled the end of this largesse. The Vietnamese reaction to the shift in the Soviet policy emerged at the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December the same year. Party representatives approved a program of economic development to wean Vietnam from its dependence on Soviet economic aid, and in electing Nguyen Van Linh to serve as their new Secretary General took what to many observers appeared to be a step toward a younger, more innovative leadership. Linh’s initiatives included economic reforms and a call for an end to Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia.

As the Chinese, Soviets, and Vietnamese shifted their emphasis away from their international differences and toward internal priorities, a route to the end of the Third Indochina War opened up. On July 27, 1987, Vietnam and Indonesia called for talks among all the belligerents, and in December 1987, Prince Sihanouk, representing the Cambodian resistance, met Prime Minister Hun Sen, of the Hanoi-installed Phnom Penh government, to discuss a peace settlement. This meeting was an acknowledgement by the Cambodian resistance groups, principally the Khmer Rouge, FUNCINPEC, and the KPNLF, and their Chinese, American, and ASEAN allies of the legitimacy of the Hun Sen government. With this recognition and given the declining need for military forces to operate against the Cambodian resistance, Hanoi announced that it would withdraw half of its forces from Cambodia by the end of 1988. Treaty negotiations, which began with the departure of the first Vietnamese troops, continued until September 1991. China, the United States, ASEAN, and the Cambodian factions signed the treaty on October 13, 1991, at the Second International Conference on Cambodia in Paris. On November 10, 1991, with the Cambodia issue resolved, the Chinese and Vietnamese signed a joint communiqué on the normalization of their relations. The Third Indochina War had ended.

In these four chapters, we have examined the events of the Third Indochina War from 1978 to 1991. This narrative has shown how war came to these former allies and how the war was fought. The next section of this study will explore some of the problems the Chinese faced and how they solved them or endured them.
Part IV

Explorations
Crisis in command

The cadre system under stress in the Guangzhou Military Region

On April 18, 1979, Xiang Zhonghua, Political Commissar of Guangzhou Military Region (MR), weighed the results of the recent campaign for the MR’s division-level cadres and above. In a speech and circular, Xiang told the cadres that the war had been a victory and that most cadres had acquitted themselves well. But he also said that there were great tasks ahead, and he said that it was essential that the MR retain, utilize, and develop the cadres who had served in the campaign. His demand was indirect, but he was challenging the divisional leaders and army leaders to rebuild, from top to bottom, the entire cadre system of the Guangzhou MR.

Xiang had served in all of the PLA’s wars since the Autumn Harvest Uprising of 1927 and understood Chinese military affairs well. As overall supervisor of political–military affairs in Guangzhou, he would have known the enormity of what he was asking. The cadre system of dual leadership by military and party specialists was the central nervous system of the PLA – nothing in the PLA moved without the work of the cadres – and it had been wrecked by the excesses of the Maoist era. The PLA had fought the 1979 campaign with a staff of cadres that at all but the highest levels was no better than makeshift, and Xiang was now seeking to fix this problem.

In this chapter, we explore some of the cadre problems Xiang and the other PLA leaders had faced in the months before the 1979 campaign. Warfare in the last decades of the twentieth century was not a “come as you are” affair, and no army, and certainly not the PLA, went to war without preparing its troops, organizing and reinforcing its leadership institutions, or replacing peacetime personnel shortages. This chapter analyzes the way Guangzhou MR prepared for war.

The focus of the PLA in the fifteen years leading up to the 1979 campaign had been on politics, and when the time came to fight, China’s armed forces simply were not ready. The principal problem, in most cases, was that units were almost inextricably mired in their peacetime duties. During the Cultural Revolution that had ended in 1976, the PLA had served primarily as guards and riot control forces. Units had been tied to a single location for such long periods of time that many had set up farms and shops to supply their soldiers and families. Others had established small- or medium-sized enterprises – brick kilns, cement
factories, or transportation or construction businesses – for which their soldiers worked as paid employees. The impact of this situation on military readiness was enormous. For example, when 1979 came around, two of the three infantry regiments of the 125th Division of the 42nd Army were engaged in long-term production. When the decision was made to commit the division to combat, forty-three cadres had to be assigned to retrain the leaders of these regiments and to teach the soldiers how to fight. For the 125th Division as for many others, there lay ahead a long, hard road to combat readiness.

Preparation for war: replenishing the ranks

The Guangzhou MR had begun its preparations for the 1979 campaign more than sixty days before the February 17 attack on Vietnam. At least as early as December 12, 1978, the Guangzhou MR had established a Military Region Forward Command Political Department (junqu qianzhi zhengzhibu). This forward command headquarters, comprising political, operational, and logistical staff, would have been charged with supporting all military operations in the Guangzhou MR’s portion of the front; that is, roughly those parts of China that lie opposite the Vietnamese provinces of Quang Ninh, Lang Son, and Cao Bang. A similar headquarters was set up in the Kunming MR to manage the other major part of the front. The MR staff in most cases would not direct the actions of the armies assigned to their region in wartime – that is the responsibility of the General Staff Department in Beijing – but would direct both the wartime and peacetime operations of units assigned directly to the region, such as the internal defense divisions and border defense divisions, and would also direct many of the logistic, medical, and transportation units that support the front-line troops.

The political and logistics staff immediately found themselves confronting a problem of undermanning. The PLA had not fought a significant foreign campaign since 1962, and the political conflicts of the Cultural Revolution had thinned out the ranks of veterans. In addition, there had been two PLA-wide demobilizations, and even as it was now instructed to prepare for war the Guangzhou MR had to meet the requirements of a third demobilization and the transfer of soldiers to civilian work.

On December 12, the political staff at the Military Region Forward Command Headquarters issued a circular announcing that it had encountered problems “in meeting its war preparations requirements” (“zhan bei gongzuo xu yao”). The circular advised that, in principle, the arrangements made for the third wave of demobilizations nonetheless were not to be changed. Soldiers who had been demobilized during the second wave but who had not yet left their units also were to be directed to detach themselves from their units as soon as possible. The circular went on to say, however, that small numbers of cadres, if needed for specific assignments, could be held on active duty pending the approval of MR headquarters. Skilled cadres at the regimental level and below also could be retained beyond the normal demobilization date if their replacements had not arrived or should there be an appropriate vacancy at a higher level
of staffing. At the core of the instruction, however, was that while General Political Department (GPD) regulations on maintaining the quality of cadres were to be respected, all company-level and basic technical vacancies were to be filled immediately. Newly established and reorganized units were told that, effective immediately, they could appoint soldiers to cadre jobs.\(^5\)

The MR Political Department and the Logistical Department provided additional guidance on the new personnel policies in another circular, sent the same day. This second circular stated that technical personnel in artillery, engineering, communications, armored, anti-chemical warfare, and confidential units in the armies, MR artillery units, and MR engineering units should be retained if they wished to serve another tour, were experienced, had no significant health problems, and had not yet been replaced. The circular ended by advising that if individuals slated for demobilization could not be replaced, the number of cadres to be demobilized could be reduced. As the circular did not state specifically that this retention policy had been approved at a higher level, it appears that the MR had taken the initiative of authorizing its subordinate units to put the demobilization program on hold.\(^6\)

The second circular devoted particular attention to the problems of hospitals. Hospital commanders were told to adhere to a July 7, 1978, circular from the General Staff Department, the GPD, and the General Logistics Department on the subject of reorganizing hospitals and convalescent homes. The earlier instruction had ordered general hospitals to operate at a ratio of 1 patient to 1.2 staff, central hospitals at a ratio of 1 patient to 1.07 staff, and military hospitals at a ratio of 1 patient to 1.04 staff. To maintain these ratios, the circular from the MR Political Department and the Logistics Department instructed the hospitals to retain their skilled medical personnel. Units that encountered difficulty in so doing were to report their problems to the MR headquarters.\(^7\)

On December 14, the PLA GPD gave guidance to its subordinate units on handling cadre personnel problems. At the bottom line, all units were to fill all cadre vacancies immediately. Vacancies in combat units at all levels were to have the highest priority. Low-level cadres that had been temporarily assigned to other units were to be returned to their assigned units, and technical cadres were to be reassigned within the MR – if needed, in combat units. Any unit unable to achieve its full complement was to notify the GPD, which would try to fill any remaining vacancies by conducting a search of the “entire army” (quan jun). The circular stated that the task of transferring cadres to civilian work could be “adjusted.”\(^8\)

The circular also made a point of restating the proper procedures for appointing division-level cadres at the army and MR levels and reminded that the CCP’s Military Affairs Committee (MAC) had to approve changes at this level. The problems of filling these cadre appointments continued, however, and on February 1, 1979, the MAC sent a circular to the MRs advising all PLA units to relax the procedures. The MRs were told to appoint cadres first and to send the names to the GPD and MAC for later approval.\(^9\)

To meet the requirements set out by the circulars and to fully staff the units in
Guangzhou MR for the campaign required an enormous number of promotions. Several army-level and division-level cadre positions in the end were filled by promotions from units within the MR, and at lower levels, great numbers of deputy divisional commanders and regimental commanders and commissars were promoted. The need for new leaders was so great that 74 percent of all of the cadres added to units in the sixty days prior to the start of the campaign were promoted from the ranks. Tens of thousands of soldiers were made cadre in this period.  

In addition to these promotions, several hundred other cadres were transferred to the Guangzhou MR, coming from the Nanjing, Beijing, Jinan, Fuzhou, Wuhan, and Chengdu MRs and from the Party Committee of the Air Force and the General Headquarters in Beijing. Most of these cadres were technicians for signals, radar, meteorological, and “confidential” (jiyao) units. Guangzhou MR’s cadre strength was so depleted that it could not even spare the cadres to receive these replacements and escort them to the MR’s assembly point.

Because so many of the units lacked cadre and troops, the PLA authorized the MRs to combine understrength divisions. The MR Political Department assumed responsibility for the reorganization and creation of units up to the division level. The MR’s summary of cadre work states, “In each army two B-type divisions were organized into one A-type division and all cadre vacancies were to be filled in about ten days” (“Mei ge jun liange yi zhong shi . . . wei jia zhong shi, dou zai shi tien zuoyou”). Although it is not clear from the source exactly how these units were reconfigured, it is reasonable to speculate that the B-type divisions (yi zhong shi) were border defense, internal defense, or garrison divisions that were being combined into A-type (jia zhong shi) infantry divisions. The B-type divisions were composed of about 600–800 cadres and 6,000–7,000 soldiers; in comparison, an infantry division comprised of about 1,300 cadres and 11,000 soldiers. Since the PLA’s armies (jun) usually had three divisions per army, it is likely that these “new” divisions were used to supplement the usual organization of the armies.

This spasm of organizational juggling created an enormous amount of personnel turbulence. As the size of the troop units expanded, so too did the number of cadres – according to the MR Political Department’s “Work Summary,” by about 50 or 60 percent. The new cadres had to be taught the fundamental military skills necessary to execute their duties in their new assignments, and the need for this training was so acute that it continued in all of the few free hours the units had, right up to the time they made contact with the Vietnamese on February 17.

The Guangzhou MR Political Department acknowledged the flaws that were incumbent in this approach, reporting that the new cadres represented a “weak link in the chain of military skills.” Many of the new cadres themselves admitted that they had assumed their new duties without any knowledge of the techniques of commanding and leading units in battle.
Rebuilding the army (jun) leadership structure

The condition of the cadre system at the army level was similar to the situation that existed at the MR level. The armies had to overcome the familiar problems of combining units, creating new units, replacing cadres, and filling empty billets, and furthermore had to do so for a headquarters that was mobile. The age, health, and experience of their cadres were even more important for the armies than they were for the MRs, which at least operated out of static headquarters. In 1979, three armies were based in the Guangzhou MR area of operations: the 41st, 42nd, and 55th.

During the weeks leading up to the invasion, the 41st Army had difficulty organizing itself for battle. It had successfully relocated from its bases in northern and eastern Guangxi province to its assembly area in southern Guangxi, opposite the Vietnamese town of Tra Linh (CH: Cha Ling), but it struggled with the conversion of its B-type division into an A-type division. Several battalions of artillery also had to be expanded, and several company-level units of various types had to be expanded or reorganized. To build the leadership structure of the new units, it was necessary for the 41st to add or reassign several hundred cadres.

Ultimately, all but four artillery companies succeeded in making the changes in the required ten days. The 41st Army had suspended its demobilization transfers, and it had made a point of finding places for all available cadres, even if their skills and experience did not match the requirements of their positions. Presumably, the army commander felt that it would be best to start the campaign with as full a complement of cadres as possible; whether or not their skills and experience matched their responsibilities was a secondary concern to that of getting soldiers in the line on the eve of a major campaign.

In the weeks before the invasion, however, the 41st Army’s leaders appear to have grown concerned about the quality of the cadres that would conduct the actual operations of the campaign. By February 17, the 41st had promoted eleven division-level cadres, eighty-two regimental cadres (of whom thirteen were primary officers, commanders, and political officers), and 812 battalion or lower cadres. More than 20 percent of its 4,521 cadres were new to their duties, including thirteen (59 percent) of the twenty-two commanders and political officers in the army’s eleven regiments. To alleviate concerns of inexperience, the army headquarters sent sixty-four work teams of 164 people to assist the leadership at the lower levels. The post-campaign report of the 41st’s Political Department noted that divisional and regimental cadres had led battalions and even companies into combat and that 80 percent of the army’s cadres had participated in combat in some capacity. The report nonetheless called for even greater efforts to be made to strengthen command at the lower levels: army-level cadre should go down to strengthen leadership at the regimental level, it said, cadre should go down three echelons to strengthen lower-level leadership.

In the run-up to the campaign, the 55th Army similarly promoted 712 (15.7 percent of its authorized cadre strength) battalion, regimental, and divisional
cadres to ensure a full complement of leaders who were sufficiently young and skillful to meet the test of combat. The numbers of division-level and regimental cadre promotions, at fifteen and seventy-six respectively, seem particularly high. The typical army only had three divisions and eleven regiments, but the 55th Army’s Summary of Cadre Work makes it clear that it was reorganized into a unit of five divisions and twenty regiments during the thirty days before it entered combat. In some units, the entire slate of leaders was replaced once, and in some divisions and regiments, the leadership was replaced two or more times as cadres were siphoned off to fill billets in other units. The 55th in the end had to appeal to the MR for additional cadres to bring the unit up to full strength, receiving thirty-nine cadres to fill vacant positions.  

The 55th Army used a system of appointments of higher-level cadres to its fighting units to ensure that command was maintained over those units should large numbers of cadres become casualties. In all units, the principal and secondary leaders were publicly designated to avoid confusion in combat and to ensure a continuous chain of command. If both the primary and secondary cadres were incapacitated, the higher-level cadre who accompanied the unit would take charge. Prior to the 1979 campaign, the 55th Army moved five army-level leaders down to the divisions, twenty-six division-level cadres to the regiments, and fifty-four regimental leaders to the battalions. This ensured that every division, regiment, and battalion had two or three leaders from the next higher level of command. The 55th furthermore was weak in terms of combat experience: the Summary of Cadre Work for the unit states that only 2 percent of its cadres were veterans. It is likely that this system of assigning high-level cadres to lower-level units also therefore was an attempt to improve the experience level at the lower levels.

The cadre system at the division level was in no better shape than it was at the army level. The 124th Division, for example, prepared for the war by replacing or filling in 283 (21.9 percent) of its total cadre strength of 1,292. According to the Military Region Forward Command Political Department, 90 percent of these new cadres needed training in the fundamentals of their duties. The newly assigned cadres accordingly were given short, intensive training sessions to acquaint them with the basic information and to furnish them with the skills that they would need to serve as tactical and political leaders during the offensive. The 124th Division comprised of five regiments, the 370th, 371st, and 372nd infantry regiments, an artillery regiment, and a tank/assault gun regiment, amounting to eighteen battalions. Of the division’s 283 replacements, twenty were needed at the regimental level, thirty-one at the battalion level, forty-nine at the company level, and 132 as platoon leaders. The case of the 372nd Infantry Regiment is illustrative. When the regiment was alerted for wartime duties, its commander, Liu Xianglin, was absent pursuing advanced studies, and a large number of its political officers were under investigation as a result of the “reveal, criticize, and investigate” movement (jie pi cha yundong). No replacements had been assigned to the unit, which as a consequence was woefully unprepared for war. When the 372nd went into action, it did so led by its
deputy commander – who nevertheless performed his duties well enough to receive second-class honors.

Training and battle: the cadre system fails

Pre-deployment training and training in the assembly areas in southern Guangxi province exposed other problems quite apart from those of manning. The 374th Regiment of the 42nd Army, for example, quickly found that its machine gunners did not know how to support an infantry attack. The gunners fired wildly and used enormous amounts of ammunition to minimal effect and critically were unable to coordinate their firing with the movement of the assault force.26 A newly promoted deputy commander of the 377th Regiment, similarly defeated by the concept of laying down covering fire, solved his dilemma by simply abandoning his machine guns and mortars while he trained his unit.27 In effect, he turned all his soldiers into infantrymen!

The experience of the 165th Division of the 55th Army was typical. In January 1979, the 165th was under strength, but its manning problems and those of its sister 164th Division were quickly addressed: 203 cadres were transferred from army headquarters and the 163rd Division,28 cadres visiting their families returned to their units, and soldiers who were in hospital devised ways of getting discharged and returning to service. Soldiers and cadres who had been scheduled for demobilization were held up and returned to their units.29 The division’s training deficiencies, however, were less easily addressed. When the 165th arrived in its assembly area, it underwent thirty days of intensive training. Tactical exercises were conducted with live ammunition, and troop units conducted practice attacks and defense. Platoon cadres practiced issuing commands, higher-level cadres conducted sand table exercises and participated in map exercises, and the division’s leaders were taught organizational procedures and the methodology of coordinating the infantry with armor, artillery, and other units. Political work cadres were trained to operate under wartime conditions.30 Cadres from headquarters gave extensive assistance to the more experienced members of the division during this training period, but their limited assistance and advisory role in practice often turned out to be something more. The 55th Army’s report on cadre work noted that during the war, the cadres sent to the lower levels frequently also had to “help command during combat” (“xi zhu zhi hui zhan dou”).31

The effects of the cadre crisis on unit performance were particularly pronounced at the regimental level. The experiences of several regiments of the armies based in Guangzhou MR (the 41st, 42nd, and 55th Armies) and several units (primarily of the 43rd Army) that deployed to the MR from other parts of China are worth examining in some detail. The 1,135 man artillery regiment of the 122nd Infantry Division of the 41st Army, according to the unit’s after-action report, for example, had severe cadre problems when it was alerted to prepare for the campaign. The regiment had just completed two years of building and guarding military camps and barracks, it lacked military training, and its
leaders were incapable of leading troops on operational assignments. Platoon leaders were unable to conduct reconnaissance, survey their firing positions, read maps, or adjust artillery fire from observation – all of which are essential skills for artillerymen. To develop the minimum skills it needed to go to war, the regiment launched the “Three Helps” (san bang) campaign: to help improve the ideology of the troops, to help improve combat skills, and to help improve leadership skills.32

Some deficiencies in basic training were not discovered until the units were in combat. On the first day of fighting, the positions of the 4th Company of the 488th Regiment of the 163rd Division (55th Army) were hit by Vietnamese artillery fire. Several of the bunkers collapsed, and the unit lost two soldiers in the attack. Unit cadres later conducted a meeting and concluded that the soldiers lacked the skills to build sound defensive fortifications. The cadres set to the process of retraining their soldiers in the basics of field defensive engineering: on the next attack, the bunkers stood up to the test.33

The problems in the cadre ranks also had allowed equipment maintenance standards to slip in the years prior to the 1979 campaign. One artillery unit, the 27th Regiment of the 1st Artillery Division, found that forty-four of its 120 trucks were defective. If this was the case with a piece of equipment that the unit could reasonably be expected to have used frequently during peacetime, the mechanical problems found with little-used or stored equipment must have been daunting.34 The maintenance personnel of this unit had to work continuously for a week in February to merely get their vehicles back in operational condition; even so, their problems were much less than those of other units. In 1979, the PLA had a rudimentary logistics system. Rear depots could supply petroleum, oil, and lubricants to front-line units, but spare parts, replacement parts, and other essentials for keeping the PLA’s simple machines operational were difficult to obtain. After the 1979 campaign, one PLA officer recalled that when one of his unit’s tanks was disabled by a mechanical failure, he had had to send a trusted man back to the factory in northern China to get the needed replacement part.35

The effect of this situation on the soldiers could be demoralizing. The artillerymen of the 27th Regiment in fact confronted their political officers and commanders with their fears that, after more than twenty years out of combat, their equipment and fighting ability would not be up to the forthcoming test.36

As other regiments of the 41st Army prepared for war, the problems stored up in the cadre promotions became evident. Although the writers of reports destined for higher headquarters rarely commented unfavorably on the meteoric rise of some cadres, it is clear from the fact that these events were reported at all that some writers thought them remarkable. For example, in the 365th Regiment of the 122nd Division, a young man who enlisted in 1977 had by the time of the invasion become a deputy company commander.37 In the Artillery Regiment of the 122nd Division, another soldier who had entered the army in 1977 was a battalion communications officer.38 In the West, where armies rely heavily on college training and military skills training to develop junior officers, such speed
of promotion would be unremarkable, but the PLA used a different practice. In 1978–79, the PLA school system was barely active, and almost none of these cadres were likely to be college graduates: instead, the Chinese based promotions on age and experience. A typical platoon leader in 1978 would probably have had eight or ten years of military service. But in 1979, the situation was no longer typical, and the use of these younger men in key leadership positions created problems. They lacked the technical and leadership experience of older men and sometimes they were defeated by basic military tasks. The communications officer mentioned above, for example, had to be taught the essentials of leadership by a battalion deputy political officer through the use of slogans such as “strictness reflects fondness” (yan shi ai) and “leniency begets harm” (song shi hai).

In many cases, the lack of experience among these young leaders manifested itself on the battlefield in a lack of competence. Chen Huaming, a platoon leader of the 368th Regiment of the 123rd Division, was relieved of his command when he lost his nerve in the battle near Tra Linh. Under heavy artillery fire, another platoon leader, Liu Zhenwei, withdrew his unit from its position without permission. Liu later left the platoon, again without permission, to seek medical attention for a bamboo splinter in his foot. In another company of the 368th, a deputy company commander took his attacking platoon down the wrong road, came under fire, and withdrew after he suffered minor wounds. Another company commander, Liu Zhulin, was unable to assemble his unit and was relieved because he could not accomplish his mission. All of these cadre were relieved, counseled, and sent to other tasks in the regiment. Chen was made a private soldier in the same unit he had led. In some cases, however, the disgraced cadres were returned to leadership posts after they later performed well in combat.

Whether the senior cadres were being magnanimous in forgiving their errant juniors or whether they were being pragmatic in the face of what became a pressing need for replacements is unrecorded. Chen, Liu Zhenwei, and Liu Zhulin, if they survived the campaign as private soldiers, were among the luckier of those who entered the fight as young cadres. When battle was joined, the casualty rate for these young leaders was extremely high. The 365th Regiment of the 122nd Division replaced sixty-three of its 251 cadres (25 percent) during the incursion, and high as these overall losses were they were even worse among the lowest levels of the cadre ranks. The regiment’s 2nd Battalion promoted sixteen company commanders during the first three days of hostilities, a casualty rate that translates into each of the battalion’s five companies having to replace its commander on each of the first three days of the fighting. It is little wonder that the regiment’s party committee ended the war struggling to persuade soldiers to step up to cadre positions.

The worst case, however, may have been that of the 375th Regiment of the 125th Division (42nd Army). During twelve days of fighting in the area around Cao Bang, the regiment had to replace its entire complement of company commanders and company political officers twice over, and its deputy company
commanders, deputy political officers, and company quartermaster officers thrice. Of the regiment’s 251 cadre slots, 206 (82 percent) had to be refilled during the campaign. The unit’s cadre reserves were rapidly depleted, such that 109 of the 206 replacements were soldiers promoted from the ranks.44

The 55th Army, which operated near Lang Son, had similar problems. Of the 163rd Division’s 1,292 assigned cadres, several hundred became casualties. Some company and platoon cadre posts were filled three or four times, and some even more: the 9th Company of the 493rd Regiment appointed five new commanders in eleven days, and the 7th Company of the 495th Regiment lost eleven cadres over the same period, promoting seven soldiers from the ranks to fill the vacant billets. By the end of the war, the 55th Army was promoting conscripts with just a few months’ service to cadre.45

The 55th Army suffered personnel problems across its entire front. A new company commander of the 491st Regiment of the 164th Division refused to lead an attack because he was bothered by a painful sciatic nerve. A deputy regimental commander of the 2nd Company of the 490th Regiment, demonstrating that ineffectual leadership was not the unique preserve of the new men, failed to lead his unit to its attack position until three hours after it should have moved out. An experienced commander, he subsequently was hesitant in battle, showing a distinct preference for the rear of the unit he was supposed to lead. He was relieved of his post.46

Those units deployed to the Guangzhou MR from outside the region were no better prepared. When the 43rd Army, which was based in Hebei province in the Wuhan MR, received its orders to move south, it had at least one division, the 129th, engaged long-term in civilian production. The army had numerous cadre positions to fill, and many of the cadres that it ultimately sent to these posts were simply not ready for the responsibility thrust upon them. Some political officers were so unprepared that they were unable to conduct political mobilization or even hold an effective meeting. In the Maoist PLA, where political mobilization was the sine qua non of warfare, this was a mortal sin.47

The casualty rates among cadres for the out-of-region units appear to have been similar to those of the Guangzhou MR units. Full casualty details for the 43rd Army are not known, but the available information tells a familiar tale. The 379th Regiment of the 127th Division, for example, promoted eighty-five cadres to new positions during the campaign, representing 33.8 percent of the regiment’s cadre strength. Casualties were sufficiently high that on February 23, the division instructed its lower-level units to appoint an additional deputy commander to the battalion and company leadership groups to ensure that the chain of command was unbroken.48

The cadre system even showed signs of fraying in areas far from the front line. An important characteristic of the combat support units during the campaign was that they operated in small, widely separated groups. The deployment of the MR engineering units was typical. The 13th Regiment of Engineers, for example, broke up its eight companies in order to send engineering teams to six divisions of the 41st and 42nd Armies. Other teams from the 13th Regiment,
ranging in size from four to twenty-six men, were deployed to provide specific services to the main force armies engaged in the campaign. The regimental headquarters attempted to maintain control of these widely separated detachments by assigning a cadre to each of them; it also, in accordance with policy, sent cadres down to the lower levels to serve as advisors and, if necessary, leaders. Despite its being a support unit, the 13th and a similar regiment, the 84th Engineer Regiment, had to replace eighty-nine of its cadres, representing 21.8 percent of their combined cadre strength, due to combat losses.

Even among the railway engineer units, the command structure faced problems. The railway engineers were notified of their mobilization on February 5, 1979, the eve of Lunar New Year – the most important holiday in the Chinese calendar. One hundred and seventy-three cadres cancelled personal or business trips, but the unit was obliged to redistribute its cadre strength to make up for shortages. The division was better served by veteran cadres than were most of the combat units, with 112 cadres (11.2 percent of the assigned strength) having served against the United States in the Second Indochina War, but it suffered problems nonetheless from weak leadership or insufficient training. The commander of the 9th Company of the 8th Regiment, for example, was found to be ignorant of the processes of bridge construction. After some hasty training, the unit was apparently able to complete its combat missions.

**Conclusion**

When in late 1978 and 1979, the PLA assault forces got their orders to deploy, they found that after years of neglect of its military role, the cadre system would now fail them. Army units that had spent the Cultural Revolution patrolling cities sloganeering and farming instead of training and maintaining their equipment were incapable of accomplishing their military missions. Cadres who had carved out comfortable niches as “military politicians” during the season of “politics in command” had to lead men on the battlefield. Although the PLA tried to fix the system with hasty training, massive reassignments, and the appointment of high-level leaders to low-level units, the high replacement rates and high rates of cadre casualties in the 1979 campaign demonstrated that many could not make the grade.
As described in Chapter 3, the PLA in 1979 was unique among the world’s armies in placing a political work system at the core of its operations and on depending on that system to unite and motivate its fighters and cadres to close with and destroy its enemies. The system, based on Maoist military–political thought, had served the PLA well through the Civil War, had made the Chinese armies a formidable foe in Korea, and had underpinned China’s successes in the 1962 war with India. But by 1979, the PLA was distanced from its last foreign war by seventeen years and the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. The campaign was, as has been shown, plagued by problems. This chapter examines how and to what extent the problems of China’s incursion are due to the political work system and to the cadres and conscripts who were required to live by it.

**Unity of officers and soldiers**

Unity of purpose is a universal requirement for success in war. Military strategists have through history recognized this fact, and China’s military thinkers frequently have made the point that combat is a test of wills. In the Civil War, the Korean War, and Indian War, the PLA had operated a system that emphasized the need to unify the will of the PLA. Mao Zedong, following the Chinese tradition of war, believed that by attending to the morale, welfare, and motivation of his soldiers and by uniting all elements of his army in the common cause he could achieve a level of military effectiveness unmatched by his opponents.

The unity of officers and men (guan bing yizhi) was the key to the Maoist system of mobilization. The unity principle defined the close relationship that was expected to exist between PLA officers and soldiers. Mao believed that other armies were weak because there was an inherent “contradiction” in the status of leaders and followers. Leaders, in Mao’s view, represented the counter-revolutionary and exploitative elements of society; the led were members of the classes and groups that had been exploited and were potentially revolutionary. From this class analysis, Mao concluded that the officers and men of a non-communist army must always operate at cross-purposes. His battlefield experiences and his understanding of Chinese military history confirmed the proposition that armies that lacked unity between their officers and men, such as the Guomin-
dang armies of 1945–49, were easily beaten, while those that were united, such as the Taipings, were capable of victories against more powerful forces.

The concept of *guan bing yizhi* was therefore solidly emplaced in the PLA as one of the “three basic principles of political work” (*zhengzhi gongzuo sanda yuanze*). These principles had been adopted during the Autumn Harvest Uprising of September 1927 and had since then shaped most aspects of the behavior and battlefield operation of the PLA. The ideal relationship between cadres and soldiers, as defined by the “three basic principles,” had several important facets. There must be political equality between cadres and soldiers. The cadres must cherish (*aihu*) the soldiers and the soldiers must respect (*zunzhong*) the cadres. The cadres and troops must mutually assist each other in all duties and must share the same burdens and discomforts. And cadres and soldiers must exercise and support democratic leadership and must work to maintain discipline.

During the Maoist era, *guan bing yizhi* was used to encourage cadres to develop a work style that brought them into close and sympathetic contact with the soldiers. The military institution, largely through the offices of the General Political Department (GPD), also sought to develop unity through a variety of broad initiatives. These included the promotion of a stream of heroes who embodied the ideals of the perfect Maoist soldier. Perhaps the most famous example of this initiative is the hagiolatry of the soldier Lei Feng, begun in 1962. The GPD also inspired and propagated such movements as the “Xia Lian Dang Bing” movement, which in a 1958 directive stipulated that cadres at all levels of the PLA must go down to companies, platoons, and squads to serve as soldiers – to eat, sleep, work, and take part in leisure activities with the rank and file. According to *Hong Qi*, the theoretical journal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the purpose of this exercise was to “improve their style of thinking and better the relationship between officers and soldiers.” At all levels of the PLA, senior cadres accordingly went down to small units to learn the lessons that service in the ranks taught.

The principle of *guan bing yizhi* was integral to Mao’s egalitarian Marxism, but its practical function in Mao’s military thought was to create effective units on the battlefield: Maoist PLA units would win because they were united in pursuit of their objectives. Cadres and soldiers shared the good and the bad, learned from each other, and helped each other. In Mao’s political theory, this attitude of egalitarian cooperation was the antithesis of the hierarchical and unequal system that served as the basis of the officer–soldier relationship in other armies.

Every unit in every army has its own culture, of course, that blends the hierarchical and the egalitarian. The success of the blend as a motivational force can be seen in the degree to which the unit has shared ideals and the degree to which it lives up to those ideals. The level of equality in a unit’s culture is often evident in the way that awards and decorations are distributed: where there is inequality, it is common for certain groups to receive more than their fair share of recognition for service. Leadership style is another important component of unit culture; the PLA style, for example, is for leaders to share without privilege.
the hardships and dangers of the common soldier. Ultimately, however, the success or failure of the unit culture is demonstrated by the degree to which the troops accept the justice of their situation and by their confidence in their leaders.

As we have seen, by 1978, the PLA’s unit culture was in trouble. The *guan bing yizhi* model did not fit with reality, and the awards system was seriously compromised. Morale often was bad, and confidence in leadership was lacking. The troops, in most cases, nonetheless went forward.

**Leading by example: models and exemplars**

The PLA, like all of Chinese society during the Maoist era, identified and promoted exemplars of model behavior to guide and teach the common soldier or citizen. In 1979, most PLA models were drawn from the Civil War period, but a few also were taken from the experience of the Chinese People’s Volunteers in Korea. The models exalted courage, initiative, forbearance of pain, and absolute loyalty to the party, the army, and the nation.6

The most important and widely discussed model in Chinese military and civilian circles during the 1960s and 1970s was the soldier Lei Feng. Lei Feng was born in Wancheng County, Hunan province, in 1940. As the story goes, the Japanese beat his father to death, and his mother’s rage was so great that she killed herself. Lei Feng was raised an orphan by poor relatives in his native village. He grew to maturity with a deep love of the Communist Party and the peasant masses, and in 1957 he was recognized as a “model worker” (*gongzuo mofan*) by the Communist Party in his home county. After gaining several other titles, including “model laborer” and “Red Flag Bearer,” in January 1960 he joined the PLA. In November the same year, he joined the Communist Party. His military career was one of sacrifice and selflessness. In June 1961, Lei Feng was promoted to squad leader, an achievement that usually did not come until the fourth year of service, and he quickly made his 4th Squad a unit to be emulated. On August 15, 1962, Lei Feng died performing an act of heroism for the “masses.”7

The CCP, the PLA, and the Chinese media all fell upon the story of this exemplary young man. Lei Feng was awarded several posthumous decorations and the titles of Model Member of the Communist Youth League (*Mofan Gong Qing Tuan Yuan*) and “The Savior Soldier” (*Jieyue Biaobing*). He was lionized in the *People’s Daily*, the *Liberation Army Daily*, and the *China Youth Daily*. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Chen Yun, and Deng Xiaoping publicly recognized the “greatness” of Lei Feng, and Mao called on all of Chinese society to study his life.8

Lei Feng was the most widely propagandized model of the 1960s and 1970s, but he was not necessarily the right model for the Chinese soldiers about to invade Vietnam. Lei Feng had never seen combat – his great deeds all were performed as a guardian of the people against natural threats. Lei Feng was a driver and then squad leader in a transportation unit in Shenyang Military Region
Shenyang is in the far northeast of China, near the quiet borders with the Soviet Union and North Korea, and China was at peace. The border dispute with India that was fought in 1962 came only after Lei Feng’s death.

In the weeks before the 1979 invasion, the GPD responded to this problem by propagandizing four warrior-like figures in addition to Lei Feng: Dong Cunrui (1929–48), Huang Jiguang (1931–52), Qiu Shaoyun (1926–52), and Yang Gensi (1922–50). All had died in action: Dong attacking a Guomindang blockhouse during the Civil War, Huang and Qiu defending hills in Korea – Qiu allegedly against a force of more than 500 Americans – and Yang in Vietnam. Three of the four significantly had died fighting in land beyond China’s borders where a “hegemonist” power was intervening in China’s affairs (the United States in Korea and France in Vietnam).9

From late 1978 into 1979 and the border campaign, the political cadres used the four models to inspire different types of combat behavior: one slogan, for example, was “Emulate Huang Jiguang during an emergency, Dong Cunrui while blowing up a bunker.”10 On March 2, 1979, Unit 54202, a Guangzhou MR regiment, was ordered to capture Hill 542 in an unknown location in Vietnam. Perhaps with the heroism of Dong Cunrui in mind, soldier Liang Yingrui took it upon himself to destroy an enemy bunker that blocked the unit’s path. According to the official account of the incident, Liang, who had “loved Mao and the party since childhood” and who after becoming a soldier had “earnestly studied Lei Feng, Dong Cunrui,” and the other heroes, climbed onto the bunker to jam an explosive charge into its roof. He was wounded in the leg as he approached the bunker, and his first attempt to place the charge failed, but he persisted and forced the charge into the bunker, tamping it in place with his body. He was killed, but his unit was able to move forward.11

Not all of the PLA soldiers in Vietnam were as taken by their model heroes as Liang Yingrui. Heroes of the Civil War, the battles in Korea, and of the era before the Cultural Revolution must have seemed dated and irrelevant on the bloody battlefields of northern Vietnam. The attitude of some soldiers toward the institutions of the communist system is telling. The political officer of one Chengdu MR regiment reported that the young soldiers in his unit thought the Young Communist League (Qing Nian Tuan; YCL), the CCP’s youth organization, to be an unwarranted distraction from their military duties and irrelevant to the unit’s success on the battlefield.12

The political officers nonetheless continued to make models of exceptional soldiers. On February 17, the first morning of the campaign, a Guangzhou MR engineer regiment encountered stiff resistance to its initial attack. Company commander Liu Junqin moved forward to scout the enemy positions and on five occasions led teams to clear mines, barbed wire, and bamboo spikes from four 80-meter paths that the combat units needed to proceed. Liu died when he stepped on a land mine. His dying words were admonitions to the troops to carry out their combat assignments.13 The regiment’s cadres immediately popularized an account of Liu’s heroic feats and made him a model for the other soldiers in the regiment, and after the war Liu’s battalion party committee gave time from
CCP and YCL meetings for soldiers to visit Liu’s grave, to perform volunteer labor in Liu’s honor, and to discuss his deeds.\textsuperscript{14}

The \textit{guan bing yizhi} concept of unity between leaders and soldiers depended at least in part on the cadres and men sharing similar models for action, and with changing times the models also had to change. Lei Feng was a symbol of international proletarian solidarity, and the use of his model to inspire the workers and peasants on one side of a battlefield to kill their comrades on the other side made no sense. Huang Jiguang died to defend communism in China and her neighbors, but now China was fighting Vietnam, a communist country that young soldiers had been taught was their own nation’s closest friend. The cadres had to junk their old models and exchange their old enemies for new ones.

The staff of a regimental political office in the 42nd Division of the 14th Army lamented this problem when they noted that their political officers had had difficulty motivating soldiers because of the “rapid shifts in ideology” (\textit{youyu sixiang zhuande taiji}).\textsuperscript{15} The unity of officers and soldiers was built on shared perceptions, and to a large degree those perceptions were shaped by the models the PLA used. When the ideology changed, the models became obsolete and the shared perceptions weakened.\textsuperscript{16}

The PLA’s awards system also weakened the unity between officers and soldiers. In 1965, the PLA abandoned its traditional system of awards at the same time that it abandoned its rank system: awards and ranks were considered to be bourgeois affectations that interfered with the ideal of unity that was to be realized in the PLA. The “abolition of explicit differentials of rank” was intended to “remove the conditions that foster the ideas of rank, fame, and personal interest.”\textsuperscript{17} Anything that hindered the officers from becoming close to the soldiers, or that obstructed cadres and soldiers in their efforts to become close to the masses, was to be eliminated.

Prior to 1965, the PLA had had awards for individual and unit achievement and for campaign service. The three orders of honor given by the Communist Party at the national level – the Orders and Medals of August First, the Orders and Medals of Independence and Freedom, and the Orders and Medals of Liberation – also could be awarded to soldiers. (The three orders of honor continued to be awarded during the years between 1965 and 1979, but were not worn.\textsuperscript{18})

In the mid-1960s, a system of honorary titles was instituted that persisted until 1979 and into the early 1980s. The honorary titles system recognized individual and unit accomplishments. Soldiers and cadre were eligible for the titles of Meritorious Soldier, Combat Hero, Model Soldier, and Good Fighter and for the Order of Merit; unit awards included titles such as Red Steel, Brave Killer Company, Tiger Company, and Sharp Sword Company. The individual Order of Merit was awarded in four classes. The Special Merit award, the highest award, was given for meritorious service or for bravery involving death or significant wounds. The Class One award recognized service leading to a serious loss to the enemy. The Class Two award was presented to recognize exemplary bravery, and the Class Three award honored the meritorious performance of duty under dangerous, arduous, or difficult circumstances.\textsuperscript{19}
The principle of guan bing yizhi presumably should have seen the PLA distribute its honorary awards for heroic and meritorious acts through an equitable system of recognition, with medals awarded in rough proportion to the numbers of cadre and troops serving in the combat zone or on the front lines. Soldiers in the hazardous roles of infantry platoon leader, squad leader, or rifleman might reasonably have garnered a greater share of the awards, but an equitable system would have seen units and individuals recognized in broad relation to their involvement in combat. This was not the case in 1979.

Another factor that was likely to make the awards system more contentious came in the form of guidance from the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in the winter of 1978. For the first time since the early 1960s, there appears to have been a material incentive attached to certain awards.

Before examining the situation in 1979, it is helpful to take a look at the example of the PLA’s involvement in the Sino-Indian War (October 19–November 21, 1962). After that war, the PLA made 327 awards for heroism. Of these, 160 (about 48 percent) went to cadres, of whom just more than 70 percent were party members. Of the 158 other soldiers who received awards, 54 (34.2 percent) were members of the party or youth league.

In 1979, the GPD’s policy on cadre awards was clear, at least on paper. On March 22, 1979, after all the Chinese troops had withdrawn from Vietnam, the GPD notified all parts of the PLA that processing cadre awards was a high priority and should be undertaken in a fast, effective manner. The GPD went on to say that no more than 10 percent of the cadres in any one unit should be issued awards. In 1979, a Chinese army at 100 percent personnel strength had 4,521 cadres, representing about 10.5 percent of the army’s total strength of 42,983 personnel. If the percentage of awards given to cadres were to exceed 10 percent, there was the danger that this would give the impression that cadres were being favored for recognition – hardly a situation likely to encourage a close relationship between the cadres and the troops.

When the awards were announced, however, it was immediately clear that the GPD directive had been broadly ignored. The GPD itself set a poor example. In its after-action report, published in July 1980, it cited twenty-three individuals for their heroism during the campaign: cadres made up 83.3 percent of those recognized, a proportion exceeding even that of the 1962 war, the PLA’s last real foreign combat.

A similar situation emerged among many of the field units. Unit 35217, an infantry regiment of the 42nd Division of Kunming MR’s 14th Army, for example, had about 250 cadre positions and made 229 cadre awards. In one company of the 124th Infantry Division of Guangzhou MR’s 42nd Army, eleven of thirteen cadres received honors and two of the eleven received Class Two citations. Unit 33980, a division in Wuhan MR’s 54th Army, made awards to twenty-five of the thirty-two CCP members in one battalion and in one company made awards to ten of eleven cadres.

There are other examples in which the award system appears to have been abused for the benefit of cadres and party members. For example, although there
is no record of the naval 217 Formation making contact with the enemy, the unit issued a large number of awards. Forty-five individuals were recognized, sixteen of whom were cadres and thirty-nine of whom were CCP members. Only six awardees were neither cadre nor party members. In a sample of fifty-three reports of unit actions in the war, soldiers were mentioned in just eighteen (33.9 percent) reports, but cadres were mentioned in thirty-six (67.9 percent). Ninety-eight cadres were named, but only sixty-five soldiers. In this sample, cadres were more than one and half times more likely to be mentioned in dispatches than were soldiers.

Before the award nominations were forwarded to higher-level party committees and the GPD, each unit held meetings to discuss its nominations. Reports of these meetings reveal frequent bitter disagreements and cynicism about the process, typically centered on the belief by some participants that the number of cadres proposed for awards was too high; and where the unit political officers actually followed the GPD policy of capping cadre awards at 10 percent of the serving cadre, disagreements often arose over which cadres should receive an award.

The report of Guangzhou MR Engineering Unit 53702, probably a regiment of the 42nd Army, is illustrative. Seven of the nine cadres of the 7th Company were on the slate to receive honors. The branch party committee at the next level identified this as a problem for the reasons that some of the things for which cadres were nominated were the result of the cooperative work of the entire unit, and because the nominations exceeded the GPD guidance. The party committee decided to discuss the matter with the unit’s troops and after three meetings narrowed down the slate to four nominees. This number still exceeded GPD guidance, but the unit was satisfied that it was at least a more reasonable slate.

In another Guangzhou MR regiment, Unit 54449, some party committees that thought their units had made an important contribution to the campaign submitted extra citations. The response from those units that were less recognized for their work was the cynical “the awards do not mean anything” (“mei you shemma hao ping de, ping shang ye mei you yi xiang”) and a predictable impasse at the party meetings. The opinions of both sides were strongly held, with favored units complaining to the party committees if their proposals were not approved.

The introduction of material incentives also appears to have created problems. The 504th Field Hospital, for example, had the usual difficulties drawing up an appropriate merit list for its members, but with an added twist: as the unit reported, “Now that they [the awards] are about material incentives, everyone is striving and contending” (“xianzai sheji dao wuzi daiyu jiu yao zheng yi zheng le”). The unit held two and a half days of political meetings to resolve the situation.

In spite of the institutional propaganda and ideological exhortations, the principle of guan bing yizhi thus was often strained. Many of the units that fought in 1979 had been hastily assembled, and the leaders were new to the troops and new to each other. Some leaders were not qualified, and some soldiers were
poorly trained or not trained at all. Units that had been involved in economic work for long periods of time had obvious problems of preparedness for war, and others that had to move long distances to their attack positions or that had to maintain major items of equipment had problems building the proper sense of unity because there was little opportunity for orientation and education. In logistics and support units that were dispersed across the front, the opportunities for building unity similarly were few and far between.

The more stable units generally had better unity and fared better in combat. In February 1979, Hu Xuqing was the political instructor in a company of Wuhan MR’s 54th Army operating in the area south of Lang Son. Opposing his unit probably were elements of the 42nd Regiment of the PAVN’s 327th Infantry Division. Although serving as a political officer, Hu led an assault on an unnamed hill. His small force rapidly seized the hill and then repulsed four enemy counterattacks, killing ninety-eight Vietnamese soldiers. Hu subsequently received the honorary title “Combat Hero” and his unit the title “Heroic Shock Company.” Hu attributed his success to the fact that he had served in the company for seven years as a platoon leader, during which time he had learned how to command troops and had learned how to use every weapon in the company inventory. When the time came to fight, Hu brought to his mission leadership skills, the ability to motivate soldiers, a familiarity with his troops, and a high level of professional skills – an essential combination for combat effectiveness.32

These ingredients for success were seldom available to other units. In one division (Unit 33720) of the Wuhan MR’s 43rd Army, the political officers found that the troops did not trust their cadres as battlefield commanders and the cadres did not trust their men as soldiers. This mutual lack of confidence, on the eve of battle and in a unit that was 1,000 kilometers from its home base, must have been terribly corrosive to the unity between officers and soldiers, and the situation furthermore was aggravated by a conviction among the soldiers that the Vietnamese had powerful American- and Soviet-made weapons. The political staff of the division had much work to do.33

The pressure on commanders and political officers to create unity was not helped by the fact that their efforts to inspire enthusiasm for the war often were met with cynicism. The cadres of Chengdu-based Unit 56045, concerned about the level of motivation among their troops, organized a letter-writing campaign at the company level, with the objective of letting the troops “spontaneously” show their desire for battle by petitioning their leaders for the most dangerous assignments. It was also good form in such letter-writing for the soldier to state how many enemy soldiers he intended to kill. The political officers analyzed the letters for signs of ideological strength or weakness and used them at meetings as the basis for competitions between small units and individuals. Everything went fine in Unit 56045 down to the company level. At the squad and platoon level, however, the political workers found that some of the individuals who had written letters in truth feared combat and had written only because their leaders had told them to do so. A series of meetings that followed the letter-writing
failed to generate the enthusiasm that the cadres had expected and left them with thirty-two soldiers, of the fifty who originally had expressed their fears, who did not want to go into combat.  

To motivate such soldiers during the combat operations that began on February 17, platoon and squad leaders would attempt to use personal persuasion or otherwise would assign a better-motivated “core” soldier to monitor the recalcitrant individual. In some cases, this worked, and the soldier proved himself in combat to be a worthy and capable warrior. In other cases, soldiers cried, feigned illness, hid in their foxholes, or attempted to avoid the most dangerous battlefield tasks. One soldier is reported to have wept because he was to be transferred from a long-established company to a newly formed one that he presumed would as a consequence of its newness be weak. His fear was a testimony to the sense of instability that permeated the Chinese units and a negative assessment of the state of “unity” between cadre and soldiers.

There also on occasion was a lack of unity among the cadres. One tank battalion, the 3rd Battalion of Guangzhou MR Unit 54450, had four recently promoted cadres among its complement of five. Reassigned from other units, the new cadres could not get along. This lack of cohesiveness spread to the troops and had ominous implications for the unit’s performance in combat. It took the intervention of the cadres at a higher level to polish this relationship into one that could bear the strains of combat.

The theory governing the structure of the PLA that invaded Vietnam in 1979 was that the army had as its backbone a core of party members. These party members, most of who were cadres, would unite with the conscripts in a manifestation of the Maoist political work principle, and on the battlefield would be a potent military force. When in practice this occurred, the PLA was an effective fighting force. When it did not, as it frequently did not in the 1979 campaign, the PLA was a stumbling giant.

The unity of the army and the people: “An army of Buddhas”? 

As Unit 33762, a PLA regiment from the Wuhan MR, withdrew from Vietnam in the middle of March 1979, an elderly Vietnamese woman told a Chinese soldier that the PLA was “an army of Buddhas” (pusa budui), because they had treated the Vietnamese civilians with compassion and respect. The story may be apocryphal, but it reflects the way that the cadres and conscripts of the PLA, for the most part, would like to have been seen. The kind and compassionate treatment of civilians was an important ideal of the PLA’s method of operations during the Maoist era. War is not a popularity contest, but popularity, or at least an absence of hatred, can contribute to the attainment of a campaign’s objectives.

The late Song Shilun, Commandant of the Chinese Academy of Military Science and a leading military thinker of the Maoist era, quotes Mao Zedong as defining the unity between the army and the people in the following way:
The unity between the army and the people comes about because disciplined troops do not harm the people. The army informs the people through propaganda, organizes them, and arms them. The army reduces the financial burdens of the masses and it strikes at traitors and collaborators. Therefore, the army is closely united with the people and is always welcomed by the people.38

The PLA had close contact with the Chinese people who lived in the border region in the late 1970s. In particular, it had direct contact with the militia units raised in the communes of southern Yunnan and Guangxi provinces. When the PLA was deployed en masse to the border for the 1979 invasion, the communes of these provinces, at the direction of the local and provincial party and military authorities, assembled their militia in support. According to one Taiwan-based source, 80,000 militia were called up before the campaign ended.39

The PLA also had close contact with the Vietnamese citizens of the border provinces. The northern periphery of Vietnam is not as densely populated as other parts of the country, but the area is sprinkled with agricultural communities of Vietnamese and several minority ethnicities, including those related to the Chinese Zhuang, Miao, and Tai minorities. At the time of the 1979 campaign, there also were small groups of Han Chinese living in the area.40

**Militia operations**

Militia operations in Guangzhou MR were extensive and provided a wide variety of assistance to the Chinese assault forces. The Guangxi Provincial Military District of the Guangzhou MR has three prefectures on the border with Vietnam: Baise, Nanning, and Qinzhou. The county of Longzhou, which had a central role to play in the 1979 campaign, is in Nanning prefecture. The county seat lies about twenty kilometers east of the border at the intersection of two roads that link it to the major border crossing at Friendship Pass near Pingxiang, the largest Chinese border town in the Guangxi Military District, and to the small border crossing at Shuikou (VN: Thuy Khau). The Chinese 54th and 55th Armies launched their attacks on Lang Son from the Longzhou–Friendship Pass road.

During January and February 1979, the Longzhou County People’s Armed Forces Department (PAFD) organized more than 10,700 militiamen and women in support of the PLA.41 On February 17, more than 700 armed militiamen were deployed to areas along the border to create diversions and distract the Vietnamese border guards with small arms fire. Another 5,600 militiamen and women were assigned to fight with the PLA in Vietnam, and specifically to conduct mopping up operations in the rear of the 54th and 55th Armies. The militia also provided rear-area security for the regular units and, since Longzhou was located on the northwest flank of the axis of advance, probably also flank security.42

The Longzhou County PAFD additionally organized more than 900 militiamen and civilians to help carry ammunition, repair roads, build bridges, and perform other forms of labor. Eighty vehicles were used to move 1,400 tons of
food and materiel. The militia also set up tea stands along the route to the forward positions, providing tea, soup, and gruel to the passing soldiers. Production brigades and work teams assisted the militia with labor and security in the movement of materiel in rear areas.43

While performing these emergency duties, the militia somehow also managed to continue with their work as farmers in the county’s production brigades and work teams.44 The PLA was at least partially dependent on local food, and the spring crop had to be planted and the normal repair work done on dikes, canals, and other agricultural infrastructure. When the PLA needed porters to transport provisions or materiel, virtually the entire population of Longzhou County had to mobilize to support the war.45

The Kunming MR also mobilized a strong force of militia to support the Chinese invasion force. The Yunnan Provincial Military District of the Kunming MR had four front-line prefectures along the Sino-Vietnamese border. From west to east, these prefectures are Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Simao Prefecture, Honghe Hani-Yi Autonomous Prefecture, and Wenshan Zhuang–Miao Autonomous Prefecture. Wenshan Prefecture is home to a key county of the 1979 campaign, Maguan County. The county seat, Maguan (shown on some older maps as Anping), is located at an elevation of about 1,500–1,800 meters, about twenty-five kilometers northwest of the border. The town is at the junction of several small roads that lead to Wenshan and on to Kunming, and in Vietnam to Muong Khuong and several smaller hamlets. As in Guangxi, the Dai, Yi, and, most significantly, the Zhuang and Miao minorities are prominent in the border counties of Yunnan. Across the border, the same ethnic minorities are all represented in Vietnam, where the Miao are known as the Hmong or Meo.46

Maguan County mobilized more than 25,000 militiamen and women in support of the invasion.47 These troops were organized into eighteen armed militia companies, twenty newly raised armed militia companies, seven pack animal transportation companies, one stretcher battalion, one medical team, and five guard post units.48 In some cases, the units were raised at extreme short notice: when one PLA unit requested urgent stretcher support Maguan County responded by providing 100 stretchers and their bearers in just one hour.49

The Maguan County militia performed the same combat, transportation, security, and medical missions as their counterparts in Longzhou County but were less called upon to perform a combat role and were thus able to engage to a greater extent in agricultural work. The militia cultivated 2,600 mu (one mu equals 0.1647 acres) of land near the border and increased the acreage of rice paddy by 16,300 mu compared to that which had been planted in 1978. An additional 19,050 mu of corn also was planted.50

Longzhou and Maguan counties lie directly on the Sino-Vietnamese border and therefore could be expected to be drawn into support operations for the war. The contribution of Longan County, which is about 100 kilometers northeast of the border at its closest point, is perhaps more surprising. Longan lies in the You River valley in Guangxi province about seventy-five kilometers northwest of
Nanning. It is not directly connected to the border by road and physically is shielded from the border region by a large area of karst formations of an elevation of up to 1,000 meters.

Several weeks before the invasion, a member of the Longan CCP Standing Committee and the deputy director of Unit 53214’s Political Office set out to raise ten stretcher-bearer companies from among the county’s residents. The organizers conducted three or four days of educational briefings and classes and then called for 2,000 volunteers. More than 40,000 people registered for service, of whom 2,036 were selected. The Longan militia companies arrived at the assembly area of Unit 53214 on February 16 and the next day accompanied the regular PLA units in the attack on Cao Bang.

The ideal of the unity of the army and the people that was embodied in these combined army–militia teams was tested at all points along the front. Things did not always go smoothly. The enthusiasm even of some of the Longan volunteers faded when they reached the departure areas on the border, and Unit 53214’s political work cadres had to conduct remedial political training to restore their courage. The PLA unit found itself obliged to conduct frequent roll calls and musters of its militiamen and had to provide infantrymen as “security” escorts for its volunteer stretcher-bearers.

Other PLA units ran into ideological and practical problems with their militia counterparts. Unit 56034, a division or regiment of Chengdu MR’s 13th Army, was partnered with a militia unit that had been recruited and dispatched to the front in just two days. This had left little time for the orientation of the militiamen, as Unit 56034’s Political Department later lamented. Some militiamen, it reported, had a “fuzzy understanding” of the reasons for the invasion, and others violated the PLA’s policy of treating humanely its Vietnamese prisoners and the civilians that they encountered.

The PLA also encountered practical problems that strained the ties between the army and the militia. Unit 53513, a Guangzhou MR unit, found that some of the men drafted for militia duty as guides were of questionable reliability. One, for example, turned out to be a relative of a Vietnamese deputy provincial magistrate; others had family and financial problems; and some, it transpired, could neither read a map nor speak Mandarin. The unit used the three weeks between arrival at its assembly area and February 17 trying to train its appointed guides.

The militia–PLA connection was the point at which the Chinese people came into direct and intimate contact with their army. The PLA mobilized the people in great numbers and, although there were problems, most PLA reports indicate a general feeling of satisfaction. On balance, the performance of the militia showed that the principle of civil–military unity was strong in the theater of operations.

The relationship between the PLA and the Vietnamese people

The invading PLA invested an enormous amount of effort to win the political support of the Vietnamese civilians in the theater of operations. In the same way
that it sought to build and draw upon a close relationship with the Chinese civilian population, the PLA employed a mass work (qunzhong gongzuo) program to win the trust and assistance of the Vietnamese. In the sanguine post-conflict assessment of its efforts, the PLA’s GPD said that the program “not only expanded our army’s political influence but also played a supporting role in the successful completion of the mission” (“bu jin kuodale wo jun zhengzhi yingxiang, erqie dui wancheng zuozhan renwu qidaole peihe zuoyung”).

The Chinese operated a political campaign for two reasons. First, it was a PLA “tradition.” Political warfare had a hallowed place next to tactics, the operational art, and strategy in the repertoire of PLA methods for imposing the will of the CCP on its opponents. The Gutian Congress Resolution of December 29, 1929, had mandated of the PLA that it conduct political work, and the histories of the PLA had since that date lauded the success of the political work program. Second, the PLA leadership was ideologically conditioned to accept the international unity of the working classes. This ideology held that the Chinese and Vietnamese masses must share identical interests; given that the PLA represented the Chinese masses the logical deduction was that the PLA was in Vietnam to help the Vietnamese. The problem with which their Vietnamese comrades were struggling was the emergence of class enemies among the Vietnamese leadership: the Le Duan (CH: Li Sun) clique. Before the war, the GPD in Beijing published regulations that told the political officers to explain that the Chinese were invading to “fiercely strike the reactionary Vietnamese authorities.” There was to be a clear differentiation between the Le Duan group and the Vietnamese people, who were to be won over to the cause of the PLA (“yao qiu bi xiu ba Yuenan renmin he Li Sun fandong jituan yange qifen kai lai, ji yao hen hen da ji Yuenan fandong danju, you yao zhenqu yuefan qunzhong”).

In addition to its directive to the political officers, the GPD had also issued guidance and regulations, in conjunction with the Military Affairs Commission, to all troop units addressing ways in which to win the support of the Vietnamese population. The regulations, approved by the MAC and promulgated by the GPD, outlined the political basis for the war and the policies to be followed to attain its political objectives. They stipulated first and foremost that the army was to differentiate between Vietnam’s leaders and the Vietnamese population, that soldiers were to explain this policy to the Vietnamese, and that they were to show respect and compassion for the civilians in the battle zone. The “three main rules of discipline and the eight points of attention” (san da jilu ba xiang zhuyi) were emphasized in troop education (see also Chapter 2), and discipline was enforced.

In the Kunming MR across the border from the Lao Cai theater of operations, Unit 56041, an infantry regiment of the 149th Infantry Division of Chengdu MR’s 13th Army, prepared to conduct its military and political tasks in a variety of ways. The political cadres began by reminding the soldiers of Unit 56041’s tradition of political work, which dated back to World War II and the regiment’s award of the honorary title “Model Mass Work Regiment” (Qunzhong Gongzuo Mofan Tuan). Presumably less was said of the 13th Army’s combat record since
then: post-1949, it had been in action only once, in a 1967–68 clash with the 14th Army, another Kunming MR unit, over factional issues relating to the Cultural Revolution.61

Preparing for their political work in Vietnam, the cadres of Unit 56041 first assigned to a deputy political commissar and a subordinate responsibility for the mass work that would be undertaken with Vietnamese civilians. The party committee additionally added a mass work secretary, established a mass work subcommittee, and set up and trained a mass work team in each company. These company-level teams were to spread propaganda and to ensure that the disciplinary guidance that the companies had received from the regiment and higher authorities was followed. Second, the political cadres organized groups to study Mao’s works on the importance of good civil–military relations. Third, they arranged for senior cadres who had fought in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 to lecture the troops about the ways to conduct mass work in a foreign country. Finally, they briefed the troops on the tradition of Sino-Vietnamese friendship, on Vietnamese customs, and on the problems that mass work teams were likely to encounter while performing their duties in Vietnam.62

After the unit entered Vietnam in February 1979, it discovered that its preparations fell short of what was needed. The unit commanders and political workers quickly established five more rules: do not damage homes or crops; do not take the property of the Vietnamese civilians; if possible, do not kill or injure the local people’s animals; send an advanced guard ahead to maintain order when a unit enters a village or town; and respect Vietnamese customs. The regiment’s political office commissioned inspection teams to enforce these rules.63

The regiment additionally bivouacked in fields to minimize the opportunities for conflict with the local populace and for the rest of the campaign – at least according to its after-action report – successfully performed its political and military missions. Medical teams were dispatched to treat the old, the sick, and the injured, and the report tells also of an incident in which the soldiers of the regiment, having discovered five women of the Jing minority hiding in a cave, gave them food and water and convinced them that it was safe to come out of hiding. As a result of these kind acts, the Vietnamese people in Unit 56041’s area of operations gradually returned to their homes.64

The unit’s official report goes on to say that the soldiers of Unit 56041 were rewarded for their actions in several ways. First, the local people did not offer resistance to the regiment: they were either friendly to the Chinese soldiers or apathetic. Second, by convincing the local people to return to their homes, the PLA troops were able to gain control of the population, such that the only people moving at night or in certain areas could be regarded with confidence as hostile. Third, the unit gained valuable intelligence from the people, being alerted to and in consequence being able to thwart planned raids on its support bases.65

Elsewhere in the Kunming MR, the Yunnan Provincial Military District also worked hard at its political responsibilities. The district raised 16,000 yuan to
pay for the mass work expenses of combat units operating in its area, and it opened its granary and distributed 200,000 kilograms of rice to the Vietnamese. It also deployed more than 100 teams to do mass work in more than 100 Vietnamese villages. Each work team included cadres, soldiers, medical personnel, interpreters, and militiamen.

Nineteen of these teams were deployed in the area northwest of Lao Cai by the 2nd Battalion of Unit 35548, the Pangbian Border Defense Regiment. The work teams performed a wide variety of tasks: they helped the Vietnamese peasants get water, treated the sick and wounded, chopped firewood, and monitored the behavior of other Chinese troops toward the local people. They also searched the hills for refugees, bringing them back to their homes or villages where they could be fed, treated, and, perhaps most important, controlled.

A primary mission of the Yunnan Military District mass work teams appears also to have been to disarm the Vietnamese they encountered. Guided into the mountains by an elderly couple, one work team patrol located a group of fifty Vietnamese and persuaded them to return to their village. The patrol confiscated twenty-two weapons from this group. Another mass work team attached to the 2nd Battalion of Unit 35548 similarly convinced a Vietnamese commune official to lead it to refugees in the mountains, on this occasion confiscating more than forty-five weapons.

In at least one case, a mass work operation created the conditions for a victory by the Chinese. Pha Long (CH: Fa Long) is a small Vietnamese village in Hoang Lien Son province, close to border marker 21 and about forty kilometers northeast of Lao Cai and the Red River. The hills around Pha Long, on both sides of the border, are home to the Miao minority. Before the start of the war, a Yunnan Military District unit initiated charges of political crimes against the local Vietnamese leadership. The Chinese unit, which had Miao cadres and soldiers serving on its mass work team, encouraged the Chinese Miao to pursue a friendship with a Miao who was a section leader of the Pha Long militia on the Vietnamese side of the border. This was done so successfully that on the first day of the war the Vietnamese Miao section leader was prepared to guide the Chinese assault force past his own militia sentry post, with the result that the PLA troops passed through the Vietnamese lines without being spotted.

Attempts at similar mass work operations were also underway in the Guangzhou MR. Unit 53214, a division of the 42nd Army, reported that the key to its mass work was maintaining discipline and the belief of both cadres and soldiers in the value of the exercise. Some individuals believed that mass work with foreigners was a waste of time, saying, as reported in the unit’s official history: “the quality of discipline toward the masses in a foreign country doesn’t really matter – if you do well, they still won’t say so” (“zai yiguo zuozhan, qunzhong jilu hao huai guanxi bu da, zuode haole ye bu hui shuo ni hao”). The counter argument by the political cadres was that maintaining discipline during operations in a foreign country helped to shape the world’s perception of the PLA and that the PLA’s prestige was important to all Chinese. Other soldiers objected that they could not tell the difference between
Vietnamese soldiers and civilians or between military and civilian buildings. To them, the only thing that mattered was the military aspect of the operation, and mass work distracted from the achievement of the military objectives. Since good deeds and compassionate treatment would never be reciprocated in a foreign country and since mass work required making difficult distinctions, many soldiers did not believe that they should waste time and risk lives performing mass work in Vietnam.75

Members of one company of Unit 33762, a Wuhan MR regiment, expressed similar opposition to the idea of conducting mass work. The political cadres stated that they encountered “ideological resistance” (sixiang shangde nuli) as soon as the unit crossed into Vietnam. Some objectors said that it was impossible to conduct effective mass work in Vietnam, and others felt that maintaining the rigorous discipline that mass work required was too difficult and that the unit should focus on its military tasks. Still others said that the Sino-Vietnamese relationship had changed, the Vietnamese people were now the enemy, and all enemies should be wiped out (yao tong tong gandiao). The flight from the fighting of Vietnamese civilians pleased many of the PLA soldiers: where there were no masses, there could be no mass work.76

In spite of the “ideological resistance” reported by the cadres, Unit 33762 went on to perform numerous mass work activities. The soldiers of the company went door to door in the area under their control, calming civilians and distributing necessities. During the three weeks of the campaign, the unit reports distributing 123 kilograms of rice, 200 kilograms of salt, forty kilograms of kerosene, twenty kilograms of dry rations, and seventeen blankets or articles of clothing. Medical treatment was provided to 100 patients, seventy-five soldiers were formed into three working parties to repair five roofs and straighten up thirty houses, and the company helped 280 civilians return to their homes. It is this unit that supposedly earned from a grateful Vietnamese woman the description of the PLA as “an army of Buddhas.”77

The epithet conferred upon the PLA by the Vietnamese government was wholly different. In a pamphlet published in April 1979, the Vietnamese authorities charged that the PLA was “the great army of crime.”78 This document charged that the PLA had engaged in a ruthless campaign against the people of northern Vietnam. While it cited numerous incidents to illustrate the brutality of the Chinese soldiers, its case rested primarily on three incidents. In Tong Chup, a hamlet in Hoa An district of Cao Bang province, the Vietnamese claim that troops of the Chinese 42nd Army used axes and knives to kill forty-three women and children on March 9, 1979. According to local officials, the bodies were mutilated and dropped into the hamlet’s drinking water wells.79 The pivotal town of Dong Dang, just north of Lang Son, was completely and deliberately ravaged by withdrawing Chinese troops. Everything removable – furniture, bicycles, and quilts and even railroad ties – was stolen; everything else was destroyed.80 And the Chinese allegedly also destroyed the town of Cam Duong, a town of about 20,000 people on the Red River in Hoang Lien Son province, about ten kilometers from the Chinese border. The town’s apatite mine also was destroyed.81
Before they withdrew, the Chinese allegedly photographed one of their soldiers giving eighty-two-year-old Nguyen Thi Sam a bag of rice. As far as the Vietnamese were concerned, the PLA’s mass work campaign was as phony as the picture.82

A good and close relationship between the army and the people was an inextricable part of the political work system that made the PLA Maoist. The PLA’s bonds with the Chinese peasants of the border area were strong enough for cadres and local officials to be able to mobilize a large part of the population for security and labor missions. Its efforts to bond with the Vietnamese people were less successful. The Vietnamese people were patriotic, politically indoctrinated, and accustomed to hardship. They were not an easy sell, and the fact that the Chinese convinced even a few is remarkable.83 Their efforts, however, were undermined by the evident engagement of at least some elements of the PLA in wanton acts of murder and destruction. In theory, the principle of “unity of the army and the people” remained sound. In practice, the 1979 campaign showed that the bonds that united soldiers and civilians were growing frayed.

“Wajie dijun”: disintegrate the enemy

In addition to its political work with the civilian populace, the PLA conducted extensive political operations against enemy soldiers. “Wajie dijun,” or “disintegrate the enemy,” was a basic principle of the PLA and played an important role in the 1979 campaign.84 The objective of wajie dijun was to force enemy officers and soldiers to lay down their arms, surrender, revolt, or desert. The Chinese hoped that through their political operations, they could make the Vietnamese waver and could thereby make easier the task of defeating them on the battlefield.

Preparation for the political campaign against the Vietnamese soldiery began at least as early as December 12, 1978. The tools and techniques of wajie dijun had to be readied: loudspeakers were repaired or issued, stocks of paper and ink were distributed, and copies of six standard Vietnamese phrases were issued to the troops, with instructions to memorize them and to use them in battle. Propaganda teams also were formed, to carry the war to the enemy. After the campaign, one division, designated Unit 53203, reported that it had used 440,000 leaflets and 265 poster slogans in its attempts to convince Vietnamese soldiers to surrender. Thirty propaganda teams had been assigned by the division to the political work campaign, to nail up posters and distribute leaflets.85

Much of the onus for the success of the campaign naturally fell on the soldiers themselves, and they were instructed in their responsibilities according to a simple plan. Political officers told the Chinese soldiers to surround the Vietnamese and to shout for their surrender. If the enemy surrendered, the Chinese soldiers were to treat their prisoners well and to ensure that they came to no harm nor suffered any deprivation. Any PLA troops that effected a capture were to persuade their prisoners that the Chinese cause was just and that the Vietnamese people were the victims of the erroneous policies of Le Duan, the
General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party. If a prisoner could be won over, he or she was to be persuaded to shout slogans at the Vietnamese who continued to fight. The training was intense. One company reported that it devoted so much time to this training that by the time it moved into Vietnam, 95 percent of its troops were able to use the six slogans against the enemy.86

Other units, however, were less successful in their training, with the political officers running up against soldiers who had concluded that all Vietnamese should be killed and all Vietnamese property taken or destroyed.87 The broad themes of wajie dijun thus had to be refined into simple slogans to direct the rage of these soldiers away from the Vietnamese who might surrender. The political cadres taught the troops that they had to recognize “three distinctions” during the campaign: the “Le Duan clique” did not represent all the Vietnamese people or all Vietnamese officials; local party leaders, military officers, and regional government officials were different from workers and soldiers; and Vietnamese who resisted were different from those who did not resist or who rallied to the Chinese side. To further clarify the issue, the PLA leaders created for their soldiers a model of Vietnamese society that presented a Vietnam in which the revolution had been hijacked by an evil clique. The PLA soldiers were to remain mindful of these distinctions and were to offer different treatment to their opponents based on their political position and their resistance to the Chinese invasion. If soldiers followed the “three distinctions” policy and treated the Vietnamese humanely, so the official line went, the PLA would make the enemy disintegrate. According to the political officers, this process had been successful in all of the PLA’s previous wars. Wajie dijun, according to the political officers, was the PLA’s “eternal and formidable weapon for conquering” the foes of the nation and party.88

Persuading the Chinese soldier to conduct a political campaign, while fighting a military operation, was not easy. However, even in an army that emphasized the nonmilitary aspects of military operations, there were great reservations about the plan. In one unit, designated 53016, the political officers found themselves contending with the belief that military operations alone could be effective in accomplishing the PLA’s missions. The problem, according to some soldiers, was that military actions are more effective than political actions and, since time in combat is limited, the best course of action was to pursue the military option to the exclusion of political work. Political work took time, and lost time could lead to lost opportunities for success.89 In Unit 56029 and Unit 56005, both soldiers and cadres had reservations about the effectiveness of political operations in a foreign country. The difficulty of conducting political operations in a foreign language was obvious, and this objection was clearly expressed to the unit political officers.90 Some cadres additionally voiced their concern that the Vietnamese were too well indoctrinated for the Chinese efforts to have any effect.

The PLA leadership attempted to solve the language problem by assigning to the combat units overseas Chinese who had Vietnamese language skills. These individuals were usually refugees who had been displaced by the Vietnamese
expulsions in 1978 and typically were not well motivated for hazardous work on the front line of combat. The political officers of Unit 53200 nonetheless report that through remedial political education and careful leadership, the unit was able to bring its reluctant draftees around to the proper point of view.91

These issues aside, the most significant problem faced by the political officers in their efforts to prepare for the invasion was the basic brutality instilled into the soldiers during combat training. Soldiers were taught that their attitude toward the enemy should be merciless and that they should look upon him with the “three looks”: contempt, disdain, and hostility.92 Political officers in several units noted that their soldiers were in a frenzy of “extreme emotions”;93 and in one unit, the soldiers felt such hatred for the Vietnamese that they said they would never take prisoners. To these soldiers, taking prisoners created a burden for which there could be no justification.94

The awards system of the PLA also contributed to the pressure to kill, and by extension to the undermining of the wajie dijun campaign. In the run-up to February 17, the political officers encouraged their troops to compete for honors and recognition; but the best way to earn recognition was to kill as many enemy soldiers as possible.95 The drive to create a high Vietnamese body count could only be counterproductive to the goals of the wajie dijun program: the disintegration of the enemy through persuasion that he was fighting for a wrong cause. In the end, prisoners were the key to the political offensive.

When the battle finally began, the Chinese forces immediately met with strong Vietnamese resistance, and the entire campaign bogged down (see Chapter 5). The men of the PLA clearly had the wrong idea of what to expect from their foe. Unit 53203 was among many that took heavy casualties, and its soldiers reacted by venting their frustration and anger on their prisoners. Six prisoners captured during the slow advance were only saved from summary execution by the intervention of a cadre.96

The Vietnamese resistance shocked the PLA in its breadth as well as its ferocity. Unit 53203 found itself fighting civilians who had taken up arms and reported that Vietnamese troops were able to hide themselves among the refugees. Application of the “three distinctions” was far from being the black-and-white matter described in the base area, and the exercise of leniency toward prisoners accordingly suffered. In the words of the unit’s after-action report, “Comrades felt that Vietnamese men and women, young and old, were against us, making it difficult to carry out the ‘three distinctions’ policy.”97 Small groups of Vietnamese soldiers, fleeing a lost engagement with the PLA, would blend with civilians and even instigate attacks by those civilians on the Chinese forces. Some Vietnamese soldiers “dropped guns and ammunition, removed badges and insignia . . . [and] changed clothes to mix with the masses and found elderly people or woman in the crowds of refugees who would vouch for them as godsons or husbands.”98 Unit 53202 claimed some success at catching individuals engaging in this behavior, but the frustration of the PLA soldiers and the failure of the unit’s political offensive was clear.

In Unit 33760, a division of the 43rd Army, that frustration again manifested
it itself in the mistreatment of prisoners. The division’s political officers uncovered this problem and concluded that additional training was needed to end it. But although aware of the problem and critical of the perpetrators, the unit’s cadres were unable to stop the abuse, and cases continued to arise of Chinese soldiers killing, hitting, cursing, insulting, and stealing from unarmed prisoners. Few Chinese units reported the numbers of prisoners taken during the campaign, but through the political chain of command Unit 33760 reported taking only forty-nine prisoners during its month of operations around Lang Son.99

Elsewhere, the failure of the political program and the high costs of tactical operations created a frustration that was expressed in even more brutal ways. Xu Meihong, a Chinese intelligence officer for fifteen years, spoke frequently to veterans of the Third Indochina War. After immigrating to the United States in 1990, Xu set down her observations on the conduct of the war in an article in “Vietnam” magazine. Although Xu’s thesis, that the war was a success because it allowed Deng Xiaoping to claim that the PLA needed to modernize its weapons and equipment, is debatable, her record of the frustrations and actions of Chinese soldiers is helpful in assessing the effectiveness of the Chinese political program.100 The account of one veteran is typical:

The war was “incredibly bloody and savage.... Those of us who had not been in Korea or India and who had never seen war before – we never believed it would be like that.... We were really upset by the huge costs of the victory.... We believed, we really believed, that if we applied the full force of the PLA that the Vietnamese would be shattered in a matter of hours, that we would be in Hanoi and Haiphong within a day or two.”101

Another officer told Xu that when the war was over, there were few prisoners held by the Chinese because of the soldiers’ reaction to the continuous harassment. The Vietnamese put mines, punji sticks (a sharpened and often poisoned bamboo stake), and booby traps in every conceivable place to slow down and disorganize the Chinese advance. The officer said that this led the Chinese troops to lose “all interest in taking prisoners. They played the Vietnamese game. They began shooting everyone. And of course the Vietnamese did the same thing to the PLA soldiers.” He went on to say that when it was time to exchange prisoners “not many showed up, because ... they had killed them all.”102

In the recollection of another soldier, a unit near Lang Son that had lost seven T-59 tanks to a single sniper was so frustrated that when they caught their assailant they reacted in a particularly brutal fashion. The tank unit commander ordered her stripped and bound and thrown on the road. He then drove the tank back and forth over the young woman “... until nothing was there anymore – until she was in the ground. The soldiers were so frustrated, they just cheered.”103

Not all of the abuses of the PLA were perpetrated by individuals frustrated and enraged in the heat of battle. Before the Chinese withdrew from Lang Son,
they brought in students from a military engineering school and ordered them to destroy the city. The students were very thorough, and the PLA soldiers appreciative:

We took great delight in that – it was our revenge, or as one of our leaders said, it was a “goodbye kiss” to the Vietnamese, something they could see and always remember us by. The same thing happened to other towns... We do not regret it now, in retrospect. Not one bit.\textsuperscript{104}

The failure of “winning without fighting” techniques

In the end, the \textit{waijie dijun} operations failed for a number of reasons. The Vietnamese were themselves motivated by strong ideological training and were as a result not readily susceptible to Chinese efforts to sway them. The PLA in fact failed even to convince many of its own soldiers that the operations would work against a highly motivated foreign force. Additionally, the \textit{waijie dijun} operations conflicted with the incentives system used to motivate PLA soldiers, who were at the same time encouraged to kill and encouraged to show mercy and understanding toward their foe.\textsuperscript{105}

Although all armies engage in some form of psychological operations, the Maoist PLA was the only army that made psychological operations a formal and important part of its basic principles. The \textit{waijie dijun} innovation had served the PLA well in the past, notably helping to undermine the will of warlord and Guomindang forces during the civil war, but against highly motivated Vietnamese soldiers and civilians it failed. Only about 1,600 Vietnamese prisoners of war fell into Chinese hands, and few Vietnamese units failed to put up a strong resistance. As one Chinese officer who had served as a political cadre during the Third Indochina War put it, years later: “We were very naïve to believe our slogans would allow us to win without fighting.”\textsuperscript{106}

Conclusion

Political work was the most important factor in making the PLA a Maoist army with a unique approach to warfare. In the 1979 campaign and the other campaigns of the Third Indochina War, the PLA tried to use political work to increase its efficiency. This approach did not work. There was no magic Maoist way of war.
9 Politics versus firepower
The paradox of Maoist tactics

This [unknown] x is the spirit of the army – in other words the greater or lesser readiness to fight and face danger on the part of all the men composing an army, quite independently of whether they are, or are not, fighting under leaders of genius, of whether they fight in two or three line formation, with cudgels or with rifles that repeat thirty times a minute.

Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace

There is one component of campaign planning that cannot be managed on the map or sand table and that no military strategist can control with absolute certainty: central to all military tactics is the question of how to make a soldier abandon the security of his trench or bush or doorframe and advance in the face of death. All armies face this dilemma, and all armies seek to solve it by motivating their soldiers to perform in specific ways. In 1979, the approach used by the PLA was to combine intense political motivation with the tactics of massed attack, as described in a contemporary news report:

The Chinese infantry advanced shoulder to shoulder... When they moved out of Lao Cai they were as numerous and close together as the rice in the paddy fields.

The use of massed tactics on a battlefield in the late 1970s seems an extraordinary and reckless anachronism. Last associated in Europe with World War I, the strategy of the massed frontal attack against entrenched defenders had been discredited and largely abandoned by 1917:

Preceded by patrols the Germans had advanced at 7 a.m. in small columns bearing many light machine guns, and in some cases, flamethrowers... Few posts appear to have been attacked from the front, the assault sweeping in-between to envelop them from the flanks and rear.

The PLA’s commitment to the political motivation of its troops impressed upon them also the imperative to advance straight at the enemy, but these
“human wave” attacks were costly and often failed to accomplish their tactical objectives. Human wave attacks rarely are the tactical choice of a combatant in possession of a greater volume of firepower than his opponent. It is bewildering that during the Third Indochina War, the PLA had a significant firepower advantage over its adversary but chose to use tactics that threw this advantage away.

**Politics and tactics**

Before investigating the relationship between Chinese ideology and tactics in the Third Indochina War, it is important that the relative materiel strengths of the Chinese and Vietnamese infantry formations be understood. Since most of the fighting took place in small company, battalion, or regimental clashes, it should be noted that PLA infantry units were more lethal than those of the PAVN. In 1979, a PAVN infantry battalion had only 80 percent of the manpower of a PLA infantry battalion and only 60 percent of the number of AK-47 assault rifles that a PLA battalion carried (132 assault rifles compared to 221). The PLA battalion also had an advantage in the number of crew-served machine guns that it could bring to an attack (fifty-one compared to thirty-nine) and in the number of 7.62-mm SKS carbines its troops carried (361 versus an unknown but far smaller number). All else being equal, the PLA could put out about 40,435 small arms rounds per minute against the PAVN’s 26,405, and fifty-one crew-fired rounds against thirty-nine. There was no materiel reason for the PLA to have continued to use massed tactics.

During their early years, the PLA and the PAVN had been very similar armies. Both used old weapons and both lacked the technological advantages of their opponents. Both also recruited primarily from the peasantry of their respective societies, with the result that the PLA and PAVN shared a common problem of how to achieve a high level of military effectiveness using poorly educated soldiers. Both armies sought to solve this problem in the same way, employing a political work system to motivate their recruits. Training in both the PLA and PAVN emphasized political will and unit solidarity and relied on politics and patriotism to inspire enthusiasm for combat. A Chinese assault resembled nothing so much as a rampaging mob, urged on by bugles, whistles, and shouts. In Korea, American infantrymen dubbed these massed groups of Chinese soldiers “hordes,” and the attacks became known as “human waves” (CH: ren hai zhan shu; VN: chien luoc bien nguoi).

For an army of poorly armed and poorly trained conscripts, incapable of accurate and consistent fire and beyond the dependable control of the junior leaders, the massed attack in many ways was the best and certainly the easiest, tactical option for the commander. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some armies had made their first experiments with “open tactics,” advancing in a stop-start manner in a series of skirmish lines. This technique depended on the initiative of the individual, requiring as it did that each soldier advance at his own pace and make his own decisions about when to move, when
to shoot, and when to conceal himself. Along the line, the soldier was instructed to keep pace with the advance: soldiers who moved too far ahead of the line put themselves in danger of being shot by their own side, and soldiers who fell behind posed a danger to their comrades. The problem of “lying down,” however, would arise when individual soldiers decided that the assault was not going well and that it would be safer for them to remain in a concealed position rather than proceed toward the enemy. Major Jakob Meckel, a German General Staff Officer in the late nineteenth century, commented on this when he recalled a battlefield that he had seen:

The field was liberally strewed with men who had left the ranks and were doing nothing. . . . From where we stood you could count hundreds. Some were lying down, their rifles pointing to the front, as if they were part of the firing line and were expecting the enemy to attack them at any moment. These had evidently remained behind lying down, when the more courageous had advanced.8

Meckel became and remained for the rest of his life a strong proponent of massed formations, which he saw as the only practical solution to the problem of “lying down.” The Chinese in the Maoist era saw the problem in similar terms. But they, contrary to some other armies, retained the mass, “human wave” attacks and never fully adopted the open tactics.9

The human wave assault, which in 1950 was favored by the PAVN as well as by the PLA, generally followed an artillery barrage and required that the infantry platoon, company, or battalion advance from its last covered and concealed positions (the line of departure) toward an enemy position (the line of contact) without attempting to mask or shield its movement. The infantry would move in line or column, and while it usually would aim for a weak point of the enemy position, the sheer scale of the attack typically would render it a de facto frontal assault.

Even against a weak enemy position, a frontal massed attack was a dangerous and costly undertaking. Defenders with modern rapid-fire weapons could exact a high toll from the assault, and artillery, land mines, and aircraft also would kill many. The fact that the attacker, for whom it was imperative that his troops cross the open ground as quickly as possible and in numbers as great as possible, was obliged to assemble his troops in front of the defender’s position meant also that he could have no advantage of surprise. Night attacks provided some concealment but not enough to compensate for the noise that a force of several hundred soldiers makes as it crosses the uncertain surface of a battlefield. The attackers would fire as they moved or would simply run forward, as movement made aiming difficult. The effectiveness of the human wave assault in any case did not come from accurate small arms fire; it came from the shock that resulted when a large mass of troops hit a line of defenders. Expensive or not, the shock of a human wave attack often forced the defenders to break ranks to escape from the attacking mob, upon which the position would be lost.
A human wave attack could only be successful if the troops could be persuaded to advance against the enemy’s guns, however, and in this respect the fanatical commitment of the politically indoctrinated peasants of the PLA and PAVN was a great strength. The political officers of the two armies created the conditions for the human wave by teaching Chinese and Vietnamese recruits that will and enthusiasm were more important than firepower and professional training. They emphasized the elements of unit solidarity (CH: guan bing yizhi; VN: quan binh nhat tri) and peer pressure and overwhelmed the doubts of their conscripts with political sloganeering, heroic models, “enemy-killing” oaths, and “remembrance” books and displays. The troops had to believe that their stronger will could overcome an enemy whose strength lay in machinery and professional knowledge.

The effects of this political work were underwritten in the PLA through China’s use of multiple layers of leadership and influence. Small tactical units in most armies typically appoint 20–25 percent of their personnel to leadership positions, from platoon leader down through squad leader to fire team leader. In the late 1970s, for example, a U.S. army platoon had 26.8 percent of its soldiers in tactical leadership positions. In 1979, the PLA platoon, comprising three squads, had about 22 percent of its soldiers in comparable positions, but it also had an additional set of political leaders superimposed on the tactical chain of command. In the 1930s, the PLA had established a “three by three” system of political leaders in its squads. Every squad of nine or ten men was divided into three groups of three or four, each with a leader – a soldier who was a party member or who was in the process of seeking party or youth league membership – appointed to monitor the morale of the group and to encourage group members on the battlefield. This was part of the Chinese solution to the problem of “lying down.” The addition of these political leaders, who had no tactical leadership role, raised the proportion of leaders in a Chinese platoon to about 38 percent of the platoon membership, or a ratio of less than three to one. As discussed in Chapter 7, there was enormous turbulence and confusion in the days before the campaign when the PLA juggled units, leaders, and training. It should not be surprising, therefore, that junior PLA leaders had difficulty conducting basic military operations against the experienced Vietnamese.

It is a common-sense adage of military affairs that an effective army assigns leaders down to the level of organization at which it trains to fight. If the army’s basis of motivation is the development of professional skills, leaders must be at the level of organization where they can use those skills. If the basis of motivation is political exhortation, the leader must be within sight and voice range of his soldier. And if the motivational method is physical coercion, the leader must be close enough to his men to apply the timely kick, punch, or push. It is given that the junior tactical leaders should be the best soldiers available for these jobs. The PLA, however, did not follow this adage: a failing that added to the likelihood that it would use massed assaults.

The PLA’s leadership problem had two parts. First, tactical leadership did not go below the level of the squad leader and assistant squad leader. These leaders
may have been capable of operating independently with smaller *ad hoc* groups, but the PLA did not assign lower-level tactical leaders because it had no intention of operating in units smaller than the squad. After World War II, in contrast, a typical Western army would assign tactical team leaders to fire teams of just four soldiers. Second, the PLA’s political officers used political rather than military criteria to select the men who would lead their squads and platoons. An individual who impressed his cell leader would be encouraged to join the youth league or party. If he did well, he would become a cell leader, and if he continued to impress the political leaders he would be selected for assignment as an assistant squad leader. Military skills were considered, but they were not the deciding factor. The PLA paid for its choice with high casualties and low effectiveness.

**The PLA and PAVN diverge**

The problem of hurling a human wave assault at well-armed and well-trained troops was revealed firsthand to the Chinese when the PLA attacked American forces in Korea during the winter of 1950–51. While some less well-trained U.S. army units broke and ran, some of the better-trained marine units successfully resisted the shockwave of the Chinese attacks. By July 1953, when the ceasefire halted the Korean War, the training and experience levels had increased among the army units to the point where most of them also were able to hold their ground against human wave attacks. Peng Dehuai, the Chinese commander in Korea, recorded in his memoirs that during the first campaigns of the war, the PLA “swept into the enemy ranks with the strength of an avalanche and engaged the enemy at close quarters with grenades and bayonets.” By the end of the war, Peng said that the PLA was engaging only in “piecemeal” or decentralized attacks (*fensan gongji*).

These new tactics, supposedly formulated by Mao Zedong, consisted of the assault troops laying down a strong base of fire at the line of departure and then moving forward in small groups to kill or capture the enemy at the line of contact. The new attacks did not rely on artillery barrages to keep the enemy occupied during the initial stage of the advance, and, as far as possible, they eschewed the use of a daylight approach against the enemy’s front. The emphasis of the attacks, which echoed those of the Soviet and American and other Western armies, was firepower, surprise, and the use of cover and concealment to approach the enemy’s lines. Small attacking groups would move forward using the fire and maneuver technique, and within those groups, the individual soldiers would move separately using fire and movement. Squads of nine to twelve men and fire teams of as few as three men replaced massed platoons, companies, and battalions as the most common assault units. When the objective was large and well defended, and a large attacking force therefore required for there to be any chance of success, the PLA leaders would break down the objective into small parts (hence “piecemeal”) and assign them to the many squads or fire teams of the assault force.
By 1953, the PLA in Korea had abandoned massed tactical assaults. Chinese attacks looked like American attacks, and the shock of the human wave had been replaced by the deadly precision of well-executed tactics.

The PLA shared its Korean experience with its PAVN ally. The Chinese had begun to train the PAVN in 1947 and by the end of the Korean War had become trusted advisers at every level of organization but the lowest. In Vietnam’s war with the French, the Chinese Central Military Commission reviewed PAVN operations plans before the plans were executed, and by 1953 Chinese advisers were so well accepted that they felt able to guide the Vietnamese military leadership at the campaign level. They also urged the PAVN to do political work with its soldiers. In 1953, the PAVN had begun the first moves of the northwest campaign that culminated in the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu. The early PLA advisers had trained the Vietnamese in mass tactics, but when the PAVN’s human waves had run up against disciplined French troops fighting from fortified emplacements, the cost in dead and wounded had been enormous. In late January 1954, Wei Guoqing, the senior Chinese adviser to the Vietnamese, finally advised that smaller-scale attacks and attrition were more likely than massed attacks to produce victory.

The PAVN had by then learned for itself the folly of the human wave assault. At Dien Bien Phu, the longest and last battle of the war with France, the PAVN had used mass attacks in its early attacks on the French positions and had suffered enormous casualties. According to Bernard Fall, the Vietnamese had deployed four divisions and an independent regiment, totaling about 45,000 troops, against the 10,000 French defenders. In three months of fighting, from March 29, 1954, to May 7, 1954, they lost 22,900 men – a staggering 50 percent casualty rate. Vietnamese losses were so high that the PAVN went to ground in a ten-day period in late March 1954 digging more than 100 kilometers of trenches.

The enormous losses in the first half of the battle triggered a motivational crisis among the PAVN troops. In April 1954, their will was close to breaking. Qiang Zhai concedes that “some PAVN officers wavered in their resolve to occupy Dien Bien Phu” and that the Chinese and PAVN leaders were concerned by the “lack of resolve” among the troops. Historian Phillip B. Davidson is more blunt, asserting that the morale of the PAVN soldiers “broke.” Davidson says that the French intercepted PAVN “radio messages which told of units refusing to obey orders,” and “Communist prisoners said that they were told to advance or be shot by the officers and noncommissioned officers behind them.” He also quotes Vo Nguyen Giap’s acknowledgment of the problem: “It was precisely at that time [around April 12, 1954] that a rightist and negative tendency [Giap’s italics] appeared among our officers and men, under various forms: fear of casualties, losses, fatigue, difficulties and hardships.” According to Davidson’s analysis, in the fighting from March 29, 1954, to April 13, 1954, Giap’s force lost between 16,000 and 19,000 killed, wounded, and captured. If we compare these statistics to the casualty figures cited by Bernard Fall, the PAVN attackers at Dien Bien Phu suffered between 69.8 and 82.9 percent of
their casualties during the months in which the human wave had been the principal method of assault.

By the end of the Korean War and the First Indochina War, the PAVN and the PLA had thus both experienced firsthand the enormous failings of the human wave assault. The political workers of the two armies had shown that they could motivate peasant recruits to conduct extended, physically difficult, and dangerous infantry operations; what they had not succeeded in doing was to turn these recruits into competent tacticians or to mold them into effective small units. There was a clear gap in the training of Chinese and Vietnamese soldiers at the tactical level. Ideological consistency was the primary goal, and the battlefield tactic most consistent with the pursuit of this goal was to throw these masses of poorly trained but highly motivated young men at the enemy in an effort to overcome his firepower. The results were inefficient and costly. Should military effectiveness have been the primary goal, the tactical response would have been to seek ways to neutralize the enemy’s firepower. The result would have led to greater efficiency and lower casualties.

The Soviet military advisers who worked with the PLA and PAVN in the 1950s went some way to resolving this weakness. Soviet tactical doctrine had evolved more slowly than the doctrine of the German, American, British, and French armies, but by the late 1950s, it was the broad equivalent of the doctrine employed by the Western armies at the end of World War II. Soviet tactical practice was based on the innovations in German tactical doctrine that had emerged late in World War I as Germany sought to break the stalemate on the western front – the Von Hutier doctrine, or “storm trooper” tactics. The new German system replaced mass attacks with small-scale, coordinated assaults that moved forward in small bursts from concealment and cover to other places of concealment and cover. It emphasized the night attack, with no preceding artillery barrage; and, radically, it replaced the company or battalion as the most important unit on the battlefield with the much smaller ten- or twelve-man squad.23

The Soviets had experimented with the new tactics during training in the 1930s, when the Red Army was undergoing modernization, but they did not bring them to the battlefield until the later stages of World War II. Political purges of the officer corps had removed the senior men who understood the folly of mass attacks, and the furious German onslaught that in six months at the start of the war destroyed almost half of the Soviet army left the Soviets with little option but to throw their poorly trained conscripts forward in massed attacks. By the end of the war, however, Soviet units had adopted the fire-and-maneuver and fire-and-movement tactics of Von Hutier and had developed them into assault group tactics that were the equal of those of other advanced armies.24

While the PLA and PAVN were thus advised during the late 1950s in the use of modern infantry tactics, the Chinese had by the 1960s reverted to their old ways. During his tenure as Minister of National Defense from 1954 to 1959, Peng Dehuai had instituted a modernization program that sought to regularize the PLA forces, create professional training programs, and deemphasize the
motivational aspects of the political work system (see Chapter 3). He had neither retired the political workers nor disbanded the party apparatus, but he wanted the replacement of the ideological slogans of the political work system with rules and regulations more appropriate to a modern army. This, and Peng’s political criticism of the Great Leap Forward, put Peng on a collision course with Mao, whom he fatally crossed at the Lushan Plenum of the CCP in August 1959. A short time later, he was relieved of his duties as minister.  

Lin Biao replaced Peng Dehuai as Defense Minister later that year and restored to the PLA its old priorities. Political work resumed its position as the most important activity in the army, and professional military training retreated into the background. The tactical doctrine of the PLA, once again, drew heavily on the views of Lin Biao. In his 1946 essay, “Principles of Combat,” Lin outlined the system of mobile, conventional warfare that he advocated to defeat the Guomindang during the Civil War. But while his operational art was imaginative and his generalship of a high standard, his tactical guidance was inconsistent with the small-unit tactics of the Soviets and clashed also with the system of Peng Dehuai. Lin thus rejected Peng’s reforms and threw away also the lessons that the PLA had learned in Korea.

Lin’s tactical system had four key features. First, Lin prized huge masses of troops, stating that “to undertake a successful offensive there must be a superiority of 500 to 600 percent.” Second, he limited the range of options available to his junior leaders: senior officers issued the orders and the troops were not encouraged to show initiative. (“Only the highest officers may issue orders . . . No independent action may be undertaken, for such actions only result in great losses.”) Third, Lin liked the frontal assault. He said, “When the enemy is well entrenched . . . our commander should be able to . . . change from raiding tactics to heavy attack.” He also said that “without [artillery and demolitions units], frontal attacks can hardly be expected to be successful.” This philosophy would seem to strip the assaulting force of the possibility of attacking with surprise, but Lin qualified his remark with the observation that “technical equipment is only an aid to, never a substitute for, bravery.” Fourth, Lin preferred “deep columns” to small, coordinated attacks and had on occasion deployed several battalions or a regiment en masse against a company. Lin’s tactical guidance, the return to the doctrine of massed attacks, set the PLA on the route to the disaster it was to experience twenty years later in battle against the disciplined, hardened soldiers of the PAVN.

In a sense, Lin Biao was the man who made the PLA Maoist. Within Lin’s PLA, the political ideals of Mao Zedong were better represented than within any other institution of Chinese society. The PLA coupled intense political work with simple military tactics to produce a force that depended on the unquestioning enthusiasm of its conscripts and on their belief that their will alone could solve all the problems of the battlefield. Lin Biao died in September 1971, and in 1975 Ye Jianying, a competent but unimaginative leader, was appointed Defense Minister. In 1978, Ye was replaced by Xu Xiangqian, but while its supreme leadership changed, the PLA itself did not. Under Lin Biao, the numerous mili-
tary schools that Peng Dehuai had established were closed: from the mid-1960s to 1977, the number of schools dropped from 140 to forty, with most of the surviving schools focusing on ideological rather than military training. In the words of one observer, “Lin Biao and the Gang of Four wielded a big stick against those who wanted to engage in military training. The results were disastrous. Some soldiers had been in the armed forces for several years without ever touching a rifle, and some cadres could not lead troops.” In 1977, some of the military schools were reopened, but the real work of solving the PLA’s problems did not begin until almost ten years after the death of Lin and after China’s entry into the Third Indochina War.

While China was thus casting aside the guidance of the Soviets, south of the border, the Vietnamese were proving attentive students. Vietnamese military modernization started slowly, as the newly established Democratic Republic of Vietnam focused on building its industry and on resurrecting its agricultural sector, but in 1957, Hanoi started receiving Soviet military assistance. In 1958, a series of directives laid the foundation for the creation of a regular, professional Vietnamese army. Specialized branches were established within the military to improve the army’s technical capabilities, legislation created a regular officer corps, and the improvement of basic combat skills was placed at the core of military training. Political work and ideological training were retained as part of the military curriculum, but less time was devoted to these subjects. In 1965, the departure from the Directorship of the PAVN’s General Political Department of Nguyen Chi Thanh, a proponent of the ideological approach to war, underlined the switch in emphasis from the ideological approach to a more professional one.

When the Second Indochina War (1964–75) came around, the PAVN had largely discarded the human wave assault as a viable tactic. Most American combat arms veterans recall PAVN and National Liberation Front (NLF) assaults as being a phased series of attacks at night, emphasizing speed, surprise, and the coordinated movements of small units. During the initial phase, the Vietnamese would prepare their targets with machine gun, mortar, or rocket-propelled grenade fire. At the same time or earlier, a sapper unit would clear and mark lanes leading to the enemy positions. In the next phase, the PAVN or VC infantry would attack in small groups, using cover and concealment to get as close to the defender’s lines as possible. Should one of these groups break into the enemy position, the leaders of the attack would in the final phase assemble their troops to exploit the opening.

The PAVN had learned their lessons so well that the human wave attack was an extreme rarity, and when one occurred it would create astonishment among the enemy. One example occurred in early 1966, when a PAVN unit attacked a battalion of the American 1st Infantry Division in Binh Long province. The PAVN attacked in daylight, walking three lines of massed troops across a grassy field to the line of contact with the Americans. The U.S. battalion was mounted on armored personnel carriers and in good defensive positions, and the predictable outcome was the slaughter of the PAVN soldiers. Major General James F. Hollingsworth, who was present during the engagement, told an officer of
another unit that he thought the PAVN troops must have been “on drugs” to even have attempted such a reckless attack.37

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the balance of political work and military training in the PAVN continued to reflect the lessons that it had learned from the Soviets and from the battlefield. During the years after the capture of Dien Bien Phu, the PAVN (and later the Viet Cong) continued to conduct political work among its troops, but the time devoted to military training always exceeded the time devoted to political training. PAVN and VC cadres were sent to extensive military training programs both in and away from the combat areas. Squad and platoon leaders were trained for three to five months, and operators of crew-served weapons such as heavy machine guns, recoilless rifles, and mortars received four months of training. Even during these courses, and when the soldier returned to his unit, political training was held to 20 percent or less of the overall training time.38 The training furthermore often was perfunctory. Consider the following exchange between a PAVN lieutenant, who had just been captured, and his interrogator. The lieutenant was a party member and a graduate of a PAVN military school:

**Interrogator:** Did you have to learn about Marxism–Leninism when you joined the Party?

**Prisoner:** I did but very few . . . I learned only the rules.

**Interrogator:** What are the books you were required to read?

**Prisoner:** None. But they recommended that you read Marxist books. However, you are free to read or not . . .

**Interrogator:** What do you know about Marxism?

**Prisoner:** A little bit. Marx taught that he would bring peace and prosperity, a peaceful and egalitarian world. Everyone equal. To each according to his needs from each according to his abilities.39

The history of Army Officer School Number Two (Truong Si Quan Luc Quan 2) indicates the difficulties the PAVN faced in developing the professional skills of its officers. The school was founded in Cambodia on August 27, 1961, a short distance west of the Vietnamese border near Tay Ninh but at least 750 kilometers from its nearest point of supply in North Vietnam. It drew its first faculty and students from the local 50th and 850th Regiments of the NLF. The instructors, all of whom had to at one time or another make the perilous journey along the Ho Chi Minh trail, were veterans of combat against the South Vietnamese. The school was repeatedly bombed and strafed by U.S. aircraft, but continued to perform its training mission until the end of the Second Indochina War, moving in March 1975 to Ben Cat, inside South Vietnam, as the final PAVN offensive was underway. After the war, the school moved to Long Thanh. The history of Army Officer School Number Two captured in microcosm the PAVN’s efforts to attain high training standards even in the most difficult circumstances.40
The trend away from political training in the PAVN had accelerated as the war escalated. The political work system had been showing signs of obsolescence, but the Tet Offensive in January 1968 dramatically exposed the system of party committees as too cumbersome to work with the small, fast-moving PAVN and VC units that were engaged in battle. To be effective in combat, the modernizing PAVN required guidance that could adapt rapidly to changes on the ground, and a political work system that required constant reference to additional staff officers clearly hindered the PAVN’s speed of reaction. As a result, many political officers found themselves forced to play a subordinate role to military commanders. As Douglas Pike observed in 1966, the best soldiers in the communist forces were the most professionally competent:

Americans and others often assumed that the NLF army members were fanatics. Because they performed well in combat, it was argued, they were highly motivated, which meant dedication to an ideological cause. Thus the search was for the essence of this belief. It proved elusive, largely because it did not exist. The best of the military units – the main force units – were highly effective because they were composed of professionals. These were not green young Vietnamese farmers, only recently introduced to the rifle, but experienced guerrillas who had been fighting most of their adult lives. What impelled them was not ideology so much as professional competence.41

In May 1979, immediately after its border defense against China, the PAVN was to abolish the system of dual political and military command. After almost thirty years of mixing the political work system of the commissars and the professional practices of the commanders, the leaders of the PAVN were to decide that the skills of the commanders were the key to the future.42

1979: political inflexibility and battlefield tragedy

In 1979, in contrast, the PLA was persisting with the human wave assault as its main combat tactic as if its reverses of the Korean War had never happened.

On February 18, 1979, the Chinese 55th Army assaulted the Vietnamese defensive line about 1.5 kilometers south of Dong Dang. Facing it, a single regiment, the 12th Regiment of the Vietnamese 3rd Division, had dug in on a line that stretched 3.5 kilometers from the eastern side of the valley at Hill 423 to Hill 438 and Khon Long in the west. At the heart of the line was a series of low hills that spread across the valley and blocked the Chinese advance along Highway 4 to Lang Son. The 163rd and 164th divisions of the Chinese 55th Army spent four days trying and failing to breach this line, concentrating their assault primarily against a two-kilometer section between Tham Mo and Hill 339. On February 21, the 55th Army committed its reserve, the 165th Division, against Hill 339. Two days later, after repeated “headlong charges” (chongfeng xianzhen)43 against the Vietnamese emplacements, the 55th Army, by now supported by the 54th Army, finally broke through the 12th Regiment’s defenses.
At Dong Dang, it took a Chinese army six days of human wave attacks to throw back a Vietnamese regiment. The reckless folly of the mass attack was nowhere more clearly underlined than in those cases where the Chinese attackers recognized their error and changed their tactics. For example, the 124th Division of the 42nd Army was brought to a halt by the Vietnamese defenders on Hill 316 in the vicinity of That Khe. The 3rd Battalion of the 371st Regiment had led the assault and been repulsed, leaving 41 of its 682 men dead on the hill. The deputy battalion commander called a meeting to develop a better plan of attack, rejecting a second daylight massed assault in favor of an attack based on small units moving against the defense at night. In its next attack, the battalion took Hill 316 with light casualties.

Despite its failures in 1979, the PLA persisted with the tactic of the mass assault. In April 1984, China attacked the Vietnamese positions on Laoshan and Zheyin Shan Mountains on the border northwest of Ha Giang (see Chapter 6). The 40th Division of the 14th Army of the Kunming Military Region led the attack on Laoshan, and the 49th Division, probably of the 16th Army from the Nanjing Military Region, attacked Zheyin Shan. Defending the mountains was the Vietnamese 313th Division, supported by two battalions of the 168th Artillery Brigade. Following a thirty-five-minute artillery barrage, at 05:00 on April 28, the 40th Division launched a massed frontal attack against the Vietnamese positions. A typical front for a Chinese division during an attack was 8,000–12,000 meters, but on this occasion, the 40th Division was confined to a front of just 2,500 meters. Ahead of the soldiers lay a 2,000-meter scramble, in daylight, across open slopes to the Vietnamese defenses. Although the Chinese had massed an enormous number of troops in a very small place, it took the division until 14:00 to force the Vietnamese to withdraw.

Conclusion

Over the years 1978–87, the PLA repeatedly tried to mount effective ground operations. Repeatedly it failed. To a great extent, the PLA political work system shaped the tactics of the Chinese troops. If the political work system had performed as Beijing’s political theorizing said it would, the PLA would have surged over the Vietnamese in a wave of Maoist political enthusiasm. Vietnamese soldiers, enlightened by the Chinese proselytizing campaign, would have thrown down their arms and persuaded any last skeptics among their number to surrender also. The PLA, an army that had shown in Korea that it could advance twenty kilometers in a night, would have brushed aside the Vietnamese defenders in the borders and prepared itself to move on Hanoi.

But the political work system did not work as the theorists said it would. The tactical formation that it produced may have eliminated the problem of “lying down,” but it did so by asking its troops to walk in great numbers into machine gun fire. That they would willingly do so reflected well the success of the cadre
system in creating a close relationship between leaders and soldiers, but troop enthusiasm alone was proven in February 1979 to be no substitute for the military skills that the PLA had neglected to develop. The PLA’s blind commitment to political work guaranteed that it would fail when it came face to face with the disciplined firepower of the PAVN.\textsuperscript{50} The PLA on February 17, 1979, had amassed a huge number of battalions that were bigger and more lethal than those of its Vietnamese adversary. Its soldiers may have been fighting regular Vietnamese troops in fortified positions, but in some areas they outnumbered the defenders by as much as ten to one. Its tactics, however, were obsolete and ineffective. The political work system led to the human wave, and the human wave led to defeat.
Part V

Conclusion
10  Conclusion

The legacy of an “incredible, shrinking war”

On January 21, 2001, Chinese Ambassador Qi Jianguo and his Defense Attaché, Senior Colonel Han Yujia, visited Vietnamese Defense Minister Senior Lieutenant General Pham Van Tra at the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense reception hall at 33 Pham Ngu Lao Street in Hanoi. Although much of the meeting was taken up with pleasantries and exchanges of best wishes for the upcoming Lunar New Year festival, Qi had one important mission. Amid the compliments and small talk, Qi drew Tra’s attention to a message that Qi had delivered to other Vietnamese ministries in recent weeks. Qi’s message, which had been delivered on direct orders from Beijing, had explained to the Vietnamese that China found offensive the fact that Vietnamese textbooks still discussed the Sino-Vietnamese hostilities of the Third Indochina War, the Chinese attacks on Vietnam, and Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The message in particular objected to the portrayal of the Chinese leaders as a “united block . . . intent on actions to harm the feelings of the peoples of the two countries” (“zhongguo lingdao ceng yixie ren . . . shanghai yue zhong liang guo renmin ganqing de xingdong”). Tra noted Qi’s views, and the meeting ended amicably. At a time when China and Vietnam were working to mend their frayed relationship by increasing trade between the two countries, exchanging state visits, and negotiating border treaties, the Chinese had introduced another obstacle to friendship.

Chinese feelings did not improve in the following months. About a year later, after the Lunar New Year holidays in 2002, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Vietnam. Jiang praised the friendship between China and Vietnam, and while noting that the two nations had experienced “difficult periods” in the past insisted that the two nations had always maintained an “underlying friendship.” But on February 27, in the midst of his state visit, Jiang urged Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh and President Tran Duc Long to change the wording in Vietnamese history textbooks. Jiang counseled the Vietnamese to revise their treatment of the Chinese campaign in northern Vietnam in 1979 and to soften accounts of China’s support for the Khmer Rouge. He also asked Manh and Long to play down the Chinese invasions of Vietnam during the imperial era (pre-1911) and to play up China’s support of Vietnam during the Second Indochina War (1954–75).
The Sino-Vietnamese hostilities during the years 1978–91 were more extensive, more intense, and more costly than they have been portrayed in most recent histories. Yet new Chinese, and to a lesser degree Vietnamese, treatments of the war have become harder and harder to find.

The rewriting of history

The Third Indochina War is today rarely mentioned in Chinese discourse. Autobiographies, encyclopedias, and public statements increasingly downplay or ignore the war. It may be that Chinese authors omit reference to the war in order that their writings align with China’s developing perception of its place in the world, or it may be that they simply believe that nothing is to be learned from the study of a lost war. But the United States, which lost its war with Vietnam, developed an extensive field of study dealing with the analysis of the diplomatic, military, and social reasons for the defeat. China lost its war, and it is hard to find a mention of it in the written record.

Few Chinese political leaders, military commanders, or senior diplomats have published memoirs covering the years of the war. Of those who have written books covering the late 1970s and 1980s, even fewer have dealt in detail with their actions in the Third Indochina War. For example, in 1992 Chinese diplomat Yun Shui published an account of the escape of Sun Hao, the Chinese Ambassador to the Khmer Rouge, from Phnom Penh to the border with Thailand. Sun Hao was fleeing the Vietnamese offensive of 1978–79. Although the account covered the period from January 2, 1979, to April 11, 1979, in great detail, it did not mention the Chinese campaign in northern Vietnam. Yun states that the Cambodians asked Sun to “take along a radio . . . to facilitate continuous normal interaction between the two countries” and that every morning the Chinese embassy team radioed Beijing. Yun says, “Every morning, the embassy’s critical task was to contact Beijing. The center [the Beijing leaders] wanted to grasp the situation promptly and to convey important news to the Cambodian leadership.” The invasion of Vietnam by 400,000 Chinese troops could surely be classed as “important news,” yet there is no mention in the book of the February campaign – neither of Beijing’s informing its representative in Cambodia of the attack nor of the reaction of the Khmer Rouge leaders.

The 2000 autobiography of Wang Hai, the former commander of the PLA air force, is similarly illustrative of the short shrift given by Chinese writers to the events of and around February 1979. Wang Hai led the Chinese air force units along the Sino-Vietnamese border at the time of the major 1979 incursion. He was in an excellent position to observe or make the decisions that shaped the air force strategy in the campaign and undoubtedly was aware of the ground and air plans for the operation. He does not once mention his service in the campaign against Vietnam.

References in Chinese encyclopedias to the war also are being excised. The newer the volume, typically the less information it contains. The 1989 edition of Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu (The Chinese Encyclopedia) had an article of
more than 1,100 characters addressing the campaign in northern Vietnam, illustrated with two pictures of Chinese troops. In 1997, Zhongguo Junshi Baike Quanshu, the encyclopedia of the PLA, had an article only of about 300 characters, with a single reproduction of one of the photographs published in the 1989 book. Nor is this the entire story. The 1989 encyclopedia did not mention the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, but by 1997 its sister encyclopedia had an extensive article of about 1,400 characters on the campaign.

As the length of entries has changed, so too has the direction of the content. The 1989 entry on the Sino-Vietnamese border campaign states that the war occurred because the relationship between China and Vietnam had deteriorated and that in 1978 alone there were 1,108 violent incidents on the border. It went on to say that Chinese border defense troops (bianfang budui) crossed the border on February 17, 1979, and penetrated up to 20–40 kilometers into Vietnam, attacking the provincial capitals of Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai and more than twenty other towns. It explains that the Chinese force withdrew on March 16, 1979, claims that the operation was a “great victory” (“da shengli”), and concludes by saying that the Chinese campaign contributed to world peace by opposing “hegemony.” The entry does not mention Cambodia. The 1997 entry in contrast furnishes a brief description of the help that China gave to Vietnam in the first seventy years of the century, before simply stating that Chinese border defense troops attacked from Yunnan and Guangxi on February 17, 1979, and withdrew on March 16, 1979. The entry does not claim victory and again does not mention Cambodia.

The 1997 article on Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia similarly is selective in the facts it chooses to present. China’s roles in this situation – specifically, its support of the Pol Pot regime, its repeated threats of a “second lesson” for Vietnam, and its military operations along the Sino-Vietnamese border – are well documented by other sources, but in the encyclopedia, there is no mention at all of China. The entry divides the war into phases and explains the Vietnamese strategy in broad terms, and it accuses the Vietnamese of being “regional hegemons” (“diqu baquan”) who tried and failed to incorporate Cambodia into a Vietnamese-led Indochina federation. The article ends by stating that the war was a chapter in the Soviet and American competition for influence that followed World War II.

The impression that these encyclopedia articles leave is that the major geopolitical event in the region of the late 1970s and 1980s was a massive invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese as part of the Soviet–American Cold War. Yes, a small border battle occurred between Chinese and Vietnamese border guards in 1979, but this had nothing to do with the main event. China defended its border but otherwise stood aside while others fought.

There is not one word that would suggest to the reader that Beijing supported the Khmer Rouge. The Chinese want to forget, and would prefer that the rest of the world forget also, that they fought from 1978 to 1991 to defend the Khmer Rouge. When Pol Pot was committing his greatest excesses, China was his closest friend.
Early glory to obsolescence: the neglect of the PLA

Success or failure at the strategic level of war is built on the myriad performances that take place at the tactical level. In the 1979 border campaign and subsequent border clashes, it was the inadequate performance of thousands of cadres and conscripts that rendered the PLA ineffective as an instrument of Chinese national power. The Chinese soldiers may individually have been brave, hardy, and determined, but they were enmeshed in a tangle of tactics, organizations, and politics. The political work system of the PLA had atrophied and was of little help on the battlefield. In conditions that required decentralized fire-and-movement tactics, the PLA was committed to the massed attack, and the best efforts of the soldiers were wasted.

From 1979 to the late 1980s, the PLA, the model institution of Chinese Maoism, proved inept in the arena of its most important mission – the battlefield. It had been a potent force in China’s revolution and during the Korean and Indian wars, but after weathering the full effects of the Maoist era, the PLA was incapable of performing its military tasks in the Third Indochina War. By the end reduced to lobbing massive numbers of artillery shells at a few isolated Vietnamese hills.

The death of Mao and the rise of Deng Xiaoping was an important turning point in modern Chinese history. Deng Xiaoping had disagreed with Mao on a host of issues and policies, and with Mao’s death Deng took his opportunity to press for reform. He took only small steps at first (for example, in 1978 encouraging the greater mechanization of farm work), but his long-term goal was to dismantle Chinese society, cleanse it of its Maoist attitudes and institutions, and rebuild it in a very different way. One of the preeminent institutions of Maoist China, the PLA was a central target for Deng’s reform.

From its formation in 1927 through the Chinese Civil War (1946–50), Korea, and India, the PLA had by its own standards and those of others built an extraordinary record of success. During the Civil War, communist generals like Lin Biao and Zhu De managed clever, prudent campaigns that confused and confounded their Western-trained and American-armed Guomindang opponents and proved that they were the equals of any generals in the world. The PLA’s soldiers were tough and disciplined and capable of almost superhuman feats of endurance on the battlefield. The political work system molded the political
leaders, the generals, and the troops into a united and effective instrument of war. French General Lionel M. Chassin, in the last pages of his 1965 history of the Revolutionary War, paid the PLA a glowing tribute:

[The] Chinese Red Army constitutes a remarkably effective fighting force. . . . By 1949 this army had performed a feat which is unique in the military history of the world: the entire conquest of an enormous country at a rapid pace averaging six miles per day, an advance which swept from the fall of Mukden [Shenyang] on 8 November 1948 to the capture of Canton [Guangzhou] on 15 October 1949.\textsuperscript{13}

According to Chassin, “Some of the battles [the PLA] fought . . . stand as genuine models of strategy and tactics which merit careful study by the officers of Western countries.”\textsuperscript{14} He also said that the PLA, if it were to be supported by a modern air force, would “prove itself to be a truly formidable foe for even the best adversaries.”\textsuperscript{15}

In late 1950, the PLA had entered the Korean War and in less than one month (November 25 to December 24) had thrown the United Nations’ forces out of North Korea. The United Nations’ forces halted the advance and stalemated the war, but the astonishing early success of the PLA against armies of the United States and other industrialized nations was an irrefutable mark of the potency of the Chinese force. T.R. Fehrenbach said in \textit{This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness} that the Chinese soldier was a fit, highly motivated, and experienced fighter.\textsuperscript{16} The official U.S. Marine Corps history of the Korean War makes the same point on several occasions: “Although the Chinese Reds were represented by a peasant army, it was a first-rate army when judged by its own tactical and strategic standards.” The Marine Corps history additionally notes that the Chinese soldier “could do one thing better than any soldier on earth: he could infiltrate around an enemy position in the darkness with unbelievable stealth.”\textsuperscript{17} Clearly, in Korea, the PLA worked. The Chinese generals matched the American and allied generals, the soldiers were tough, and the political work system pulled the generals and soldiers together into an effective fighting unit.

China’s war with India in 1962 followed a similar pattern. The PLA conducted a rapid offensive that in two months of intermittent fighting attained all of its objectives and allowed Beijing to announce a unilateral ceasefire. There was nothing left to fight about: the PLA had won again.

After the Sino-Indian War, however, the PLA began to change in significant ways. From 1954 to 1959, the PLA had, under the leadership of Peng Dehuai, engaged briefly in a debate about improved professionalism and modern equipment, but when Mao Zedong relieved Peng in 1959 and replaced him with Lin Biao, China’s armed forces took a fatal step backward. Lin, with the approval of Mao, changed the PLA to reflect his view of the relationship between war, society, and ideology. For thirty years, the PLA had, with a weak sense of professionalism and poor technology but a strong political system, prospered. Mao and Lin reasoned that the armed forces could become more effective if politics
were to be emphasized to an even greater degree. Mao and Lin accordingly
dee emphasized the professional and technical programs of the PLA and reempha-
sized its ideological and political work. For the PLA, this policy shift was the
beginning of the “Maoist Detour.” Mao and Lin changed superficial military
conventions like ranks, medals, and terms of address, but they also dug deeper.
The political work system, which had never been weak, was reinforced, and the
PLA’s lack of modern military technology came to be identified not as a weak-
ness, but as a strength. The time spent on military training declined, and in
accordance with the Maoist vision of society that held everyone as equal, the
PLA abandoned any thought of ranks, individual awards, and specialized forces.

Mao and Lin could change the PLA because the PLA was the army of the
CCP, loyal exclusively to the party ideology and party leaders. By eschewing
technology and professionalism, emphasizing political work, and pursuing
absolute egalitarianism, the two men had made the PLA a model for Chinese
society. PLA political workers and demobilized soldiers spread out through
China to teach the political work program, ideological incentive systems, and
egalitarian policies that, according to Mao and Lin, were the basis of the PLA’s
success. The PLA had been made the teacher and role model for a Maoist
Chinese society, and Chinese everywhere were exhorted to “Learn from the
PLA.”

The subsequent Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1965–75) saw the mil-
itary effectiveness of the PLA continue to decline. Although the PLA used viol-
ence against some of its political enemies, the violence rarely required extensive
training or planning and never called on anything other than the lowest level of
military skill. Cadres ran government and party organizations, and PLA fighters
performed escort, patrol, and political service. The skills and attitudes that separ-
ate an army from police force fell into disuse, and military effectiveness
suffered. Any incentive that might have been for reform vanished utterly when
Lin Biao fell out of favor and Mao and his political allies, now distrust the
PLA, decided that it would be folly to improve the military skills of a potential
opponent.

In September 1976, Mao died. A factional fight for the top party posts
ensued, but the status of the PLA changed little in the years from 1976 to 1979.
The Chinese leadership, Chinese society, and the PLA itself continued to believe
that the PLA was as effective a fighting force as it had proven in its history to
1962. As late as June 1978, Deng Xiaoping, member of the Politburo of the
Communist Party and Chief of the PLA General Staff Department, told the All-
Army Conference on Political Work that improving the quality of PLA political
work would directly enhance its combat effectiveness. This was a delusion.

The “Maoist Detour” ended in the mid-1980s when it became clear that the
PLA was incapable of aiding China to achieve its strategic objectives in the
Third Indochina War. Real military modernization finally could begin.
Conclusion

The PLA had been rendered hopelessly ineffectual by the military policies of the Maoist era. PLA leaders threw their soldiers forward in massed daylight attacks because they had no alternative: their men had not been trained in small-unit tactics. The political work system had absorbed so much time, energy, and attention that there was nothing left to put into training in other techniques. Not that this mattered: the conviction of the ideologues was unshakeable that men were superior to weapons and tactics.

The political work system, however, itself showed signs of weakness. The relationship between the cadres and the conscripts was not as strong as it had been, and while the relationship between the PLA and the Chinese people, at least superficially, remained strong, attempts to win the critical support of the Vietnamese people failed completely. The cadres, who were the key to the successful accomplishment of military and political tasks, were not prepared for their duties nor had they prepared their men.

Instead of teaching Hanoi that it had erred in invading Cambodia, the hapless Chinese invasion of 1979 taught Vietnam only that China was weak. Revisiting the military–political equation, Hanoi could calculate with certainty after the Chinese withdrawal that the cost of Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnamese towns was higher than the cost of fighting back. Vietnam accordingly retained its hold on Phnom Penh and for the next eight years continued to prosecute its war against the Cambodian resistance groups. It furthermore felt secure enough against Chinese threats to pursue the guerrillas into Thailand, a Beijing ally.

The Chinese responded with threats and bluster. In 1981 and 1984, the PLA picked border fights on hills that were as obscure as they were numerous, but for most of the 1980s, the Chinese strategy was to rain shells on Vietnamese border villages and issue dark threats of a dreadful “second lesson.” The Vietnamese did not withdraw from Cambodia, and the second lesson never came. The Third Indochina War ended finally not because China had its way, but because the Vietnamese had essentially eliminated the Khmer Rouge, such that when in 1986 the Soviet Union announced an end to military aid to Vietnam, Hanoi was comfortable enough to at last withdraw to within its own borders.

The last three decades of the twentieth century were a time of enormous change in Chinese society. In the years from 1965 to 1976, China had been shaped by the policies of Mao Zedong. When Mao died, 1977 and 1978 were marked by factional feuding and drift, with Deng Xiaoping subsequently building his political power through the transitional period of 1978 to 1982. The most significant military event during this period was the beginning of the Third Indochina War, and the most significant revelation of the early part of the transition was that the PLA had been critically weakened by the years of Maoism.

As early as August 1977, Deng had said that the army needed to attach greater importance to education and training to overcome the fact that the PLA had been “sabotaged for so long by Lin Biao.” As Deng and the people of
China evaluated the Maoist legacy, they realized that, in addition to the failure of Maoist social and economic policies, Maoist military policy had failed. Some Chinese and Western scholars have not looked carefully at the Chinese military failures of the Third Indochina War. This study hopes to return them to their proper position in recent Chinese history.
Appendix 1
Principles of the political work system

The following eighteen principles are abridged from paragraph five of the first section, “General Principles” (Zong Ze), of the 1963 edition of the “Regulations Governing Political Work in the PLA” (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Tiaolie). The regulations were designed to identify the most important issues and provide broad guidance for the conduct of political work and the activities of political workers at all levels of the PLA.¹

1 Guide and make sure that the troops thoroughly implement the program, political line, and policies of the Communist Party of China, that they obey the state laws and statutes, and that they accomplish all tasks assigned by the party and state.

2 Organize all personnel to study Marxism–Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, to transmit the party’s resolutions and directives and to grasp the ideological trends of the troops. Educate all personnel to be loyal to the motherland, to the people, and to party work.

3 In compliance with the constitution of the Communist Party of China, exercise control over the party’s ideological and organizational work in the army, supervise the party committees at various levels and the building of primary party organizations, and direct the work of Young Communist League organizations.

4 Carry out wartime political work, effect uninterrupted propaganda and agitation, bolster combat morale, promote confidence in victory, and ensure that the troops are resolute in carrying out orders and accomplishing combat missions.

5 Mobilize all military personnel to engage in active study of Mao Zedong’s military thought and the combat experiences of our army. Endeavor to learn combat skills; to be thoroughly familiar with one’s own official responsibilities; to persist in carrying out all types of rules, regulations, directives, and systems; to constantly improve the military qualities of the troops; and to cultivate a sense of organization and discipline and a fine combat style to ensure the completion of the task of military training.

6 Promote and develop the three–eight work style and persist in the correct political orientation.
Persistently carry out the party’s cadre policy to select, train, equip, and review the performance of cadres. Conduct the work of demobilization, transfer, and retirement of cadres, and of matters concerning the dependents of cadres.

Conduct security work: safeguard state and military secrets, prevent counterrevolutionary sabotage, [and] struggle against criminal activities.

Conduct cultural work, firmly grasp the party’s literary guidelines, and develop mass cultural recreations, sports, and cultural studies.

Promote and develop the fine tradition of respecting cadres and cherishing soldiers to strengthen the unity between officers and men. Educate the cadres to cherish the fighters, to conduct strict supervision, and to use patient persuasion. Educate the fighters to respect the cadres, to observe discipline, and to carry out orders. Develop, under centralized leadership, political democracy, economic democracy, and military democracy.

Promote and develop the fine tradition of supporting the government and cherishing the people, strengthen the relations between the army and the local party and government organs, and [strengthen the relations] between the army and the masses of people. Educate the troops to strictly adhere to the three major rules of discipline and the eight points of attention, to actively participate in socialist construction and the political life of the state, and to assist the local authorities in doing mass work.

Carry out the work of disintegrating the enemy (wajie dijun) and of lenient treatment of captured prisoners.

Carry out political work in scientific research organizations for national defense to ensure the achievement of positive results and the successful cultivation of talents.

Carry out political work and political education in schools to turn out cadres who are both red and expert.

Carry out political work in rear-area logistic services. Thoroughly implement the guidelines of building the army. Ensure completion of [the provision of] material supplies, public health, and production.

In coordination with local party and government organs, conduct the militia in political work and carry out political work in the recruiting of service personnel, in wartime mobilization, and in the demobilization and discharge of servicemen.

Educate all personnel to develop the spirit of internationalism and to conduct the work of uniting with friendly troops. Develop military friendships.

Organize the inspection of work and the summing up and publicizing of advanced experiences and strictly follow the system of seeking instructions from and reporting to the senior levels.
Appendix 2
Principal duties of the political commissar

The following ten duties of the political commissar are taken from the 1963 edition of “Regulations Governing Political Work in the PLA.”

1. Ensure that the party’s line and policy and state laws and regulations are implemented in the armed forces.
2. Ensure that the troop unit implements the orders and directives from higher levels and accomplishes its combat tasks, training, and all other assignments.
3. Direct the troop unit in studying Marxism–Leninism and Comrade Mao Zedong’s works, transmit the party’s decisions and instructions, grasp the trends of thinking in the troop unit, and see to it that the troop unit always maintains high political morale and a firm fighting will.
4. Uphold strict military discipline, develop democracy under centralized leadership, strengthen internal unity, ensure a high degree of centralization in the troop unit, and prevent and stop violations of discipline.
5. Exercise leadership over the work of building the party and the Communist Youth League in the troop unit.
6. Together with the military commander at the same level, undertake to draw up operational, training, and supply plans for the troop unit and countersign the plans.
7. Exercise leadership over the work of the political organ at the same level, bring the role of the political organ into full play, strengthen the building of the political organ, and raise the level of the political workers subordinate to you.
8. Take firm hold of the party’s cadre policy, pay attention to fostering the cadres, and sign your name to the orders of appointment and dismissal of cadres and transfer of personnel.
9. Take firm hold of the party’s policy concerning security work. Work to ensure the political and organizational purity of the unit.
10. Maintain contacts with local party and government organs and establish close ties between the army and the masses of the people.
1 Introduction

1 The army of the Chinese Communist Party had different names at different times (most notably the “Red Army”), but for purposes of clarity it is here referred to as the PLA. The Vietnamese army likewise is referred to throughout as the PAVN (People’s Army of Vietnam).

2 For purposes of this discussion, a cadre is a Chinese Communist Party member serving in a leadership position in a Chinese military unit. Individual cadres exercise authority by virtue of their affiliation with the party and their service in a leadership post.

3 Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Department Cadre Department, Zhong Yue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuo Zhan Gongzu Ziliao Huibian (Compilation of Materials on Cadre Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border) (Guangzhou Military Region, 1979) p. 139 (hereafter referred to as GGZH). “Promotion on the firing line” is a euphemism for a promotion to replace a casualty. The 165th Division’s loss of 243 cadres (18.8 percent) is comparable with some of the worst slaughter in France and Belgium during 1914–18. The French Fifth Infantry Division, which later mutinied in part because of its heavy casualties, lost 17.5 percent of its officers at Charleroi, one of its most costly battles. See Leonard V. Smith, Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Division During World War I (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994) p. 45.

4 There is nothing particularly Chinese, Maoist, or unusual about this strategy. In 1954, B.H. Liddell Hart offered the example of Scipio Africanus’s campaign against Carthage in 202 B.C.E as an example of the effective use of the indirect approach to strategy. Additionally, the Chinese have a traditional saying “Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao” (wei wei jiu zhao). B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy (New York: Praeger, 1954) pp. 50–2. Su Ruozhou, Junshi Chengyu (Military Sayings) (Shanxi Province: Shanxi People’s, Press, 1983) pp. 287–8.

5 The phrase “The Third Indochina War” is derived from the title of a volume edited by David W.P. Elliott in 1981. Elliot used the term “The Third Indochina Conflict” to describe hostilities between China and Vietnam and Vietnam and Cambodia. The phrase is very helpful to this chapter because it allows the author to isolate the Chinese invasion of 1979 while also exploring the Chinese actions that followed the invasion and lasted for almost ten years. David W.P. Eliot (Editor), The Third Indochina Conflict (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981).


Notes


10 Shu Guang Zhang, Mao’s Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950–1953 (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1995) p. 264. See also Allen S. Whiting, China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War (New York: Macmillan, 1960) p. 121. This estimate is based on a review of Chinese reports from the political departments engaged in military operations in northern Vietnam from February 17, 1979, to March 16, 1979. It is supported by estimates made at the time by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA): a August 20, 1979 CIA memo stated that the Chinese had deployed 500,000 troops, a force of “thirty or so” divisions, to the border before the start of the operation (CIA, “Memorandum: Sino-Vietnam Border Situation,” 20 August 1979 Classified” “Secret,” Declassified June 2002).


12 Private conversation with Arthur Waldron, April, 1999.

13 These measures are derived from the work of T.N. Dupuy, which applies statistical methods to the predictive study of war. (See T.N. Dupuy, Numbers, Predictions and War: Using History to Evaluate Combat Factors and Predict the Outcome of Battles (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979) p. 56.) The same approach is not possible here: the data simply are not available to assess these factors with statistical rigor. Dupuy’s three performance criteria nonetheless are based on a common-sense understanding of warfare that helps to illuminate the actors in this war. Where information is available, we can ask “did they succeed in taking the objective?”; “How long did it take to do it?”; and “How many soldiers and how many casualties did it take to achieve the goal?”


16 Although the PLA ultimately captured the three objective towns in Vietnam’s border provinces, it was much delayed in doing so. China furthermore attacked only when it had built up overwhelming numerical superiority. Under such circumstances, almost any army could have achieved the same objectives.


18 King C. Chen has studied the decision-making process that led to the war, and his work is replete with the maneuvering of the Beijing elite. See China’s War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions and Implications (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1987).

19 PLA General Political Department, Zhong Yue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Zhengzhi Gongzuo Jingyan Xuanbian (Compilation of Experiences of Political Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border), Volumes 1 and 2 (Beijing: PLA General Political Department Publishers, 1980).

20 Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Department Cadre Section, GGZH.

21 In the arcane world of Chinese military affairs, every regiment, division, and corps/army (jun) has a different number. Depending on the level of secrecy of the discussion or the text, the unit can be known by a five-digit number or a one-, two-, or three-digit number. In the West, these numbers are called the true unit designator (TUD) and the military unit cover designator (MUCD). The TUD is the real number
of the unit – the “name” of the unit. This number has one, two, or three digits (for example, the 123rd Division) and is used in secret reports and discussions. The MUCD is the five-digit number that is used in unclassified writings or discussions (for example, Unit 54401). Many Western analysts and Chinese people know the MUCD as the “unit number” (budui bianhao) because these are the numbers that appear in the Chinese press and on signs around Chinese military bases. Few Western analysts or Chinese people know the TUD for a unit. Where the source refers to the MUCD, I have used the MUCD; where the source refers to the TUD, I have used the TUD. Whenever possible, I also have attempted to correlate the two numbers.

2 For example, see Vu Lap (ed.), Su Doan 316 (316 Division) (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1986).

2 The Chinese political work system

1 The political work system of the PAVN was strongly influenced during the early years of that army’s existence by Chinese advisers but ultimately evolved into a uniquely Vietnamese institution. See D.M. Fitzgerald, The Vietnam People’s Army: Regularization of Command, 1975–1988 (Canberra: Australian National University, 1989).

2 There was additionally a fourth set of organizations and individuals, the discipline inspection system, which was charged with correcting the harsh treatment meted out to some cadres during the Cultural Revolution, conducting rectification campaigns (a mission it shared with all the other elements of the political work system) and investigating violations of party and military discipline. Reconstituted only after 1980, the system had no bearing on the military realities of the battlefield during the war. See David Shambaugh, “The Soldier and the State: The Political Work System in the People’s Liberation Army,” in China Quarterly, Vol. 127, September 1991, pp. 549–50.


4 David Shambaugh, “The Soldier and the State in China,” p. 548. Although Shambaug’s description of the party system is generally reliable, he confuses “squads” (ban), units of about ten soldiers, with “squadrons” (zhong dui), units of more than 100 soldiers.


7 Fang Zhu, Gun Barrel Politics, pp. 35–6.

8 “Regulations Governing Political Work in the PLA” (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Tiaoli) (published in China March 27, 1963. Mimeograph from U.S. Consulate, Hong Kong). These regulations were in force, with one minor exception, throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. See Footnote 63, this chapter, for an outline of the key changes made to the Regulations post-1963. (The post-1963 changes did not have a direct impact on the performance of the Chinese soldier on the battlefield.)


10 Some Chinese sources, particularly the more recent ones, use the terms junguan (officer) and ganbu (cadre) interchangeably. This practice confuses the issue and is avoided here.
11 AMS, Zhongguo Junshi Baike Quanshu, Vol. 4, p. 133.
12 Interview with a Chinese scholar who grew up in the family of a military meteorologist. December, 2000.
13 Michel Oksenberg, “Foreword” in Lau Yee-fui Glossary of Chinese Political Terms (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1977) page unnumbered.
15 Jiang Siyin, Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Shi (History of Political Work in the PLA) (Beijing: Chinese People’s Liberation Army Political Academy, 1984) p. 75.
16 Mao Zedong, “Interview with the British Journalist James Bertram,” in Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1975) p. 53. The concept of “wajie dijun” translated literally is to “disintegrate/collapse/crumble (wajie) the enemy army (dijun).” To Chinese soldiers, the concept encompasses all active and passive measures that would break apart the enemy’s army and induce its troops to surrender, flee, or fight ineffectively.
17 Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu, p. 1286.
18 AMS, Zhongguo Junshi Baike Quanshu, Vol. 4, p. 375. Some authors equate the awkward concept of “disintegrate the enemy” (wajie dijun) with the concept of lenient treatment of enemy prisoners of war, but the two are not interchangeable. Yu Yongbo, the Director of the PLA’s General Political Department and the senior PLA authority on political work, says in his foreword to the volume of Zhongguo Junshi Baike Quanshu that is devoted to political work: “Concerning the enemy, it is important to bring into play the political superiority of the people’s troops, from the political viewpoint to disintegrate the enemy and to carry out the policy of leniency toward prisoners of war” (“Dui dijun, zhuyao shi fahui renmin jundui de zhengzhi youshi, cong zhengzhishang wajie dijun he shixing kuandai fulude zhengce”). Jiang Siyin states that in the Jinggang Mountains’ campaigns, the most effective methods of “disintegrating the enemy” were “lenient treatment of prisoners of war” (kuandai fulu); “release of prisoners” (shifang fulu); “medical treatment of wounded soldiers” (yizhi shang bing); and “launch of propaganda” (kaizhan xuanchuan) (Jiang Siyin, Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Shi) p. 71.
20 Mao Zedong, Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1972) p. 353.
21 The three main rules of discipline are: (1) obey orders in all your actions; (2) do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses; and (3) turn in everything captured. The eight points for attention are: (1) speak politely; (2) pay fairly for what you buy; (3) return everything you borrow; (4) pay for anything you damage; (5) do not hit or swear at people; (6) do not damage crops; (7) do not take liberties with women; and (8) do not ill-treat captives (Mao Zedong, Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1972) p. 343. The same work has a helpful footnote on page 344 describing the evolution of the “three-eight formula”. Song Shilun, who led a communist guerrilla unit in Jiangxi province in the late 1920s, provides a similar explanation of the evolution of the concept (Song Shilun, Mao Zedong Junshi Sixiangde Xingcheng Jiqi Fazahan (The Formulation and Development of Mao Zedong’s Military Thought) (Beijing: Military Science Publishers, 1984) p. 58.
22 The establishment date for the PLA is August 1, 1927.
Notes

30 *Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu*, p. 1349. The designation of the Eighth Route Army as the Eighteenth Combined Army was a political gesture by the CCP. The unit was still known in communist circles as the Eighth Route Army, and it never really existed or fought as part of the Nationalist or “United Front” Army (Larry M. Wortzel, *Dictionary of Contemporary Chinese Military History* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1999) p. 71.
33 The Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army were the main combat formations of the PLA during World War II.
39 In May 1940, this organization was renamed the “Enemy Work Bureau” (*Di Gong Bu*) (Jiang Siyin, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Shi*) p. 259.
46 The military significance of the success of the *wajie dijun* campaigns is another matter. According to Lincoln Li, the puppet troops were too few and too poorly armed to effectively secure the enormous area assigned to them. They furthermore were distrusted by the Japanese, who took precautions to avoid situations in which the puppet troops were the only insurance of the security of a Japanese interest. While Li does not present a systematic analysis of the strength of the puppet forces, the numbers he cites lead to the conclusion that there were fewer puppet troops than are indicated by the Chinese statistics cited here (Lincoln Li, *The Japanese Army in North China, 1937–1941: Problems of Political and Economic Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) passim.

The motive and intensity of PLA warfare against the Japanese also is questionable. Jiang Siyin states that the Chinese were fighting a “minzu zuozhan” (race or nationalities battle) (Jiang Siyin, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Shi*, 174
p. 259), a claim that is supported by the Chinese finding that just 6,213 Japanese were captured in eight years of war (1937–45). In four years of fighting (1941–45), the Western allies captured 11,600 Japanese (James F. Donnigan and Albert A Nofi, *The Pacific War Encyclopedia* (New York: Checkmark, 2000) pp. 513–14), in what has similarly been described as a race war (John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1986). Comparing these figures suggests that the Chinese fighting against the Japanese was even more uncompromising than the relentless campaign of the allied forces.


53 Jiang Siyin, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Shi*, p. 303. Jiang points out that Tan Zheng’s report was criticized by Lin Biao in 1960 as a “fabrication” (*mouxiangyou*). He also points out (page 316) that on August 1, 1978, the *Renmin Ribao*, *Hong Qi*, and the *Jiefang Jun Bao* republished Tan’s report as a guide to the lessons learned in political work.


55 *Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu*, p. 1349.


62 AMS, *Zhongguo Junshi Baike Quanshu*, Vol. 4, p. 396. According to this source, the 1978 Regulations “improved” (*zenjia*) youth league work by organizing a committee at the battalion level. Prior to this, committees were organized at the company level. Minor changes also were made in the Regulations in 1983 to allow them to be reissued. It was not until 1988, however, that a significant body of changes was made to the guidance announced by Lin Biao in the early 1960s. On July 1, 1988, at the Second Session of the Seventh National People’s Congress, the “Regulations Regarding Military Ranks of Officers of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army” (*Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Junguan Junxian Tiaoli*) was approved, and on September 5, at the Third Session of the Congress, the “Regulations Regarding Military Service of Active Service Officers of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army” was passed. These two sets of regulations show clear differences from those that originally had implemented Lin Biao’s “Resolution,” the most obvious of which are in the source of the regulations and the terminology used. The 1963 Regulations were issued by the Central Committee of the CCP and used the term “cadre” (*ganbu*) to refer to party members in leadership positions. The term “officer” (*junguan*) was not used. The 1988 Regulations were approved by the National People’s Congress and freely
substitute junguan for ganbu. The return of a system of ranks to the PLA, which had abandoned the system in 1965 during Lin Biao’s tenure as defense minister, was an enormous step away from Lin’s Maoist philosophy. (See page 392 of Zhongguo Junshi Baike Quanshu for a discussion of the new rank system and page 394 for a summary of the conditions of service regulations.)

63 J. Chester Cheng, “Resolution on Strengthening Political and Ideological Work in the Army,” p. 73.
69 J. Chester Cheng, “Resolution on Strengthening Political and Ideological Work in the Army,” p. 66. The “Four Relationships” are the proper relationship between men and weapons; between political work and other work; between ideological work and other aspects of political work; and between living ideas and books.
77 Nelsen tracks thirty main force armies (jun). There may in fact have been as many as thirty-six main force armies at the time and an even higher rate of deployments.
78 Admittedly, troops learn about loading and unloading railroad cars during long rail deployments, and troops engaged in their home areas get some training in motor and foot movements. These are simple skills, and improvement in these skills does not make up for the loss of training time devoted to developing the advanced skills needed to perform more complex military tasks.
80 Author’s observation of PLA fieldwork near Guilin, Guangxi province, in October 1979 and of a PLA vegetable canning factory in Nanning, Guangxi province, winter 1984.
81 Harlan W. Jencks, From Muskets to Missiles, p. 104.
82 This observation is supported by conversations with PLA logisticians whom the author accompanied on a visit to the United States in February 1985.
83 D.M. Fitzgerald, The Vietnam People’s Army, pp. 10–25. Fitzgerald (page 1) states also that the PAVN abandoned the divided leadership system in May 1979.
3 Hanoi and Beijing on the road to war


2 NSC, “Sino-Vietnamese Conflict; Iran,” p. 4.

3 David W.P. Elliot, “The Third Indochina Conflict: Introduction,” in David W.P. Elliot (ed.), The Third Indochina Conflict (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981) p. 1. The term “Third Indochina War” is used here to designate the conflict, originally involving Vietnam, Cambodia, and China, which later grew to include the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Soviet Union. Where Elliot used the word “conflict” the word “war” here is substituted in an attempt to better capture the gravity of these contests and to underline the important continuities connecting the events of the 1945 August Revolution in Vietnam to the signing of the Chengdu Agreements in September 1991. The Vietnamese also use the term “Third Indochina War” (“cuoc chien tranh Dong Duong lan thu 3”) (see Nguyen Hue Toan, Sua That Ve Nhung Lan Xuat Quan Cua Trung Quoc Va Quan He Viet Trung (The Truth About the Many Times the Chinese Have Used Troops Against Vietnam, and the Chinese–Vietnamese Relationship) (Da Nang: Da Nang Publishers, 1996) p. 110.


8 Stephen P. Heder, “The Kampuchean–Vietnamese Conflict,” p. 44.

9 Stephen P. Heder, “The Kampuchean–Vietnamese Conflict,” p. 44.


12 Gareth Porter, “Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis,” p. 82.

13 The ICP was the party of the Vietnamese communists from 1930 to 1951.


17 See Elizabeth Becker, When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution, pp. 311–14, for a description of the purge of So Phim and the military leadership of the Eastern Military Region.


20 E-mail exchange between the author and Mr Merle L. Pribbenow, February 2001.


22 Stephen P. Heder, “The Kampuchean–Vietnamese Conflict,” p. 34.


Notes

29 William E. Ridenour, “The Vietnamese Campaign in Cambodia: A Military Analysis,” pp. 20–4. In January 1979, the PAVN established the 479 Front to serve this purpose (e-mail exchange with Mr Merle L. Pribbenow, March 2002).
32 E-mail exchange with Mr Merle L. Pribbenow, November 2001.


60 One can only speculate about what Deng and the Chinese leaders learned from the Vietnamese campaigns against Cambodia. For their part, the Vietnamese learned that limited campaigns against local objectives are not enough to change regime behavior. It would appear from their later behavior that the Chinese missed this lesson, taking away only the reminder that a massive, rapid attack, even against determined resistance, could be very successful: the Vietnamese campaign in December 1978 and January 1979 matched the rates of advance of the Chinese army in the Korean War and the Sino-Indian War. Mao’s enthusiasm for “quick-decision offensive warfare on exterior lines” seemed to have been vindicated by the actions of China’s future enemy.

4 The 1979 campaign


3 At the operational level, war involves the employment of military forces, usually armies and corps, to attain strategic goals through the conduct of campaigns and major operations. At the strategic level, it involves the actions of national armies, navies, and air forces, alone or in combination with the forces of other nations, to accomplish the objectives of a national military strategy. And at the tactical level, war involves the employment of divisions, regiments, battalions, and companies to attain specific goals through fighting battles and other engagements. This definition draws heavily on U.S. Department of the Army, *FM 100-5: Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1986) pp. 9–10.

4 “*Dien Bien Mot Thang Chien Dau Chong Quan Trung Quoc Xam Luoc*” (“Developments in the Victorious Battle against the Chinese Invasion”), in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, April 1979, p. 63.

6 Harlan W. Jencks, “China’s ‘Punitive’ War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment,” in Asian Survey, August 1979, p. 812. Jencks based his research on the original FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service) translation and qualifies this number as half killed and half wounded.


8 Li Man Kin, The Sino-Vietnamese War, p. 59.

9 According to Carter Malkasian, “Attrition is a gradual and piecemeal process of destroying an enemy’s military capability” (Carter Malkasian, A History of Modern Wars of Attrition (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002) p. 1). The technique is becoming obsolete as the United States, the United Kingdom, and a few other nations have moved into the area of high-technology warfare. In its recent campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States abandoned attrition and sought instead to produce the sudden and total destruction of the enemy’s command, control, logistic, and information systems. China, however, remains in the era of attrition warfare. See also Robert H. Scales, Jr, Yellow Smoke: The Future of Land Warfare for America’s Military (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003) passim.


11 It is a common misperception that Vietnam is a country covered by large areas of triple-canopy jungle. There is some such jungle in parts of the central provinces of the former Republic of Vietnam, but in the northwest region, which is densely overgrown with foliage and perhaps otherwise comes closest to the myth, most of the foliage is bamboo and vines, not stands of tall trees. Both types of foliage create difficulties for military operations: true “triple-canopy jungle” allows the relatively easy surface movement of troops but makes aerial support of operations difficult, while the dense bamboo forests make cross-country troop movements almost impossible. In contrast, the hills of northeastern Vietnam are covered predominantly with low shrubs and grasses. There are stands of trees, but these stands are not extensive and the trees are not especially tall. Movement in this area may be slow, but it is far from impossible.


17 In August, the 571st Division sent a convoy of 174 trucks to Military Region Two to support defensive operations along the northern border (Science Section, General Logistics Department, Lich Su Su Doan Oto 571 (History of the 571st Transportation Division) (Hanoi: General Rear Services Department, 1981:182). Classified: “For internal military distribution only.”

18 Interview with a former U.S. military intelligence officer who spoke on condition of anonymity, April 17, 2001.

19 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam (Fifty-

20 The identification of the 316A Division in the Lao Cai area is found in ZGJX-1, p. 54. The 254th Regiment is identified as being in the Lao Cai area in ZGJX-1, p. 215.

21 Interview with a former U.S. intelligence officer who spoke on condition of anonymity, April 17, 2001. The 345th Division was assigned to the newly established 6th Corps on April 16, 1979. The 6th Corps was deployed in Military Region Two (55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam, p. 406). It is likely that the unit was there much earlier and that the establishment of the corps was simply a measure to improve control of the forces that were already deployed in the area. Li Jian, in Xin Zhongguo Liuce Fan Qinlue Zhanzheng Shilu (The True History of New China’s Six Battles to Oppose Aggression), p. 327, states that the 345th Division was one of the divisions that the Chinese annihilated. Li Man Kin (The Sino-Vietnamese War) places the 345th in combat in the Lao Cai area on February 17, 1979.

22 Interview with a former U.S. intelligence officer who spoke on condition of anonymity, April 17, 2001.

23 Interview with a former U.S. intelligence officer who spoke on condition of anonymity, April 17, 2001. The source either could not recall or declined to identify the Kunming Military Region units that moved during late 1978.

24 Interview with a former U.S. intelligence officer who spoke on condition of anonymity, April 17, 2001.

25 Interview with a former U.S. intelligence officer who spoke on condition of anonymity, April 17, 2001.

26 Interview with a Western diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity, December 13, 2000.

27 The main Chinese airfields within 100 miles (160 kilometers) of the border are Nanning and Ningming in Guangzhou Military Region and Simao, Mengzi, and Jinghong in Kunming Military Region. The Vietnamese had airfields capable of supporting military operations at Kep, Phuc Yen (Hanoi–Noi Bai), Gia Lam, and Yen Bai. With the exception of Yen Bai, all of these are within 100 miles of the border.


29 The number 48 does not correspond to the pennant number of any Chinese ship listed in Jane’s Fighting Ships (London: Jane’s Publishing Company, 1983) in 1979. The only Chinese naval ship listed in Jane’s with the digits “48” in its pennant number was a Romeo-class submarine, pennant number 248. It is possible that the writer of the report mistakenly dropped the digit “2” from the number; it also is possible that the 2 was dropped for security reasons. It is clear from the text that ship 48 had guns, but this does not preclude the possibility that it was a submarine: Jean Labayle Couhat’s Combat Fleets of the World 1986/1987 (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1987) p. 333 shows a 1971 Xinhua news photograph of a Romeo submarine with a pair of 25-millimeter guns mounted on the conning tower. It also is possible, however, that warship 48 was an armed trawler that was too small for inclusion in Jane’s or that it was a Ministry of Fisheries or other civilian craft pressed into emergency service.

30 The organization of the 217 Formation is as described in ZGJX-1, p. 359. It is not clear from this source whether other ships were assigned to or otherwise operated with the formation. The source mentions other naval squadrons and groups (both configurations are termed in the Chinese dadui, but for the purposes of this study, a
group is taken to comprise more than one squadron) but does not make clear their relationship to the 217 Formation.


32 Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, Zhong Yue Bian-jing Zhiwei Huanji Zhouhan Ganbu Gongzuo Ziliao Huijian (Compilation of Materials on Cadre Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, 1979) p. 1. This publication is hereafter referred to as GGZH.

33 GGZH, p. 24.

34 GGZH, p. 2.


37 GGZH, p. 30.

38 King C. Chen, China’s War with Vietnam, p. 90.


40 Kenneth W. Allen, China’s Air Force Enters the 21st Century, p. 94.


42 Nguyen Trie Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, p. 410.

43 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam, p. 403.


46 King C. Chen, China’s War with Vietnam, p. 105.

47 Beijing Xinhua broadcast in English, 13:47 GMT on March 16, 1979, as reported in FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service) Southeast Asia and Pacific, March 19, 1979, p. E-1. For the Vietnamese version of events, see Nguyen Hu’u Thuy, Chinese Aggression: Why and How It Failed (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1979) passim.

48 China claimed that it captured Lang Son, Dong Dang, and Loc Binh on the Lang Son Front; Soc Giang, Thong Nong, Hoa An, Tra Linh, Trung Khanh, Quang Uyen (or Quang Hoa), Phuc Hoa, Ha Lang, Dong Khe, That Khe, and Cao Bang on the Cao Bang Front; and Lao Cai, Cam Duong, Pho Lu, Sapa, Muong Khuong, Bat Xat, and Phong Thu on the Lao Cai Front. All of these towns lie on the direct routes to China’s three primary objectives of Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai. This would suggest that the Chinese invasion was a much more precise operation than the indiscriminate all-out attack that King C. Chen and others have portrayed it to be.

49 The chronology used here of events on the Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son Fronts draws heavily on Li Man Kin’s The Sino-Vietnamese War. Li also provides an accurate description of the Vietnamese order of battle. Much of the information on the Chinese units involved in the campaign is derived from the Ganbu Gongzuo Ziliao Huijian (GGZH) and the two volumes of the Zhengzhi Gongzuo Jingyan Xuanbian (ZGJX) and in contrast to Li’s important 1981 work is new. It is therefore heavily footnoted here. Geographic coordinates and descriptions of terrain, roads, and other features are based on observations made by the author during a series of trips to the area between 1996 and 2001. Geographic coordinates were taken by GPS (global positioning satellite system) in February and March 2001.

50 Current Vietnamese maps identify Highway 402 as Highway 236.

51 Nguyen Trie Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, pp. 420–1.

52 Nguyen Trie Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, p. 420.
54 The old gravel road has today become Route 235, a paved, all-weather country road of minor capacity. In 1980, it was so insignificant that it was not even listed in the road atlas of the PAVN (General Logistics Department, *Chi Dan Duong Bo Vietnam* (Atlas of Land Routes of Vietnam) (Hanoi: People’s Army of Vietnam, 1980).
57 Li Man Kin, *The Sino-Vietnamese War*, pp. 95–6.
58 Vietnamese sources identify the third Chinese army as the 54th Army (see Nguyen Tri Huan, *Su Doan Sao Vang*, p. 424). Chinese sources indicate that it may have been the 54th, the 42nd, or elements of both (see ZGJX-1, pp. 339–44, for reference to a unit of the 42nd that reportedly fought at Lang Son and Dong Dang).
59 Li Man Kin, *The Sino-Vietnamese War*, p. 96.
60 As recently as July 1976, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) had cautioned that “at army level the Chinese are capable of reaching objectives as far as 20 to 25 kilometers behind the enemy FEBA [forward edge of the battle area] in a single night.” FEBA is the military term that describes the front line of the enemy’s defensive position. DIA, *Handbook on the Chinese Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976) pp. 4–7.
61 Li Man Kin, *The Sino-Vietnamese War*, p. 96.
63 ZGJX-2, pp. 381–2.
64 ZGJX-1, pp. 76–84.
65 GGZH, p. 68.
66 Li Man Kin, *The Sino-Vietnamese War*, p. xi.
68 GGZH, p. 72.
69 GGZH, p. 100.
70 No Author. “Dien Bien Mot Thang Chien Dau Chong Quan Trung Quoc Xam Luoc” (“Developments in the Victorious Battle Against the Chinese Invasion”), in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam*, April 1979, p. 61.
72 Elements of the Nanjing Military Region’s 20th Army may have been involved in the attacks on the Lao Cai Front. The 11th Army’s participation is based on an interview with a former U.S. intelligence analyst who spoke on condition of anonymity, September 2003.
73 ZGJX-2, pp. 24–9.
74 ZGJX-2, pp. 37–9.
75 ZGJX-2, pp. 165–9. The deepest penetration of Chinese troops in the area near Lai Chau was to Sinh Ho (interview with an Asian diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity, August 23, 2001).
77 Li Man Kin, *The Sino-Vietnamese War*, p. 93. The official history of the 316th Division, which was published in 1986, follows the division only to July 1976, and its departure from its base at Lai Khe for the border with China. It is silent on the division’s role in the 1979 campaign. Vu Lap, *Su Doan 316 Tap Hai* (316 Division, Vol. 2) (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1986) p. 320.
80 Quang Ninh’s coastal Cam Pha coal mines, which are about seventy kilometers south of the border, produce a large percentage of Vietnam’s coal and could be
considered to be a strategic resource. The Chinese attacks did not threaten the mines, nor did China conduct naval, air, or amphibious strikes against them.

81 King C. Chen, citing Taiwanese sources, states that the attacks along the Quang Ninh border were the work of the 165th Division of the 55th Army (*China’s War with Vietnam, 1979*, p. 106). Neither Harlan Jencks, in his several works on the 1979 campaign, nor Li Man Kin discuss the fighting in this area. I am not convinced that the Chinese 165th Division was responsible for the attacks along the Quang Ninh border. The Vietnamese unit histories and Chinese cadre reports both place the 494th and 493rd Regiments of the 165th Division in the Lang Son area, ruling them out of this engagement. None of these sources make clear whether or not the 495th Regiment of the 165th Division was in the Lang Son fighting, so it is possible that this regiment made the attacks on the Quang Ninh border points; it is also possible, however, that local forces were responsible. It is equally difficult to identify the Vietnamese forces in the area, but these may have been elements of the 328th and 323rd Infantry Divisions. On March 9, 1979, the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense established a headquarters to control operations in the Quang Ninh area, and these two divisions were assigned to the headquarters (Military History Institute of Vietnam, *55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, pp. 405–6). The establishment of the corps at this late date does not necessarily mean that the units that comprised it were not in action in the Quang Ninh province before the corps was formed. The Vietnamese frequently formed their corps by grouping units in the area into larger units.

86 Cao Ba Lanh is located just east of the hamlet of Dong Vang. It is part of Binh Lieu County.
90 From ZGJX-1, p. 359: “Weile peihe wo Yunnan, Guangxi Bianfeng Budui dui Yue zi wei huanqi zuozhan, daji Sulian Shehui diguozhuyide haishang ruqin, baowei wo xisha qundao.” “Peihe” means “to coordinate,” and the Soviets here are termed “Soviet Socialist Imperialists,” but the translation given of the three missions conveys the correct meaning.
91 ZGJX-1, p. 359.
92 ZGJX-1, p. 362.
95 The Alligator is a class of Soviet landing ship, displacing about 4,000 tons (4,065 metric tons). Alligator class ships entered service with the Soviet fleet in 1966.
96 ZGJX-1, p. 364.
97 ZGJX-1, p. 364.
98 ZGJX-1, p. 367.
100 ZGJX-1, p. 367.
103 Lin Hu (ed.), Kongjun Shi (Air Force History) (Beijing: PLA Publishers, 1989) pp. 247, 302. Kenneth Allen lists the same statistics on page 93 of China’s Air Force Enters the 21st Century. Allen, who is probably the most knowledgeable analyst in the United States of Chinese military aviation affairs, states that these data are evidence of a poor performance by the PLA air force, indicating a sortie rate of one sortie every five days over a campaign of sixty days. Lin Hu stipulates that the campaign lasted just thirty days, but a new calculation on these terms still gives a sortie rate of just one sortie every two and a half days. This compares miserably with the rate of two or three sorties per day that a U.S. Air Force unit would have been expected to fly in a European conflict of the same era. As Allen says, it is not surprising that the PLA air force claimed a high readiness rate for its aircraft during the 1979 campaign – if you do not fly your aircraft, you will have plenty of time to keep them clean and repaired. Allen traces the roots of this weak showing to China’s internal problems of the previous fifteen years.


106 ZGJX-1, p. 390.

107 ZGJX-1, p. 390.


109 The terms “intelligence officer” and “special operations officer” are used here to broadly capture the role of the political officers of the Chinese and Vietnamese armies, who in addition to their political work activities developed agent networks, provided access to arms and supplies, and trained leaders among local people. The Chinese and Vietnamese armies did not in 1979 have the equivalent of Western “special forces,” but they did have skilled soldiers who performed infiltration and raiding missions. Most commonly known to the West as sappers, these soldiers were referred to by the Vietnamese as “dac cong” and by the Chinese as “tegong dui” (“special work troops”). The Vietnamese organized their dac cong soldiers in units as large as regiments, directed by a dedicated command headquarters (Bo Tu Leng Chung Dac Cong). The Chinese do not seem to have assigned their tegong dui troops to a separate command but instead created reconnaissance companies and battalions of special mission personnel that were assigned to divisions and armies. Although the second departments of the general staff departments of the PAVN and the PLA exercised staff supervision of intelligence operations, most of the officers who conducted operations in the field had backgrounds as political officers.

110 ZGJX-1, p. 216.


112 ZGJX-1, p. 435.

113 ZGJX-1, p. 65.

114 ZGJX-2, p. 304.


117 Science Section, General Logistics Department, Lich Su Su Doan Oto 571, passim.

118 ZGJX-1, p. 268.

119 ZGJX-1, p. 272.


121 No Author, Su Doan Song Lam (The Lam River Division) (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1984) p. 136.
122 A Western journalist who visited Hmong refugee camps in Thailand in 1991 reported that the Hmong first contacted the Chinese when support from the United States came to an end (July 31, 2001). See also FBIS, “PRC-Trained Armed Ethnic Groups, Regular Troops at Lao Border,” in Vietnam, March 15, 1979, p. K-6. The FBIS article refers to Meo rather than Hmong tribesmen, but the two names are applied interchangeably by the Vietnamese to the same ethnic group (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, Atlat Dai Li Vietnam (Atlas of Vietnam) (Hanoi: Center for Geographic Research, 1993) p. 9.


124 ZGJX-1, p. 15.

125 The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency’s Handbook of the Chinese Armed Forces (pp. 5–10) provides the DIA calculations of the combat rations requirement of Chinese units. The plight of the 3rd Company of Unit 53203 is reported in ZJGX-2, p. 49. According to the DIA estimation, the Chinese units should have been issued with five to seven days of combat rations before the operation (at the lower end of this scale, equating to 2,250 rations for a company of 150 men). Three days into the operation, the 3rd Company should have had at least two days of rations remaining. Either the unit was not issued its basic allocation of combat rations or its soldiers did not have the discipline to carry them.

126 ZGJX-2, p. 48.

127 DIA, Handbook, p. 5-1. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency calculated that a PLA division needed 450 metric tons of ammunition and twenty tons of rations per day during periods of heavy combat, and 150 tons of ammunition and twenty tons of rations for average levels of combat over a protracted period. Each unit is responsible for its own water supply, which typically it would source locally. Unit 53203 was an element of the 42nd Army, a Guangzhou Military Region unit that should have known what to expect of the climatic conditions of northern Vietnam.

128 Science Section, General Logistics Department, Lich Su Su Doan Oto 571, p. 265.

129 The Vietnamese use the terms Nhu Nguyet defense and Cau River defense almost interchangeably in discussion of defensive operations in the Hanoi area. Ironically, the Nhu Nguyet defense is very similar to the Chinese defensive strategy of “luring the enemy in deep,” a name that gained popular currency in the 1970s when used as a slogan of the “people’s war” in which the PRC promised to engage should China ever be invaded.

130 Vietnam moved the three divisions of the 2nd Corps from Cambodia to its northern border to defend against further Chinese attacks. This move does not seem to have hampered Vietnamese operations in Cambodia in 1979–80 (Pham Gia Duc (ed.), History of the 2nd Corps, 1974–1994 (Lich Su Quan Doan 2) (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1994) pp. 392–6. The 571st Truck Division also diverted part of its effort from Cambodia to the northern border, where it had been supporting PAVN units since mid-1978. The division at the same time was supporting Vietnamese operations in Laos.

131 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam, p. 404. The elements of the 338th Division that remained with the 5th Corps were redesignated the 390th Division.


133 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam, pp. 403–8.

134 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam, pp. 404–5.

135 Author interview with a Vietnamese man whose brother participated in the construction work.

5 The Battle of Lang Son, February–March 1979

1 Nguyen Duy, *Distant Road* (Willimantic, Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1999) p. 163. Friendship Pass is known to the Chinese as “Youyi Guan” and to the Vietnamese as “Huu Nghi Quan” (Friendship Pass) or “Nam Quan” (South Pass).

2 Other parts of the political system, as represented by the “three basic principles of political work” (zhengzhi gongzuo sanda yuanze), did not work well. The PLA never formed a close bond with the Vietnamese people (jūn mín yī zhí), and the PLA proselytizing operations (the wājiē dījun, or “disintegrate the enemy”) failed completely.

3 There are no reports that PLA soldiers lacked small arms, artillery, or tank ammunition. Since both sides used the same calibers of ammunition and the same families of weapons, there presumably would have been much use of captured munitions. Chinese propaganda claimed that the weapons and munitions used against China by the Vietnamese originally had been provided to Vietnam by the Chinese, as friends, for its fight against the United States.


5 The same drive today takes three or four hours. Between 1996 and 1999, the author made the Hanoi to Lang Son journey several times over the same roads that were used in 1979. In 2001 and 2002, the author made the trip over the new highway. Travel times are taken from those journeys.

6 Hanoi and China are only connected by two rail lines. One goes through Lang Son and the other through Lao Cai.


9 See Zhong Yue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Zhengzhi Gongzuo Jingyan Xuanbian: Shangece (Compilation of Experiences of Political Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border: Vol. 1) (Beijing: PLA General Political Department Publishers, 1980) pp. 330–5 for Unit 56229’s experiences of the campaign and Vol. 2 (Xiace) pp. 29–32 and 78–83 for the experiences of units 56039 and 56037. Unit 56229 was a logistics unit and units 56037 and 56039 were infantry units, possibly assigned to the 50th Army. The two volumes are hereafter referred to respectively as ZGJX-1 and ZGJX-2.


13 It is a common misperception that the Vietnamese had more modern and more lethal weapons than did the Chinese. It is possible that the Vietnamese had newer weapons,
but the types of weapons used by the two sides were essentially identical. If anything, it was the Chinese that had an edge on lethality.


15 This description of the operation draws on that of Nguyen Tri Huan in *Su Doan Sao Vang*, p. 421, but has been modified through the use of PLA sources to place the correct Chinese units in their assignments on the battlefield. For example, *Su Doan Sao Vang* attributes the severing of Highway 4A and the assault on hills 386 and 438 to the Chinese 164th Division of the 55th Army; in reality, it was units from the 165th Division that accomplished this mission (see Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, *Zhong Yue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Ganbu Gongzuozuo Ziliao Hui bian* (Compilation of Materials on Cadre Work in the Counter-attack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, 1979) pp. 132–42. This latter publication is hereafter referred to as *GGZH*.


18 The PLA demonstrated in the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, and the Sino-Indian War that it could march to and capture within twenty-four hours an objective up to thirty kilometers distant. Lang Son, given this historical performance, was within easy range of a Chinese lightning attack. (See DIA, *Handbook*, pp. 4–7 and 4–8. The DIA states that during the Korean War, Chinese armies repeatedly moved up to twenty-five kilometers in a night to attack an objective.)

19 Nguyen Tri Huan, *Su Doan Sao Vang*, p. 421 and *ZGJX-2*, pp. 55–60. Nguyen identifies this force as an infantry regiment (trung doan bo binh), but *ZGJX-2* says merely that an unidentified division of the 54th Army operated in this area.

20 Nguyen Tri Huan, *Su Doan Sao Vang*, p. 421. There is no record of the pack train force in any of the currently available Chinese sources. According to DIA analysts in 1984, a Chinese division engaged in heavy combat required 500 tons (508 metric tons) of supplies per day and a division engaged in light combat, 150 tons (152 tons) (DIA *Handbook*, p. 51). An American Army pack horse in the 1920s carried 200 pounds (91 kilograms). Based on these figures, the PLA would have needed 5,600 horses, making one round trip per day, to support a division engaged in heavy combat. China no doubt had these horses, but it is hard to imagine that the use of such an immense pack train could have effectively supplied a fast-moving division of the Chinese blitzkrieg.


25 Ruan Ming, *Deng Xiaoping: Chronicle of an Empire* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992) p. 54. Nguyen Tri Huan, writing in *Su Doan Sao Vang*, the official history of the Vietnamese 3rd Division, states that China’s plan was to take Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son in two days, February 17 and 18. A weekend was chosen as a time at which it was perceived the world’s press would be less attentive: on Monday, February 19, the world would thus be presented with a fait accompli. The fact that many PLA units ran out of food and water during the fighting supports this view: they simply were not provisioned for a campaign that lasted longer than one week.

26 Ruan Ming, *Deng Xiaoping: Chronicle of an Empire*, p. 54.

28 DIA, *Handbook*, p. 52. Each Chinese soldier was issued with five to seven days of combat rations before a major operation. Battalions and regiments stored a further week’s supply; divisions, ten days; and armies, two to four weeks. PLA units are responsible for their own water supplies. The U.S. army estimates that that a soldier needs between 1.5 gallons in temperate climates and 3 gallons (tropical) (between 5.7 and 11.4 liters) of drinking water per day. December, January, and February are the dry seasons in the Lang Son area, and there would have been very little naturally occurring water available for the Chinese troops.


31 *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (the official journal of the PAVN), March 1984, p. 45.

32 *GGZH*, p. 141.


34 Tam Lung station is nine kilometers north of Lang Son railroad station and six kilometers south of Dong Dang. The Tham Mo line crosses the rail line about four kilometers north of Tam Lung.


36 It is impossible to identify with any certainty the identity of the Chinese unit that attempted the Con Khoang envelopment. The *GGZH* report (p. 141) of the 165th Division says that the 3rd Battalion of the 493rd Regiment was “ambushed” (zao di fuji) deep in enemy territory on February 17 and its deputy regimental commander and political officer killed. The 3rd Battalion left the battlefield in haste, and neither body was recovered until later in the campaign.


40 *ZGJX-2*, p. 161.

41 *ZGJX-1*, p. 195.

42 *GGZH*, p. 192.


45 Nguyen Tri Huan, *Su Doan Sao Vang*, p. 462. The Chinese accounts do not provide casualty figures for any of these attacks.


47 This unit probably was part of the 163rd Division of the 55th Army. *ZGJX-2* (pp. 339–44) and *ZGJX-1* (p. 25) provide an extensive discussion of the actions of Unit 53503 in seizing this important hill. Other 55th Army units participated in attacks near Khau Ma Son. The 493rd Regiment of the 165th Division captured Hill 559, for example, about five kilometers away on one of the western avenues of approach to Khau Ma Son.


Notes

51 Nguyen Tri Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, pp. 474–5.
52 ZGJX-2, p. 28.
53 Nguyen Tri Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, p. 474.
54 No Chinese source claims the destruction of the Vietnamese 42nd Regiment, which presumably must therefore have survived the battle. It seems likely that the commanders of the newly formed 5th Corps ordered the regiment out of Ky Lua on March 2.
55 Nguyen Tri Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, pp. 424–5.
56 Nguyen Tri Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, p. 470. There is no mention in the available Chinese accounts of the 129th Division. Presumably the division’s performance was felt best ignored. It seems reasonable to therefore accept the Vietnamese reports of its humiliation as accurate.
57 Today’s maps identify the route from Chi Ma to Loc Binh as Highway 236. The road is now paved.
58 Nguyen Tri Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, p. 422.
59 ZGJX-1, p. 140.
60 Nguyen Tri Huan, Su Doan Sao Vang, p. 476. See also Li Jian, Xin Zhongguo Liuce Fan Qinlue Zheng Shilu (The True History of New China’s Six Battles to Oppose Aggression) (Beijing: Chinese Broadcast Publishers, 1992) p. 324, and see ZGJX-1, pp. 137–45 for further details on the 127th Division’s advance. ZGJX-1 designates Hill 391 as Hill 390.
61 GGZH, p. 221.
63 ZGJX-2, p. 339.
64 GGZH, p. 221.
65 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam (Fifty-Five Years of the People’s Army of Vietnam) (Hanoi: PAVN Publishers, 1999) p. 404.
66 It is not clear from the available sources where the 347th Division deployed.
68 Author interview with staff officers of the 308th Division, February 1997.

6 Artillery diplomacy: waiting for the “second lesson”

7 Nayan Chanda, “End of the Battle but Not of the War,” p. 10. The most symbolic area the Chinese retained was about 300 meters of railroad track between Friendship Pass and the Vietnamese border control point.
8 Nayan Chanda, “Rallying around the Flag Again,” in Far Eastern Economic Review, March 16, 1979, p. 10. Phong Saly province is in the area where the Lao, Chinese, and Vietnamese borders meet.
9 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam (Fifty-Five Years of the People’s Army of Vietnam) (Hanoi: PAVN Publishers, 1999) p. 404.
10 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam, p. 405. On April 20, the Quang Ninh Front was elevated to the level of a special military region. This further demonstrates the level of importance the Vietnamese placed on this area.

11 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam, p. 406. The Vietnamese source does not explain the location of Mat Tran 379 or Binh Doan 678. It may be that the Vietnamese created the unit in or near Cambodia.

12 Military History Institute of Vietnam, 55 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam, p. 406. These headquarters probably served as the command and control cells for the local forces in these provinces.

13 These estimates are based on each division having a strength of 8,000–10,000 men and each regiment having a strength of 2,000 men. The 678 Binh Doan is not included.

14 Far Eastern Economic Review, Asia Yearbook 1980, p. 312. This article states also that the first significant Chinese arms shipment after the fall of Phnom Penh was made on January 31, 1979. The Chinese maintained their embassy to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia from January to April 1979. On April 9, 1979, Ambassador Sun Hao and seven of his staff exfiltrated from Cambodia to Thailand. The ambassador was in daily contact with Beijing during his time with the Khmer Rouge government (Yun Shui, “An Account of Chinese Diplomats Accompanying the Government of Democratic Kampuchea’s Move to the Cardamon Mountains,” in Critical Asian Studies (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 34(4), p. 511.)

15 Quyet Thang, “Quan Doi Cua Chu Nghia Banh Truong Khung Hoang,” in Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, February 1980, pp. 65, 67–8.


17 The Chinese had used symbolic strategies in the past. During the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954–55 and 1958, the PLA found itself unable to strike the several islands in the Strait that were controlled by the Guomindang, so instead shelled a number of island outposts that had little military significance. The artillery attacks had little effect on the strategic situation. Gerald Segal termed this a “strategy of expedience,” undertaken to substitute for the PLA’s inability to conduct effective military operations. Gerald Segal, Defending China (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 126.


The three main resistance groups were the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC). Pol Pot led the Khmer Rouge and China provided support. Son Sann led the KPNLF and Prince Norodom Siihanouk led FUNCINPEC. China, the United States, Singapore, and Thailand supported the KPNLF and FUNCINPEC.


Interview with Minister-Counsellor Ah Bang Leo, Singapore Embassy in Washington, D.C., Fall 2001. Minister Leo served as an ASEAN liaison officer to the Cambodian resistance in the early 1980s.


Thayer cites various sources to support his argument that the Vietnamese also engaged in “symbolic” war on the Sino-Vietnamese border. He is almost certainly correct in this proposition: at a time when Western journalists and diplomats were picnicking in the area, the Vietnamese had nothing to lose by saying that there was fierce fighting along the border. That said, they had nothing to gain by pointing out Chinese duplicity, because Vietnam’s major theater was in Cambodia and they were obtaining results there (Carlyle A. Thayer, “Security Issues in Southeast Asia: The Third Indochina War,” pp. 9–10).


54 Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son are respectively 295, 285, and 154 kilometers from Hanoi. Unpaved until the end of the war, Highway 2 is today a two-lane macadam road with steep grades and tight turns. In some places, hills rise very close to the road. It would be a difficult job for any army to keep the road open in the face of a few carefully placed ambushes.

55 *Ziwei Huanji* (*Counterattack in Self-Defense against Vietnam*), available online at: extend.hk.hi.cn/~daikang/junshi/ynzz.htm. B.P. Mahony, who through his position in the Intelligence Division of the Australian Federal Police had access to classified reporting, contends that there were in fact at least three Chinese divisions involved in the attack (B.P. Mahony, “Sino-Vietnamese Security Issues: Second Lesson versus Stalemate,” presented at the meeting of the Asian Studies Association of Australia at the University of Sydney, May 12–16, 1986). Other sources have identified the 31st Division of the 11th Army as the unit that assaulted Zheyin Shan. It is possible both divisions conducted the assault. Even if they had attacked with only two divisions, the Chinese would have had a numerical advantage of about 24,000 men to the probable 10,000 soldiers of the Vietnamese 313th Division.

56 *Ziwei Huanji*, online. The Chinese claim that single regiments from the 316th, 312th, and 345th Divisions were part of the defense.


59 There were several engagements in the Laoshan area. Collectively, they are referred to here as the battle of Laoshan.

60 Author’s observation, February 2001. The Vietnamese units represented in the cemetery are the 313th, 314th, 325th, 328th, 354th, 356th, and 411th Divisions and the 266th Regiment. The 266th Regiment usually is a unit of the 341st Division.

61 Seven divisions of between 8,000 and 10,000 men per division would represent a force of 56,000–70,000 men. The actual manning of these divisions is unknown.

62 Anonymous Chinese source, interviewed in February 2001. Between five and ten border defense regiments of perhaps 1,500 men each were also operating in the area, taking the overall number of Chinese soldiers in the area to at least 100,000.

63 The fourteen armies were as follows: 47th Army (Lanzhou Military Region); 16th and 23rd armies (Shenyang MR); 27th and 38th Armies (Beijing MR); 12th and 1st Armies (Nanjing MR); 41st and 42nd Armies (Guangzhou MR); 67th, 26th, and 20th Armies (Jinan MR);14th and 13th Armies (Chengdu MR) (from *Ziwei Huanji*, online).


67 No Author, *Dui Yue Ziwei Zhanzhongde Wofang Paobing* (Our Artillery Forces During the Counterattack in Self-Defense Against Vietnam) (www8.silversand.net/nethome.goldbook/military/world history/047.htm).

68 No Author, *Dui Yue Ziwei Zhanzhongde Wofang Paobing*.


70 Li Man Kin, *The Sino-Vietnamese War* (Hong Kong: Kingsway Publications, 1981) p. 149. Li says the Chinese captured a total of 2,600 Vietnamese but released 1,000 of them on the battlefield.
Notes


78 Elizabeth Becker, When the War Was Over, p. 10.


81 You Ji, The Armed Forces of China, p. 4.


84 There is no comprehensive historical monograph on the diplomatic events surrounding China and Vietnam in the Third Indochina War. Elizabeth Becker, in When The War Was Over, covers many aspects of the diplomatic dialogue. Ramses Amer also provides a useful thumbnail sketch of the foreign policy initiatives and positions of the two belligerents in “Sino-Vietnamese Relations: Past, Present, and Future,” in Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer (eds), Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999).


7 Crisis in command: the cadre system under stress in the Guangzhou Military Region

1 By 1979, Xiang had about five decades of experience in the PLA and its predecessors. During his youth, he had served under Peng Dehuai, one of China’s most skilled modern generals; he was political commissar for China’s armored forces for almost twenty years; and from 1972 to 1977, he had been a deputy chief of the PLA’s General Staff Department (Wolfgang Bartke, Who’s Who in the People’s Republic of China (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1981) pp. 481–2.

2 Xiang Zhonghua, “Address to a Conference of Division-Level and Higher Cadres of the Political Committee” (excerpts), April 18, 1979, p. 7. In Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, Zhong Yue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Ganbu Gongzu Ziliao Huibian (Compilation of Materials on Cadre Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, 1979). This compilation is hereafter referred to as GGZH.


4 The forward command headquarters was the organization through which the military
region commander and his staff would plan, coordinate, and execute the guidance that
was sent down by the general departments in Beijing. It is unclear exactly where the
forward command headquarters for Guangzhou Military Region was located, but it
seems probable that it was Nanning City in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, as
this would have put the military region commander close to the troops operating in
northern Vietnam.

5 GGZH, General Political Department, “Directives from the General Political Depart-
ment on Political Work Conducted by Troop Units during Military Operations”
(excerpts), December 12, 1978, p. 12.

6 GGZH, General Political Department, “Directives from the General Political Depart-
ment,” p. 12.

7 GGZH, General Political Department, “Directives from the General Political Depart-
ment,” p. 13.

8 GGZH, General Political Department, “Directives from the General Political Depart-
ment,” p. 1.

9 GGZH, Central Military Commission, “Circular from the Central Army Committee
on the Appointment and Removal of Division-Level Cadres,” February 1, 1979, p. 2.


11 GGZH, Military Region Forward Command Political Department, “Working Status
Report on Pre-War Deployment Increases of Army Cadres,” March 3, 1979,
pp. 65–6.


13 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Handbook of the Chinese Armed Forces


15 This is an indication that the B-type divisions were far below their regulation
strength.


18 GGZH, 41st Army, “Summary of 41st Army Cadre Wartime Work,” May 1979,
pp. 76–7.

19 GGZH, “Summary of 41st Army Cadre Wartime Work,” p. 83. In 1979, the PLA had
large numbers of deputy commanders and deputy political commissars assigned at all
levels. Therefore, a unit could dispatch army-level cadres to lower level units to help
shore up weak or inexperienced leadership teams. For example, as recently as 1985,
the Beijing Military Region had seven deputy commanders and three deputy political
commissars. Defense Liaison Office, Directory of P.R.C. Military Personalities
(Hong Kong: U.S. Consulate General, 1985) p. 41.


21 GGZH, “Summary of 55th Army Cadre Wartime Work,” pp. 94–5. As early as 1962,
the PLA had adopted the practice of appointing high-ranking cadres and administrative
cadres to low-level leadership posts, as summarized by the slogan: “To take up
posts in a PLA company” (xia lian dai zhi). The purpose of the policy was twofold: to
improve the quality of political and professional leadership at the lower levels and to
reform the work style of senior cadres by forcing them to face the difficulties of
leading troops at those levels. The policy was different in both form and substance
from the “Go to the companies to serve as a soldier” (xia lian dang bing) policy that
Mao announced in September 1958 during the most radical period of the Great Leap
Forward, the purpose of which had been purely to reform the attitudes of the cadres.
Napoleon’s apocryphal remark that every corporal in his army carried a marshal’s
baton in his rucksack is reflective of the military thinking that new leaders can be
brought up from the ranks as officer casualties are incurred. The Chinese had a differ-
ten policy: the practice of the PLA was to move proven leaders down to lower levels
in anticipation that they would be needed as a campaign progressed. If a unit had
weak or inexperienced commanders or commissars, experienced, proven leaders normally assigned to higher levels could guide the junior cadre away from obvious errors. At the same time, if the junior cadres became casualties early in the battle, the senior cadre could assume leadership of the unit.

24 I have no further information on this movement. Therefore, I speculate that it was a local program that did not become showcased by the national press.
26 GGZH, 126th Division Political Department, “Organize Combat-Experienced Cadres to Share Their Wisdom with Basic-Level Cadres” (no date) p. 159.
27 GGZH, 122nd Division Artillery Political Department, “Earnestly Carry Out New Cadre Emergency Response Training” (no date) p. 150.
33 GGZH, Military Region (no further information), “Assist Basic-Level Cadres during Combat to Improve Their Fighting Skills” (no date) pp. 196–7.
34 GGZH, Military Region Artillery Unit (no further information), “Summary of Artillery Unit Cadre Wartime Work,” May 1979, p. 110.
35 Author interview with PLA veteran, 1985.
47 GGZH, Military Region, Army Work Section (no further information), “Leaders Should Assign a Team to Tackle Every Problem” (no date) p. 161.
49 GGZH, Military Engineer Unit (no further information), “Summary of Engineer Unit Cadre Wartime Work” (excerpts), May 1979, p. 116.
8 Political work in the 1979 campaign


2 Mao’s views on this subject are frequently quoted. See The Quotations of Chairman Mao Tse-tung (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1972) passim.


5 Wolfgang Bartke, Who’s Who in the People’s Republic of China (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1981) p. 182. In one notable example, 12th Army Commander, and later Shenyang Military Region Commander, Li Desheng served in 1960 in the 2nd Company of the 1st Battalion, 100th Regiment of the 34th Division. Li later wrote “The Teaching Method of Guo Xingfu” a paean to the commander of the 1st Battalion.

6 For a thorough analysis of the use of such models, see Donald J. Munro, The Concept of Man in Contemporary China (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1977).

7 Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu, p. 670.

8 Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu, p. 671.

9 Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu, pp. 207, 407, 866, and 1150.

10 ZGJX-2, p. 152.

11 Zhong Yue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Zhengzi Gongzuojingyan Xuanbian: Xiace (Compilation of Experiences of Political Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border: Vol. 2) (Beijing: PLA General Political Department Publishers, 1980) p. 4. This latter volume and its companion first volume hereafter are referred to as ZGJX-2 and ZGJX-1.

12 ZGJX-2, p. 146.

13 ZGJX-1, p. 102.

14 ZGJX-1, p. 102.

15 ZGJX-1, p. 134.

16 This argument deals with the process of political indoctrination and its relationship to unit culture. It does not consider the “content” used by the cadres to motivate PLA soldiers to kill Vietnamese. “Content” issues are discussed later in this chapter.


21 Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, Zhong Yue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Ganbu Gongzuojingyan Ziliao Huibian (Compilation of Materials on Cadre Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, 1979). This publication is hereafter referred to as GGZH.


23 ZGJX-2, pp. 3–17.

25 ZGJX-2, p. 50.

26 ZGJX-2, p. 136.

27 ZGJX-1, p. 366.

28 Cadres are defined as servicemen or women serving in any leadership position from unit commander to squad leader. The sample was constructed by assembling a representative selection of reports from artillery, infantry, armor, logistics, medical, naval, air force, and militia units. Only units below the military region level were included in the sample.

29 GGZH, p. 104.

30 ZGJX-1, p. 107.

31 GGZH, p. 212.

32 ZGJX-2, pp. 295–6.

33 ZGJX-1, pp. 139–40.

34 ZGJX-1, p. 208.

35 ZGJX-1, p. 208.

36 ZGJX-1, p. 426.

37 ZGJX-2, p. 228.


39 Thomas C. Roberts, *The Chinese People’s Militia and the Doctrine of People’s War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1983) p. 102. This is probably a conservative estimate. Longzhou County, about twenty kilometers from the border, raised 10,700 militiamen (ZGJX-1, p. 249). There are at least six counties in Guangxi and six more in Yunnan that are equally close to the border. If each had raised a militia force of 10,000, around 120,000 militiamen and women would have been called to arms. Even this may understate the true situation. Counties in the interiors of the border provinces also raised militia units for the campaign; for example, Longan County, about 150 kilometers from the border, registered 40,000 potential militiamen and sent 2,036 to the front (ZGJX-1, p. 227).


41 ZGJX-1, p. 249.

42 ZGJX-1, p. 249.

43 ZGJX-1, p. 249.

44 ZGJX-1, p. 250.


47 ZGJX-1, p. 257.

48 ZGJX-1, p. 259.

49 ZGJX-1, p. 258.

50 ZGJX-1, p. 262.

51 Unit 53214 was a division in the 42nd Army, Guangzhou Military Region.


53 ZGJX-1, p. 229.

54 ZGJX-1, p. 231.

55 ZGJX-1, p. 241.

56 ZGJX-1, p. 246.

57 ZGJX-1, p. 16.

58 Jiang Siyin, *The History of Political Work in the PLA* (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Zhengshi Gongzuo Shi) (Beijing: Chinese PLA Political Academy, 1984). This
work is illustrative of the Chinese view that political work is integral to the operational activities of the PLA. The volume is marked “jiang yi” (teaching materials) and presumably was used as a class text.

59 ZGJX-1, p. 16.
60 ZGJX-1, p. 16.
63 ZGJX-1, pp. 279–80. Some of the new rules are almost identical restatements of the Three Main Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points of Attention and other mass work policy guidance. For example, point number six of the points of attention is “Do not damage crops,” and the second of the three main rules is “Do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses.” Why did the cadre need to compose another rule about taking property from local people? Since this material is taken from a source whose purpose is in part to inform China’s higher authorities, it is reasonable to assume that the reporting may have applied an optimistic twist to the actual events recorded. The introduction of new rules may in reality indicate the existence of a significant problem.

64 ZGJX-1, pp. 281–2.
65 ZGJX-1, p. 282.
66 ZGJX-1, p. 270–1.
67 ZGJX-1, p. 268.
68 ZGJX-2, p. 237.
69 ZGJX-2, p. 237.
70 ZGJX-1, p. 269.
71 ZGJX-2, p. 239.
72 ZGJX-1, p. 271.
73 ZGJX-1, p. 129.
74 ZGJX-1, p. 129.
75 ZGJX-1, pp. 128–9.
76 ZGJX-1, p. 227.
77 ZGJX-1, pp. 228, 230.
81 Apatite is a compound of calcium phosphate used to make phosphate fertilizers.
83 Editorial Board of the Vietnam Courier, *Chinese War Crimes in Vietnam*, p. 7. This source concurs with the Chinese claim that some Vietnamese cooperated.
84 Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu, pp. 1037–8.
85 ZGJX-1, pp. 289–93.
86 ZGJX-2, p. 254.
87 ZGJX-1, p. 290.
88 ZGJX-1, p. 294.
89 ZGJX-2, p. 247.
90 ZGJX-2, p. 255.
91 ZGJX-2, p. 250.
92 ZGJX-1, p. 5.
93 ZGJX-2, p. 255.
94 ZGJX-2, p. 295.
95 ZGJX-1, pp. 11–12.
96 ZGJX-1, p. 293.
9 Politics versus firepower: the paradox of Maoist tactics

2 Agence France Presse, Hong Kong: English broadcast. Cited in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) *China*, February 24, 1979, K-16.
3 Massed tactics are here taken to be the assault in line or column of squads, platoons, companies, or larger units. The opposite of massed tactics is the assault by squads or fire teams in a series of coordinated advances: the “fire-and-maneuver” approach. A unit engaged in a fire-and-maneuver assault will advance by “fire and movement,” which requires the individual soldier to move toward the enemy by running forward, taking cover, and firing to support the next rush forward by his teammates.
6 In reality, all else probably was not equal. The rate of fire achievable by the crew-served machine guns, for example, depends on the level of training of the crew and other factors. It is difficult to assess the level of training of the Chinese and Vietnamese crews from the available material, but since there were more combat veterans in the Vietnamese ranks than there were in the Chinese ranks, it is reasonable to believe that the Vietnamese fired at a higher rate than did the Chinese.
7 For an exploration of an American confrontation with the dialectic between tactics and firepower, see Grady McWhitney and Perry D. Jamison, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982) *passim*. McWhitney and Jamison claim that the Southern heritage was an important motivational factor in the frequent use by the Confederate forces of the charge as a tactical maneuver. Since these charges frequently were conducted in the face of modern massed firepower, they often were costly failures.
8 Jakob Meckel, “A Summer Night’s Dream”, unpublished manuscript, p. 15. This version of Meckel’s article was translated from the German and brought to my attention by Dr Bruce Gudmundson.
9 How massed formations became common in the Chinese communist armies is a subject worthy in its own right of examination. The Chinese proclivity for massed formations probably originated with the massed formations of the Qing dynasty and the influence of German advisers in Japan and China. Jakob Meckel served as an adviser to the Japanese army in the last decades of the nineteenth century. For a

10 An enemy-killing oath was a public declaration made by a soldier of the number of enemy soldiers he would kill. The next soldier would promise to kill more, and so were the seeds of competition sown. Remembrance books and displays were exhibits of enemy atrocities.


12 It is almost impossible for a squad leader to coordinate the actions of ten or twelve soldiers in combat without the supporting leadership of the fire team leaders.


17 Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 46. William J. Duiker provides a different account. Duiker, working from Vietnamese sources, says that it was the Vietnamese, not the Chinese, that first saw the folly of the human wave attacks. In Duiker’s account, Wei Guoqing proposed the idea of human wave attacks in the early months of the siege of Dien Bien Phu. Duiker however agrees with Zhai that the Vietnamese turned to the tactics of trench warfare when they realized the costs of human wave assaults. William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000) p. 453.


24 Author interview with David M. Glantz (Col. USA, Ret’d.) April 26, 2001.

25 The Lushan Plenum was the Eighth Plenary Session of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee. It was held in Lushan, Jiangxi province from August 2 to 16, 1959.


31 Although Lin Biao had been offered the command of the Chinese People’s Volunteers (CPV) in Korea, Peng Dehuai was the commander who had crossed into Korea in October 1950 and who had exercised the real control of the Chinese forces. Lin Biao had not been in a position to learn from direct observation the problems of some of his tactical guidance.


34 For a detailed discussion of the “red versus expert” conflict that occurred within the PAVN, see William S. Turley, “The Political Role and Development of the People’s Army of Vietnam,” in Joseph J. Zasloff and MacAlister Brown (eds), *Communism in Indochina* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1975) pp. 135–64; passim.

35 The NLF is most commonly termed in the West as the Viet Cong, or VC.

36 Author’s recollections and interviews with five American combat veterans of the Second Indochina War.

37 Interview with Dr Henry Kinney, April 15, 2001. Dr Kinney was a Special Forces officer whose unit was conducting operations in Binh Long province at the time.


39 William Darryl Henderson, *Why the Vietcong Fought: A Study of Motivation and Control in a Modern Army in Combat* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1991) p. 101. Henderson does not discriminate between the National Liberation Front (NLF), or Viet Cong (VC), and the PAVN, which was commonly known during the Second Indochina War as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

40 No Author, *Truong Si Quan Luc Quan 2* (Army Officer School Number 2) (Hanoi: PAVN Publishers, 1991) 9–76; passim.


43 Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Department Cadre Department, *Zhong Yue Bianjing Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan Ganbu Gongzuo Ziliao Huibian* (*Compilation of Materials on Cadre Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border*) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Military Region, 1979) p. 134 (hereafter referred to as *GGZH*).


45 *GGZH*, pp. 87–8.

46 The Laoshan range is a mass of steep hills that on the ground are difficult – and for the Chinese troops, perhaps impossible – to differentiate from one another. It is unclear which of the peaks in the range is Laoshan itself, but the unit history of the Vietnamese 168th Artillery Brigade and Chinese press reports, supported by discussions with local people in the Thanh Thuy–Ha Giang area, point to Hill 1509 as the most likely candidate. The hill mass east of the Song Lo river (Hill 1200, also known as Dong Shan) probably is Zheyin Shan. Border marker 14 is in the center of Hill 1200, and border marker 12 is about 2 kilometers west of Hill 1509.


48 *Lich Su Lu Doan Phao Binh 168*, p. 41.

49 Luu Vu Suy, “Thuc Chat Cac Quan Dien Phan Mac-xit Cua Chu Nghia Mao Ve Cong Tac Chinh Tri Trong Quan Doi Trung Quoc” ("Several Points of the Anti-Maoist Maoism in the Political Work of the Chinese Military"), in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, March 1980, p. 56.

50 In 1950, 8.3 percent of U.S. army infantrymen were armed with automatic weapons.
The comparative figure for the PLA was 7 percent. In 1979, 31.2 percent of the troops in a PAVN battalion were equipped with automatic weapons compared to 36.8 percent of the soldiers in a PLA battalion.

10 Conclusion: the legacy of an “incredible, shrinking war”

1 The author obtained a copy of the relevant portions of the démarche in February 2000. Qi mentioned specifically two Vietnamese textbooks: *Yuenan Gongchang Dang De Lishi* (The History of the Vietnamese Communist Party) and *Yuenan Lishi Da Gang* (A Major History of Vietnam). While the Vietnamese press noted the meeting between Minister Tra and Ambassador Qi, they did not mention the sensitive démarche (Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), “SRV Defense Minister Holds Talks with Chinese Ambassador, Military Attaché,” Hanoi Voice of Vietnam Vietnamese broadcast, 23:00 GMT, January 21, 2001).


8 The author is indebted to Kenneth W. Allen, a leading analyst of Chinese air force issues, for this information.


12 Warfare is usually analyzed at the levels of strategy, operations, and tactics. The scope of this study does not extend to analysis of the operational level of the Third Indochina War.


20 Deng’s transition began at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, when it became clear that his policies had greater support among the
Party elite than did those of his rival, CCP Chairman Hua Guofeng. Huo allegedly was Mao’s chosen successor. Deng’s transition ended at the meeting of the Twelfth CCP Party Congress in September 1982, when he and his political allies replaced most of the pro-Maoist officials in Party positions of authority.

21 Deng Xiaoping, Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, p. 73.

Appendix 1


Appendix 2

1 “Regulations Governing Political Work in the PLA,” pp. 20–1 in the Chinese and pp. 23–4 in the English.
Bibliography

Chinese government document collections


This volume is referenced within the footnotes as GGZH.

This collection includes the following documents.

122nd Division Artillery Political Department. “Renzhen zhuahao xinganbude yingji xunlian” (“Earnestly carry out new cadre emergency response training”). No date.

122nd Division Artillery Regiment Political Office. “Kaizhan ‘Sanbang’ huodong, tigao xinganbu daibing dazhangde nengli” (“Launch the ‘Three Helps’ campaign to improve cadre leadership qualities in battle”). No date.


126th Division Political Department. “Cong quanju chufa, duo xuan miao xuan hao miao” (“Consider the big picture when selecting next-generation cadres: Insist on quality and quantity”). No date.

126th Division Political Department. “Zuzhi daguozhangde lingdao ganbu shenru jiceng chuanbangdai” (“Organize combat-experienced cadres to share their wisdom with basic-level cadres”). No date.

126th Division Political Department. “Zuzhi zhidaoyuan xuexi zhanshi zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Organize PLA political instructors to study wartime work”). No date.

128th Division Political Department. “Bian da bian tiaozheng, zhihui bu jianduan” (“Make mid-battle adjustments to ensure an unbroken string of commands”). No date.

160th Division Political Department. “Juban ganbu miaozi xuexibande zuofa” (“Techniques for organizing study groups for next-generation cadres”). No date.

164th Division Political Department. “Zai huoxianshang kaocha ganbu, faxian he tiba youxiu rencai” (“Discover and promote talented cadres by making personal inspections on the firing lines”). No date.


165th Division Political Department. “Jianchi biaozhun tiaojian, baozheng huoxian tigan zhiliang” (“Guarantee promotion of quality cadres on the firing lines by insisting on standard criteria”). No date.
42nd Army Political Department. “Zuzhi ganbuke (gu) zhang xuexi yanjiu zhanshi ganbu gongzuo” (“Organize cadre section chiefs to study and research cadre wartime work”). No date.
42nd Army Reconnaissance Company. “Chongfen fahui fanyi zai zhandouzhong de zuoyong” (“Maximizing the use of translation in combat”). No date.
42nd Army Tank Regiment Political Department. “Zuohao zhanshi ganbu gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively conducting wartime cadre work”). No date.
365th Regiment Political Office. “Yikao yinglian dangwei (zhibu) jishi buqi ganbu quee” (“Rely on Battalion and Divisional Party Committees (Branches) to promptly fill cadre vacancies”). No date.
379th Regiment (127th Division) Political Office. “Huoxian tigande jidian zuofa” (“Techniques for promoting cadres on the firing line”). No date.
54th Army Political Department. “Jiehe zhanping wuse ganbu miaozhi” (“Integrate battle appraisals to search for next-generation cadres”). No date.
55th Army. “Cong dazhangde xuyao chufa, jiji peiyang zheng gong ganbu” (“Put war-making needs first by actively cultivating political and labor cadres”). No date.
Division Political Department (no further information). “Gaohao huoxian tiba buchong ganbu, baozheng zuzhi zhihui bujianduan” (“Guarantee an unbroken chain of organizational command by effectively promoting and supplementing cadres”). No date.
General Political Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu guanyu zuohao budui zai junshi xingdongzhong zhengzhi gongzuode zhishi” (“Directives from the General Political Department on political work conducted by troop units during military operations”) (excerpts). December 12, 1978.
General Political Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu guanyu jiaqiang canzhan budui ganbu peibei wentide tongzhi” (“Circular from the General Political Department on deployment of military cadres during wartime”) (excerpts). December 14, 1978.
General Political Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu guanyu jixi zuohao zhangshi zhengzhi gongzuo jige wentide tongzhi” (“Directives from the General Political Department on the continued effective handling of political problems during wartime”) (excerpts). March 20, 1979.
General Political Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu guanyu ziwei huanji zuozhande zhengzhi gongzuo zhishi” (“Directives from the General Political Department on completion of political work conducted during the war of self-defense against Vietnam”) (excerpts). March 2, 1979.
General Political Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu, zong houqin bu guanyu jixiang jingfei kaizhide guiding” (“Regulations from the General Political Department and General Logistics Department on fund expenditure”) (excerpts). March 5, 1979.
General Political Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu guanyu zhongyue bianjing ziwei huanji canzhan budui chehuihoude ganbu gongzuo yijan” (“Suggestions from the
General Political Department on the effective execution of cadre work following withdrawal of forces after the war of self-defense against Vietnam”). March 22, 1979.

General Political Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu, zong houqin bu guanyu fuhe suijun tiaojian weilai duide xisheng, binggu ganbu jianshu shenghuo buzhuifei wenti wentide guiding” (“Regulations from the General Political Department and General Logistics Department on problems compensating the living expenses of family members of cadres who died during combat or of illness who met the criteria, but did not accompany them”). February 27, 1979.

General Political Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu zuzhi bu guanyu shizong junren jishu diayu wenti tongzhi” (“Circular from the General Political Department Organizational Branch on problems compensating family members of MIAs”) (excerpts). May 9, 1979.

General Political Department and General Logistics Department. “Zong zhengzhi bu, zong houqin bu guanyu xisheng lieshi shengqian qiankuande chuli yijian” (“Suggestions from the General Political Department and General Logistics Department on the handling of debts of deceased soldiers”). May 15, 1979.


Guangxi Military District Independent Division Political Department. “Lingdao qinzi kaocha, jiji zuohao huoixian tigan zhiliang” (“Leaders’ personal inspections ensure promotion of quality cadres on the firing lines”). No date.


Military District Logistics Department Political Department. “Renzhen zuohao puji jiangli pingding gongzu” (“Earnestly conduct popular incentive and evaluation work”). No date.


Military Region (no further information). “Zai zhandouzhong bangzhu jiceng ganbu tigao zuozhan benling” (“Assist basic-level cadres during combat to improve their fighting skills”). No date.

Military Region (no further information). “Jiji zuohao tiaoxuan ganbu miaozide gongzu” (“Effectively select the next-generation cadres”). No date.

Military Region Army Work Section (no further information). “Lingdao dongshou yishi yibang” (“Leaders should assign a team to tackle every problem”). No date.

Military Region Army Work Section (no further information). “Zuohao zhanqian kuobian budui ganbu diaopei gongzuode tihu” (“Personal experiences of effective pre-war expansion of military cadre deployment”). No date.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Caiqu youxiaio cuoshi, zuohao lieshi jianshu gongzu” (“Adopt effective measures to effectively tend to families of fallen comrades”). No date.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Zuohao diaochu ganbu puji gongzu” (“Effectively conduct the widespread work of rotating cadres”). No date.

Military Region Forward Command Artillery Political Department. “Reqing guanhuaiganbu, zhudong jiejue jiashu zinude shiji kunnan” (“Show heartfelt concern for cadres: offer to assist with their domestic problems”). No date.

Military Region Forward Command Headquarters and Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi silingbu, zhengzhibu guanyu jiaqiang peiyang jiceng ganbude tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Headquarters and Political Department on improving the cultivation of basic-level cadres”) (excerpts). April 29, 1979.


Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu zuohao zhandouzhong zhengzhi gongzuou jige wentide tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department on problems with political work during combat”) (excerpts). January 10, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu zhixing zhanbei xingdong renwu budui ganbu gongzuou jige wentide tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department on problems encountered by troop unit cadres during execution of combat-readiness operations”) (excerpts). December 28, 1978.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu huoxian tiba ganbude tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department on cadre promotion on the firing line”) (excerpts). February 27, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu guanyu ziwei huanji zuozhan shangyu renyu chuyuan guidui wentide guiding” (“Regulations from the Military Region on the return of wounded soldiers to units during the war of self-defense against Vietnam”). February 27, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu zuohao zhanhou zhengzhi gongzuou jige wentide tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department on problems with effective execution of post-war political work”) (excerpts). March 5, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu zuohao zhanhou ganbu gongzuou tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department on effective execution of post-war cadre work”). March 22, 1979.


Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu zuohao tiaoxuan ganbu miaozhi gongzuode yijian” (“Suggestions from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department for the effective selection of the next generation of cadres”) (excerpts). April 7, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu
zuozhan budui ganbu peizhi he baoliu, yunshu zhandou gugan wentide tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department on the problems of troop unit cadres on deploying, retaining, and transporting ‘core fighters’) (excerpts). April 25, 1979.


Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu zuohao canzhan budui jian dingde tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department on performance evaluations of cadres who served in combat”) (excerpts). May 6, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu canzhan budui zhuanyu bianfang shi zuopian de jige wentide tongzhi” (“Suggestions from the Field of Operations Political Department on transferring troops from military training to combat duty”) (excerpts). May 27, 1979.


Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu huoxian tiba ganbu gudong de tongzhi” (“Working status report from the Military Region Political Department on promotion of cadres on the firing line”) (excerpts). May 3, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department and Logistics Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu renzhen zhanshi gudong de tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Forward Command Political Department and Logistics Department on retention of technically skilled cadres”) (excerpts). December 12, 1978.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu renzhen zuohao jieshou lieshi zidi ruwu gongzuode tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Headquarters and Political Department on admission of offspring and younger siblings of deceased soldiers into the armed forces”) (excerpts). April 27, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu renzhen zuohao jieshou lieshi zidi ruwu gongzuode tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Political Department on the establishment and organization of divisions stationed along the border”) (excerpts). May 23, 1979.


Military Region Artillery Political Department and Logistics Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu renzhen zuohao jieshou lieshi zidi ruwu gongzuode tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Political Department on the establishment and organization of divisions stationed along the border”) (excerpts). May 23, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu renzhen zuohao jieshou lieshi zidi ruwu gongzuode tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Political Department on the establishment and organization of divisions stationed along the border”) (excerpts). May 23, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu renzhen zuohao jieshou lieshi zidi ruwu gongzuode tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Political Department on the establishment and organization of divisions stationed along the border”) (excerpts). May 23, 1979.

Military Region Artillery Political Department. “Junqu qianzhi zhengzhi bu guanyu renzhen zuohao jieshou lieshi zidi ruwu gongzuode tongzhi” (“Circular from the Military Region Political Department on the establishment and organization of divisions stationed along the border”) (excerpts). May 23, 1979.
Xiang Zhonghua. “Zhengwei zai canzhan ganbu shiyishang ganbu huiyishangde jianghua” (“Address to a conference of division-level and higher cadres of the Political Committee”) (excerpts). April 18, 1979.


This volume is referenced within the footnotes as ZGJX-1.

Although none of the reports included in this collection is dated, they probably were written between March 1979 and July 1980. This volume includes the following documents.

Armored Force, Political Department. “Tanke budui zuozhanzhong zhengzhi gongzuode jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political work during combat”).

Chengdu (Sichuan) Troop Unit, Political Department, United Work Team. “Zuohao zhanshi fazhan dangyuan gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of effective wartime development of party membership”).

Field Hospital 131, Political Office. “Women shi zenyang zuohao zhanshang jiuzhizhongde zhengzhi gongzuode” (“How we effectively conducted political work while rescuing and treating wounded soldiers”).

Field Hospital 762, Political Office. “Zuohao shangyuan anquan baowei gongzuode jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively providing safety for wounded soldiers”).

Guangzhou Army Engineer Unit, Political Department. “Kaizhan shadi ligong yundongde jingyan” (“Experiences of launching a campaign to inspire attacks on the enemy”).

Guangzhou Troops, Logistics Department, Political Branch. “Weirao yiqie qianxinade shengli, kaizhan zhanzhi houqin zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Launching wartime political work by the Logistics Department for the sole purpose of achieving victory at the frontline”).

Guangzhou Troop Unit, United Work Team. “Zhanhou pinggongzhong xuyao jiejuede jige wenti” (“Problems that need to be resolved regarding post-war evaluation of soldiers’ meritorious service”).

Kunming Troops, Logistics Department, Political Branch. “Zuohao bingzhan zhanshi zhengzhi gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively conducting wartime political work at a military post”).

Kunming (Yunnan province) Troops, Political Department. “Zuohao zhanshi ganbu gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively conducting cadre work”).

Kunming (Yunnan province) Troops, Political Department. “Zuohao canzhan ganbu jiashu gongzuo de tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively tending to family members of cadres”).

Longzhou County, People’s Armed Forces Department. “Ziwei huanji zuozhanzhongde minbing gongbuo” (“Conducting militia work during the self-defense counterattack”).

Office of the General Political Department. “Duiyue ziwei huanji zuozhan zhengzhi gongzuo jingyan” (“Experiences on conducting political work during the war of self-defense against Vietnam”).

South Sea Fleet, Air Unit, Political Department. “Lizu xianyou zhuangbei, shuli ganda
bisheng xinxin” (“Establishing confidence in victory among troops based on the current supply of equipment”).

South Sea Fleet, Political Department. “‘217’ biandui zai peihe zhongyue bianjing ziwei huanji zuozhan zhong, kaizhan zhengzhi gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of the ‘217’ Special Team on launching political work while coordinating efforts during the war of self-defense against Vietnam”).

Unit 33610, Political Department. “Woman shi zenyang zuo yuenan qunzhong gongzuode” (“How we conducted mass work on the Vietnamese masses”).

Unit 33700, Political Department. “Women shi zenyang zuohao zhiquian minbing zhengzhi srixiang gongzuode” (“How we effectively conducted political and ideological work with militia in support at the front”).

Unit 33700, Political Department, Office of Allied Masses. “Gaohao xunwen gongzuode jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of effective use of interrogation”).

Unit 33720, Political Department. “Shenru kaizhan aiguozhuyi he geming yingxiongzhuyi jiao yu” (“Launching thorough education programs on patriotism and revolutionary heroism”).

Unit 33740, Political Department. “Jianchi huoxian kaocha, zhengque shiyong ganbu” (“Ensure correct use of cadres by insisting on firing line inspections”).

Unit 33760, Political Department. “Women shi zenyang zuohao wajie dijun he kuandai fulu gongzuode” (“How we effectively disintegrated the enemy army and leniently treated POWs”).

Unit 33900, Political Department. “Fanfujizhande zhengzhi gongzuode zuofa” (“Techniques used to conduct political work while countering an ambush”).

Unit 33970, Political Department. “Fanditegongdui xiraode zhengzhi gongzuo tihui” (“Personal experiences of the Counterintelligence Work Unit on conducting political work while harassing the enemy”).

Unit 33990, Party Committee. “Zuohao jidong zuozhan zhengzhi gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political work during mobile operations”).

Unit 33994, Party Committee. “Jiaqiang Dangwei dui zuozhan de lingdao, baozheng zhandou renwude shengli wancheng” (“Strengthening Party Committee operational leadership to guarantee the successful completion of combat assignments”).

Unit 35015, Political Office. “Qiangjia Honghe fuqiaode zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Conducting political work during the construction of a floating bridge on the Red River”).

Unit 35107, Political Office. “Genju zhanshi tedian zuohao jiceng baowei gongzuo” (“Effectively conducting basic-level defense work according to wartime needs”).

Unit 35107, Political Office. “Renzhen zuohao shaoshurende gongzuo, gonggu tigao budui zhandouli” (“Earnestly tending to minorities to concentrate and raise troop unit combat strength”).

Unit 35113, Political Department. “Zuohao fanyi renyuande gongzuo” (“Effectively perform the work of interpreter”).

Unit 35116, Political Office. “Zhidao liandui kaizhan zuanshi tuanzhihu gongzuode jidian zuofa” (“Techniques for instructing a company to implement regimental support branches during wartime”).

Unit 35208, Political Department. “Gaohao kongsu jiaoyu, jifa duidi chouhen” (“Arousing hatred for the enemy through the effective use of denunciation”).

Unit 35212, Party Committee. “Falong jianmiezhan zhongde zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Political work conducted during the devastating battle at Falong”).

Unit 35217, Political Office. “Linzhan kuobian zhongde zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Political work conducted while reorganizing units before battle”).

Bibliography
Unit 35218, Political Department, Defense Branch. “Zuohao zhanshi zhihui jiguande anquan jingwei gongzuo” (“Effectively conducting wartime security work in a command organization”).

Unit 35218, Political Department, Defense Branch. “Women shi zenyang kaizhan zhanqu fangjian fante gongzuode” (“How we launched counterintelligence operations to guard against traitors and how we spied in the war zone”).

Unit 35302, Political Office. “Women shi zenyang kaizhan zhanshi zhengzhi gongzuo” (“How we launched wartime political work”).

Unit 35310, Political Department. “Motuo kaijin zhongde zhengzhi sixiang gongzuo” (“Conducting political and ideological work on motorized advances”).

Unit 39287, Political Department. “Jinji kongyunzhong zuohao zhengzhi sixiang gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political and ideological work during emergency airlifts”).

Unit 39326, Political Department. “Jinji zhuchangzhong zhengzhi sixiang gongzuo zuofa” (“Techniques of conducting political and ideological work during troop shifts”).

Unit 39413, Political Department. “Jiaqiang feixing dadui zhanshi zhengzhi gongzuode erdian zuofa” (“Two methods of strengthening wartime political work on the Flight Teams”).

Unit 39530, Political Department, Propaganda Office. “Kaizhan zhanshu yanjiu, lizu xianyou zhuangbei dashengzhang” (“Launching tactical research programs and utilizing our current equipment to win the war”).

Unit 53011, Political Office. “Laogu shuli quanju guannian, jiji zhiyuan bubing zuozhan” (“Firmly establishing an overarching belief in actively assisting infantrymen in battle”).

Unit 53013, Political Department. “Chuancha zuozhan zhengzhi gongzuo jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political work while fighting deep behind enemy lines”).

Unit 53019. “Shuojiang gongjianzhan zhongde zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Political work conducted during the assault on fortified positions on the Shuo River”).

Unit 53024. “Zuohao qingjiaozhan zhongde zhengzhi gongzuo tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political work during mop-up operations”).

Unit 53200, Political Department. “Renzhen zuohao zhanshi lieshi gongzuo” (“Earnestly tending to soldiers killed in battle”).

Unit 53203, Political Department. “Renzhen zhixing ‘Sange Qubie’ de zhengce, zuohao wajie dijun gongzuo” (“Earnestly carry out the ‘Three Distinctions’ policy and effectively disintegrate the enemy army”).

Unit 53208, Political Office. “Tanke budui zai chuancha zuozhanzhong, kaizhan xuchuan gudong gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of launching propaganda and agitation work in tank units fighting deep behind enemy lines”).

Unit 53210, Political Office. “Renzhen zuohao hulu zhongde zhengzhi sixiang gongzuo” (“Earnestly conducting political and ideological work while guarding a roadway”).

Unit 53214, Political Department. “Zhengdun zhanchang jilude zuofa he tihui” (“Techniques and personal experiences of strengthening field discipline”).

Unit 53214, Political Department. “Women shi zenyang kaizhan zhanshi xuanchuan, wenua gongzuode” (“How we launched wartime propaganda and cultural work”).

Unit 53214, Political Department. “Dahao minbing danjiadui de tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively leading a stretcher-bearing team in the militia”).

Unit 53500, Political Department. “Zuzhi ‘San Jiehe’ qunzhong gongzuodui, zuohao
zhengqu Yuenan renminde gongzuo” (“Organizing the ‘Three-Part’ mass work teams to win over the Vietnamese people”).

Unit 53503, Political Department. “Shiying zuozhan tedian zuohao zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Effectively conduct political work by adapting to combat circumstances”).

Unit 53505. “Tongdeng, Liangshan zhandouzhong zhengzhi gongzuode jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political work during combat in Tongdeng and Liangshan”).

Unit 53508, Political Department. “Zai huoxianshang kaocha ganbu, faxian he tiba youxiu rencai” (“Discovering and promoting qualified cadres through firing line inspections”).

Unit 53513, Political Department. “Renzhen zuohao canzhan ganbude sixiang jiaoyu gongzuo” (“Earnestly conduct educational and ideological work of cadres who participated in the war effort”).

Unit 53513, Political Department. “Women shi zenyang zuohao xiangdao gongzuode” (“How we effectively conducted guidance work”).

Unit 53701. “Huqiaozhongde zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Conducting political work during the defense of a bridge”).

Unit 53805, Political Office. “Genju paobing zuozhan tedian, zuohao zhanshi zhengshi gongzuo” (“Effectively conducting wartime political tasks based on the artillery units’ operational characteristics”).

Unit 54041, Political Department. “Zhandi yunshuzhong zhengzhi sixiang gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political and ideological work while transporting in the combat zone”).

Unit 54257, Political Department. “Guangfan shenrude jinxing yi kongsu jaioyu wei zhongxin neiorgan de zhengzhi dongyuan” (“Conducting widespread and thorough education centering on denunciation to achieve political mobilization”).

Unit 54450, Political Office. “Zuohao tanke budui zhanzhi zhengzhi gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of tank units on conducting wartime political work”).

Unit 56005, Political Department. “Zuohao wajie yuejun gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of disintegrating the Vietnamese Army”).

Unit 56005, Political Department, Propaganda Office. “Zuohao zhanshi xuanchuan gudong gongzuode jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively conducting propaganda and agitation work”).

Unit 56013, Political Department. “Rexin bangzhu xinganbu zai zhandouszhong chengzhang” (“Enthusiastically help new cadres to develop during combat”).

Unit 56017, Political Department. “Dainai zujizhan zhongde zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Political work conducted during the repulse at Dainai”).

Unit 56028, Political Office. “Kaizhan qiangganshi chuangzuo huodongde tihui” (“Personal experiences of launching arms production campaigns”).

Unit 56034, Party Committee. “Zuohao zhiquan minbing zhengzhi gongzuode tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively conducting political work with militia in support at the front”).

Unit 56037, Political Office. “Jianchi cong shiji chufa, zuohao zhanshi zhengzhi sixiang gongzuo” (“Effectively conduct wartime political and ideological work by insisting on starting with practical matters”).

Unit 56041, Party Committee. “Fayang guangrong chuantong, zuohao zhanqu qunzhong gongzuo” (“Promote the tradition of honor by effectively conducting mass work in the war zone”).

Unit 56045, Party Committee. “Zuohao shaoshurende sixiang gongzuo, baozheng
zhandou renwude wancheng” (“Effectively conducting ideological work with minorities to ensure completion of assignments during combat”).

Unit 56082, Political Office. “Women shi zenyang kaizhan paobing zhanshi zhengzhi gongzuoede” (“How we launched wartime political work in artillery units”).

Unit 56229, Hospital Party Committee. “Zuoahao zhanchang jiuzhizhongde zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Effectively conducting political work while rescuing and treating wounded on the battlefield”).

Unit 56229, Party Committee. “Women shi zenyang zuohao zhanshi yunshuzhong zhengzhi gongzuoede” (“How we effectively conducted political work during transportation”).

Unit 59055, Political Office. “Shiying zhanshi yunshu tedian, jiji zuohao xuanxhuan gudong gongzuo” (“Adapting to the characteristics of wartime transportation by actively conducting propaganda and agitation”).

Unit 86427, Political Office. “Zhanshi changzhan zhengzhi gongzuoede jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting wartime political work”).

Yunnan Provincial Military Region (Military District), Political Department. “Zuohao zhanqu qunzhong gongzuoede jingyan” (“Experiences of effectively conducting mass work in the war zone”).

Yunnan Provincial Military Region (Military District), Political Department, Propaganda Branch. “Maguanxian renmin wuzhuangbu zuohao canzhian zhiqian minbing zhengzhi gongzuoede tihui” (“Personal experiences of Maguan County Armed Unit on effectively conducting political work as a militia unit in support at the front”).


This volume is referenced within the footnotes as ZGJX-2.

Although none of the reports in this collection is dated, they probably were written between March 1979 and August 1980. This volume includes the following documents:

“Dui yue ziwei huanji zuozhan yingxiong baogao tuan huibao tiwang” (“A collection of reports on model bravery exhibited during the war of self-defense against Vietnam”).

Guangzhou Engineer Troops, Political Department, United Work Team. “Zai zhixing gongcheng baozhang zhandou renwudang zhanqian minbing zhengzhi gongzuoede jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political work while guaranteeing the successful execution of engineering assignments”).

Guangzhou Troops, United Work Team. “Yilian dahao diyizhongde zhengzhi gongzuo tihui” (“Personal experiences of the 1st Company’s political work during the successful first battle”).

Guangzhou Troops, United Work Team. “Qilian zai Tongdeng, Liangshan zhandouzhongde dangzhibu gongzuo” (“Party Branch work conducted by the 7th Company during fighting at Tongdeng and Liangshan”).

Hospital 196, Political Office. “Yiliaosuo tuanzhibu zai huoian jiuzhi shangyuanzhong, kaizhan huodongde zuofa” (“Techniques for launching activities used by League Branch medical teams while rescuing and treating wounded at the firing lines”).

Kunming Troops, Political Department, Mass Work Department. “Minbing biaoshi
zenyang zuohao zhanshi zhengzhi sixiang gongzuode” (“How the militia’s 8th Company effectively conducted wartime political and ideological work”).

Kunming Troops, Political Department, Organization Branch. “Jiulian zai zhanshi zuohao tuanzhibu gongzuode jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of the 9th Company on conducting effective League Branch work during combat”).

Unit 33616, Political Office. “Fayang youliang chuantong, zuohao zhanqu quelianghou gongzuuo” (“Effectively conduct mass work in the war zone by promoting fine traditions”).

Unit 33722, 9th Company. “Xuexi wojunde guangrong chuantong, jili geming yingxiongzhu yanjiu” (“Inspiring a spirit of revolutionary heroism by studying our army’s tradition of honor”).

Unit 33724, 100th Mortar Company. “Weirao dazhun dahan kaizhan zhengzhi sixiang gongzuuo” (“Launch political and ideological work for the sole purpose of striking accurately and ruthlessly”).

Unit 33726, 7th Company. “Qixi liu-yi-er gaodide zhengzhi sixiang gongzuo tihui” (“Personal experiences of political and ideological work conducted during the surprise attack on Hill 612”).

Unit 33740, 1st Company. “Zai chuancha zuozhuan zhong zuohao wajie dijunde gongzuo tihui” (“Personal experiences of disintegrating the enemy army forces deep behind their lines”).

Unit 33740, Motor Transport Company. “Women shi zenyang zuohao zhanshi yunshuzhong sixiang zhengzhi gongzuode” (“How we effectively conducted ideological and political work during transportation”).

Unit 33744, 1st Battalion. “Cong shiji chufa zuohao zhandouzhongde sixiang jiaoyu gongzuuo” (“Practical approaches to effectively conduct ideological education work in combat”).

Unit 33744, 9th Company. “Yipai zai Longtou zuojizhongde zhengzhi gongzuuo” (“Ideological work conducted by the 1st Company during blocking maneuvers at Longtou”).

Unit 33762, Political Office. “Liulian zuohao zhanqu quelianghou gongzuode jingyan” (“Experiences of the 6th Company’s effective execution of mass work”).

Unit 33766, Political Office. “Silian shi zenyang zuohao gujia zhengzhi sixiang gongzuode” (“How the 4th Company effectively conducted political and ideological work after suffering ration shortages”).

Unit 33970, Political Department. “Jiulian shi zenyang kaizhan shadi ligong yundongde” (“How the 9th Company launched campaigns to earn meritorious recognition by killing the enemy”).

Unit 33980, Political Department. “Yiyang chuancha zuozhuanzhongde zhengzhi gongzuo” (“Political work conducted during the 1st Battalion’s deep penetration behind enemy lines”).

Unit 33980, Political Department. “Sanlian shi zenyang tuanjie zhandoude” (“How the 3rd Company fought as a united force”).

Unit 33984, Political Instructor Hu Xuqing, 3rd Company. “Zhanshi zhengzhi sixiang gongzuode jidian tihui” (“Personal experiences of conducting political and ideological work during wartime”).

Unit 33994, 3rd Battalion, Party Committee. “Zhandouzhong fahui dangyuan xianfeng mofan zuoyoungde tihui” (“Personal experiences of effectively bringing into play exemplary Party members who lead during combat”).

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