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Soviet Strategy and the Vietnam War

RICHARD C. THORNTON

THE VICTORY of the Chinese Communists in 1949 and conclusion of the Sino-Soviet alliance in the following year were achievements of high strategic significance for the Soviet Union. Taking into account the already established Communist regimes in Outer Mongolia and North Korea, the Soviet Union now enjoyed a strong security position in Asia proper, in addition to gaining land access to Southeast Asia across Chinese soil. This favorable set of circumstances did not, however, last very long. When, in the mid-1950s, the Chinese under Mao Tse-tung sought to follow a path of development independent of the Soviet Union, the Chinese shift threatened the very core of the recently established Asian security structure. The ensuing crisis in Sino-Soviet relations provoked a quarrel within the Soviet leadership as to what was the proper course to pursue. This dispute was bound up with the larger struggle for succession to Stalin's mantle. Both the leadership and policy issues were settled by the victory of Nikita Khrushchev and the adoption of a long-range strategy designed to restore the advantageous position of 1950. Soviet policy toward Southeast Asia played an integral part in Khrushchev's strategy.

It was presumed that if sufficient pressure could be brought to bear upon the Chinese leadership, which itself was disunited, a pro-Soviet majority would eventually emerge, overrule Mao Tse-tung, and change Chinese policy. The Soviet leaders therefore sought to strengthen those within the Chinese leadership who supported a return to close relations with the Soviet Union. For the Soviets, the consequences of inaction far outweighed the risks of action. To do nothing and acquiesce in the evolution of an independent Chinese position would not only weaken the Soviet Union's Asian security position, but also severely restrict its ability to affect the course of events in Southeast Asia.

From 1957 onward, the Soviet Union applied a multifaceted policy toward China that included action on several levels. On the state-to-state

level, the Soviet Union either declined to support the PRC, or even supported its opponents in conflict situations. The Taiwan Strait crisis of 1958 and the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962 are cases in point. On the economic level, the Soviet Union at first restricted aid to China after 1957, then terminated it entirely in 1960, withdrawing all technical personnel and cutting off oil deliveries. In the process, Party relations deteriorated to the point where the Russians openly talked about expelling the Chinese from the Communist camp. The increasing shrillness of ideological exchanges marked the widening gulf between Russia and China.

As part of this policy, Khrushchev devised a scheme that hopefully would draw the Americans and Chinese into conflict in Southeast Asia. As in the earlier Korean War, a Sino-American confrontation would force the Chinese to restore the alliance with the Soviet Union. Between 1957, when the strategy was conceived, and 1962, the Soviets succeeded remarkably in creating the conditions for Sino-American confrontation in Southeast Asia. But subsequent events, particularly the course of the internal struggle in China, turned to the disadvantage of the Russians, and forced a fundamental change in Soviet strategy.

II

Early in 1957, elements within the Soviet leadership led by Khrushchev put forth the strategy of increasing pressure on the Chinese as a means of restoring the 1950 alliance. The plan triggered a severe crisis not only within the Soviet leadership, but also among the North Vietnamese, to whom it was proposed by the Russians. Both crises were eventually resolved in favor of Khrushchev's strategy of pressure, and the policy means adopted to carry it forward was to reactivate the conflict in Southeast Asia.

The crisis in the Soviet leadership began in the spring of 1957. Earlier in February, the Soviet Union had indicated its acceptance of a United Nations General Assembly proposal for the admission of both South Vietnam and South Korea into the United Nations. But in May, the Soviet Union reversed itself. Events in Peking during this period indicated that Mao Tse-tung was moving to eliminate political opposition to his own plans for setting China onto an independent path of development, and the Khrushchev group was forced to act. On Febru-

ary 26, Mao delivered his speech "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," implying that the Chinese Communist Party could make mistakes, and that it was he, Mao Tse-tung, who would determine the errors. The "rectification campaign," or purge of the Chinese Communist Party which began in April, was accompanied by a subtle shift in the Chinese position with regard to the Soviet Union. Mao sought to give support to those leaders within the Soviet Union who opposed Khrushchev, principally the Malenkov-Kaganovich-Molotov group. Khrushchev himself subsequently publicly acknowledged this development. In a speech delivered in mid-1963, he accused elements within the Chinese leadership of "poking their noses" into Soviet internal affairs and seeking his overthrow. Up to the time he gave this speech, the only attempt to overthrow Khrushchev took place in June 1957.

The June 1957 crisis within the Soviet Politburo was prolonged and vicious. At a stormy four-day session, June 18–21, Khrushchev and his supporters, Kirichenko, Mikoyan, and Suslov, were outvoted four to seven by Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, Pervukhin, Saburov, Bulganin, and Voroshilov. It was rumored that Khrushchev would be removed from his post as First Secretary and demoted to be Minister of Agriculture. Khrushchev refused to accept the Politburo decision, and instead challenged the legitimacy of the act by taking the issue to the full Central Committee, which met on June 22. In an unprecedented step, the Central Committee overruled the Politburo majority, and also voted to remove five of the seven who had opposed Khrushchev. Only Bulganin and Voroshilov were retained in the Presidium, which was enlarged from 11 to 15 members, thus giving Khrushchev a clear majority. The expulsion resolution noted that Molotov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov, in particular, were "shackled by old notions and methods, that they . . . fail to see the new conditions, the new situation, that they take a conservative attitude and cling stubbornly to obsolete forms and methods of work that are no longer in keeping with the interests of the movement toward communism."[1]

But although Khrushchev's victory over the "anti-Party group" settled policy in Moscow, the issue was yet to be joined in Hanoi. In

[1] *Pravda,* July 4, 1957.

the latter part of May, Voroshilov had been sent to Hanoi on a visit which the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's press described as a "most important historical event." Voroshilov, it is reasonable to surmise, informed the Vietnamese leadership of the impending policy conflict in Moscow. For over a month after Voroshilov's visit, there was no visible evidence of turmoil within the Vietnamese leadership. By the end of June, however, the issue had been decided in favor of Khrushchev; and on June 30, it was announced that Ho Chi Minh would embark on a tour of Eastern Europe. His departure was then put off for a few days; and the arrival of a Chinese delegation apparently forced another brief postponement. According to a long-time observer of Vietnamese affairs, the impression created by this sequence of events was one of "crisis, disorder, and impromptu decisions."[2]

Although the Soviet Union was not mentioned in Ho's announced itinerary, he did go to Moscow for discussions with Soviet leaders. From them he learned of the decision to reactivate the conflict in Indochina. Upon his return to Hanoi in August, the news of Moscow's new policy line triggered a serious crisis within the North Vietnamese leadership, which continued until the end of the year. Except for a speech in which he stressed the goal of Vietnamese reunification and his "complete unity of views" with Soviet and East European leaders, Ho dropped from sight. There was no further mention of his activities until his quiet departure for Moscow in late October to participate in the 40th anniversary celebration of the Russian Revolution.

During these months, the party leadership coalesced into opposing groups. The principal spokesmen for and against the "policy of pressure" were Le Duan and Truong Chinh, respectively. Le Duan was formally admitted into the Politburo in September, and went to Moscow with the DRV delegation for the 40th anniversary celebration. Truong Chinh emerged from comparative eclipse as the opponent of Soviet policy. One incident in particular reflects the extent of that opposition within the North Vietnamese Communist Party and Truong Chinh's role in it. While Ho and Le Duan were in Moscow, a Russian delegation from the Supreme Soviet arrived in Hanoi. Both the order of DRV leaders on the receiving platform and the content of their remarks were

[2] P. J. Honey, *Communism in North Vietnam* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963), p. 51.

extraordinary. The aged and senile Vice President, Ton Duc Thang, properly occupied first place in Ho Chi Minh's absence. But Truong Chinh and Nguyen Duc Trinh stood in second and third places, with Pham Van Dong relegated to fourth place. As Premier, Pham Van Dong theoretically outranked both Truong Chinh and Nguyen Duc Thang, who were Vice Premiers. Moreover, Nguyen Duc Thang delivered the principal speech, and in it he quoted extensively from the works of Mao Tse-tung. His remarks could not have been better calculated to insult the Soviet visitors and convey the message of their opposition to them.

Ho remained in Moscow while Le Duan returned to Hanoi with the DRV delegation after the celebration. On December 7, Le Duan addressed a meeting of Party cadres in which he affirmed the correctness of the newly promulgated Moscow Declaration. The Moscow documents, he said, "not only confirmed the line and created favorable conditions for North Vietnam to advance toward socialism, but have also shown the path of struggle for national liberation and have created favorable conditions for the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam."[3] Within two weeks, the policy issue had been resolved in Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh returned to Hanoi on December 24. The next day, Vo Nguyen Giap, who also had been out of sight for several months, appeared in public. The reappearance of Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Le Duan suggested strongly that the issue had been settled in favor of the Soviet position, and subsequent events confirmed this.

During the following year, 1958, the Soviet Union eclipsed Communist China as the principal source of aid for North Vietnam, and thereby provided the basis for the "consolidation of the North" and the preparations necessary to resume the conflict against the South. In January 1959, North Vietnam negotiated a 70 percent increase in trade with the Soviet Union, and in February obtained a large loan from the Chinese. The Chinese loan came at a time when the "pro-Soviet group" within the Chinese leadership had just delivered a setback to Mao Tse-tung, forcing him to relinquish his post as Chairman of the PRC to Liu Shao-ch'i. It was after this that the Chinese agreed to extend a substantial loan to North Vietnam, and also negotiated a

[3] *Vietnamese News Agency*, December 7, 1957.

loan from the Soviet Union for the PRC. Thus fortified with assurances of continued material support, Hanoi convened the 15th Plenum of the Lao Dong Party later that Spring, and publicly committed itself to conquest of the South. The Plenum communique said, in part:[4]

> On the basis of the consolidation of North Vietnam and its steady development in all fields, of the broad and powerful development of the patriotic movement in the South, and with the approval and support of the peace-loving people all over the world, our struggle for national unification will certainly be successful.

From mid-1959 onward, Hanoi spurred guerrilla activity in Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Laos. In Cambodia, North Vietnam resumed its support of the antigovernment "Khmer resistance" forces, as it had done during the First Indochina War. To South Vietnam, Hanoi sent cadres and material support, as yet in relatively moderate quantities, to bolster the incipient but increasingly effective terrorist campaign of the Viet Cong in the rural areas. By the Fall of 1959, Viet Cong units for the first time directly challenged ARVN forces, seizing and holding district and small provincial capitals for short periods. The pattern was similar in Laos. Following the Geneva settlement of 1956, some North Vietnamese cadres had been withdrawn. But from mid-1959 onward, North Vietnam increased its involvement in Pathet Lao activities.

III

The United States responded cautiously to stepped-up military activity in Indochina. Washington announced on July 23, 1959, that it was sending additional technical personnel and materiel to expand the Laotian army from 25,000 to 29,000, but did little else. In early August, the Royal Lao government proclaimed a state of emergency in the five provinces bordering on North Vietnam; and in September, the United Nations agreed to investigate the government's claim that North Vietnamese troops were operating on Laotian territory. Although the overall level of conflict remained low, there was a significant change over the earlier situation as terrorist acts—assassinations and kidnappings —increased.

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[4] *Pentagon Papers,* Book 2, "Origins of the Insurgency," p. 59.

The coup carried out by the neutralist officer Kong Le in August 1960 accelerated a gradually deteriorating situation. It led to the formation of a new neutralist government under Souvanna Phouma, but one which remained under challenge by the North Vietnamese-supported Pathet Lao. In the process, the Pathet Lao greatly strengthened their position in the tier of provinces adjacent to the North Vietnamese border, and were ultimately joined by Kong Le and his forces. The United States, in the meantime, had begun to send supplies in support of General Phoumi Nosavan to counter the effect of the Kong Le-Pathet Lao combination.

At this point, the Soviet Union moved decisively to increase the level of conflict in Laos and the pressure for a direct political response from the United States. On December 3, the Soviet Union began a surprise airlift from Hanoi. The act was paralleled by a public declaration from Hanoi that North Vietnam intended to intervene in the conflict as well. In the airlift operation, which continued for the next 18 months, Soviet pilots and crew members openly carried out their activities with no effort to conceal their purpose from Western observers. The operation included the shipment of several tanks and artillery pieces, along with light arms and ammunition. In all, the Soviet Union flew more than 2,000 sorties carrying in excess of 3,000 tons of materiel and equipment into Laos. Its efforts were supplemented by North Vietnam, which ran truck convoys from the DRV into Laos. The Soviet airlift and North Vietnamese convoys significantly increased the military capability of the Pathet Lao, which by the Spring of 1961 had greatly expanded the territory under its control along the DRV-Lao border. The North Vietnamese thereby achieved solid control over the access routes into South Vietnam collectively known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The newly-elected President Kennedy believed the crisis to be of such magnitude that he seriously considered committing ground troops to Laos until he learned that the US Army was unable to send even a 10,000-man contingent into the area without depleting its strategic reserve beyond acceptable levels. The United States was simply unprepared to meet a conventional-style challenge, making intervention on any significant level impossible. Yet President Kennedy believed that unless countermeasures were taken, the entire Western position in Indochina, such as it was, would be placed in jeopardy. He therefore

determined that the United States would take a stand in the region, but not in Laos, which bordered on and posed the danger of a direct confrontation with Communist China. Instead, Kennedy sought to strengthen the Western position in Thailand and South Vietnam, and also to develop a greater future capability to respond to conventional military challenges. Marine and Army Special Forces units were alerted and assembled on Okinawa for possible emergency airlift into Laos. In northeast Thailand, the United States set up a Marine helicopter repair base at Udorn, posted a number of helicopters there, and began to stockpile war materials in the region. In South Vietnam, Kennedy sought to strengthen that country's defenses by extending aid to build up its armed forces.

The new President sought to establish an American position in Southeast Asia that would not lead to conflict with China, but at the same time would prevent the loss of the Indochinese peninsula to Communist forces. He therefore pushed for a "neutralized" Laos, which bordered directly on China, and for strengthened positions in South Vietnam and Thailand, which did not. When the Soviet Union agreed to a British proposal, made in Moscow, for a cease-fire and convocation of an international conference on Laos, the United States accepted with alacrity. A cease-fire was formally proclaimed in early May 1961, although fighting continued for another year. The conference did not meet until July 1972; and although Laos was formally "neutralized" under Souvanna Phouma, the contending forces of the Pathet Lao, Kong Le, and Phoumi Nosavan were never merged and remained separate entities.

The declaration of Laotian "neutrality" permitted both the Soviet Union and the United States to modify their respective positions in the area. The Soviet Union turned over the planes employed in the airlift to North Vietnam and withdrew virtually all Soviet personnel from North Vietnam, including several hundred academic instructors from North Vietnamese schools. By the latter part of 1962, the Soviet Union had reduced its physical presence in Southeast Asia to negligible levels, and no longer had direct access to the area. The United States, on the other hand, while withdrawing forces from Laos, firmly committed itself to support of South Vietnam. Thus, by the end of 1962, the Soviet Union had succeeded in inducing the United States to establish a "containing"

position in Indochina, while at the same time disengaging Russian power from the area. Strategically, the stage seemed set for a Sino-American confrontation.

American intelligence reports displayed no awareness of the larger strategic issues at stake. In the Spring of 1963, a National Intelligence Estimate viewed the situation in South Vietnam as essentially stable.[5] The Estimate projected no significant dangers for the United States so long as there was no great increase in external support to the Viet Cong. In other words, as long as Soviet and Chinese commitments remained at current levels, the prospect for South Vietnam's survival seemed good. The Estimate closely reflected policy at this time, inasmuch as plans for the phase-out of American advisory personnel from South Vietnam were already being implemented. The main shortcoming of the Estimate was the assumption that the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China were pursuing common policies in Southeast Asia.

IV

The assassinations of Presidents Kennedy and Diem in November 1963 sharply affected the course of events, and ultimately contributed to enlargement of the conflict. After taking office, President Johnson apparently sought to avoid any action that might jeopardize his chances for reelection in 1964. The extreme caution of his approach to Southeast Asia was designed to prevent any further destabilization of the delicate balance in the area. In South Vietnam, meanwhile, conditions rapidly worsened in the months following Diem's assassination. As successive leaders rose and fell from power, the consequences of rampant political instability were compounded by accelerated deterioration of the military situation in the field.

In face of this political indecision, both in Washington and in Saigon, the Hanoi leadership decided to make a strike for victory. Beginning in the Spring of 1964, Hanoi increased significantly both the number of cadres it was sending to the South, and also the level of its logistical support. Initially, North Vietnam sent down "regroupees," Southerners who had gone to North Vietnam after the end of the First

[5] *Ibid.*, Book 12, "National Intelligence Estimate, April 1963," p. 523.

Indochina War. Later in 1964, three North Vietnamese Army regiments were dispatched to the South. Hanoi also moved to standardize the types of weapons used by the Viet Cong. This increase in men and materiel gradually but unmistakably began to tip the balance against a crumbling South Vietnamese Army incapable of matching the NVA/VC thrusts. By early 1964, it was becoming clear that the combined NVA/VC assault on the South might succeed. The collapse of the Saigon regime appeared imminent.

The threat of defeat prompted President Johnson to change his strategy and greatly to increase the level of US support for South Vietnam. His problem was how to apply American power openly without adversely affecting his chances for election. His opportunity came as a result of the Tongking Gulf incidents of August 2 and 4, during which North Vietnamese naval craft fired at two US destroyers. Clashes between North and South Vietnamese naval forces had taken place with increasing frequency during 1964. It was highly probable that US naval forces, which provided support for South Vietnamese commando raids, would also come into contact with the North Vietnamese. Whatever the "cause" of the incidents, their occurrence provided President Johnson with a justification for vastly increased American assistance to South Vietnam, whose forces were on the verge of total defeat. The incident also served to identify publicly the roles of North Vietnam and the United States in the war. It was no longer simply a Viet Cong–South Vietnamese conflict. Henceforth, both the United States and North Vietnam were also engaged.

In Moscow, meanwhile, the Tongking Gulf incidents and the American response precipitated a crisis in the Soviet leadership that ultimately contributed to Khrushchev's removal from power. The decision to send American forces to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam caught the Soviet Union tactically unprepared and unable to make an effective response. In less than a week, the United States had initiated a massive deployment of American power. On August 6, Secretary of Defense McNamara announced that reinforcements were already moving into the area; and two days later, Congress overwhelmingly passed a resolution authorizing the President to employ "all necessary measures . . . to prevent further aggression."

Although taken by surprise, Khrushchev also reacted quickly to the

Tongking Gulf incidents, but in a way that reflected the weakness of the Soviet position. On August 5, the Soviet representative to the United Nations Security Council introduced a resolution inviting North Vietnam to send an emissary to discuss the incident. Two days later, Hanoi appealed to the signatories of the 1954 Geneva Agreements to check "US preparations to invade its territory."[6] The following day, the Soviet Union assured Hanoi of full support, and demanded that the United States "immediately stop military actions against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam."[7] Khrushchev hoped that debate on the Tongking Gulf incidents in the United Nations would delay the introduction of American power long enough to permit the Russians to arrange for renewed land access to the area. But Hanoi itself rejected the plan to send a representative to the United Nations, maintaining that only the 1954 Geneva signatories could examine the case.

Once the United Nations filibuster plan had failed, Khrushchev's only remaining alternative was to match the American deployment with Soviet aid. There was no possibility of aiding Hanoi exclusively by sea. The dangers of such a lengthy and exposed ocean supply line had been dramatically brought home to the Soviet leadership only two years before, during the Cuban missile crisis. It was necessary to gain land access to Vietnam through China, the only invulnerable line of communication to the theater.

But Khrushchev, having become publicly and personally identified with an anti-Chinese policy, was unable to secure Mao's cooperation. Indeed, Mao had attacked Khrushchev repeatedly since 1962 as the wrecker of the international Socialist movement, and had suggested that only his removal from power would facilitate the normalization of relations between Communist China and the Soviet Union. In short, Khrushchev's China policy had backfired. Even under the pressure of massive American support for South Vietnam, Peking refused to allow the Soviet Union to utilize the Chinese rail system to support North Vietnam. This was the precipitating cause leading to Khrushchev's political demise. His personal identification with an anti-Maoist policy, combined with Chinese hints that his removal would permit an im-

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[6] *New York Times,* August 8, 1964.

[7] *Ibid.,* August 9, 1964.

provement in relations, persuaded the Soviet leadership to sacrifice the individual who, by his policies, stood in the way of any effective Soviet response in Southeast Asia. Thus, Khrushchev fell from power in mid-October 1964.

After Khrushchev's ouster, Soviet policy toward China was modified in some degree, but not changed fundamentally. Chou En-lai flew to Moscow, where it was decided to await the outcome of the US presidential election before estimating the lengths to which the Americans would go in Vietnam. The Soviets, while placing a moratorium on their side of the polemical exchanges and cancelling the World Congress of Communist Parties scheduled for December, continued to push for a resumption of close relations. The Chinese refusal came a few weeks after the American presidential election, when they labeled the Soviet Union's post-Khrushchev policy as "Khrushchevism without Khrushchev."

The Russians persisted. Kosygin, who with Brezhnev had succeeded to Khrushchev's mantle, traveled to Asia in late January 1965, visiting Pyongyang, Peking, and Hanoi. In Peking, he pushed once again for reconciliation under the slogan of "united action over Vietnam." His visit touched off another leadership crisis in Peking over the issues of Sino-Soviet relations and intervention in Vietnam. Although several figures were involved, the principal public spokesmen for the alternative positions were Lo Jui-ch'ing, the Chief of Staff, who represented the pro-Soviet position, and Lin Piao, Minister of Defense, who represented the Mao group.

In early May, Lo delivered a speech in which he advanced strong arguments for reconciliation with the Soviet Union as a means of affording the most effective assistance to North Vietnam. Lo envisaged the likelihood of a Sino-American clash. To prepare for this eventuality, China needed a modern professional military force-in-being. His argument implied the need for a closer relationship with the Soviet Union. Only by such means could China obtain the necessary materiel in time. Lin Piao, on the other hand, took the Maoist position of independent action. He argued that there was little probability of a Sino-American conflict. Such a conflict could occur only if the United States directly attacked China, in which case the Chinese response would be the Maoist tactic of "people's war." In essence, Lin argued that China should not

intervene in Vietnam. In consequence, he saw no need for a large force-in-being, nor for a return to the Sino-Soviet alliance.

Mao Tse-tung and his supporters ultimately managed to defeat the demands of the pro-Soviet group for intervention and a restoration of the Sino-Soviet alliance; but events in Vietnam required him to make an important compromise. The introduction of American combat troops early in March 1965 forced Mao to grant the Soviet Union land access to Vietnam. It was a decision that permitted Mao to avoid direct intervention in the conflict, but it also enabled the Soviet Union to open up a secure land supply route to North Vietnam.

V

Until the decision was taken, the strategic advantage in Vietnam lay with the United States. The initial failure of the Russians and Chinese to cooperate was the basis for President Johnson's assumption that the United States could ultimately govern the level of conflict in Vietnam. Indeed, as long as the Russians were forced to rely solely upon the sea lanes to supply North Vietnam, the United States could proceed with confidence in the South. In a crisis, the United States could interdict Soviet ships on the high seas, as it had done in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. But the assumption proved false. Within a week after the Chinese decision was taken, President Johnson had perceived the change in the strategic situation. In his speech of April 7, 1965, at Johns Hopkins University, he noted that the United States "must be prepared for a long, continued conflict" in Vietnam. The opening of the land route transferred the strategic advantage from the United States to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union now had the power to raise and maintain the level of conflict in Vietnam according to its own interests. The United States, on the other hand, having committed itself to the introduction of combat troops, could only continue to increase its forces, or face certain defeat.

As both sides escalated the level of conflict over the course of 1965, the pressure mounted on the Maoist leadership to participate in a more direct fashion. Mao Tse-tung fully recognized the dangers to his own position implicit in the increase of American forces in Vietnam. He knew that at some level of conflict, external Soviet pressure combined with demands to intervene from within his own leadership might well

prove irresistible. Should his policy be overturned and China adopt a policy of "united action over Vietnam," which meant a return to close relations with the Soviet Union, he would inevitably lose his primacy in the leadership, regardless of how the fact would be disguised. By now, Mao had become personally identified with—and, in fact, his position was based upon—the policy of China's independent development. Independence of the Soviet Union was the keystone of that policy, and to reverse it would be to repudiate Mao himself.

In the circumstances, there was only one course open to Mao. He would have to eliminate his internal opponents before the crisis in Vietnam made it impossible to avoid united action. The external manifestation of Mao's decision was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. There were, of course, other factors involved in the decision to initiate the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution at this time, but Mao's conflict with his pro-Soviet, interventionist opponents was a primary one.

When the Russians perceived that their supporters in the Chinese leadership were being removed from positions of power and thus reducing—if not eliminating altogether—the possibility of reversing Mao's course, they altered their tactics. No longer able to influence the decisionmaking process from within, Soviet leaders moved to influence it from without. Beginning in 1966, therefore, the Soviet Union began a massive build-up of military forces all along the Chinese border.

In Vietnam, meanwhile, things at first went well for the Russians. North Vietnam was already on a war footing. Hanoi had a functioning supply network into the South over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and a large, well-trained and well-equipped army. The United States, on the other hand, had not and would not mobilize, either militarily or politically. The movement of men and material to South Vietnam was impeded by the fact that, initially at least, only the port of Saigon could be employed on a large-scale basis. Finally, South Vietnam's armed forces were no match for the North Vietnamese in training or equipment at this stage of the conflict. In time, the situation would be precisely reversed; but during 1965 and the early part of 1966, the American effort was strictly defensive. The primary mission was to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam.

Political instability in South Vietnam, and the rapidity with which NVA/VC forces increased over 1965, conditioned the role that US

forces would initially play in the conflict. From mid-1965, the Americans engaged NVA/VC main force units, acting as a protective shield behind which South Vietnamese forces performed the tasks of pacification and security. Although this was an inevitable and necessary division of function at this critical juncture, and was intended to be temporary, it became a permanent feature of President Johnson's policy. The reason for it was clear. Although the United States increased its forces during 1965 from 14,000 to more than 184,000, NVA/VC units, including main force, local, and guerrilla elements, increased to about 221,000 by the end of the year, thus maintaining a Communist edge in available combat forces.

In 1966, NVA/VC force levels increased by another 20 percent to 282,000. But during the same year, the United States more than doubled its manpower in Vietnam to 385,000, a development that shaped the subsequent character of the conflict. Superior American firepower and mobility made the enemy increasingly reluctant to accept battle far from his sanctuary areas in Laos and Cambodia. Consequently, the majority of large battles took place in the border areas, a tendency that became clear in 1967 when American forces reached 486,000 and moved from what was primarily a holding action to sustained offensive operations. Moreover, US units destroyed many of the enemy's larger in-country bases and supply caches, forcing him to conduct operations almost entirely on the periphery. The reduction of Viet Cong strength resulting from stepped-up American offensive operations was compensated for by the introduction of more and more North Vietnamese manpower. By year's end, North Vietnamese troops constituted 50 percent of the total number of enemy forces in the South.

Even more ominous for Hanoi than the growing aggressiveness of the Americans was the increasingly apparent political success of the South Vietnamese leadership. Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky had come to power in June 1965 at the head of a National Leadership Committee. A constituent assembly had been elected, and drew up a constitutional draft that was officially promulgated on April 1, 1967. Paralleling these developments at the national level, a new structure of local government was established by decree in December 1966, and local elections carried out the following Spring. A presidential election held in September 1967 was won by the Thieu-Ky slate; and National

Assembly elections were also completed. By the Fall of 1967, it was clear that South Vietnam was moving toward the establishment of a functioning, Western-style political system.

Time was now running against Hanoi and its supporters. Although the shield provided by the American military presence was extremely effective, the Communists recognized that they had to disrupt the new South Vietnamese political system. In late 1967, they determined upon a major offensive in 1968, which they hoped would achieve this objective. The chances of victory on the battlefield were slim at best; but a major offensive, despite its anticipated costs, might inhibit the political development of South Vietnam, and perhaps would also have a decisive impact on the 1968 American presidential election. It was decided that the risk was worth taking.

The Communist offensive began on January 30, 1968, during the Tet holiday truce. Spearheaded by Viet Cong units, the Communists struck at 36 of 47 provincial capitals, including Saigon and Hue. While the Viet Cong made some spectacular temporary gains, such as taking the city of Hue (and executing over 3,000 civilians) and penetrating the US Embassy compound in Saigon, they were short-lived. The Viet Cong could claim no real military successes for this first stage of the Tet offensive. On the other hand, the VC suffered considerable casualties to both its armed forces and its infrastructure. Indeed, by mid-1968, North Vietnamese forces comprised 70 percent of total Communist strength in the South.

Although it proved to be a sharp military reverse in Vietnam, the Communist offensive did seriously affect the American domestic political scene. As a result of the initial offensive, President Johnson raised the authorized troop level to 549,500, but halted the bombing raids that had been an important aspect of the American military effort. He also offered to open peace negotiations, while at the same time withdrawing his own candidacy for reelection to the presidency. Peace negotiations did get underway in May, but led nowhere. While they were in progress, Communist forces led by regular NVA units struck twice more at Hue, Kontum, and Saigon, but were repulsed. North Vietnamese losses were estimated at over 150,000 for the year, a serious setback that affected the North's subsequent conduct of the war. Indeed, it would be four years before the North Vietnamese Army could

muster the necessary manpower and materiel to undertake another large-scale offensive against the South. In the meantime, developments in Sino-Soviet relations and the election of a new American President, Richard M. Nixon, greatly affected the policies of the Soviet Union, China, and the United States.

VI

While Mao had succeeded in removing his opponents in the Chinese leadership, he encountered considerable difficulty in extending his control over the provincial power structures. As opposition to the Cultural Revolution mounted in the provinces, Mao was forced to rely increasingly on the People's Liberation Army to achieve his objectives. Indeed, by the Fall of 1967 more than half of the PLA's main force units (20 of 37 Army corps) had been diverted to internal political duties, seriously weakening China's national defense capabilities. Mao took a great risk, albeit a necessary one, in committing the PLA to defense of the Cultural Revolution. Had he not done so, he might well have failed. On the other hand, by doing so he seriously weakened China's defenses against the Soviet Union, which at that time was rapidly building up its own military position on the border.

By the Spring of 1968, Soviet leaders had made clear that they were prepared to take action. The combination of continued troop concentrations, intermittent military clashes along the border, an increasingly hostile propaganda campaign, and most of all, the Czechoslovakian invasion in the Summer of 1968, persuaded the Chinese leadership that the possibility of Soviet military action against China could no longer be ignored. Mao reacted quickly, abruptly terminating the Cultural Revolution, withdrawing the main force units from domestic political duties, and returning them to their normal defense postures. China prepared for a confrontation with the Soviet Union. At the Party's 12th Plenum in October 1968, it was decided to seek an improvement in relations with the United States as a counterweight to the growing Soviet threat.

The Chinese decision to terminate the Cultural Revolution and seek American support came none too soon. The year 1969 saw the most serious crisis in the entire history of the Sino-Soviet relationship. During 1969, the Soviet Union steadily increased military pressure on

the Chinese, apparently in order to force a change of policy away from rapprochement with the United States and bring about a return to close Sino-Soviet collaboration. The shift in the PRC's position implicit in the Chinese political debates of the mid-1950s, and which Khrushchev's policy had been designed to forestall, was now actually taking place. Soviet leaders escalated political and military pressure on the Chinese throughout the year in an effort to avert the shift, but with no success. Initially taking the form of military probes all along the border, Soviet pressure culminated in September with a threat to carry out a nuclear strike against the Chinese.[8]

VII

Upon entering office in 1969, the newly-elected President, Richard M. Nixon, was confronted by rising public clamor that the war in Vietnam be brought to an end. His assessment was that it was contrary to the interests of the United States simply to withdraw American forces and allow North Vietnam to defeat the South. But if, in withdrawing, he was required at some point to reintroduce US ground forces in order to prevent a South Vietnamese defeat, he would have an extremely difficult domestic political situation to deal with. The national interest required, in short, that when American troops withdrew, they would leave behind a South Vietnam that could defend itself.

One element of the solution was self-evident. The United States would have to build up South Vietnamese forces to the point where they could take the place of the departing Americans. This was "Vietnamization," a program which, however, represented a marked difference from President Johnson's policy. President Johnson had sought to build a South Vietnamese Army that could deal with an internally based and limited insurgency. President Nixon's plan was to create a larger, more powerful force (1.2 million plus) capable not only of defeating internal insurgency, but of matching the striking power of North Vietnam as well.

The long-run objective for Southeast Asia in general was to create

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[8] Victor Louis, "Will Russian Rockets Czech-mate China?" *London Evening News,* September 16, 1969.

a military balance in the region. Vietnamization was, therefore, only part of a larger strategy pursued by the President. For Vietnamization to succeed, it would be necessary to isolate the battlefield in the larger, strategic sense. Clearly, if the supply lines into the region could be interdicted, it would substantially reduce the level of combat activity that North Vietnam could generate. A reduction in North Vietnam's fighting capability would, in turn, greatly facilitate the Vietnamization program and shorten the lead time required to establish a military balance in Southeast Asia.

The ports of Haiphong and Sihanoukville, Cambodia, could be shut off at any time; but the overland rail link across China could not be interdicted by unilateral American action. Johnson's intensive bombing campaign against North and parts of South Vietnam met with limited success. The simple fact was that once war materials got to the Sino-Vietnamese border, there was little to keep the bulk of them from reaching the combat zone. Hence, China played a crucial role in President Nixon's strategy, for only if the Chinese leaders saw it in their interest to curtail the flow of supplies traveling via their railway system was there any real chance of reducing the level of conflict to the point where Vietnamization could be effective. The alternative was continued escalation by both sides, which would leave President Nixon in 1972 in approximately the position that President Johnson found himself in four years before. He would still be mired in an unpopular war, with no end in sight.

The crucial difference between the situations faced by President Johnson and the newly-elected President Nixon was the status of Sino-Soviet relations. When Johnson made the decision to send combat troops to Vietnam in the Spring of 1965, the issues of Chinese intervention and the Sino-Soviet relationship had not yet been settled. By the end of 1968, on the other hand, the Chinese had decided against intervention and the Soviet Union was on the verge of war with the Chinese People's Republic. The Soviet deployment of between 45 and 50 divisions along the Chinese border came at a time when China's own defenses had been seriously weakened by Mao's need to employ front-line troop units to deal with domestic opposition in the provinces. In short, the basis existed for striking a mutually advantageous bargain.

Shortly after the American elections in November 1972, the Chinese requested that the Warsaw talks be resumed. Thus began the visible movement toward rapprochement with the United States. In 1969, the United States unilaterally relaxed some restrictions on trade and travel relating to the Chinese People's Republic. More restrictions were lifted in April and August 1970. Then in 1971, several important steps were taken to improve relations, including Dr. Kissinger's secret trip to Peking, seating the PRC in the United Nations, and the announcement that the President himself would travel to the Chinese capital.

Less apparent but far more significant was the Chinese decision to reduce the volume of Soviet material flowing along the railway system into Vietnam. As compared to the 1965–68 period, when the respective ratio of material inputs from the Russians and Chinese into Vietnam was 50:50, beginning in early 1969 the Chinese reduced their share by 60 percent, and the ratio changed to 80:20. The Chinese not only reduced the flow of Soviet materiel along the railway; they also altered the composition of the materiel which they themselves were sending, deemphasizing military supplies and increasing economic support.

The China link was the most important, but not the only aspect of the President's plan to isolate the strategic battlefield in Southeast Asia. The second link was the port of Sihanoukville, through which supplies could be transported directly into the delta combat zone. The deposition of Sihanouk and the ascension of Lon Nol, combined with the joint US–South Vietnamese drive into the border sanctuaries later in the Spring of 1970 resulted in closing off the Cambodian port. Closure of the Cambodian supply route and the reduction of materiel flowing along the China rail network left only the port of Haiphong open to unrestricted use.

The Soviet leaders were not oblivious to this progressive frustration of their efforts to prolong and deepen the conflict in Southeast Asia in general, and their larger strategy of involving the United States and China in conflict there. Moreover, the Russian build-up of troop levels on the Chinese border strained the capacity of the Trans-Siberian Railway, and forced an increased reliance on the long and exposed sea route from the Black Sea port of Odessa. The closure of the Suez Canal after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war was another blow, tripling the shipping time into Southeast Asia. When first the Chinese, and then the Cambodian,

supply routes were also closed off, the Russians in the fall of 1970 decided upon a major shift in strategy.

VIII

The new Soviet strategy had been taking shape for some time. As early as 1965, in response to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the Russians had begun a build-up of military forces along the Chinese border. Then in 1968, the Soviets took several steps which implied that they were preparing military action. Aside from reinforcing their units on the Chinese border by moving great stocks of military materiel—rockets, artillery, transport, fuel, food—into eastern Siberia, the Russians continued to build up their naval forces in the Indian Ocean. They also sought to improve relations with the countries surrounding China —Japan, India, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, and even Taiwan. These were initial, tentative steps which would later evolve into a policy of containment similar to that which the United States had attempted in the 1950s.

The Czech crisis in the Summer of 1968 served notice that the Soviet Union would not recoil from the use of military force to protect its paramount interests. Indeed, the nature of Soviet interests was explicitly expressed in what came to be known as the Brezhnev Doctrine: a threat to the Communist system of one state was a danger to all, and had to be combated. Events in China were seen as such a danger. During the following year, 1969, the Soviet leadership sought to mobilize support from other Communist countries for "collective measures" against China, but was only partly successful. At a World Congress of Communist Parties convened in June, Brezhnev publicly expressed the idea of an Asian collective security pact, but both Rumania and Yugoslavia dissociated themselves from the proposal. Soviet declarations in favor of a security pact came against the background of the escalating military confrontation on the Sino-Soviet border. In fact, September saw the Soviet Union threaten China with nuclear bombardment, perhaps to forestall Chinese steps toward rapprochement with the United States. Far from preventing such a development, the Soviet action hastened it.

The ground was, therefore, well prepared for the major change in policy that was inaugurated at the 24th Soviet Communist Party Con-

gress in March 1971. The most widely publicized decision of the Congress was to pursue a policy of "detente" with the United States. Indeed, improvement in relations with the United States was to be sought on several fronts, including Berlin, SALT, and at a summit meeting. Internally, Brezhnev also consolidated his own political position within the leadership, a development underscored by the removal of the "hawk" Pyotr Shelest from the Soviet Politburo.

Major decisions affecting China policy, with their attendant implications for Asian policy in general, went unpublicized. It was decided to strengthen the Soviet position all around China's periphery: in eastern Siberia, Japan, India, and Vietnam. Economically, the Soviet Union would give higher priority to the development of eastern Siberia and the maritime provinces, while at the same time encouraging the Japanese to undertake development projects, including oil exploitation, in the area. Improving relations with the Japanese would also have the effect of drawing Japanese investment capital toward the Soviet Union and away from China, which eagerly sought development assistance. The overall impact would presumably be to strengthen Soviet ties with Japan, while helping to fortify the Soviet economic position in Siberia, where Soviet forces would operate at a logistical disadvantage in any drawn-out conflict despite weapons superiority and enormous stockpiles of war materiel.

Discussions with Indian leaders following the Party Congress culminated in the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship signed on August 9, 1971. The Indian attack on Pakistan which followed was significantly assisted by the strong Soviet military position along the Chinese border. Soviet willingness to "open a diversionary action" in Sinkiang constituted a strategic threat that precluded direct Chinese involvement on behalf of their Pakistani ally—a factor that materially affected the outcome. The political returns for Soviet assistance, discreet though they were, included the establishment of a strong Indian position on China's flank, safe passage for Soviet vessels in Indian waters, and Soviet access to the ports of the new state of Bangladesh. (In fact, the Soviet Union began construction of port facilities at Chittigong shortly after the new state came into being.)

The 24th Communist Party Congress also ratified a major policy decision affecting Southeast Asia. This decision stemmed directly from

the realization that failure in Vietnam was inevitable as a result of Sino-American cooperation. In an effort to make the best of this projected loss, Soviet leaders decided to step up the flow of supplies to North Vietnam in preparation for a final large-scale assault on the South. Since the only remaining fully accessible supply route was the long and exposed sea passage to Haiphong, the Russians altered the weapons mix to maximize the degree of firepower per item shipped. After the Congress, the Soviets began shipping large quantities of new and heavier weapons to the North Vietnamese, the most significant types of which were T-54 medium tanks, 130mm artillery pieces, and SA-7 missiles. These items were not part of the earlier Soviet aid program, nor were they defensive in nature. They constituted the key elements in the North Vietnamese offensive that got under way in the Spring of 1972, after President Nixon returned from his historic trip to Peking but before he left for the Moscow summit meeting.

The North Vietnamese offensive was anticipated by American leaders, but its scale was underestimated. The use of heavy artillery and tanks, in particular, forced the United States hurriedly to ship in tanks and antitank weaponry to stem the North Vietnamese. As part of the American response, President Nixon ordered the blockade of Haiphong harbor—an act aimed directly at the Soviet Union. Sealing the harbor completed the strategic objective of isolating the Southeast Asian battlefield. Thereafter, the only materiel received by North Vietnam was a reduced flow of supplies still coming overland from China. The amount was insufficient to permit continuation of the offensive, and it ultimately failed.

IX

Current Soviet policy in Southeast Asia must be viewed from the perspective of the failure to restore the Sino-Soviet alliance to its 1950 position. When the conflict in Southeast Asia did not burgeon into a Sino-American controntation, but rather led to rapprochement between the two powers, the Soviet Union altered policy in an effort to "contain" China. This containment strategy, the general growth of Soviet military power, and the reduction of the American profile in Asia has enabled the Soviet Union to develop a position of some strength and influence in Southeast Asia.

Soviet prospects in the area will, of course, be strongly affected by the future of Sino-Soviet relations. Given continued hostility between the two powers, the Soviet Union can be expected to build a structure of friendly relations with those countries bordering on the People's Republic. Such efforts could provide a counterbalance to the possible expansion of Chinese influence in the region, particularly if the United States continues to reduce its profile. On the other hand, a radical improvement in Sino-Soviet relations would lead to overall strengthening of the general Communist position in Southeast Asia at the expense of all concerned, including the United States.