

FAILED DETERRENCE

THE 1979 SINO-VIETNAMESE CONFLICT

Todd West

University of Georgia

Todd MacEgan West sheds new light on the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese Conflict by bringing to bear prospect theory, a new mode of understanding decision-making under risk, on the problem of explaining the Chinese decision to attack Vietnam. This decision makes little sense according to rational-choice theory, which relies strictly on expected cost-benefit calculations. Prospect theory generates different implications for the analysis of military deterrence and a more coherent narrative for the lead-up to the conflict.

At dawn, on February 17, 1979, China attacked Vietnam. For roughly a month, Chinese and Vietnamese armies tore at each other along the Sino-Vietnamese border region in what came to be one of the deadliest contests between two supposedly “fraternal” communist countries in history. Oddly enough relations between China and Vietnam had been amicable up to 1965. Nevertheless, from 1965 to 1979, Vietnam took on a new pro-Soviet diplomacy, which China felt threatened its interests. Although China repeatedly expressed its rising discontent to Vietnam over the changing status quo, it took no militant steps for more than a decade. Chinese restraint finally snapped at the end of 1978 when Vietnam joined the Soviets in a joint security alliance. The Chinese attack on Vietnam in February 1979, however, was inconsistent with rational deterrence models: it occurred at a point when the odds for a victory or even for a significant gain in the case of a loss were too low for any “rational” cost/benefit analysis to have justified it. By contrast, the Chinese decision to attack seems to accord with prospect theory, which accounts for foreign policy choices involving gains and losses based on context.

This study begins by reviewing the tenets of prospect theory vis-à-vis extended deterrence. Next, I lay out the historical context of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict. A review of history is critical to the study, not only because it increases analytical clarity, but because the general reader may be unfamiliar with background information essential for understanding China-Vietnam relations.¹ I selected the empirical aspects of part three based on evidence from interviews and research in China and the United States. Then, this paper analyzes the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict through the theoretical predictions of prospect theory and provides a discussion of the findings before presenting some concluding remarks.

Prospect Theory

Prospect theory stands as an alternative to rational choice in that it conceptually frames the cognitive patterns of actual actors rather than strict cost/benefit calculations. The keystone of prospect theory is revealed in the observation that there is a decreasing value to continually rising gains. The subjective value of a gain of “\$1000 is more highly

valued than is the same \$1000 when added to an initial gain of \$10,000.”²² The same can be said for losses so that the difference between a loss of \$10,000 and \$10,100 is less significant than between a loss of \$1,000 and \$1,100. The main distinction between prospect theory and rational choice is found in the interpretation of the reactions to gains and losses. Per rational choice, states estimate the extent to which an outcome is desirable in conjunction with its net asset position. In contrast, prospect theory is based on the premise that states evaluate the desirability of outcomes according to an orientation of gains and losses measured against a neutral reference point.³ Moreover, gains feel good far less than losses feel bad, so that the thrill of a gain is less intense than the pain of a loss.⁴

Prospect theory has two important implications for studies of military deterrence. The first is what many refer to as the framing effect according to which state-driven evaluations of the desirability of the status quo are a central component in deterrence behavior. If a state considers the status quo acceptable, and it knows that an offensive action on its part involves further gain but some probability of loss, that state is considered to be in a positive orientation. In a positive orientation, prospect theory predicts that states will prefer the security of the status quo over the insecurity of a risk of loss. On the contrary, if a state considers the status quo as unacceptable, and has an opportunity to improve its relative position through an attack, it is deemed to be in a negative orientation. Prospect theory posits that states in negative orientations tend to be risk acceptant, and as such, prone to take actions that favor a return to an acceptable position in the status quo. The second implication is the concept of loss aversion. In essence, loss aversion implies that states “will act more aggressively to avoid a loss than to

secure an equal gain, and will pursue loss aversion beyond a rational expectation of benefits.”⁵ The upshot for deterrence is that credible threats, rather than serving to deter a target state from attacking, may actually push it into a negative orientation. If this occurs, the target state, being in a negative orientation, might very well attack out of the notion that it is at an unacceptable position in the status quo.

A combination of the respective conceptual frameworks of the framing effect and loss aversion works to create a general two-part thesis for deterrence; that is, deterrence is more apt to be effective at such times that each of two states is concurrently in a positive orientation, and deterrence is less apt to be effective when either or both of two states are in a negative orientation. On the condition that there is some chance for loss, a state in a positive orientation will not seek to upset the status quo even if the expected utility of an offensive attack is greater than that of staying with the current situation. On the contrary, while in a negative orientation, there may be no level of military leverage great enough to deter a state from attacking provided that the attack involves some prospect for a return to normalcy in the status quo.

Prospect Theory and Extended Deterrence

Extended deterrence refers to the situation in which one state pledges to defend another against foreign attack. The security agreement between America and South Korea is a case in point. As per prospect theory, extended deterrence will be more operative if all states involved are in positive orientations. Once the orientation of any target state of a security arrangement goes negative, that state will become decreasingly risk averse. Further, it is at such a point that a security arrangement is rendered

unstable.

In an extended security arrangement, patron states attempt to solidify their support for the client state through resolute public commitments. The patron state often claims that the preservation of the security of the client state is important to both countries, and the seriousness of the resolution is often manifested through deployment of significant numbers of armed forces on the ground. The American military in Okinawa is illustrative.

The purpose of a security alliance is to deter foreign aggression; however such an alliance may serve to push the target state into a negative orientation. To the target state, support for a rival means a greater security risk. According to prospect theory, if the target state comes to believe that its security under the status quo is in danger, it will attack the client state despite the risks. The failures of extended deterrence in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq are good examples to cite.⁶

Historical Context

Credibly the most unexpected and striking event in Far Eastern politics after the American led war in Vietnam (1957-1975) was the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict. “Unprecedented in scale and casualties, the brief Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979 was the bloodiest military conflict in the ‘fraternal’ communist world.”⁷ As per the Chinese, the attack on Vietnam in 1979 was triggered by illicit Vietnamese land grabs of Chinese territory following a strategy of *revanche*.⁸ Apparently, “from August 25 to December 15, 1978, Vietnam sent a total of 2,000 armed personnel to invade more than 100 areas of China’s Guangxi region, instigating 200 border incidents—100 in Youyiguan area alone.”⁹ However, the actual catalyst was much more involved. For instance, ancient history and ethnic

entanglements all played a part. Yet, it was broader geopolitical events that really provoked the Chinese. By 1978, Hanoi had completed several agreements with the Soviets, all of which threatened Chinese hegemony in communist East Asia. In reaction, China attacked Vietnam on February 17, 1979.

The Sino-Vietnamese Alliance

In the first half of the 20th century, Vietnamese communists battled against foreign imperialists as a result of their inspiration from the growing worldwide socialist movement.¹⁰ In 1946, they conquered significant territory above the 17th parallel, which effectively divided Vietnam into northern (communist) and southern (capitalist) partitions. The North established Hanoi as its capital while the South ruled from Saigon. In 1957, communist guerillas from the North began launching attacks on southern villages. The skirmishes at length coalesced into full-scale civil war. China, of course, backed the communists.¹¹

In the 1950s and early 1960s, relations between China and Vietnam were reasonably close.¹² To be sure, on February 6, 1950, the Chinese and North Vietnamese formed the Sino-Vietnamese alliance according to which both peoples would follow two broad principles: encouraging true friendship between themselves and creating a geopolitical bloc to guard against imperialist threats. Moreover, the 1950 Sino-Vietnamese alliance was just the first of a spate of such agreements that Beijing and Hanoi concluded between 1950 and 1965.

While China and Vietnam certainly had good formal relations until 1965, informal cooperation flourished between them as well. Indeed, Beijing staunchly supported Hanoi in its wars of national liberation far beyond what formal agreements mandated. For instance, during the American-led

war in Vietnam (1957-1975), China even went so far as to provide the North Vietnamese with matériel and space to shelter troops on Chinese territory:

At the end of 1949 Việt Minh [i.e. North Vietnam] prospects changed dramatically when the Communists won control in China . . . The long Chinese-Vietnamese border allowed the People's Republic of China (PRC) to supply the Việt Minh with arms and equipment and to provide advisers and technicians as well as sanctuaries where the Việt Minh could train and replenish its troops. On 18 January 1950, the PRC formally recognized the DRV and agreed to furnish it with military assistance . . . By the end of 1952, more than 40,000 [northern] enlisted men and 10,000 officers had been trained in China. Arms were also available from the substantial stocks of weapons, including artillery that the US had supplied to the Chinese Nationalists.¹³

Collapse of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance

The collapse of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance can be attributed to five separate but related conditions: ancient animosity, irredentism, Indochina, ethnic conflict and Soviet-Vietnamese relations. While Hanoi had positively cooperated with Beijing for over a decade, by 1965 it began fabricating a new brand of anti-China unilateral politics. Naturally, the Chinese disliked the new outlook in Vietnam and tried to change it. It was in China's political interests to have Vietnam on its side. However, over the next thirteen years, the Sino-Vietnamese alliance would degenerate in sentiment from affability to antipathy. So badly would the alliance worsen, both sides ultimately resorted to armed conflict to resolve

their differences.

Ancient Animosity: Sino-Vietnamese political relations extend back two-thousand years with repeated Chinese invasions, occupations, and Vietnamese retaliations defining the two millennia.¹⁴ This pattern of history is not happenstance. The Imperial Chinese saw the domination of Vietnam as a critical part of their grand strategy to protect Chinese security against foreign (barbarian) encroachments from the south. Moreover, as Chinese history shows, this strategy was not a strategically wasteful endeavor. Foreign invasions from the north and south of China constantly posed a threat to Chinese sovereignty, and in some instances, actually resulted in barbarian domination. The Chinese sought to always maintain a layer of buffer countries around them for protection from outside invasion. In addition, by making the tributary states pay large amounts in riches to the Chinese Emperor from time to time, the Chinese could continually replenish their Imperial treasury for national projects such as military spending. Consequently, for centuries, the Vietnamese were compelled to pay tribute to the powerful Middle Kingdom, facing direct invasion and occupation otherwise.

While the Vietnamese traditionally “appreciated, admired and adopted Chinese culture, they despised, dreaded, and rejected Chinese political domination.”¹⁵ Certainly, “[s]ome of the greatest Vietnamese legends have been woven around the exploits of heroes who led the struggle against the Chinese.”¹⁶ The famous Trưng sisters’ rebellion is a case in point.¹⁷ Even after the Vietnamese defeated China at the battle of Bach Dang River to win independence in 938 A.D., ferocious fighting episodically continued. Examples include the wars against Mongol (1285), Ming (1428), and Qing (1789) forces.¹⁸

In summary, the story of Sino-Vietnamese relations has been a struggle between nationalism and grand strategy. As a result, many Vietnamese mistrust and begrudge China. So, while the Vietnamese have historically defined their nation as “a cultural offshoot of China,” the resentment left over from “Chinese domination for long centuries” has acted to whet “a militant nationalism against any alien rule” in the minds of many Vietnamese.¹⁹ It is no surprise, then, that Hanoi turned to Soviet aid to balance increasing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia after 1965.

Irredentism: Any contemporary attempt to demarcate conclusively the land-border that separates China and Vietnam is rife with subjectivity.²⁰ Land on both sides of the border has been politically controlled by either side at one time or another. Certainly, northern Vietnam was a de facto part of Imperial China up to 948 A.D. Moreover, little consistency exists between Vietnamese and Chinese historical records. Thus, determining what nation has the “natural” right to disputed territory is extraordinarily difficult.

In April 1975, communist forces reunited northern and southern Vietnam. Hanoi remained the capital. The initial move of the new united government was to reassert certain historical claims on the Spratly Islands located in the South China Sea.²¹ According to Hanoi, the Spratlys (Truong Sa in Vietnamese) were rightfully part of Vietnam given that these islands were officially annexed into the Empire of Annam (Vietnam) almost 200 years before. Apparently, in 1815, King Gia Long of Annam sent an expedition to chart sea lanes in the South China Sea, and sometime during the expedition, the sailors involved decided to occupy and settle the Spratlys for Annam. Of course, the Chinese completely opposed and discredited Hanoi’s

rendition of Spratly history, claiming that “the Spratly Islands had been Chinese territory from ancient times.”²² The Chinese asserted that these islands had not only been discovered by Chinese navigators, but had been under Chinese Imperial control since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The Vietnamese, however, had just defeated two imperial powers. What threat could the Chinese pose in comparison? Thus, military leaders in Vietnam agreed that the moment had come to recover territorial entitlements of strategic and historical importance.

Indochina: Indochina is a geopolitical term defining an area that is today composed of three sovereign nations: Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The northern border of Indochina adjoins the Chinese Provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan. Of the three original Indochinese states, only Cambodia does not share a border with China, being south of Laos and west of Vietnam. Starting in the late 1800s, these three countries, at one time or another, were each incorporated into a greater federation of states called Indochina under French rule.²³ When the Vietnamese communists commenced in their crusade against foreign imperialism in the first half of the 20th century, the insurgency included men at arms from all three Indochinese states.

After World War II, the French sought to reestablish de facto control over Indochina, which had been briefly lost to Japanese forces between 1941 and 1945. The French rather easily regained political power over Cambodia and Laos, but had trouble negotiating a settlement with the chief communist leader in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, who led the Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam (Vietminh) at that time. The two sides failed to settle their differences peacefully, and war broke out in December 1946. By 1953, the French campaign to retake Indochina was close to defeat.

In November 1953, Cambodia was recognized as an independent nation. Seven months later, after a successful 56-day siege of the fortress of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam against French forces, Paris called for an end to the fighting. Vietminh and French officials met at Geneva, Switzerland in July 1954 to negotiate the details of the cease-fire. The final agreement gave control over Vietnam north of the 17th parallel to the communists, while the capitalists gained control over the territory south of the 17th parallel. In any event, the idea of an Indochinese federation (especially under Vietnamese control) lingered in the minds of many Vietnamese after independence. Thus, Hanoi predictably began coordinating plans of conquest over Cambodia and Laos following reunification in 1975.

The notion of a united Indochinese federation under Vietnamese and, by extension, Soviet aegis did not sit well with Beijing, as the political ramifications would have been particularly unfavorable to Chinese political interests.²⁴ Consequently, as early as 1954, Beijing was looking to strengthen its position vis-à-vis control of Indochina. The Chinese for instance barred the Cambodians and Laotians from attending the 1954 Geneva conference as full members because of Vietminh influence over Laotian and Cambodian politics at that time. Apparently, if the Cambodians and Laotians had been allowed to attend as full members, they would have given the Vietminh delegation excessive political leverage with regard to Indochina. In the early 1960s, the Chinese began supporting the Cambodian leader, Prince Sihanouk, who was supposedly neutral in the struggle between communist and non-communist nations. The Chinese supported the prince because the Vietnamese had already shown signs of aggression toward the rest of Indochina as well as deepened relations with the Soviets. In the early 1970s, Beijing began

staunchly supporting the Cambodian Khmer Rouge organization whose communist leader, Pol Pot, favored Beijing over Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The Chinese continued aiding Khmer Rouge even after it had taken full control of Cambodia in April 1975. The Chinese also actively encouraged Pol Pot to resist Vietnamese ambitions in Indochina at any cost. Pol Pot apparently took the advice from Beijing quite seriously: after signing a military-aid pact with China in September 1977, he wasted no time escalating hostilities with Vietnam. In November 1977, Chinese and Vietnamese officials held talks in order to settle the crisis. The Chinese demanded that Vietnamese forces withdraw entirely from eastern Cambodia. Hanoi rejected the demand, and Sino-Vietnamese relations took a turn for the worse.

Ethnic Conflict: In reaction to the failed bilateral talks with China, from May to June in 1978 the Vietnamese ejected an estimated 100,000 Chinese out of their country. By July, the number had reached 150,000. The campaign was callous and deliberate. The Vietnamese reasoned that if the border area could be cleared of any Chinese, the territorial disputes would naturally disappear, as well as any opportunities for Chinese expatriates to engage in espionage. Their strategy backfired: before long, violent incidents arose between civilians and soldiers. On May 4, 1977, for instance, “[a] bloody incident broke out at Youyiguan with 51 Chinese workers being injured by 500 Vietnamese soldiers.”²⁵ A few days later, Hanoi stepped up its expulsion and within two weeks, at least 57,000 more Chinese were forced to abandon their homes. By May 24, Beijing had lost all patience, and began publicly reproaching Hanoi. On May 29, Beijing “accused Vietnam of atrocities against the Chinese in Vietnam, including mass arrests, mass killings, and firing at the refugees crossing the land border and escaping by boats.”²⁶

This was followed by “a series of documentary films on the plight of the refugees to drive home her arguments.”²⁷

Events in June and July unfolded in quick succession. In an effort to halt the exodus, Beijing ordered the entire Sino-Vietnamese border sealed on July 11. Predictably, the policy failed and the Chinese were compelled to continue absorbing thousands of refugees. Meanwhile, the Chinese in southern Vietnam were trying frantically to escape by boat. Among them many were caught and imprisoned. What’s more, those who stayed were often “fired from their jobs, ostracized, persecuted, and had their food rations stopped.”²⁸ In the end, an estimated 200,000 ethnic Chinese were expelled from Vietnam.²⁹ The ejection was so severe and cruel that the Chinese naturally listed it as a chief reason why they ultimately chose to attack Hanoi.³⁰

Soviet-Vietnamese Relations: As already mentioned, the Sino-Vietnamese alliance further declined over the prospects of a reunited Indochina. The Chinese warned the Vietnamese that any invasion of Cambodia or Laos would be intolerable and incite armed retribution. The Vietnamese were undaunted.

In the interim, Soviet strategists in Moscow began scheming how to exploit the new Sino-Vietnamese rift as a means to promote an alliance between themselves and the Vietnamese. Like the Chinese, the Soviets recognized the great strategic value of Indochina, just as the Vietnamese recognized the importance of Soviet deterrence against Beijing. The Chinese alleged that the new Soviet support for Vietnam was both unnecessary and anti-Chinese in motivation. The Soviet Union was already the largest nation on earth in territory, and thus, the Soviets had no need to extend their military forces into Indochina unless it involved some sort of political

motivation. That is why Chinese officials suspected the Soviets of negotiating plans to construct naval bases in Vietnam and Cambodia as part of a grand strategy to encircle China from the Horn of Africa to Vladivostok.³¹ If the Soviets could succeed in encircling the Chinese, they would not only be in a strategic position to wrest control of the communist world from the Chinese, but would also gain a foothold in Southeast Asia from which to disrupt international trade between the West and Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The Spratly Islands with their rich oil reserves were certainly on the Soviet radar as well.

Final Polarization

In late October 1978, Vietnamese emissaries left for the Soviet Union to discuss the possibility of enacting a joint “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation” to last for a quarter-century. The discourse went well: in less than a week, on November 3, 1978, the treaty was signed. This accord was not only the first of its kind in that region for the Soviets, it also stood as a geopolitical victory by legitimizing a Soviet military buildup in Indochina. The preamble and first nine articles of the alliance refer to Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation in all possible areas as well as an affirmation of the unification of the world socialist system and the need to resist all imperialist attempts at expansion.

While the terms of the treaty only stipulated “consultation” if either country came under attack, its overall tone plainly signaled a stronger military bond between Vietnam and the Soviet Union.³² In view of that, Beijing inferred that the Soviets meant to construct military facilities in and around Vietnam. The Chinese likewise predicted that the Vietnamese would use the new Soviet pact as a means to further their own political ambitions in Indochina.

The Chinese reacted with antipathy to the Soviet-Vietnamese treaty. Indeed, within a week of its enactment, Chinese officials were announcing their enmity: "Emboldened by Soviet backing, the swell-headed Vietnamese authorities regard the great Chinese people as susceptible to bullying . . . We sternly warn the Vietnamese authorities: Draw back your criminal hand stretched to Chinese territory."³³ While such initial statements retained some diplomatic civility, later ones were militant:

Vietnam has gone far enough in pursuing her anti-China course. There is a limit to the Chinese people's forbearance and restraint . . . We wish to warn the Vietnamese authorities that if they, emboldened by Moscow's support, try to seek a foot after gaining an inch and continue to act in this unbridled fashion, they will decidedly meet with the punishment they deserve.³⁴

By early January, Chinese leaders were even speaking of "teaching Vietnam a lesson."³⁵

Meanwhile, a series of armed attacks between Chinese and Vietnamese forces escalated tensions. By the beginning of February, the Chinese "had assembled 330,000 troops, 1,200 tanks, at least 1,500 pieces of heavy artillery, and nearly 1,000 combat aircraft along the Sino-Vietnamese land border, and an unusually large Chinese fleet also gathered off Hainan Island" as a sign of their dissatisfaction.³⁶ The Vietnamese reacted predictably with resentment and animosity. By early February, 1979, the threat of a Soviet reprisal was the only factor left that plausibly carried enough political weight to deter the Chinese from attacking Vietnam.

Open Conflict

On the morning of February 17, 1979,

between 100,000 and 180,000 Chinese troops attacked Vietnam with "extremely powerful artillery shellings, followed by tank units" despite the threat of Soviet retaliation.³⁷ The Chinese offensive was aimed at six border provinces: Quang Nkh, Lang Son, Cao Bang, Ha Tuyen, Hoang Lien Son, and Lai Chau. While the morning blitzkrieg effectively caught the Vietnamese military off guard, it failed to incite enough panic in Hanoi to disrupt government operations. Indeed, contrary to Chinese plans, the Vietnamese government issued public statements forthwith calling the leaders in Beijing "war criminals, more cruel than Hitler," and describing how Vietnam would see a great and glorious victory over China.³⁸ Further, Vietnamese generals ordered the deployment of between 75,000 and 100,000 border troops and militia to the front lines. It would be no less than a month later before the Vietnamese and Chinese armies would stop the carnage.

Analysis

The analysis of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict is divided into two periods. The first starts in the latter half of 1970, and ends with the 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The second period begins just after the 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty and concludes with the outbreak of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict. The reversal in orientation of the Chinese in the time specified above can be accredited to objective and particular variations in the theoretical frame of the status quo. In period one, the Chinese operated under a more or less positive orientation in which the status quo was defined by Vietnamese irresolution and incapacity relative to China. In period two, several events including the signing of the 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese treaty combined to effect a reversal in orientation from positive to negative among the

Chinese. Because of the reversal, the Chinese grew negatively oriented and thus attacked Vietnam.

Positive Orientation

Critical Facts: In the autumn of 1970 the Chinese policy towards North Vietnam underwent a critical change. Previously, the North Vietnamese had relied heavily on Chinese assistance in its struggle against foreign imperialists and Saigon. In the latter half of 1970, however, Hanoi began seeking increasingly more Soviet support while decreasing its reliance on China (for reasons specified in part two). The ensuing nine years saw an incremental deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations against a corresponding increase in cooperation between the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

On October 3, 1971, Soviet diplomats arrived in Hanoi to negotiate several agreements pertaining to bilateral military and economic aid. Soon after that, another top Soviet delegation visited Hanoi. Among them were such high-ranking officials as the Deputy Minister of Defense and the Commander of the Soviet Air Defense Force. The delegation remained in the capital until March 1972 while scores of Soviet matériel ranging from “tanks, long-range artillery, mobile anti-air-craft missile, and SA-2 missiles arrived in North Vietnam” at a cost of roughly \$700 million.³⁹

In October 1975, Vietnamese envoys visited the Soviet Union to sign two major economic aid agreements according to which the Soviets would provide financial assistance to Vietnam for a period of five years. In addition, Soviet officials enounced that an accord had been reached with Hanoi for the joint management of the national economic strategies of Vietnam and the Soviet Union for 1976 through 1980. The Soviets also said that they had invited Hanoi to join the Council for Mutual

Economic Assistance, and in June 1978, Vietnam did sign on as a member.⁴⁰

By 1975, it had become obvious that the Soviets had embarked on a course to put military personnel in Vietnam and Cambodia.⁴¹ The Soviet strategy was straightforward. It called for the Soviet military to surround and squeeze the eastern flank of China from the northern City of Vladivostok to the southern Bay of Cam Ranh. It also sought control of the Straits of Malacca to obstruct naval and oil routes to Europe and the United States. Further, the Soviet purpose overlapped with the Vietnamese twin desires of establishing Vietnam as a regional power and dealing a heavy blow to the prestige of China.

On November 3, 1978, delegates from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union to last for twenty-five years. It was a diplomatic victory for both the Soviets and the Vietnamese, but a great loss for China. The Soviets and Vietnamese had “played a deep game” against China, and it was not a game the Chinese would easily forget.⁴²

Analysis: It is curious that, during the period before the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty, the Chinese took no decisive action as the Vietnamese increasingly favored relations with the Soviets. Beijing was well aware of the strategic dangers in allowing the Soviet Union to gain a foothold in Indochina long before November 1978. Yet, it never tried to directly intervene to stop the chain of events that led to the signing of the Sino-Vietnamese Treaty. As per rational deterrence theory, states decide whether to use military force based on a comparison of the expected utility of using or not using such force, and they choose the option with the greatest expected utility. If this is so, it must be concluded that choosing not to attack Vietnam prior to the Soviet-Vietnamese treaty was irrational.

To clarify the above, consider first that until the Soviet-Vietnamese treaty had been enacted, the Chinese had both the military strength and the raw manpower to overrun Vietnam with little possibility of outside interference. Then consider that the actions taken by the Soviets to foster ties with Vietnam occurred in noticeable and incremental stages over a period of nine years. It makes little rational sense in light of these facts that the Chinese failed to clamp down on Vietnamese recalcitrance before it was too late.

I argue that the Chinese failed to act at an appropriate time because a positive orientation had been dominating their perception prior to the Soviet-Vietnamese treaty. Relations between China and Vietnam had been imbalanced and unequal from the start: the Chinese dominated the Vietnamese. In addition, the weakening effects of the Vietnamese civil war prior to reunification meant that the Chinese had little reason to worry about an emerging competitor on their southern flank. To further explain, consider the following: the Vietnamese communists needed and sought Chinese assistance to win their war against the capitalists and imperialists. This situation appealed to the Chinese because it indicated their relative superiority. In addition, because the Vietnamese were at war with each other, the Chinese knew that neither side would be strong enough to oppose them unilaterally. It was also recognized that, as long as the Vietnamese remained divided in war, the rest of Indochina would continue to be dependent on Chinese benefaction. Therefore the Chinese found the status quo quite comfortable, and accordingly, had no incentive to change it. As a result, even repeated and blatant acts of disregard on the part of the Vietnamese vis-à-vis Chinese prerogatives failed to incite a bold front by the Chinese. Only when it was “rationally” too late

did the Chinese initiate any actions to reverse the retrogression.

Negative Orientation

Critical Facts: As Chinese leaders experienced feelings of frustration and vulnerability over the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty, “the armed forces of communist Vietnam began a full-scale invasion of communist Cambodia” on December 25, 1978.⁴³ Two weeks later, Vietnamese-backed Cambodian guerillas succeeded in overthrowing the legitimate Cambodian government. Naturally, the Chinese denounced the Vietnamese military operations and connected them to the Soviet plot to enclose the Chinese eastern flank. In the meantime, the Soviets succeeded in transporting an expeditionary force to southern Vietnam. To make matters worse for the Chinese, on January 25, 1979, the Vietnamese highlighted their diplomatic triumph by calling for the celebration of “the 109th anniversary of the Vietnamese military victory over Beijing in 1789 under the reign of Emperor Quang Trung.”⁴⁴ By the end of January 1979, the Chinese attitude toward Vietnam had hardened, and a fury of calls to arms signaled that the Chinese had been pushed too far.

The Chinese army attacked Vietnam at 5 a.m. on February 17, 1979. It initially made considerable gains in territory, as Chinese war-planes bombed factories, power-plants, and communication facilities throughout northern Vietnam. As the conflict escalated, the number of Chinese ground forces burgeoned to an estimated 600,000.⁴⁵ The aim of deploying so many troops was to compel Vietnamese reserves stationed in Cambodia to move to the front-lines. The Chinese reasoned that if they could force as many Vietnamese troops out of Cambodia as possible, there would be too few of them left to control the Cambodians by the end of the conflict.

While strategically sound, the tactic failed: Vietnam occupied Cambodia well into the 1980s.

China attacked Vietnam to lend credibility to its warning that the Chinese were not afraid to teach their southern neighbor a lesson. That is, China wanted Hanoi to understand categorically that it would attack and never stop attacking if military action in Cambodia continued and more Soviet troops came to the Bay of Cam Ranh. The Chinese *démarche* also served as a warning to other countries: excessive provocations against China would result in unadulterated retaliation.

Analysis: In theoretical terms, the 1979 Chinese attack against Vietnam was irrational. The odds against a successful military strike against Vietnam at that time were too low for any legitimate rational analysis to have justified it. That is, a cost/benefit analysis would have shown the relative gains of a loss in battle to have been less profitable compared to the effects of a sure loss of inaction. To validate this, consider the subsequent facts. The Soviets had already positioned troops in Vietnam. The Vietnamese were hardened fighters while the Chinese were not. The Soviets possessed such immense military strength especially in their nuclear strike capability that even powerful countries like the United States declined pleas to fight alongside the Chinese out of fear of Soviet retaliation. In that light, rational deterrence theory offers no coherent explanation for the impetuous activities of China.

I reason that the Chinese undertook their drastic military move on February 17, 1979 because of the many detrimental events that had affected Chinese national security and prestige from 1970 to 1978. More specifically, the events between 1970 and 1978 combined to put China in a negative orientation, which became risk-acceptant: no matter what the social or economic costs may have

been, China's subjective reaction to the negative orientation compelled it to follow a high-risk course of action involving low odds for high returns in the event of a loss. Such behavior is never predicted in rational deterrence theory. The signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese treaty marked a point of reversal in the Chinese orientation from positive to negative. As a result, the Chinese grew acceptant of risk and attacked Vietnam.

Discussion

Some may assert that the short duration of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict represents a rational decision on the part of Beijing to deliver its message of admonition to Vietnam based on a cost/benefit calculation of the odds for a Soviet non-response to Chinese action in a small window of time.⁴⁶ On the surface, this conjecture is appealingly clear-cut, but it ignores the fact that China chose to attack Vietnam at a juncture least conducive to success. In other words, it fails to account for the broad context of state action. Imagine for instance that signing the 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese treaty had been just the first of such actions taken by the Vietnamese. It is not very reasonable to say in this case that the Chinese would have necessarily attacked Vietnam. It stands to reason then that an analysis of whether the Chinese based their final attack plan on some calculation of Soviet response time is beside the point. The decision to attack Vietnam must be evaluated in the broader context so as to come to the most sensible conclusion as to the motives of state action.

Other analysts may try to explain the chaotic nature of the 1979 attack as resulting from aftereffects of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Again, while appealing, this account is not entirely plausible. The growing empirical evidence of research in

prospect theory indicates that actors systematically make decisions based on the status of their cognitive orientation. Thus, ongoing political chaos caused by the Cultural Revolution could not reasonably be categorized as an endogenous variable affecting foreign policy decisions. Rather, it is predictable cognitive processes that shape what choices actors make. When Beijing was satisfied with the status quo, cognitive processes led to predictable “risk averse” patterns based on a positive orientation. By contrast, dissatisfaction with the status quo led to predictable “risk acceptant” behavior in Beijing based on a negative orientation. Hence, before Hanoi and the Soviets joined forces, the Chinese were in a positive frame, and therefore, risk averse. But, after the alliance, Beijing fell in a negative orientation, and risked the wrath of Soviet retaliation.

There is one counter argument that deserves further analysis, however. According to some political analysts, Beijing showed no fear of Soviet deterrent threats in Vietnam because it had already tested Soviet resolve in 1969 directly. In reaction to alleged illegal occupation of Chinese territory, on March 2, 1969, Chinese soldiers waylaid Soviet patrols on Chenpao Island on the Ussuri River.⁴⁷ In the ensuing fight, dozens of Soviet patrols fell to wounds. As expected, the Soviets retaliated (protested) with

armor and heavy artillery, but eventually stood down. China had won the fight and resumed control of its land. Hence it could stand to reason that, in view of the Soviet capitulation on Chenpao, China attacked Vietnam in 1979 without fear. That is, the Chinese may have rationally calculated that, since the Soviets were unwilling to wage war even after Chenpao, they would unlikely do so in Vietnam as well. I believe this line of reasoning deserves more investigation.

Conclusion

The idea that states take actions as a result of cost/benefit calculations does not support the empirical evidence: the Chinese attack on Vietnam occurred at a time when the odds for a victory or even for a significant gain in the case of a loss were too low for any rational cost/benefit analysis to have justified it. By contrast, the Chinese attack is consistent with the predictions of prospect theory. In a positive orientation, the Chinese were risk averse, choosing not to upset the status quo by engaging the Vietnamese militantly. On the other hand, in a negative orientation, the Chinese became risk acceptant and attacked the Vietnamese at one of the least opportune times.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Baogang Guo, “Political Legitimacy and China’s Transition,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, vol. 8, nos. 1-2 (Fall 2003), 8.
- 2 Jeffrey Berejikian, “A Cognitive Theory of Deterrence,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2002), 170.
- 3 Daniel Kahneman and Avos Tversky, “Prospect Theory and Analysis of Decision Making under Risk,” *Econometrica*, vol. 47, no. 2 (1979), 263-291; Richard Thaler, “Toward a Positive Theory of Consumer Behavior,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1980), 39-60.
- 4 George Quattrone and Avos Tversky, “Contrasting Rational and Psychological Analyses of Political Choice,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 82 (1988), 23-36.
- 5 Berejikian, op.cit., 172.
- 6 Ibid., 178-179.
- 7 King Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), xi.
- 8 Chang Pao-min, *The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1986).
- 9 Ibid., 48.
- 10 D.R. SarDesai, *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1992).
- 11 Chinese mainlanders had been communist since 1949, and ruled China from Beijing.
- 12 Ram Kaushik and Susheela Kaushik, *Back to the Front: The Unfinished Story in Vietnam* (New Delhi, India: Orient Longman Limited, 1979).
- 13 Tucker Spencer, *Vietnam* (London, UK: University College London Press, 1999), 56.
- 14 Henry Kenny, *Shadow of the Dragon: Vietnam’s Continuing Struggle with China and the Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s Inc., 2002).

-
- 15 SarDesai, op.cit., 7.
16 Ibid.
17 The Trung sisters rebelled against Chinese rule between A.D. 39-43. See Spencer, 7-8.
18 Spencer, op.cit.
19 SarDesai, op. cit., 7.
20 Chang, op. cit.
21 See "Spratly Islands Dispute," <www.american.edu/TED/SPRATLY.HTM>, (accessed on 28 August 2005).
22 Hemen Ray, *China's Vietnam War* (Kalkaji, New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1983), 65.
23 Ronald Cima, "Vietnam: Historical Background," in V. Largo, ed., *Vietnam: Current Issues and Historical Background* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2002), 109.
24 Anne Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1970-1979* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992).
25 Chen, op. cit., 64.
26 Chang, op. cit., 31.
27 Ibid., 31.
28 Steven Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992), 149.

29 Chang, op. cit., 50.
30 Hood, op. cit., 150.
31 Gilks, op. cit.
32 Ibid., 217.
33 *People's Daily* (10 November 1978); in *British Broadcasting Corporation*, SWB, FE 5966/A3/1-2; in Anne Gilks, 218-219.
34 *Xinhua News Agency* (24 December 1978), 25; in Chang, 52.
35 *New York Times* (1 February 1979), A1.
36 Chang, op. cit., 52-53.
37 Chen, op. cit., 105.
38 *Chinese Aggression against Vietnam* (Hanoi, 1979), 113-28; in Ray, 101.
39 Ibid., 54.
40 Ray, op. cit., 54-65.
41 Chen, op. cit.
42 Ray, op. cit., 92.
43 Stephen Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 5.
44 Ray, op. cit., 93.
45 Ibid., 107.
46 For a similar explanation, see James Mulvenon, "The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese Border War," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Fall 1995), 68-89.
47 Robert Gates, *From the Shadows* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 35-36.