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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Sino-Vietnamese Relations Over the Last Two Years

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No. 43

19 December 1969
No. 0401/69A

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SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS

Chinese and Vietnamese leaders could have been the characters Samuel Beckett had in mind when he wrote in *Waiting for Godot*, "They gave birth astride the grave...." For the death of Ho Chi Minh provided the occasion for the infusion of new life into the Sino-Vietnamese association. Like a distant relative who had been out of touch, Premier Chou En-lai hurried to Hanoi the day after Ho's death as if to make amends for not maintaining family relations.



The public breach in Sino-Vietnamese relations that opened with the beginning of the Paris talks in mid-1968 was indeed closed with the death of Ho Chi Minh. But Sino-Vietnamese relations are a part of the hard world of international politics, and there is more behind this change than a death in the family.

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THE FUNDAMENTALS

For years, China and North Vietnam have been bound together by the war in South Vietnam. Hanoi's goal of achieving control of all Vietnam has coincided with Peking's interest in a major, clear-cut defeat of the US in Southeast Asia—a defeat that the Chinese have hoped would lead to a general lessening of the American presence in Asia and, specifically, a reduction of US political and military commitments to nations adjacent to China. Additionally, a US defeat in Vietnam or even a continuation of the present struggle could be used by Peking to demonstrate the efficacy of a Chinese-style "peoples war" and to further its ideological case against Moscow.

Political relations between the Chinese and the Vietnamese Communists have always contained elements of serious friction, a legacy of historical Chinese imperialism brought up to date by Hanoi's repeated demonstrations of independence during the past several years.

Prior to the overthrow of Khrushchev, however, the North Vietnamese clearly regarded China as their primary ally, characterizing their relations as being as close as "lips and teeth." Scarcely an issue of North Vietnamese publications missed taking a swipe at "modern revisionism," and no occasion was overlooked to praise Peking. This attitude on the part of the Vietnamese stemmed almost entirely from the hard fact that China offered political and material support for Hanoi's efforts to take over the South, whereas Moscow had refrained from all but token gestures of support.

This unnatural dependence ended when the Soviet Union first assumed an active role in support of Hanoi's war effort, allowing North Vietnam to strike a balance between Moscow and Peking. Since then, Hanoi has accepted assistance

and advice from both but ultimately has charted its own course. Thus the power and proximity of China—and even the considerable assistance it has provided without interruption—have not enabled Peking to exert what it considers a proper degree of influence in Hanoi.

The Sino-Vietnamese frictions that might have been expected as a result of this new political equation were exacerbated considerably by the growing Sino-Soviet conflict and the convulsions of China's Cultural Revolution. Chinese propaganda began to treat the Vietnam issue as an object of Sino-Soviet ideological rivalry, an approach that produced increasing Vietnamese resentment. Hanoi was also angered and alarmed by Peking's efforts to export the Cultural Revolution to North Vietnam's ethnic Chinese community—the same "Red Guard diplomacy" that ruined China's relations with many of its other friends. In May 1967, the North Vietnamese party journal went so far as to publish an indirect but unmistakable personal attack on Mao Tse-tung and the destructiveness of his Cultural Revolution.

Despite these frictions, Peking maintained close relations with Hanoi. Throughout 1966 and 1967 the war in the South was expanding, and the Chinese used every occasion to encourage a maximum Vietnamese Communist war effort. Chinese propaganda treated the 1968 Tet offensive effusively and ecstatically, even though it was far from the kind of peoples war envisaged in Maoist doctrine. At the same time, however, the Chinese became increasingly concerned that Hanoi, under the pernicious influence of Moscow and the growing physical pressures of the war, might not stay the course but might prove willing to settle for something less than victory. Chinese propaganda began to lecture the Vietnamese openly on this subject, exhorting them to shun "Soviet-US peace-talk plots" and to persist in protracted war.

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Thus the limitations on Chinese influence were perhaps most dramatically illustrated by Hanoi's decision to begin talks with the US in the spring of 1968. In fact, Peking may not have been informed by Hanoi in advance.

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In any event, the strong and insistent propaganda line Peking had maintained against any kind of negotiations was severely undercut by Hanoi's decision.

THE RIFT APPEARS

With the opening of talks, the Chinese revised their treatment of the Vietnam issue considerably. Posters in Peking supporting North Vietnam were removed, and small-scale pro-Hanoi parades and demonstrations—previously a daily occurrence—were stopped. Formerly numerous and extensive Chinese radiobroadcasts covering military activity in Vietnam virtually ceased. Chinese propaganda continued to attack the general concept of negotiations as a US fraud and hoax, and even refused to acknowledge that talks were actually under way for some five months.

For its part, Hanoi was forced to adapt to the change in the Chinese attitude, but attempted nevertheless to preserve an impression of correct relations with Peking. For example, North Vietnamese negotiators traveling between Paris and Hanoi continued to stop in Peking as well as Moscow to confer with Chinese and Soviet officials. Privately, however, the North Vietnamese were undoubtedly irritated by Peking's behavior. By the fall of 1968,

[REDACTED] North Vietnamese officials occasionally made critical statements about China, something they had previously refrained from doing [REDACTED]

The deterioration of relations between Hanoi and Peking was clearly reflected during the Chinese National Day celebrations on 1 October 1968. Chinese leaders virtually ignored the subject of Vietnam, and, in terms of protocol, ranked the low-level delegations representing Hanoi and the National Liberation Front behind even the Australian Communist Party. Later in the month, the North Vietnamese had to resort to force to free some harassed Soviet officials at the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi.

Despite the obvious strain, Peking was careful to express its displeasure with Hanoi obliquely, so as not to impair its fundamental interests in North Vietnam. Chinese propaganda did not criticize Hanoi directly for participating in the Paris talks, but rather attacked the US and the USSR for their perfidy in supporting the talks. Most importantly, materiel in support of the Vietnamese Communist war effort—including Soviet shipments—continued to pass through China. Although the withholding of such aid was Peking's one physical lever on Hanoi short of armed force, Chinese leaders seemed well aware that an aid stoppage would only diminish Hanoi's ability and will to continue the war at a critical stage and thus would be self-defeating from Peking's point of view. A new aid agreement was signed in August 1968, and the Chinese were quick to deny subsequent Soviet charges that aid shipments transiting China were being held up deliberately by Peking.

As reports from Paris began to point toward some progress in the talks during the fall of 1968, Peking found public avoidance of the subject increasingly untenable. Finally on 19 October, the Chinese broke their official silence by reprinting several Western news reports of an imminent US bombing halt. They later followed up by publishing without comment the official US and North Vietnamese government statements on the

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bombing halt of 1 November and the enlargement of the talks to include Viet Cong and South Vietnamese Government representatives. Privately, Chinese officials continued to denigrate the talks but admitted that they were unable to influence Hanoi. During the rest of 1968 and through the spring of 1969, Peking continued its indirect criticism of the talks and further indicated its displeasure with Hanoi's policy by refusing to acknowledge publicly the stopovers in Peking of North Vietnamese negotiators traveling between Paris and Hanoi. Chinese publicity for the war in the South remained at a low level; even the 1969 post-Tet offensive was ignored.

The inherent difficulties of this ambivalent policy of supporting and criticizing Hanoi were again illustrated by Peking's recognition of the South Vietnamese Communists' Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in June 1969. Oriented primarily toward Hanoi's negotiating strategy, the PRG was an instrument for which the Chinese obviously had little use. On the other hand, nonrecognition by Peking would have constituted an open break with the Vietnamese Communists, and there is no evidence that the Chinese ever seriously considered this course. Even so, Peking managed to convey its misgivings by responding tardily and by somewhat fudging its official recognition statement.

Otherwise, there were few revealing events in Sino-Vietnamese relations in the last months before Ho Chi Minh's death. The Chinese predictably labeled US troop withdrawals, announced after the Midway meeting, as a fraud. Though their congratulatory message to Hanoi on its independence day on 2 September was perhaps slightly warmer in personal greetings to Ho Chi Minh than was the previous year's message, it still stressed the standard Chinese line indirectly opposing the Paris talks by attacking the US and the USSR and urging the Vietnamese to carry the war on to complete victory.

THE RIFT DISAPPEARS

The death of Ho Chi Minh on the following day, however, was an occasion for something more than a routine or automatic response by Peking. Indeed, Premier Chou En-lai's quick trip to Hanoi within hours of the North Vietnamese announcement was an expression of high-level interest and action, and in fact foreshadowed a week-long outpouring of condolences and eulogies for Ho Chi Minh throughout China. Even though the thrust of the attendant Chinese publicity was still aimed at urging the Vietnamese to turn grief into strength and fight on, China's over-all response went well beyond the level of necessary courtesy, and distinctly improved the climate of Sino-Vietnamese relations.

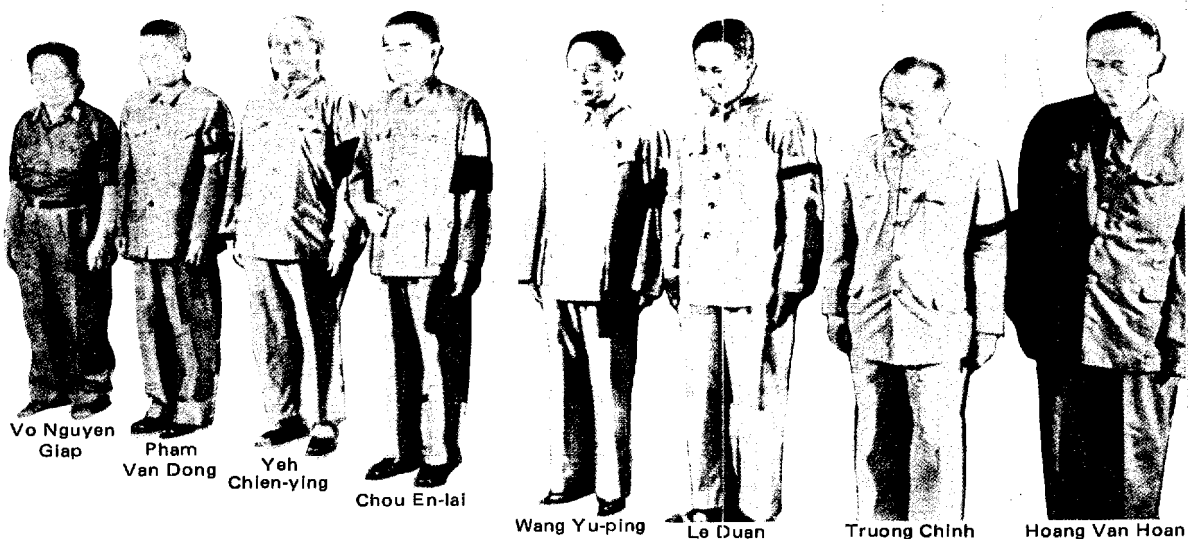
The attendance of North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong and NLF chairman Nguyen Huu Tho at Peking's anniversary day on 1 October further signified improved relations. In stark contrast with the anniversary day the year before, the high-ranking Vietnamese representatives were warmly received by the Chinese and were afforded considerable publicity. The signing of the military and economic aid agreement also contributed to the image of renewed Sino-Vietnamese solidarity. In Hanoi, an impressive array of the North Vietnamese leadership appeared at the anniversary reception given by the Chinese Embassy. Indeed, so that no one would miss the point, an editorial in Hanoi's Nhan Dan stated that "the fact that a delegation...led by Premier Pham Van Dong (went to Peking)...clearly shows that our people pay great importance to the friendship and militant solidarity between the peoples of the two countries, and have made untiring efforts to enhance it."

More significantly, these signals of renewed Sino-Vietnamese friendship in the month following Ho Chi Minh's death were accompanied by an apparent softening of Peking's attitude toward

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A death in the Vietnamese family brings a mournful Premier Chou En-lai to Hanoi on 4 September 1969. Flanking him are Yeh Chien-ying, a member of the Chinese Communist Party politburo, and Wang Yu-ping, Peking's ambassador in Hanoi. Rounding out the front row is the core of the North Vietnamese politburo: Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap; Premier Pham Van Dong; party first secretary Le Duan; party theoretician Truong Chinh; and China specialist Hoang Van Hoan.

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the Paris talks. After the anniversary on 1 October, Nguyen Huu Tho's NLF-PRG group remained in China long after other major delegations had departed, and subsequent sessions with the Chinese became occasions for statements by both sides on the issue of a Vietnam settlement. At a banquet on 8 October for the Vietnamese, Chou En-lai for the first time publicly addressed the question of a settlement by declaring that the unconditional withdrawal of all US troops was the sole correct basis for ending the war. Nguyen Huu Tho's reference to the NLF-PRG's ten-point

peace plan in a speech at the same banquet was rebroadcast the next day by Chinese news media—the first public Chinese acknowledgment of any Vietnamese Communist plan for a political settlement. A joint communiqué issued after talks between the same men on 15 October reiterated Peking's agreement that the unconditional withdrawal of US troops was the crux of any settlement. By containing individual as well as joint statements, however, the communiqué also clearly revealed continuing differences in emphasis between the two sides, the Vietnamese

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reiterating the correctness of their ten-point peace plan and the Chinese stressing protracted war.

As the South Vietnamese group departed China after nearly three weeks of lavish Chinese hospitality and publicity, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong arrived back in Peking to resume talks with Chou En-lai, after seeking aid and good will on a tour of Eastern Europe and the USSR. In Peking, Chou and Pham exchanged speeches at a banquet on 23 October, and another joint communiqué on Vietnam was issued on 25 October. Though the communiqué was virtually identical to the one issued on 15 October, Chou appeared to go further in his speech by omitting the standard Chinese call for the Vietnamese to persevere in protracted war until final victory. Instead, he expressed the belief that the Vietnamese would overcome all difficulties along their "road of advance"—a vague formulation that could sanction various military or political moves by Hanoi.

By introducing something other than Peking's standard emphasis on protracted war, Chou in effect injected some flexibility into China's tactical stance regarding the Paris talks. In so doing and in supporting Hanoi on the issue of an unconditional US withdrawal, Peking has implicitly become the champion of Hanoi's maximum demands in Paris without committing itself to the talks per se or to any lesser terms the Vietnamese might be tempted to accept. Although Peking could, if it chose, now support a settlement at Paris based on lesser terms, the shift in its position to date by no means signifies a lessening of its interest in seeing a maximum defeat inflicted upon the US.

Indeed, at least for the present, Peking seems to have concluded that mutual concessions leading to a settlement are not in the offing. After a delay of about a week, Chinese propaganda

portrayed President Nixon's speech of 3 November as conclusive evidence that the US intended to maintain its aggressive policy in Vietnam. The delay in Peking's response may indicate that the Chinese attached special significance to this speech and, consequently, evaluated it carefully before taking a position. In any case, the eventual Chinese commentary was extensive, perhaps inordinately so; it even seemed to contain undertones of perverse satisfaction that Peking's long-standing charge of US intransigence had been, by Chinese lights, validated.

Peking has also endeavored to maintain its hard-line attitude toward the Vietnam issue by affording more preferential treatment to the NLF-PRG than to Hanoi. The Chinese described their talks with South Vietnamese Communist representatives in October in glowing terms, while applying friendly but distinctly less effusive adjectives to subsequent talks with North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong. Additionally, the NLF-PRG rather than Hanoi was thanked for its observance of China's 20th anniversary in a note signed by Mao Tse-tung, Lin Piao, and Chou En-lai. By so distinguishing between the Vietnamese Communists, Peking is certainly indicating something less than complete satisfaction with all elements of the leadership in Hanoi, and probably is trying to further its interests by paying special tribute to those at the forefront of the struggle in the South.

In any event, the improvement in relations has allowed Peking to play a more active role. This was demonstrated as early as China's October anniversary day in Peking. Taking advantage of the presence of high-ranking Vietnamese Communist and Cambodian officials, Chou En-lai arranged for a meeting between them, apparently to resolve the interrelated problems of Vietnamese Communist use of Cambodian territory and Cambodia's withholding of arms shipments

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destined for the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army. Although details of the meeting remain obscure, limited arms shipments are apparently once more reaching the Viet Cong through Cambodia. Cambodian agreement to deliver future shipments appears to be contingent upon the fulfillment of promises made by the Vietnamese regarding their use of Cambodian territory.

MOTIVATIONS FOR THE CHANGE

It seems clear that both Hanoi and Peking were mutually interested in restoring close relations. Hanoi's point of view appears relatively clearcut. North Vietnam has consistently wanted its relations with China to be as friendly as possible, provided that its independence did not become the price for such relations. This desire was made specific by Ho Chi Minh's posthumous request for Sino-Soviet rapprochement and increased Communist unity.

Because Peking's petulant reaction to the start of the Paris talks was the major cause for poor Sino-Vietnamese relations since mid-1968, the improvement in relations clearly hinged more upon a change in Chinese attitudes than upon North Vietnam's behavior. In this respect, the awkward and unproductive aspects of Peking's position on Vietnam since mid-1968 are worth stressing again. Indeed, it is not clear why the Chinese reacted adversely in the first place unless they feared that the war might be settled quickly at Paris. If so, the passage of time and the lack of any Communist concessions at Paris proved that such fears were unfounded. At the same time, the Chinese probably derived some encouragement from Hanoi's apparent preparations for a lower level, protracted war as an alternative to a quick settlement. Thus by mid-1969, the Chinese easily could have concluded that the eventual outcome in Vietnam was still uncertain, and that China's interests were best served by renewing close con-

tacts with Hanoi in order to influence future decisions there. This kind of pragmatic evaluation is in line with the general restorative trend in Chinese policy since the Ninth Party Congress last April, and with the professional hand of Chou En-lai that has since been more evident.

This turn toward realism in Peking meshed neatly with Ho Chi Minh's death, which provided not only an opportunity but an extra incentive for the Chinese to restore close relations with Hanoi. Indeed, the vacuum caused by Ho's demise and the inevitable readjustments to be made among remaining North Vietnamese leaders certainly contain the potential for the more effective application of Chinese influence.

As decisions are approached by Hanoi in the future, it seems reasonably clear that the Chinese intend to weigh in heavily on the side of those opposing a settlement and supporting a continuation of the war.

The Vietnam war almost certainly looms large enough in Chinese eyes to warrant special consideration; nevertheless, the adjustment in Peking's Vietnam policy has also been encouraged by China's bitter dispute with Moscow. During the past year Peking has become increasingly concerned over its weak and isolated position vis-a-vis the USSR and currently is working to improve its relations with Communist states such as Yugoslavia and North Korea as well as Hanoi. Peking's decision to enter border negotiations with Moscow made its overt opposition to Hanoi's negotiating strategy even more untenable. Indeed, the Chinese have used their justification for the current Sino-Soviet border talks as rationalization for their new approach to Vietnam, maintaining that their "dual revolutionary tactics" of negotiating

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while resisting Soviet aggression can be applied by "all revolutionary people."

PROSPECTS

In important respects, the strained Sino-Vietnamese relationship that existed from mid-1968 through the summer of 1969 may best be viewed as an abnormal period, with the recent improvement representing a return to normality. From this perspective, the change in China's position does not foreshadow a major new effort by Peking to create a second front against the US, either in Indochina or elsewhere, in order to aid the Vietnamese. For years, the Chinese have maintained a low profile of active involvement in Southeast Asia. Chinese support of insurgency has been limited, partly out of caution vis-a-vis the US and partly because of the long-term view that the weaknesses of the various insurgencies have forced the Chinese to adopt. At this point, there is little to suggest that either of these basic Chinese considerations has changed.

On the other extreme, Peking's more ambiguous attitude toward the Paris talks does not seem to reflect any Chinese willingness that a compromise settlement materialize at Paris. Although the Chinese now support Hanoi's maximum demands, they still emphasize protracted war and continue to demonstrate their disdain for the Paris talks. Indeed, it seems very likely that Peking intends to use the opportunity provided by closer contacts with the Vietnamese to influence the post-Ho leadership against accepting any compromise.

The closing of Sino-Vietnamese ranks and Peking's public support of North Vietnam's terms for a settlement will obviously benefit Hanoi. The North Vietnamese, however, still retain their ultimate independence, and their crucial decisions about the war and the negotiations will undoubtedly continue to be influenced more by physical realities in North and South Vietnam and by US action than by considerations of relations with China. Peking's close contacts with Hanoi did not prevent the North Vietnamese from deciding to go to Paris in 1968, and the Chinese have no assurance that improved relations will forestall future decisions that are equally unpleasant to them.

In short, basic tensions will probably remain beneath the surface of Sino-Vietnamese relations while the war continues and its outcome remains in doubt. So long as Peking does not increase its physical involvement in the war, relations between Hanoi and Peking are more likely to reflect major developments than to cause them. In this respect the end of the war should prove a watershed from Peking's point of view, because relations with Hanoi would tend to lose the special significance that the war against the US has lent them to date. Of the various possible outcomes in Vietnam, the Chinese would be faced with a particularly difficult decision if the war were ended by a compromise in which South Vietnam's political future was uncertain and the US retained ties with the Saigon government. Indeed, Peking's ambivalent attitude toward Vietnam from mid-1968 to mid-1969 probably serves only as a mild rehearsal for the searching reappraisal that Peking would undergo in such circumstances.

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