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China: Military Options Against Vietnam



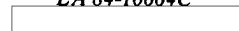
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An Intelligence Assessment

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March 1984

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was written by



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Office of East Asian Analysis.

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
addressed to the Chief, China Division, OEA,

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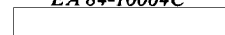
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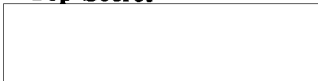
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**China:
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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 15 March 1984
was used in this report.*

Beijing has the muscle to conduct a wide variety of military actions against Vietnam but is not likely to undertake a "second lesson" unless severely provoked. Our judgment is based on the following factors:

- *Cost.* The February 1979 invasion of Vietnam was costly both in lives and resources. Beijing lost 20,000 killed or wounded and spent at least \$1 billion. Beijing today is committed to an ambitious economic modernization program and would be reluctant to initiate a prolonged conflict that would drain China's coffers and have the potential to cause domestic political dissension.
- *Vietnamese strength.* We believe the massive expansion and qualitative improvements of the Vietnamese armed forces facing China are major deterrents to Chinese action. In 1979 China dictated the beginning and end of the conflict. In our view, because of Vietnam's new capabilities, the Chinese military could not guarantee a quick, contained lesson.
- *Soviet presence.* With a major Soviet naval and air presence at Cam Ranh Bay, China would probably avoid such actions as naval offensives against Vietnamese-held islands in the South China Sea.



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In lieu of a second lesson, Beijing uses "saber rattling" incidents—such as small-scale skirmishes and artillery barrages—to warn Hanoi against border provocations or assaults on Kampuchean resistance bases along the Thai border. "Saber rattling" provides a highly visible demonstration of Beijing's support for the Kampuchean resistance and the Thai Government and reminds Vietnam that Chinese military power is still potent. Moreover, it forces Vietnam to keep most of its forces deployed in the North and unavailable for duty in Kampuchea.



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If Beijing believed, however, that its own or Thailand's national security were directly threatened, or the existence of the Kampuchean resistance was in jeopardy, we believe China would take stronger military action against Vietnam, probably a ground offensive. Large-unit ground attacks into Vietnam or Laos would be a measured escalation of the existing conflict whereas naval or airstrikes would be more likely to open the door to Vietnamese retaliation using newly acquired air-to-surface and surface-to-surface missiles. Moreover, there are still glaring deficiencies in Chinese air and naval forces that will take several years to overcome.

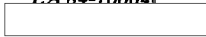


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We believe that short of a massive, and improbable, Chinese assault to take Hanoi, there is probably no military action Beijing can take that will force Vietnam to withdraw from Kampuchea. The best that Beijing can hope for is that through a combination of diplomatic and limited but persistent military pressure it can convince Hanoi that its interests are better served by a political settlement to the Kampuchean situation. 

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**China:
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The 1979 Lesson

On 17 February 1979, after a three-month military buildup larger than the one that preceded China's entrance into the Korean war, China launched a short but bloody border war against Vietnam. Before the war China maintained only 150,000 troops within 400 kilometers of the Sino-Vietnamese border. It redeployed 10 armies, some from as far away as 1,600 kilometers, drawn from six military regions for the attack. For 16 days, an estimated 500,000 Chinese troops carried out an attack along the entire border designed to "teach Vietnam a lesson" for invading Kampuchea, for moving closer to Moscow, for attacking Chinese positions on the border, and for mistreating ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam.

China's ground troops destroyed Vietnamese border fortifications, occupied three provincial capitals, and used a scorched earth policy to create a *cordon sanitaire* along the 1,200-km border. Hanoi had only 100,000 troops in the three northern military regions and half of them were held in reserve in defensive positions near Hanoi.

After Chinese forces seized the provincial capital of Lang Son—a battle in which both sides had heavy casualties—China's then PLA Chief of Staff Deng Xiaoping declared that Vietnam had been punished enough, and on 5 March Chinese forces began to withdraw. Chinese troops took 10 days to pull out, meanwhile destroying public works, blowing up bridges, and using artillery barrages to cover their withdrawal and to create a wasteland along the border. The lengthy pullback highlighted China's control of the situation and prevented Hanoi from credibly claiming it had chased the invaders back across the border.

Even before the last Chinese soldiers had left Vietnam, Hanoi began a massive buildup of its forces in the north. Divisions were recalled from Kampuchea and southern Vietnam, a general mobilization was decreed, and units previously assigned to economic

construction activities were upgraded into main force divisions. Hanoi nearly doubled the size of its army throughout Indochina from 600,000 troops in early 1979 to about 1.2 million troops by late 1981.



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The Situation Today

Beijing shows no signs of willingness to compromise with Hanoi and holds open the option of another limited war. In January, just after the leaders of the tripartite resistance coalition of Kampuchea visited Beijing, a senior Chinese Foreign Ministry official told a US diplomat that in response to an aggressive Vietnamese dry season offensive this year, China would be willing to increase diplomatic, economic, and military pressure on Vietnam and has not abandoned the option of giving Vietnam a "second lesson."



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Last April, Beijing pounded Vietnamese positions near the Chinese border with long-range artillery and mortar barrages in retaliation for Vietnam's 1982-83 dry season campaign in Kampuchea, which spilled over into Thailand. Despite talks aimed at improving relations between Moscow and Beijing, China's official news agency in November sharply criticized Moscow, calling Vietnam "a knife the Soviet Union has placed at the back of China" and accusing Moscow of forming a military alliance with the Vietnamese in order to forge another link in the military encirclement of China.



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Hanoi takes the Chinese threat seriously and keeps more than 60 percent of its ground forces as well as most of its newest Soviet weapons deployed against China.



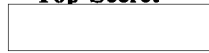
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Beijing's troops in Kunming

Military Region also went on an alert in reaction to new border fighting, according to Chinese press reports. China accused Hanoi of 35 border provocations during the New Year holiday alone. [Redacted]

If Beijing believed that its own or Thailand's national security or the existence of the Kampuchean resistance forces were seriously threatened, we believe China would take strong military action against Vietnam. Beijing has assured resistance and Thai leaders that it will not allow Vietnam to reduce its forces along the northern border in order to increase striking power in Kampuchea. Moreover, the Chinese willingness to increase border tensions—both this and last year—even without a major threat to either the Kampuchean resistance or Thailand, is an indication of Beijing's deep commitment to trying to check Vietnam from consolidating its control in Indochina.

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The Military Balance, 1984

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Ground Force Options

In our judgment, if Beijing exercised the option of a second lesson it would probably be in the form of a limited ground offensive. The PLA is still a conservative, ground-oriented military force that has little experience or confidence in projecting power using its naval or air components. A border incursion into Vietnam or Laos would be only a measured escalation of the existing conflict whereas naval or air strikes would be more likely to open the door to Vietnamese retaliation using its airpower and air-to-surface and surface-to-surface missiles. Finally, there are still glaring deficiencies in Chinese air and naval forces, particularly in the areas of ground- and sea-based air defense, that will take several years to overcome. [Redacted]

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Beijing's 270,000 troop strength within 400 kilometers of the border is approximately half that of the opposing force in northern Vietnam. This has fostered a belief that China has few military options it can exercise against Vietnam. Such assessments fail to take into account China's large reserves and its demonstrated ability to redeploy armies rapidly to the southern front. Hanoi's buildup in the north would increase the cost of another border-wide, ground force assault such as the 1979 incursion, but Beijing could elect to use a variety of ground, air, and naval actions against the Vietnamese. Over the past five years, Beijing has upgraded its military capabilities in south China and in some ways, particularly naval operations, has actually broadened its range of military options against Vietnam. [Redacted]

Beijing has the muscle to mount another massive ground assault comparable to 1979. There are 27 ground combat divisions and an estimated 600,000 ground, air, and naval troops in Kunming and Guangzhou Military Regions. Hanoi currently has 38 ground combat divisions and upwards of 700,000 ground, air, and naval troops in all of northern Vietnam but has few reserves available to augment this force (figure 2). Beijing, on the other hand, has an additional 1 million ground troops not committed to the Soviet front which it can dispatch to fight Vietnam. Moreover, if Beijing were again to deploy to the

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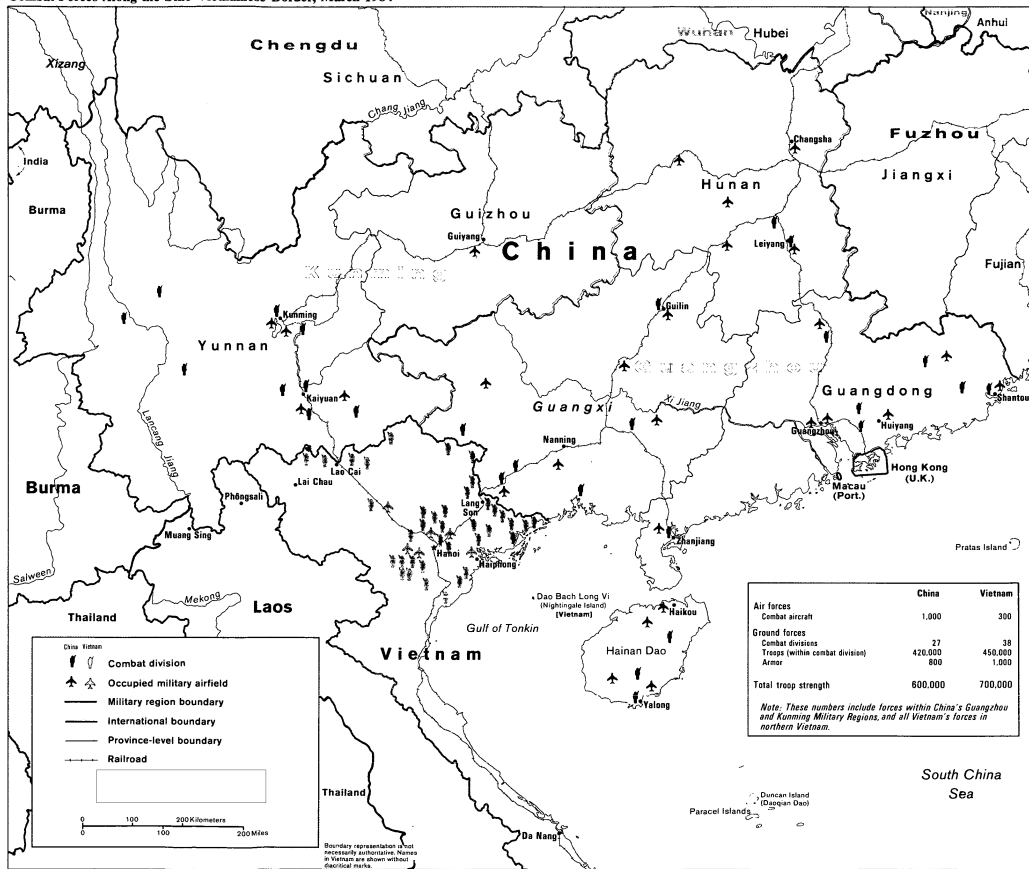
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Figure 2
 Combat Forces Along the Sino-Vietnamese Border, March 1984



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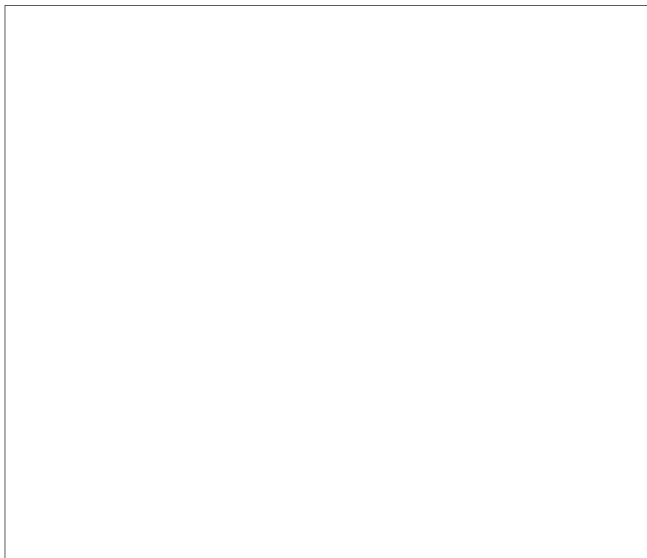
south, maneuver divisions from the Wuhan strategic reserve, the Sichuan basin, and Kunming and Guangzhou Military Regions, as it did in the 1979 conflict, it could attain an overall advantage of almost 2 to 1 in main force combat troops and a similar edge in armor.

assaults into Vietnam. Terrain, however, dictates use of only a few major corridors in the event of large-scale operations.

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Concentrated Border Attacks

China is aware of the Vietnamese buildup and, in our view, recognizes the heavy costs of launching another border-wide offensive similar to the 1979 incursion. An option for Beijing would be to mass an invasion force at a single point on the border and thereby gain a decisive tactical advantage along a narrow front rather than the entire border. To maintain the element of surprise, smaller forces could be active along much of the border to mask the chosen objective from Vietnamese forces until the actual attack. Chinese forces could take a particular objective, for example the provincial capital of Lai Chau, protect their flanks, and then withdraw within a short period after once again proving Vietnam's vulnerability and administering another, albeit smaller, lesson.



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Improvements to the Chinese military infrastructure within the border area since 1979 enhance Beijing's ability to exercise this option. Five years ago, there were few major military installations along the frontier, and invading troops were housed in villages and temporary camps.

Beijing also has at least one highly specialized reconnaissance unit on the Vietnamese front trained for long-range patrols behind enemy lines which could provide additional intelligence during a border assault.

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and these bases could serve as staging areas for sizable reserve forces arriving from the north. In addition, vastly expanded logistic storage facilities and new military hospitals close to the front provide greatly enhanced resupply and casualty care—two glaring weaknesses of the 1979 campaign.

this is an elite, highly trained special forces unit in which all soldiers are proficient in Vietnamese, close-quarter combat, and parachuting. The unit reportedly captured more prisoners than any other Chinese unit during the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. It has practiced paradrops in the border area frequently in the past five years. This elite unit can be expected to serve again as a major collector of tactical intelligence in any future foray into Vietnam.

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China has also built an extensive network of new roads into the border region.

the Chinese have constructed a series of unpaved roads that parallel 440 kilometers of the Vietnam-Guangxi Province border and have greatly improved roads on the Yunnan front as well. These new road nets provide better lines of communication between Chinese installations and the border, give Beijing's troops greater lateral movement, and increase the number of possible entry points for land

Ground Attacks Into Laos

An alternative to ground assaults along Vietnam's heavily fortified northern border is a Chinese incursion into Laos. Vietnam only has one division deployed in the three Lao provinces opposite China and

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only one additional combat division—a total of about 20,000 men—in the two military regions of northern Laos. We estimate that the Vietnamese could get support from about 20,000 Lao troops, but the Chinese could overwhelm the defenders by massing two main force armies (100,000 men) for an attack.

[Redacted]

Beijing could also count on Chinese-trained resistance forces in northern Laos to harass Vietnamese and Lao positions, to disrupt lines of communications, and to provide detailed intelligence on the defenders' troop strengths and dispositions. Since 1979, China has trained Lao resistance fighters at military installations in southern Yunnan and sent them back to bases in northern Laos or Thailand.

[Redacted]

Vietnam is concerned about the possibility of a Chinese offensive through Laos and frequently conducts exercises simulating combat against such an attack. These exercises also test an increasingly complicated command structure in Laos that involves incorporation of new equipment into the Lao Army inventory:

[Redacted]

Assaults into Laos offer both advantages and disadvantages to Beijing. An offensive through Laos would allow for an easier withdrawal when the lesson ended because Vietnam lacks the reinforcements there to press a counterattack, and it would also offer Beijing the chance to focus world attention on the existence of an armed resistance movement in Laos. There are also some major drawbacks:

- An assault into Laos might be seen by the international community as an attack on a third country and a widening of the regional conflict.
- Because of the mountainous terrain and sparse road networks, large Chinese units would be channeled into valleys where they would be vulnerable.
- A Chinese attack could punish Vietnamese forces stationed in Laos but would offer no opportunity to hurt the Vietnamese economy unless Beijing's troops pressed eastward into Vietnam's Lai Chau Province.

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Saber Rattling

The most likely Chinese ground force option is to initiate small-scale clashes and ground probes into northern Vietnam in response to Vietnamese provocations along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier or a large Vietnamese offensive in Kampuchea that threatened Thailand. This alternative increases the tension along the border and is a highly visible demonstration of Chinese displeasure but limits the danger of escalation of the conflict. It also has the advantage of forcing Vietnam to keep most of its forces deployed in the north and unavailable for duty in Kampuchea.

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This is the option that Beijing exercised in a limited way in 1983 in response to a Vietnamese drive against resistance forces along the Thai border. In late March and early April, the Vietnamese overran two resistance bases on the border, crossed into Thailand, and in a brief firefight killed several Thai soldiers.² China,

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Figure 3. Chinese long-range artillery pound Vietnamese positions in 1979.



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Sino-Vietnamese War ©

responding to a Thai request, pounded Vietnamese positions from Lao Cai in the west to Lang Son in the east with long-range artillery. Chinese troops also mounted hit-and-run raids on Vietnamese border outposts. Beijing was able to accomplish this show of force with surprise, few casualties, and without reinforcements largely because the PLA had built a series of field artillery positions on high ground along the border capable of lobbing shells as far as 25 kilometers into Vietnam.



in mid-April unusually large truck convoys—with some vehicles towing field artillery—were moving northeast out of Hanoi while a field-deployed surface-to-air missile position was activated near the border town of Lao Cai.

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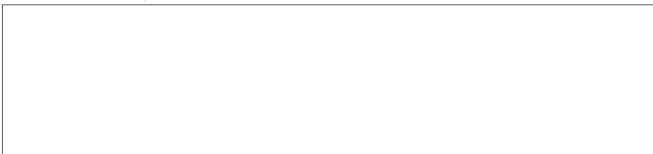
Air Options

Vietnam's well-developed air defenses restrict Beijing's air options. During the 1979 war, although nearly 600 fighter and bomber aircraft shifted from airfields throughout China to the south—raising Beijing's air strength along the border to over 850 combat aircraft—China limited its air involvement to defensive patrols and reconnaissance along the border. Today, the Chinese have three choices for mounting air operations against Vietnam: tactical bombing raids against military or civilian targets near the border, air support for ground offensives, and deep penetration bombing attacks.

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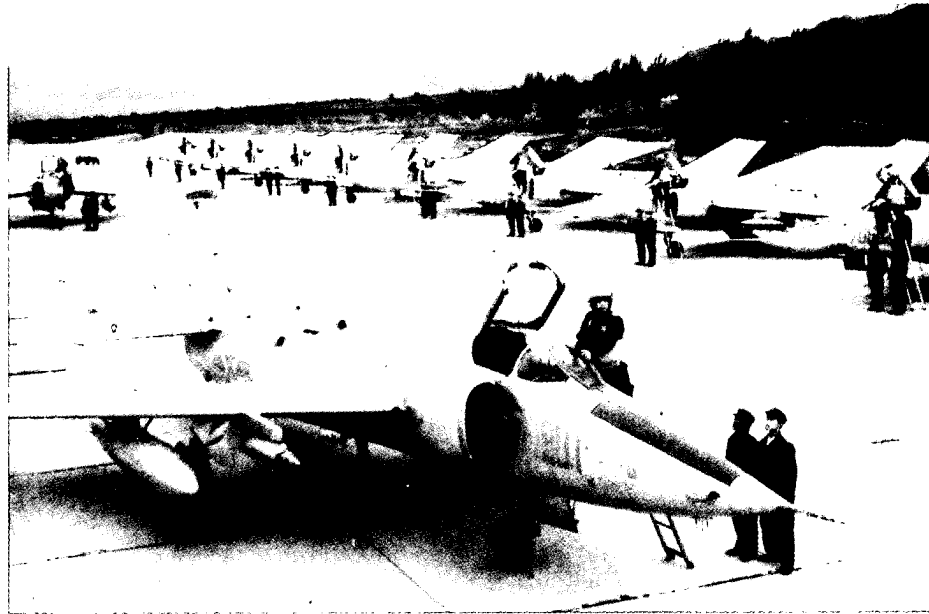
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Figure 4. An A-5 fighter-bomber regiment.



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Conmilit: The Defence Monthly ©

Fighter Attacks

Beijing's best aircraft for tactical bombing strikes and ground attack operations is the A-5 fighter-bomber. Even though it is a short-range aircraft with a limited bomb load, it could be used effectively in bombing raids against targets near the Chinese border. The A-5s could take off from airfields near the border, attack, and return to Chinese airfields before Vietnamese fighter aircraft could intercept them.



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Beijing recognizes the utility of these aircraft and formed a regiment of 25 A-5 fighter-bombers in Guangzhou Military Region in March 1980. It is the first new ground attack regiment created since 1976 and the only one in south China.

Bomber Strikes

In May 1980, Beijing added B-6 (TU-16) medium bombers to the air division at Leiyang in Guangzhou Military Region, giving the Chinese the option to mount bombing runs deeper into Vietnam. These bombers can strike targets deep in Vietnamese territory with larger bomb loads than either the A-5s or B-5s. However, the B-6's relatively slow speed, limited maneuverability, and ineffective electronic countermeasures would make it easy prey for supersonic fighter-interceptors and surface-to-air missiles.

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Ground Support

Training involving the A-5s in Guangzhou shows that the Chinese intend to use the fighter-bombers in two wartime missions: to strike preselected targets in tandem with bombers, and to support ground forces. In at least two large-scale exercises in Guangzhou since late 1981, A-5s working in conjunction with B-5 (IL-28) light bombers flew multiple ground attack missions.



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China would run the risk of high bomber losses if it attacked installations other than those close to the Chinese frontier. The Hanoi-Haiphong corridor presents especially great dangers for B-6 bombers, as the

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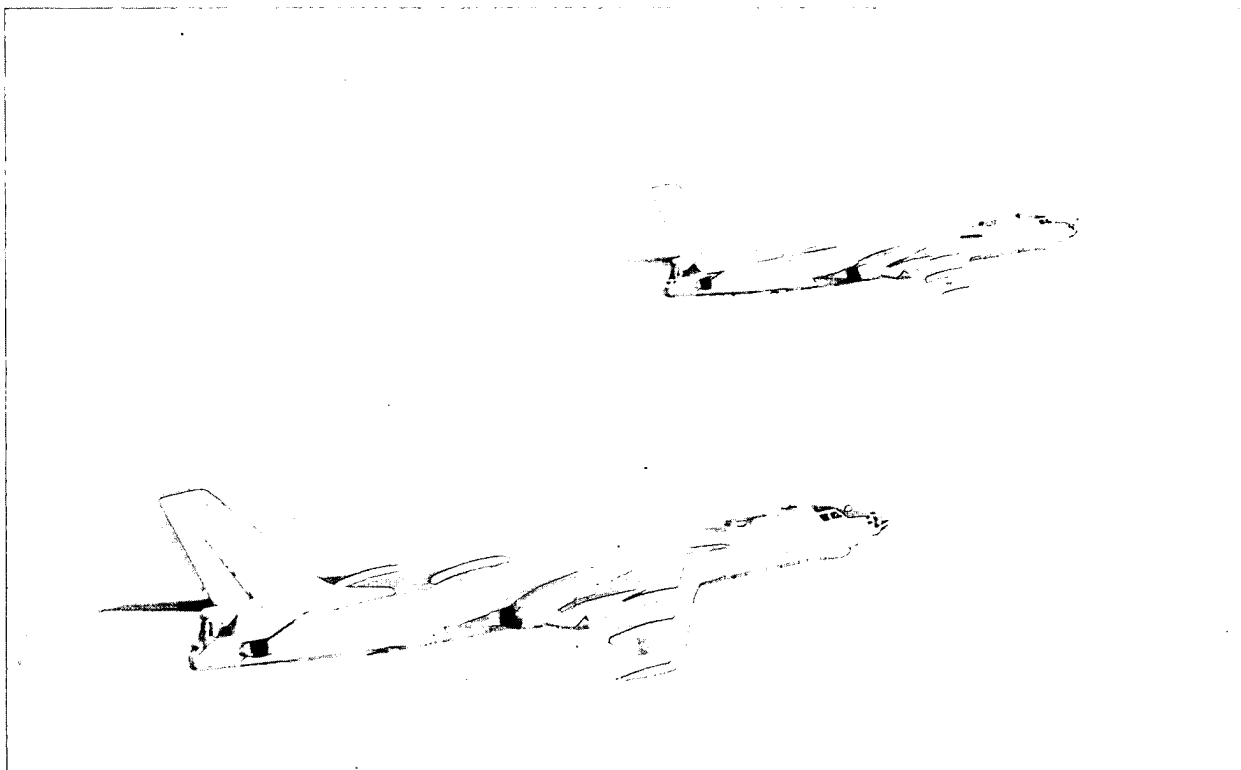


Figure 5. Chinese B-6 medium bombers.

China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation ©

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area is protected by a sophisticated network of overlapping SA-2 medium-to-high and SA-3 low-to-medium altitude missile sites. Moreover, Vietnam has received over 150 late-model MIG-21 fighter-interceptors from the Soviet Union since the war, and nearly all are based near Hanoi. Vietnamese economic and military targets along the border are, however, vulnerable to B-6 attacks. They are defended by only a few surface-to-air missile sites, and A-5s could attack the ground-based air defenses before the B-6s arrived. Although B-6s would be easy targets for Vietnamese supersonic interceptors, if the B-6s struck targets close to the Chinese frontier, they could be adequately defended by Chinese interceptor aircraft.

[Redacted]

Beijing is well aware of the improvement to Vietnamese airpower and has taken steps to bolster its own air defenses.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

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In addition, fighter regiments from other military regions continue a policy begun in 1979 of rotating to airfields along the Sino-Vietnamese border for six months. These rotational assignments not only augment air strength in the region, but also give pilots experience in a combat environment and acquaint regiments with flying conditions in south China.

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[Redacted]

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Naval Options

We believe that the Chinese are more likely to consider the use of naval power in a "second lesson" than they were in the 1979 conflict. Two key factors underlie this judgment: first, there has been a significant increase in the capability of the South Sea Fleet

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could assemble an assault force with a decisive numerical advantage. Moreover, if the assault force included half of the fleet's complement of destroyers, frigates, and subchasers, China would have a commanding edge in firepower over the Vietnamese defenders. Beijing could gain a similar edge over the estimated 1,000 Vietnamese soldiers on Bach Long Vi Island as it is much closer to the Chinese mainland and landing craft could make multiple journeys carrying troops and equipment. [Redacted]

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The Emerging Marine Corps. Beijing has also created a dedicated amphibious force of Marines, with the South Sea Fleet leading the way, which greatly increases the likelihood of success in any amphibious assault operation. On 12 May 1982, *Liberation Army Daily* announced that tanks and armored vehicles of the Navy's "new force," the Marines, had taken part in an amphibious landing exercise in south China.

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Since then, we have noted [Redacted]

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[Redacted] that China is training a small force of marines in amphibious operations, probably on Hainan Island:

to undertake offensive naval action; and second, Vietnamese naval weaknesses have not been fully redressed. We judge that the two types of actions that China would seriously consider are an amphibious assault against Vietnamese-held islands in the South China Sea and the mining of Haiphong harbor.

[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Amphibious Assault Against Vietnamese Islands
Improvements to the South Sea Fleet's amphibious lift capabilities make the Chinese Navy better prepared than ever for taking Vietnamese-held islands by force. [Redacted]

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- *PLA Pictorial*, Beijing's monthly military magazine, in April 1983 carried a series of photos highlighting the creation of a Marine Corps. Combat troops wearing navy uniforms were pictured landing with tanks and amphibious armored personnel carriers. The landing craft were Yuliang LSMs which only the South Sea Fleet operates. The armored vehicles were marked with a letter "H" suggesting that they are dedicated *Haijunluzhandui* or "Marine" assets. [Redacted]

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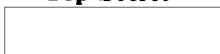
With these capabilities, Beijing would have a commanding edge over Vietnamese troops defending the two most likely targets, the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea or Bach Long Vi (Nightingale) Island in the Gulf of Tonkin. Assuming that Hanoi's garrisons—a total of 500 troops—on the nine islands they occupy in the Spratlys are not reinforced, China

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Although we know little about the structure and size of China's new Marine Corps, we expect that each of China's three fleets will eventually form its own unit. (We believe these units will eventually be as large as a Chinese infantry division (14,000 men) and be equipped with a regiment of amphibious tanks and armored personnel carriers. [redacted])

- In May 1983, Beijing, for the first time, dispatched two naval ships on a training mission to the Spratlys. [redacted]

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The Paracels—Outpost in the South China Sea.

China seized control over all of the Paracel Islands in January 1974 after a short naval battle with South Vietnamese gunboats and minor skirmishes with South Vietnamese ground forces on the islands. Beijing did little to bolster facilities on the Paracel Islands before the 1979 war but since then has improved its military presence there, which would enable the islands to be used in support of military operations in the South China Sea:

- In October 1983, two B-6 bombers overflew Malaysian-occupied Swallow Reef in the Spratlys, this time with a frigate and replenishment oiler deploying south of the Paracels to provide navigational assistance and air surveillance. [redacted]

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Deficiencies of the South Sea Fleet. The South Sea Fleet's most serious weakness in projecting power is its lack of modern shipborne air defense systems. Any Chinese naval task force operating in the Spratlys, for example, would be out of range of China's land-based fighters and within striking distance of Vietnam's airpower. Although Hanoi's SU-22s and MIG-21s would be operating near the limits of their effective combat radius, they would pose a credible threat, using bombs and Soviet AS-7 tactical air-to-surface missiles against China's naval ships. At present, South Sea Fleet warships have no surface-to-air missiles or other modern weapon systems for defense against fighter-bombers and air-to-surface missiles. Ground forces have shoulder-fired SA-7s but no mobile, tactical, low-to-medium altitude SAMs to deploy after establishing shore positions. [redacted]

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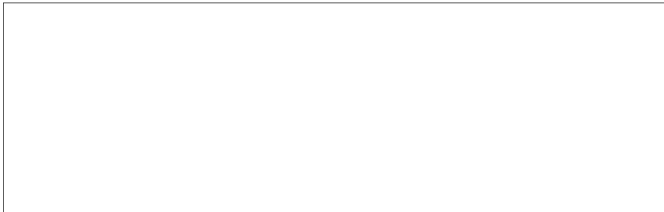
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[redacted] by early 1982 the Chinese had built a new naval base and port on Duncan Island. The harbor is routinely used by submarine chasers, and it may be able to accommodate larger warships. [redacted]



Similar problems would be encountered in an assault on Vietnamese-held Bach Long Vi Island in the Gulf of Tonkin. Although Chinese fighters would be available to provide fleet air defense [redacted]

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[redacted] the Vietnamese have Sepal naval surface-to-surface cruise missiles at installations near Hai-phong. The Sepal has a range that covers the entire Gulf and half of Hainan Island and it could be used effectively against the Chinese fleet. Even if the Vietnamese Sepals were destroyed by Chinese air-strikes, a confrontation in the Gulf would almost certainly lead to a costly air war in which China's numerically superior airpower probably would wear down and eventually defeat the Vietnamese, but not before taking heavy losses. [redacted]

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Beijing appears to be testing its newly improved naval capabilities in the South China Sea. Since late 1980, Beijing has paid more attention to the Spratly Islands, over which it claims sovereignty:

- On 8 November 1980, two naval B-6 bombers from Hainan Island overflew Northeast Cay, the northernmost island of the Spratlys. In anticipation of Vietnamese reaction, Chinese fighter aircraft conducted defensive patrols near the Paracels while the bombers flew south.

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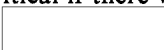
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A second deficiency for the Chinese during any amphibious assault is the lack of adequate antisubmarine warfare capabilities. Although the Chinese have made some minor improvements in the ASW equipment they acquired from the Soviets in the late 1950s, it remains of limited utility. Chinese sonars, in particular, can detect targets only within short ranges. The Vietnamese Navy does not yet have any submarines, but four to six Soviet submarines usually are present in the South China Sea, including several diesel-powered torpedo-attack submarines and one or two nuclear-powered cruise missile submarines. They could conceivably support Hanoi in a Sino-Vietnamese naval conflict. 

Mining Vietnamese Harbors

We believe that the mining of Vietnamese harbors would be a low-risk, high-impact military operation that is within the capabilities of the Chinese Navy. Haiphong harbor is the most attractive target, as over 50 percent of Vietnam's merchant shipping and most arms imports come through the port. Even a temporary closure would cause considerable economic dislocation and complicate the delivery of arms from the Soviet Union. Traffic could be rerouted to southern ports, but the delays could prove critical if there was fighting along the northern border. 

Mindful of Vietnam's well-developed air and coastal defenses around Haiphong, the Chinese would probably use submarine-launched naval mines. China has over 100 R-class diesel attack submarines—22 in the South Sea Fleet—each of which can lay up to 36 mines. China's submarine force could easily lay enough mines in one operation to close Haiphong to shipping. The United States, using a mine roughly equivalent to China's current mines, initially closed Haiphong in 1972 using only 50 mines. China produces five varieties of naval mines ranging in weight from 200 to 1,100 kilograms. We believe the Chinese Navy has a large stock of naval mines. 


The Vietnamese Navy's ASW and minesweeping capabilities, though improving, are probably insufficient to prevent China from mining Haiphong, and the Navy would be hard pressed to clear independently the harbor once mines were laid. Hanoi's ASW force consists of four Petya-class light frigates and eight subchasers based at Da Nang, and 30 KA-25

Hormone helicopters based at Haiphong. The Chinese would be most likely to mine the harbor at night since Hormone ASW helicopters are unable to operate effectively in submarine detection at night. All six of Vietnam's minesweepers would have to be used to reopen Haiphong, but Chinese submarines could probably keep the harbor closed by returning at night to lay more mines. 

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Obstacles to Chinese Actions

Vietnam's New Strength



The expansion and qualitative improvements to the Vietnamese armed forces facing China are certainly major obstacles to a Chinese attack. In 1979 the Chinese were able to dictate the beginning and ending of the conflict. Today, Vietnam has acquired new offensive weapons such as SU-22 fighter-bombers and AS-7 tactical air-to-surface missiles. They have also acquired Scud-B tactical surface-to-surface missiles that can strike Chinese airfields and cities from Kaiyuan in the west, to Nanning in Guangxi, to the west coast of Hainan Island. The Scud-B is an older Soviet system, and, while inaccurate, it can deliver a 1,000-kilogram high-explosive or chemical warhead on targets as far as 300 kilometers from the launch position. In view of Vietnam's new strength, the Chinese military could not guarantee a quick, contained lesson. 

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A Soviet Shadow

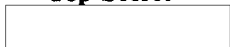
With a major Soviet naval and air presence at Cam Ranh Bay, China would also have to weigh heavily the possibility of Soviet intervention in any future Sino-Vietnamese hostilities. We believe it is unlikely that the Soviets would intervene in a purely Sino-Vietnamese conflict, but the Soviets have sought to deter the Chinese before by dispatching warships to the South China Sea. During the 1979 war, a Kresta-II cruiser led a task force into the South China Sea and a Sverdlov cruiser moved into the East China Sea.  the Soviets routinely maintain a complement of six surface combatants in the South China Sea and last November expanded their air operations at Cam Ranh Bay by transferring nine Badger (TU-16) bomber aircraft from a base near Vladivostok. 

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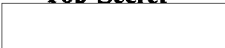
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We do not believe, however, that Soviet troop deployments along the Sino-Soviet border are a major military deterrent to Chinese action against Vietnam. China in 1979 prepared for the possibility of Soviet retaliation along the northern frontier and placed troops on a high state of alert but was not deterred from attacking Vietnam. Today, China has strengthened its northern defenses and is less vulnerable than in 1979 to Soviet pressure along their long land border.³

- China's increasing levels of material support and training for antigovernment insurgents in Laos offers the prospects of increasing the cost to the Vietnamese of their efforts to control Indochina.
- Mutual condemnation of Vietnam's takeover of Kampuchea has created new reasons to support Thailand and opened doors to improving relations with other Southeast Asian nations. Opposition to Vietnamese domination of Indochina as well as the growing Soviet naval presence at Cam Ranh Bay allows Beijing to point to a congruence of interest with US foreign policy in this part of East Asia.

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Prospects

Second Lesson Unlikely . . .

Although Beijing has the muscle to implement a wide variety of military options, we do not believe that China will undertake a major second lesson against Vietnam unless severely provoked. The 1979 invasion was costly both in terms of lives and resources as China lost 20,000 killed or wounded and had to raise its 1979 military budget by over 2 billion yuan to cover the cost of the war. Beijing today is committed to an ambitious program of economic modernization and would be reluctant to get involved in another prolonged conflict which would drain China's coffers and potentially cause domestic unrest.

Nonetheless, the price Beijing exacts today through limited military activity is not sufficient to force Vietnam to withdraw from Kampuchea. Short of a massive, and improbable, Chinese assault to take Hanoi, there is probably no military action Beijing can take that will break Vietnam's resolve. The best that Beijing can hope for is that through a combination of diplomatic and limited but persistent military pressure it can convince Hanoi that its interests are better served by a political settlement to the Kampuchean situation.

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. . . But the Tensions Remain

Even without a new border war, Beijing exacts a high price from Vietnam for its domination of Indochina and its collusion with the Soviet Union, and has few incentives to defuse the tension:

The hostility and diametrically opposed positions on Indochina point to a prolonged hostility between China and Vietnam. Beijing, over the last five years, has shown no willingness to accept Hanoi's many overtures for a reduction in tensions and continues to make a total Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea the precondition for any settlement. Vietnam, on the other hand, is unwilling to compromise its basic aim of controlling Indochina. We see no wavering on Moscow's part of its backing for the Vietnamese position, and thus we believe the impasse will continue.

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- The harassment along the land border compels Hanoi to maintain a large standing army at a relatively high state of readiness along the Chinese frontier.
- Beijing's assistance to Kampuchean resistance groups has helped to mire Hanoi in a long and inconclusive antiguerrilla campaign in Kampuchea.



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