

Preface

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When I first visited Hanoi, in the fall of 1995—with a delegation of historians accompanying former U.S. secretary of defense Robert S. McNamara, as surreal a voyage as anyone who lived through the Vietnam War could imagine—within a few hours of reaching the city, I walked over to the History Museum a few noisy blocks east of Hoan Kiem Lake. Though my Vietnamese language abilities were essentially nonexistent, it didn't take a linguist to grasp the meaning of the display cases dominating the vast hall on the second floor. One after another, with dates extending back more than a millennium, they held maps of present-day Vietnam and China, with blue arrows reaching down from the northern neighbor only to confront red arrows racing up to rebuff them. Each, it was obvious, described an epic Vietnamese struggle against a Chinese attempt at domination—centuries before the more familiar battles against the French or the Americans. Though I couldn't decipher the explanatory panels, several names leapt out at me, already familiar from the streets outside; every Vietnamese city, I soon learned, featured main thoroughfares named after heroes of anti-Chinese revolts or resistance.

For one immersed in the Cold War but a bit hazy about its precursors, this vivid lesson in the persistence and pervasiveness of conflict in Sino-Vietnamese relations reinforced two central truths: that the histories of these two countries were inextricably intertwined; and that the expressions of eternal ideological solidarity uniting Beijing and Hanoi loudly proclaimed during the Vietnam War masked a far more complex reality—something that experts knew or at least surmised at the time, but that was not really made evident until these two former allies fought a nasty little border war just a few short years after the communist conquest of Saigon in the spring of 1975. Among those few who noticed the incongruous newspaper headlines—after the nightmare ended, most Americans did their best to forget Vietnam ever existed—there was considerable head scratching. Wait a minute: Hadn't we fought the war in the first place to stop Chinese expansionism? Weren't those communist regimes, headed by those grizzled revolutionaries Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, fully in cahoots in their quest to topple imperialist dominoes? What were these "comrades in arms" suddenly doing at each other's throats? "There's something happenin' here," Buffalo Springfield had sung of the fighting in Vietnam a decade earlier. "What it is ain't exactly clear. . . ."

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Finally, it is becoming clearer: Going behind the Bamboo Curtain, this volume penetrates and illuminates a relationship that for roughly a decade, beginning in the early 1960s, was as important to U.S. officials, and also as exasperatingly unfathomable, as any in the communist world. As the Vietnam War ascended to dominate America's foreign policy agenda and poison its domestic politics, those responsible for dealing with the turmoil in Southeast Asia found the mystery-enshrouded Beijing-Hanoi link both vital and vexing.

At every stage of the conflict, Washington's approach depended crucially on comprehending, or even influencing, the ties between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam (DRV). The roots of the U.S. commitment extended back, in fact, to the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War of 1949–50, which helped push Washington, after much vacillation, to back the French wholeheartedly against the Viet Minh and view the fight for Indochina in a Cold War context, linking it to the danger of further communist expansion in Asia rather than a mere nationalist anticolonial uprising.¹ Then, in the Kennedy years, as crises flared up over communist insurgencies in both Laos and South

Vietnam, Washington blamed a belligerent Beijing for egging on Hanoi, encouraging and supporting the armed struggles. When Lyndon B. Johnson sent hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops to South Vietnam and began bombing the North, he feared military escalation might trigger a large-scale direct Chinese intervention, reprising the Korean disaster a decade before. Then, as the Johnson administration for long, bloody years sought fruitlessly to open negotiations with North Vietnam, it blamed Beijing (and a purported “pro-Chinese” faction in Hanoi) for being stubbornly determined to fight on until total victory against the “criminal imperialist aggressor.” Finally, after U.S.-DRV talks started and quickly deadlocked in Paris, the Nixon-Kissinger strategy relied on “triangular diplomacy”—Washington’s simultaneous cultivation of improved relations with both communist powers, the Soviets and the Chinese—to manipulate Beijing, through a blend of enticement and coercion, into pressuring Hanoi into making concessions that would permit a “peace with honor” and an American exit from the war.²

Yet, at the time and for decades afterward, the truth of what transpired between these communist leaderships remained hidden beneath multiple layers of ideological dogma, cultural unfamiliarity, and pervasive secrecy. Only now, as the Vietnam War and the Cold War itself recede into history, can scholars scrutinize and inspect the kind of evidence about which contemporaneous analysts could only fantasize. Melodramatic as it may sound, one may without exaggeration state that CIA spies would have literally killed—or at least paid substantial bribes—for the types of intimate information and revealing insights into the Sino-Vietnamese alliance this book contains.

Once the schism between Moscow and Beijing broke out, Western analysts could at least collect firsthand accounts from one side of the story, as numerous Soviet bloc officials maintained contacts with Westerners and increasingly shed their inhibitions about confiding feelings of exasperation, consternation, and mystification concerning the Kremlin’s ex-ally. But Sino-Vietnamese ties were far different: U.S. intelligence analysts, both military and civilian, required to advise policymakers and engaged in their own frequently contentious debates over whether to accentuate cooperation or friction between Beijing and Hanoi, often had relatively little hard information to go on, and were at times reduced to the equivalent of reading the “tea leaves” of blustery public pronouncements issued by party mouthpieces like *Renmin Ribao* and *Nhan Dan*, or drawing broad inferences from cryptic military deployments or hearsay gossip.³ This was by design, not

accident: As a matter of culture and party discipline, both communist regimes kept a tight grip on information, permitted few outsiders to gain more than token access to their realms, and effectively concealed tensions between them behind militant protestations of ideological solidarity.

The process of uncovering this hidden history received a boost from the deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations following the communist victory in 1975. As their alliance degenerated into bitter recriminations, the two sides hurled historical accusations of betrayal and ingratitude, in the process disclosing previously secret episodes and details of such issues as Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Conference, and the significance of aid to Hanoi during the war against the Americans. Those accounts, however, were highly selective and warped by clashing political aims.

Far more beneficial to history, however, has been the process of Chinese modernization, spearheaded by Deng Xiaoping, accompanied by the ending of the Cold War. Since the late 1980s, despite the persistence in power of a nominally communist regime, a flood of historical materials has emerged from the PRC on the post-1949 era, ranging from memoirs, hagiographies, and oral histories to *neibu* (restricted) compilations of party documents to, most excitingly, the gradual opening of archives in various provinces and, finally, in Beijing itself. Such sources have enabled, for the first time, such scholars as Zhai Qiang, Chen Jian, and Yang Kuisong to reassess China's involvement in three decades of Cold War conflicts in "Indochina" or, more neutrally, Southeast Asia, going beyond Sinological accounts based largely on public sources or intelligence estimates by outsiders.⁴ Unfortunately, the declassification process in Vietnam itself has moved at a far slower pace, although, as this volume shows, the release of substantial fresh Chinese historical evidence—in addition to American, Russian, and other sources—is stimulating Vietnamese scholars to respond to a reinvigorated historical debate, and, one may hope, placing fresh pressure on Hanoi to reveal more of its own side of the story.⁵

The present volume builds on this foundation, gathering an international cross-section of scholars and primary sources—Chinese, Vietnamese, Western (both American and European), Russian—that, collectively, bring new information to the surface and advance original interpretations, addressing some old mysteries while also raising and examining previously unasked questions. Originally presented at a January 2000 conference at Hong Kong University in a bracing series of discussions that were collegial but at times grew heated—especially when Chinese and Vietnamese scholars disputed aspects of the breakdown in Sino-Vietnamese relations—the

chapters, since extensively revised, present an up-to-date, kaleidoscopic panorama of perspectives in a fluid, fast-changing field. Naturally, they cannot claim to offer a comprehensive or definitive account—many sources remain off-limits, and there are simply too many broad issues to cover—but readers should find the contributions exciting in several areas of overlapping interest: Not only do the Vietnam War and Sino-Vietnamese relations receive attention, but the chapters also enhance our understanding of several complex dynamics that are now at the cutting edge of scholarly investigation, such as the interactions between the conflicts in Southeast Asia, the decolonization process as a whole, and the evolution of the Sino-Soviet split and Sino-American relations during the Cold War.⁶

Finally, as with the best of the new international Cold War history, *Behind the Bamboo Curtain* rewards readers in additional ways. It is replete with “fly on the wall” moments when one feels privy to the inner sanctum of history, when figures like Mao and Ho, Zhou and Giap, Kissinger and Khrushchev, spring from the page and come to life. It also pieces together from disparate archives and sources, in different languages, countries, and continents, Rashomon-like tales of international intrigue that even those directly involved, seeing only their own side, could not have discerned. Few, if any, countries were able to escape the reverberations of the Asian crisis. Ultimately, and most important, this volume represents a new point of departure, which should inspire further investigations, most immediately in China and Vietnam, but also in the United States, Russia, European states on both sides of the shredded Iron Curtain, and the rest of the world.

Notes

1. For an excellent new study on how the United States came to throw its full support behind the French, see Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

2. Although China naturally surfaces sporadically in accounts of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, no focused study of U.S. policy toward China in the context of the war using declassified documents yet exists. The emergence of fresh communist and international evidence, highlighted by the present volume, suggests such a project might shed considerable light on U.S. policy toward both the war and the process of Sino-American normalization. For a start, a researcher might consult volumes of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series on both Vietnam and China, which are now available (online at http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/frusonline.html) for the Kennedy and Johnson years and are being released for the Nixon administration.

3. For two important fresh sources on U.S. intelligence estimates on Vietnam and

China during the war, see *Vietnam 1961–1968 as Interpreted in INR's Production*, by W. Dean Howells, Dorothy Avery, and Fred Greene, declassified November 2002, accessible on the National Security Archive Web site (<http://www.nsarchive.org>); and the collection of declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyses of the Vietnam War, accessible at the CIA's Freedom of Information Act Web site (http://www.foia.cia.gov/nic_vietnam_collection.asp).

4. For examples of this growing literature in English, see Zhai Qiang, "Beijing and the Vietnam Conflict, 1964–1965: New Chinese Evidence," *Cold War International History Project* [hereafter CWIHP] *Bulletin*, nos. 6–7 (Winter 1995–96): 233–50; Zhai Qiang, "Opposing Negotiations: China and Vietnam Peace Talks," *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 1 (February 1999): 21–49; Zhai Qiang, *Beijing and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965–1968*, CWIHP Working Paper 18 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1997); and Zhai Qiang, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–1969," *China Quarterly*, no. 142 (July 1995): 365–66; Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), chap. 8; Yang Kuisong, *Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949–1973*, CWIHP Working Paper 34 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2002); and Odd Arne Westad, Chen Jian, Stein Tonnesson, Nguyen Vu Tung, and James G. Hershberg, eds., *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977*, CWIHP Working Paper 22 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1998).

5. On the fitful release of Vietnamese archival sources, see, e.g., Mark Bradley and Robert Brigham, *Vietnamese Archives and Scholarship on the Cold War*, CWIHP Working Paper 7 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993); Fredrik Logevall, "Bringing in the 'Other Side': New Scholarship on the Vietnam Wars," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 77–93; and Pierre Asselin, "New Evidence from Vietnam," *Passport* (Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter), December 2004, 2–5.

6. For important new scholarly investigations of the interaction between the Sino-Soviet schism and the Vietnam War, see the dissertations (from Yale University and the London School of Economics and Political Science, respectively) and forthcoming books of Lorenz Luthi and Sergey Radchenko, both of whom extensively and creatively use Chinese, Russian, European (both East and West), U.S., and other sources in their narratives.