

What's behind the China-Vietnam clash?

On February 17, 90,000 troops of the Chinese People's Liberation Army drove across the Vietnamese border. The assault, which pushed up to 25 miles into Vietnam's border provinces, was aimed at punishing Vietnam for its constant attacks on China's border and for its aggressive efforts to control all of South East Asia. Additionally, the Chinese military action was intended to demonstrate to the world that it is possible and necessary to resist the expansionism of the Soviet Union and its allies.

The key battle of the campaign took place in the first week of March. The Vietnamese sent crack main force troops to defend the contested city of Lang Son. After several days of combat, the Chinese decisively won control of the town. With this powerful blow to the Vietnamese army, China's leadership ordered the complete withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and warned that attacks on units pulling out would only prolong the conflict.

WHY CHINA STRUCK

The Chinese move was not much of a surprise. For over a year, Vietnam has been encroaching on China's south-

ern border, acting as the leading edge in Soviet efforts to encircle China.

Ever since the massive Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia last December, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao Ping) and other leaders have been warning that Vietnam should be punished for its actions.

In early February, when Vietnam was preparing to legitimize its conquest and occupation of Cambodia by signing a "friendship treaty" with the puppet government it had just installed, China made a final appeal. Vietnam, it said, should "stop on the precipice, retreat from the wrong path and not go any further."

At that point, China launched its limited attack, which had three main objectives:

1) It was punitive, to make it clear to Vietnam that actions like the overthrow of Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia) and raids on China's border cannot be undertaken without heavy consequences. This was why it was limited in space and time, with the Chinese making it very clear that they "do not want an inch of Vietnamese territory."

2) It was aimed at confronting the Soviet Union, which is Vietnam's spon-

sor, while the inks are still wet on a USSR-Vietnam treaty pledging "mutual defense." China wanted to strike back at Soviet encirclement efforts and to show other countries that the Soviets are not as powerful a backer as they seem.

3) It aided the Cambodian people in their guerrilla war against the Vietnamese occupation, forcing Vietnam to shift troops and attention away from Cambodia. The rainy season, traditionally a bad period for foreign invaders, begins in April.

Both Vietnam and its Soviet backers admitted, in deed if not in word, that the attack was limited and thus very different from the all-out Vietnamese assault on Kampuchea (Cambodia). The Vietnamese didn't even move to transfer main force troops from Laos and Cambodia to the border area until two weeks into the fighting — after the total failure of their border divisions to deal with the Chinese. Like-

wise the Soviet Union, bound by treaty to defend Vietnam from attack, restricted itself to beefing up forces on the border it shares with China, and swearing and hollering about how China was trying to conquer Vietnam.

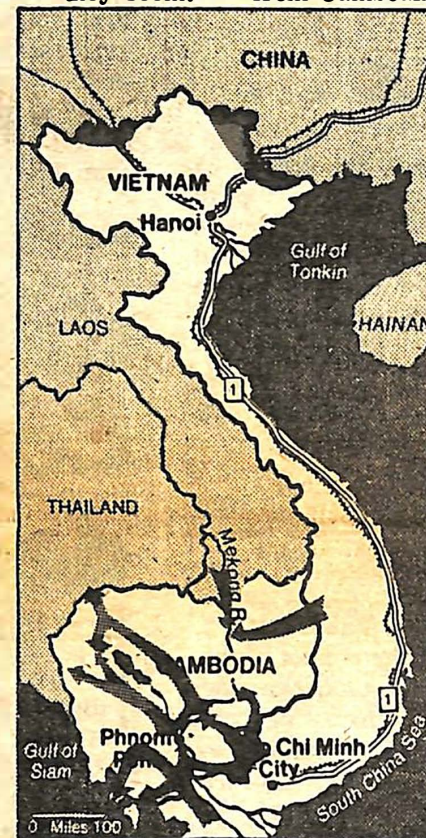
Unlike Vietnam, China responded favorably when many countries in the United Nations began discussing resolutions calling for China to withdraw from Vietnam and Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. The Chinese restated their intention to withdraw, and challenged Vietnam to do the same, saying, "We do not think that you dare."

CONFLICT GROWS LAST FEW YEARS

The three issues that pushed the Chinese people past the breaking point were Vietnam's aggression in Cambodia, its mistreatment of the Chinese minority in Vietnam, and its constant military pressure against the Chinese border. All three have seriously escalated from 1977 to the present.

When fighting first broke out between Vietnam and Democratic Kampuchea in that year, the Kampuchean (Cambodian) government denied reports that it was just a border conflict,

saying the Vietnamese wanted to dominate their country. China immediately expressed concern over the fighting between its neighbors, and offered to mediate. As the fighting continued, and reasoning proved unsuccessful in



Top: Areas occupied during China's action.

Bottom: Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea.

curbing Vietnam's appetite, the Chinese government gradually changed from a position of neutrality to one of support for Cambodia.

During the same period, beginning in 1978, Vietnam began expelling Vietnamese citizens of Chinese origin and Chinese nationals from the country. Over 200,000 have been forced out in the last year.

Although the Vietnamese claim they are capitalists unable to adjust to socialism, the majority come not from the recently liberated South, but from the North, where socialist construction has been going on since 1956. The Chinese in Vietnam made a convenient scapegoat for Vietnam's economic difficulties. Also, Vietnam's Soviet sponsors delight in the hardships that resettling so many refugees is causing China.

As thousands fled over the border to China, Vietnam began trying to destabilize the border area itself, increasing pressure on China. In the last half of 1978 alone, the Chinese report over 700 different incursions by Vietnamese troops, resulting in the death of 300 Chinese soldiers and civilians. Until the Chinese counter-attack, the main beneficiary of this ongoing aggression was not Vietnam, but the USSR, which has over a million troops menacing China's northern borders and could thus threaten China with military attack on two fronts.

NEW WORLD SITUATION

The current turmoil in Southeast Asia underlines the fact that there has been an irreversible change in the relations among the world's countries. At the heart of the change is the Soviet Union. A socialist country turned capitalist, the USSR has replaced the United States as the most aggressive imperialist power in the world, and the greatest source of war.

Kampuchea, only three and a half years after driving out the US, is now fighting an occupation backed by the USSR.

Vietnam, having defeated the US, has now fallen under increasing Soviet domination. With its economy devastated by war, Vietnam turned to the USSR for aid. But although Vietnam's food situation is almost as bad as Bangladesh, Soviet aid is designed to beef up Vietnam's military strength, not build a self sufficient economy.

The Vietnamese rulers have gone right along with this. Their army is now 50% larger than it was during the war with the US. The Soviets see Vietnam's army as an expeditionary force to use in Asia and maybe elsewhere. The Chinese call Vietnam "the Cuba of the Orient" because this is the role Cuba has played for the USSR in Angola, Ethiopia, Yemen and elsewhere.

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The US government did not attack China outright for the invasion. While criticizing it, American officials linked the call for China to withdraw from Vietnam to a call for Vietnam to leave Kampuchea.

But the US ruling class revealed something else in its response. Politicians and the news media alike fretted that China's "desperate gamble" would drag the Soviet Union into the conflict and precipitate a new world war. President Carter gave a speech in Atlanta, vowing that under no circumstances would the US involve itself militarily in the conflicts breaking out around the world. In part, this position is an acknowledgement that since Vietnam, the American people are not willing to go to war to defend the interests of the corporate giants that run this country.

But it also shows that the ruling class of this country is dazed by a long string of defeats and unable to come to grips with its decline in the world. Deng Xiaoping highlighted this kind of thinking on February 22 when he said:

"Both the Cuba of the Orient and the Cuba of the West seem emboldened by the so-called tremendous

backing force behind them. Now some people in the world are afraid of offending them.

"Even if they do something terrible, these people wouldn't dare take action against them. It's a question of being afraid of them."

PAPER POLAR BEAR

China's leaders speak and act from long years of experience. In the war against Japan, the Chinese learned the importance of uniting all who could be united against the main enemy. And they have summed up that the period preceding World War 2 shows that efforts to appease Germany's rise to power with concessions only added to its appetite.

In the past two decades, revolutionary struggles in countries around the globe have shown US imperialism to be a paper tiger. China's action against Vietnam shows that the Soviet's agents have to pay for their aggression. And China wants to demonstrate to the world by standing up to the Soviet Union and its huge military machine that this mighty power is, in the final analysis, just a paper polar bear.