

China vulnerable to Viet-Soviet attack

The characterization of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam as a "limited punitive action" is as absurd as it is a criminally dangerous assessment, in a military situation that could bring the world to thermonuclear war. The Soviet Union, Cuba, and Vietnam have publicly defined the Chinese invasion as a replay of the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 and a prelude to a war against the Soviet Union.

As the Nazis were backed by assurances from the British, the Chinese are acting with the backing of the Anglo-American alliance as part of a global plan. Therefore, the Vietnamese front is being viewed by the Soviets in terms of global strategic calculations: it must be assumed that every Vietnamese military move down to the tactical deployments is being determined on that basis.

Soviet strategists at Red Army headquarters in Moscow studying their maps see the Chinese invasion as an obvious attempt to neutralize the Vietnamese threat on their southern flank, enabling troop redeployment to the Soviet front. A glance at the Eurasian map will reveal the strategic significance of the Sinkiang Province front with the Soviets. There, there are major Soviet industrial and military concentrations while on the Chinese border there are no population or industrial centers but only Chinese military staging areas for conventional and nuclear capabilities. The obvious threat posed to the Soviets in the Sinkiang border area makes it a primary candidate for a Soviet attack.

MacArthur, Giap, and Yang Te-shih

The Chinese commander, General Yang Te-shih, is conducting the Vietnam campaign as he conducted the Korean War three decades ago. The strategy involved is the sacrificial "human wave" tactics whose effectiveness is only guaranteed by the assurances that Chinese staging areas are secured from enemy attack. In Korea, Harry Truman covered Yang's flank by not allowing General MacArthur to attack those staging areas.

Vietnam's General Giap, being in the same tradition as General Tukhachevsky of the Red Army and General Douglas MacArthur of the U.S. Army, is pursuing an offensive strategy that, in avoiding frontal assaults, seeks the strategic mobility afforded by outflanking and enveloping his enemy. Unlike MacArthur, Giap has no Harry Trumans in Hanoi or Moscow.

The Chinese invaders crossed at four or five major points, but the topography of the border areas defines

the so-called "Friendship Pass" at Dong Dang in Lang Son province, and Mong Cai, along the coast, as the crucial areas, the traditional invasion routes over the centuries. (The last such Chinese invasion several hundred years ago failed miserably, with the Chinese suffering 300,000 casualties.) On the Chinese side of the border at these points are a dense communications and logistical infrastructure. General Yang, as in Korea, is recklessly counting on the immunity of these areas from enemy attack, as a result of China's "American card" protection.

This Chinese deployment was known well beforehand by the Vietnamese as a result of careful monitoring of the border situation over a period of a year, and most intensely over the past several weeks. On the ground Giap aims at employing the same strategy he employed at Dien Bien Phu against the French, and in the 1975 spring offensive in South Vietnam: draw his enemy out at a battlefield of his own choosing, creating the conditions for effectively outflanking, enveloping, and eventually destroying the enemy forces.

With reports of thousands of fresh Chinese troops pouring through the two main points, the knocking out of the staging areas inside China will become crucial for the Vietnamese. Despite the superiority of Vietnamese Mig-23s and captured U.S.-made aircraft, the Vietnamese have no strategic bombing capability, and no amphibious capability to use in a replay of General MacArthur's operations at Ichon during the Korean War, a highly successful amphibious landing behind North Korean lines. Moreover, despite the fact that the Vietnamese have superior weaponry, they lack an in-depth capability in terms of experienced cadre to carry out a protracted war, especially up against the "human wave" tactics of the Chinese. Moreover, the continued unstable situation in Cambodia could leave that Vietnamese flank vulnerable.

If the Chinese stay ...

If the Chinese do not withdraw, the only option becomes direct Soviet intervention, either a direct strike at the Chinese staging areas or some other appropriate target or combination of targets in China. The Soviets are steadily beefing up their naval presence in the region.

Fighting on their own territory, the Vietnamese nevertheless are giving the Chinese a bloody nose. The Chinese have suffered 8,000 casualties and have had over 100 of their tanks knocked out as a result of skillfully effected Vietnamese encircling tactics.

But as the Chinese commit more and more troops in the hope of gaining the initiative, they will only be lowering the threshold for a major Soviet intervention. The generals of Peking should heed Soviet warnings: "Hands off Vietnam."

— Dean Andromidas