

Introduction: The Vietnam War in Its International Setting

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For more than twenty years, from at least 1953 to 1973, Indochina served as the cockpit of Asia, a fulcrum where the interests of several great powers—notably China, the Soviet Union, and the United States—collided, competed, and conflicted, as did the regional interests of China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian nations. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnam War became the subject of emotionally and politically supercharged debate in the United States, a millstone dragging down the successive presidential administrations of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, something reflected in the continuous torrent of books on the subject that began in the 1960s and still shows no sign of abating.¹

Even today, for at least some Americans, Vietnam remains an open wound, its memory perennially bitter, as became apparent in the controversy provoked in the mid-1990s by former secretary of defense Robert S. McNamara's long-deferred memoirs, *In Retrospect*, when many of his former critics dissented bitterly from his stance that, although mistaken, he had acted in good faith first in greatly escalating his country's involvement

in the war, and then in failing to make public his growing private misgivings. McNamara's close involvement in the production of a 2003 documentary film, *The Fog of War*, covering his role in the making of major Johnson and Kennedy administration foreign policy decisions, not just Vietnam but also the Cuban missile crisis and others, predictably stirred up yet more controversy.²

Though perhaps to a lesser extent, within Asia, the Indochina wars, like their predecessors, have generated lasting tensions and, in particular, sensitive and disputed memories, as is readily apparent in the current press. For many years the governments of China, South Korea, and the Southeast Asian nations have attacked Japanese school textbooks for allegedly underplaying the history of Japanese militarism and aggression against its neighbors during the 1930s and World War II, disputes highlighted in the spring of 2005 by major anti-Japanese riots in several Chinese cities.³ In 2002, President Jiang Zemin of China, while visiting Vietnam, "urged Hanoi to alter some school history textbooks to make them less antagonistic towards China" and "to make more clear . . . China's assistance to Vietnam during the Vietnam War that ended in 1975." He also "voiced hope former Chinese dynasties' repeated invasions of Vietnam, which followed thousands of years of Chinese domination, would not be linked to the current Chinese administration's foreign policy."⁴ Meanwhile China—apparently fearing that "unflattering evidence" might emerge as to its role in bringing the Khmer Rouge to power in Cambodia in the mid-1970s and its subsequent acquiescence in Pol Pot's atrocities—in 2002 pressured President Hun Sen to scuttle the projected UN tribunal, which had been supposed to put surviving Cambodian Communist leaders on trial for their role in that regime's genocide.⁵

Yet, notwithstanding such continuing attempts to dictate what views of the Vietnam War are currently acceptable, as international tensions faded and new documentary materials, from Western, Asian, former Soviet, and East European archives became more readily available in the 1990s, a new era opened in the study of the Indochina wars and, indeed, in the broader history of the Cold War in Asia and elsewhere. Initially, the great bulk of the outpouring of scholarship and writing on the Vietnam War was American in origin, making it one of the very few wars, as three distinguished historians with some irony pointed out, whose history was written primarily by the losers.⁶ Given the persistent and traumatic impact of the Vietnam War upon the United States, this was to some extent understandable. Over time, however, this emphasis has changed, and the past decade in particular has seen a slew of books and articles seeking to appreciate the wars in Indochina in their international context.

The pioneering effort on this subject was undoubtedly R. B. Smith's ambitious multivolume work, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, some of whose numerous stimulating insights can now be proved, disproved, clarified, or supplemented by newly available archival materials.⁷ Fredrik Logevall's acclaimed study, *Choosing War*, surveyed the United States' 1963–65 decisions on the dramatic escalation of military commitments in Vietnam in the context of America's relations with its allies in Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, finding that while none except Australia thought those decisions wise, with the exception of President Charles de Gaulle of France, allied leaders failed to make strong representations on the subject to American officials.⁸

Caroline Page, a former British diplomat, has studied the nature and effectiveness of official U.S. propaganda on Vietnam in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, and its broader impact on American relations with these countries.⁹ The Australian historian Peter Edwards has published two comprehensive volumes on his nation's involvement in the wars in Indochina, and two studies of Canadian involvement in Vietnam have also appeared.¹⁰ Broadening the focus to U.S. allies in the Asian sphere, Robert Blackburn suggested that the response of the Thai, South Korean, and Philippine governments in contributing troops to the American war effort in Vietnam, as called for by President Johnson's "more flags" campaign, effectively meant that their soldiers were serving as "mercenaries."¹¹ Thomas Havens has also scrutinized the impact of the Vietnam War on Japan, the most significant U.S. ally in Asia.¹² From somewhat differing perspectives, Thomas A. Schwartz and John Dumbrell have assessed how the Vietnam War affected Johnson's ability to deal with both his country's European allies and the Soviet Union.¹³

Four collections of essays published in the past decade attempt to give some sense of the breadth of scholarship in some way related to the Indochina wars currently in progress. The first, edited by the British historian Peter Lowe, brought together perspectives from American, Australian, British, Chinese, Russian, and Vietnamese scholars on the war.¹⁴ Two years later, a volume edited by two American historians, Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger, expanded the focus to include not just the major protagonists, Vietnam, the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, plus Australia, but also the war's impact on a range of American allies—including the NATO alliance, South Korea, and Japan; its long-term effects on Southeast Asia; and how it affected U.S. flexibility in handling the Middle East.¹⁵

In 2003, Gardner joined with two German historians to produce an even more ambitious collection of essays, some of which drew analogies between

aspects of the Vietnam War and comparable historical episodes and events. Others not only focused on a range of international relationships during the war—including the assorted alliance concerns of the NATO powers, Thailand, Australia, and North Vietnam, and the war's impact on the international monetary system—but also considered the influence the war and protests against it exerted within Italian, West German, and East German politics and the American women's movement.¹⁶ Gardner and Gittinger followed this collection with a further compilation of essays by an international array of leading scholars from the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, Japan, China, Germany, Canada, and France, who discussed the various ways in which all those states, plus North Vietnam, South Vietnam, India, and Czechoslovakia, played some part in the lengthy attempts of the 1960s and early 1970s to end the war through negotiations of some kind.¹⁷

Much though by no means all of the new scholarship of the past decade, which clearly generated a great overall upsurge in investigating the international ramifications of the wars in Indochina, has been due to or at least greatly facilitated by the novel availability of archival materials from the communist or former communist bloc. The United States-based Cold War International History Project, founded in 1991, with its initial mission to encourage the opening of archival sources and the development of scholarship in the communist and former communist world, has published extensive selections from such sources and from the new scholarship to which they have given rise.¹⁸ Particularly notable, in relation to the current volume's broad themes, is the translation of *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977*, a compilation of transcripts or excerpts from official conversations obtained somewhat surreptitiously from unidentified archives and other sources in China and, in a few cases, Vietnam.¹⁹ A selection of these documents is included in this volume.

Although their provenance apparently varies, some of these documents may initially have been gathered or excerpted to serve as source material for China's *White Paper* of 1979, an official counterblast published in response to Vietnam's own *White Paper* justifying its own position on the war that had just erupted with China. In no country as yet is the complete archival record open, despite the extensive declassification of files in the United States, United Kingdom, and other Western countries. Indeed, after a period of rapidly expanding access in the early 1990s, some former Soviet archives were subsequently closed or sharply restricted, and many of their most significant sources were never generally open.²⁰ Still, former Soviet

and, increasingly, East and Central European archives are providing new insight into the whole span of the Cold War foreign policies of Asian communist powers, offering information simply unavailable in the archives of Western countries, whose dealings with those states were the reverse of intimate. The Russian academic Ilya V. Gaiduk and the Norwegian scholar Mari Olsen have both used Soviet sources to elucidate Soviet involvement in Indochina over part or whole of the period from the Geneva accords to the reunification of Vietnam in 1975.²¹

As a rule, within Asia, the archival position is more restrictive. Many of the most significant mainland Chinese archives are closed, while in others often ill-defined rules of archival access, since the late 1990s all too frequently subject to draconian retrospective interpretation by the Chinese Public Security Bureau and courts, in many cases retard and discourage serious scholarly research. Yet China has also seen an upsurge of scholarly interest and productivity, with the publication of many significant official—sometimes restricted—documentary compilations, the compilation of oral histories, the production of memoirs, and the publication of serious and scholarly historical works on many topics.²² As in present-day Russia, a new generation of younger Chinese scholars, often with doctorates earned in the United States, some of whom remain based in that country while others have returned home, are increasingly melding Chinese with Western, former Soviet, and other sources, while benefiting from the insights provided by their personal experience of spending their formative years in a still communist society to draw attention to the saliency in the Cold War of such issues as ideology and culture, which Western historians have often tended to discount and deemphasize.²³ Chinese scholars, whether based on the mainland or overseas, often show great ingenuity and creativity in exploiting the wealth of materials available in provincial, municipal, and specific bureau archives to illuminate the making and implementation of their country's foreign policy, and in correlating these with materials from other sources from different countries.²⁴ Sadly, at present it is still not always possible for them to provide complete citations of their sources.

Perhaps in partial response to China's flood of official, often *neibu* (classified), and semiofficial publications, the Vietnamese are publishing substantial volumes of official histories, documents, memoirs, and oral histories. In recent years, Western presses have also begun to publish translations of full-length Vietnamese works utilizing normally closed official sources.²⁵ Though Vietnamese sources remain considerably less accessible, especially to foreign scholars, than even comparable Chinese archives, valuable and

enlightening material is slowly becoming available, a process that ongoing scholarly interchanges undoubtedly facilitate. And in both the West and Asia, some scholars have begun to publish studies based upon Vietnamese materials. Particularly notable are Robert K. Brigham's study of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front; Mark Bradley's volume on pre-1950 Vietnam; Ang Cheng Guan's works presenting the "Vietnam War from the other side," giving the perspective of North Vietnam; Stein Tønnesson's volume on the origins of the Vietnamese revolution of 1945; Christopher E. Goscha's and Thomas E. Engelbert's extensive studies of relations among the Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Thai, and other Southeast Asian communist parties; William J. Duiker's works on the years of war and revolution in Vietnam, and his biography of Ho Chi Minh; and Jeffrey Kimball's study of the Nixon administration's Vietnam policies.²⁶

In international meetings from 1988 onward, Vietnamese and Americans also began to explore their often dramatically divergent perspectives on the Indochina wars. One early fruit of such encounters was a collection of essays, jointly edited by the American scholar Jayne S. Werner and the Vietnamese historian Luu Doan Huynh, the latter of whom participated in many of the events he described.²⁷ In 1995 the Watson Institute for International Relations of Brown University in the United States and Vietnam's Institute for International Relations in Hanoi began an oral history project that brought former officials and scholars from both sides together in several conferences and generated much provocative discussion, while McNamara's participation assured them copious press coverage.²⁸

During the past decade, the Cold War International History Project, whose first director, James G. Hershberg, was much involved in the aforementioned Vietnamese conferences, has itself organized and cosponsored, with a variety of partners, several conferences with an Asian theme—on Sino-American relations, the Cold War in Asia, Sino-Soviet relations, and the insights that East European archives can provide into the Cold War in Asia. This book is based upon one such conference, "New Evidence on China, Southeast Asia, and the Vietnam War," which was held at the University of Hong Kong in January 2000.²⁹ This conference was itself the third of several held starting in 1990 at that institution centering on themes of international diplomacy that included numerous mainland Chinese scholarly participants, as well as Russian, American, European, Australian, Israeli, and Vietnamese scholars, most of whose papers utilized a broad international range of source materials. One of its most notable accomplishments was the opportunity it provided for sometimes heated interchanges

between Chinese scholars and two Vietnamese counterparts, the redoubtable Luu Doan Huynh, and Doan Van Thang, both from the Institute for International Relations.

The most extensive study of Chinese involvement in the wars in Indochina, that of Zhai Qiang, gives an excellent survey of the quarter century from 1950 to 1975, but it can by no means serve as the last word on the subject; rather, it marks a beginning. No one historian, however diligent and talented, can hope to give definitive answers on every aspect of Chinese involvement in Vietnam, especially when new evidence is constantly becoming available in archives around the world, including in China itself. Various chapters of the present volume enlarge and elucidate upon themes raised by Zhai, such as the role of Mao Zedong, Chinese aid to Vietnam, Chinese efforts to limit the conflict, and the impact of the Vietnam War itself upon Sino-Soviet relations. In chapter 11 of this volume, Zhai himself provides a lengthy analysis of Chinese dealings with Cambodia, and other contributors have broadened the geographical focus to include the Soviet Union's views of both Vietnam and China in the mid-1950s, the role that long-standing U.S. hostility to China played in the decisions of 1964–65 to escalate the war, and French attitudes toward China and Vietnam.

Even so, this volume in no way pretends to give a complete picture of Chinese policy, or even Sino-Vietnamese relations, during the Indochina wars. Its contributors range from senior scholars and officials with decades of experience to young academics just finishing their doctorates, and even those from the same country are by no means committed to a single viewpoint. The chapters of this volume raise as many questions as they answer. It is to be hoped that, rather than being considered in any way conclusive, they will stimulate and indicate directions for further research, not least by many of the able contributors themselves.

Part I: From Colonial Rule to Escalation

For more than a quarter century after the foundation of new China, the mighty figure of Chairman Mao dominated Chinese politics, domestic and foreign, though it seems likely that from the late 1960s, as China reeled under the twin impact of the Cultural Revolution and ever more intense Sino-Soviet antagonism, Premier Zhou Enlai increasingly prevailed in the making of foreign policy.³⁰ It is fitting, therefore, that chapter 1 of this book—by Yang Kuisong, who has also written perceptively on Sino-Soviet and Sino-

American relations—surveys the entire span of Mao's policy toward Indochina.³¹ Relying heavily on newly available published collections of Chinese documents, and also utilizing unpublished materials, Yang gives a nuanced account of the gradual evolution of Mao's thinking on Indochina, which like recent studies by Chen Jian and Qiang Zhai emphasizes the close early ties between the Chinese and Vietnamese communist movements, and the reciprocal military assistance and even refuge which, before attaining power, the two afforded each other (as, indeed, did the Chinese and Korean movements).³²

In chapter 1, Yang depicts Mao as both principled and pragmatic. Given the genuinely international nature of Asian communism, Mao's very conscious sense that he sought to become the leader of nationalist, anticolonialist forces around the world, and Stalin's acquiescence in 1949–50 in China's assumption of a vanguard role in such revolutionary movements in Asia, retaining for the Soviet Union the captaincy of international proletarian revolution in developed countries, Chinese eagerness to assist Vietnam is even more explicable. As early as November 1949, indeed, Stalin sought to restrain Mao's eagerness to send Chinese troops to assist Ho's forces in Vietnam.³³ Yang likewise demonstrates that Mao's support for Vietnam changed over time. In 1954, he endorsed the policy advocated by Zhou and the Soviets, of pressuring Ho and the Viet Minh to accept, at least temporarily, the division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, a policy decision dictated in part by Chinese reluctance to encourage greater American involvement in Asia, and also by China's need, after many years of fighting in the anti-Japanese War, the Civil War, and the Korean War, to concentrate upon domestic development. Despite Mao's rather rambunctious determination to enter the Korean War in 1950, it seems that the unexpected U.S. military intervention in that conflict, and the protracted experience of fighting a lengthy, stalemated war, may have had a certain sobering impact upon him.³⁴ Yang also suggests that, in the mid-1950s, Chinese policymaking remained more democratic than it later became, leading Mao to yield to his more pragmatic colleagues, something he later claimed to regret as a betrayal of Vietnam's revolution.

After 1958, however, as he found Soviet efforts to attain peaceful coexistence with capitalism increasingly irksome, Mao viewed North Vietnam's resumption of revolutionary struggle against the South as a validation of his own belief in revolution. In the early 1960s, he rejected attempts by Zhou, Deng Xiaoping, and Wang Jiaxiang, the director of the Chinese Communist Party's International Liaison Department, to restrain the con-

flict in South Vietnam to a low intensity, a position they favored partly because they believed China needed to concentrate on internal economic recovery from the damage wreaked by the Great Leap Forward and the withdrawal of Soviet aid, and also because they sought to minimize the possibility of large-scale U.S. intervention.³⁵

Such policies reflected a broader switch in Mao's thinking, from the promotion of revolution and communism around Asia and elsewhere in the developing world through peaceful, democratic methods, to the assumption by China of the role of the "center of world revolution," with the establishment of training camps in China itself for young, foreign revolutionaries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, to whom China then provided military and economic assistance. At least verbally, Mao went so far as to contemplate Chinese military intervention in Indochina in response to any potential American commitment of troops. Rather ironically, in 1963 and 1964 China even attacked Ho for being insufficiently revolutionary, particularly in his adoption of Soviet rather than Chinese models of land reform, and for attempting to remain neutral in the Sino-Soviet split, when China would have preferred strong Vietnamese endorsement of its own position. Even more infuriating was North Vietnam's acceptance from late 1964 onward of Soviet assistance in its struggle with the United States, aid that surpassed, in technological sophistication and eventually in quantity, anything China could match, and which brought Soviet influence to China's own southern borders.

Even so, Chinese aid to Vietnam, already relatively substantial between 1956 and 1963, grew dramatically in the years 1964 to 1968, and China even helped to transport some Soviet aid to Vietnam itself. Yet from 1965 onward, Mao repeatedly attacked Soviet efforts to facilitate negotiations between North Vietnam and its enemies, and when, after the Tet Offensive of the spring of 1968, peace talks were begun, China likewise considered this policy mistaken and a betrayal of the revolutionary cause. Such disputes effectively drove Vietnam away from China, forcing it into closer ties with the Soviets. From 1969 onward, however, Mao—disappointed by the substantial failure of his policies of world revolution, and alarmed by the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, fierce Sino-Soviet border clashes, and Soviet threats of a nuclear attack upon China—showed himself "sober and capable of paying attention to the realities of power politics." He therefore endorsed Zhou's efforts to obtain protection against the Soviet Union by reopening relations with the United States, even though for two decades Chinese propaganda had depicted the latter as the chief and foremost of China's international enemies.