

Vietnam and China talk while preparing for a new war

While Vietnam and China are talking in Hanoi, both sides are preparing for a new outbreak of fighting that may this time involve the Soviet Union and the United States. The impetus for the present talks, especially when the opening negotiating positions of the two sides are examined, clearly comes from the Vietnamese. The Chinese for their part, while obliged to talk, are already proclaiming, as Vice-Premier and Chinese strongman Deng Xiaoping did this past week, that China is ready to "punish" Vietnam again if their "provocations" continue. With Henry Kissinger in Peking telling the Chinese that their previous invasion was a "moral" and "courageous" act, the Chinese seem to feel assured that the Carter Administration and others here will back them up.

Indeed Joseph Kraft, that noted mouthpiece for high-level policymakers in Washington, made clear in a recent column that if China goes to try to "teach" Vietnam a lesson" again, the U.S. will not this time remain so distant from the conflict, and neither will the Soviet Union.

The circumstances of the talks in Hanoi are shaped in large part by events in the region, particularly in the neighboring Indochinese states allied to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The Laotians last week sent a note to the United Nations Secretary General and the Security Council protesting Chinese incursions into their country, including stirring up of Meo tribesmen who inhabit the area of northern Laos and stretch into China, and warning of Chinese preparations for an invasion into Laos.

The Cambodia situation is the key to the present events, however. The Chinese are clearly perturbed that, following the failure of their previous invasion which resulted in heavy Chinese casualties and much destruction of Vietnamese life and property, they made no dent in the core regular forces of the Vietnamese army and did not force them to remove forces from Cambodia and Laos. More importantly, in the past weeks combined Vietnamese and Cambodian forces (of the new Phnom Penh government) have carried out a major offensive which has succeeded in smashing

remaining concentrations of Pol Pot forces and driving them into Thailand. With the rainy season approaching in weeks, it looks as if they will have scored the January victory of the Heng Samrin Kampuchean United National Front.

China, then, is in a strategic box. Their initial invasion was aimed at saving their barbaric protégés in Cambodia and at destroying the Vietnamese who stand as an obstacle to the Chinese designs of dominating the Southeast Asian region. If the Vietnamese are able to consolidate their alliance with Laos and Cambodia, China's great power hopes will fade rapidly. China, from Peking's standpoint, must act—but is such action going to bring anything except a greater and more disastrous military and political defeat for the Peking regime?

Negotiations betray China's strategy

The conduct of the talks gives the Chinese game away. At the time of the invasion China sanctimoniously proclaimed that this was limited response to Vietnamese border provocations and offered to negotiate. After getting a healthy drubbing from Vietnamese forces, mostly irregular units, the Chinese withdrew, likely under the shadow of imminent Soviet intervention. The talks began with the Vietnamese making a reasonable three-point proposal (printed below) which took seriously the Peking regime's own premise for its actions by proposing steps to demilitarize the border region and settle border claims.

The Chinese response was to dismiss the border issues as relatively unimportant and instead call for Vietnam to withdraw its forces from Laos and Cambodia, recognize Chinese claims to two island groups in the South China Sea (the Paracels and Spratley Islands), pledge no Soviet military presence in Vietnam, and generally acquiesce in China's domination of the area. The Chinese aims then are barely hidden and the rationale for their costly invasion is deftly put into the desk drawer ... for now.

The Vietnamese counterresponse was twofold. They denounced the Chinese lack of sincerity, warned about

buildup of Chinese troops, Chinese incursions into Vietnamese air and water space, and then reiterated their three-point proposal. Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong told Western reporters accompanying U.N. Secretary General Waldheim that the talks had not broken down, that Vietnam is ready to keep talking. He also rejected Waldheim's mediation offer as unnecessary—what he did not say on that was that the offer, which the Chinese have embraced, is obviously part of an effort to rescue Peking from its dilemma.

The Waldheim offer resembles the idea, floated by Sihanouk in Peking, by Assistant Secretary of State Warren Christopher, and others, to hold a Geneva-style "international conference" to discuss the "neutralization" of Laos and Cambodia. The Chinese play it both ways—on one side they run guns to the Pol Potists and

pressure the shaky Thai regime to allow sanctuary and actual aid to the remnants (allowing them to escape a Vietnamese-Cambodia trap at the border) in hopes of keeping their brutal friends alive. On the other hand they play with the pathetic Sihanouk as the "neutral" option, a man who is now reduced to dining with and praising Henry Kissinger—the man responsible in large part for Sihanouk's ouster in 1970. It is highly unlikely, given Vietnamese determination not to give the Chinese any maneuvering room, that such ploys will work. Peking then must choose—war again, a war that may become a global confrontation within days, or back off. Presumably the top level leadership meeting reported going on now in Peking is making that ominous decision.

—Daniel Sneider

The Vietnamese peace proposal

The following proposal, entitled "Main Principles and Contents of a Three-Point Settlement of the Problems Concerning the Relations Between the Two Countries," was put forward by the Vietnam government delegation in the first session between the Vietnamese delegation and the Chinese delegation negotiating an end to the hostilities between the two nations on April 18, 1979 in Hanoi:

1. Urgent measures to secure peace and stability in the border areas of the two countries and to ensure an early reunion of the people captured during the war with their families:

a) To refrain from concentrating troops close to the border-line, to separate the armed forces of the two sides: the armed forces of all kinds of each side along the entire border-line to pull back into their territory to a distance of three to five kilometres from the line of actual control prior to February 17, 1979.

b) To stop all acts of war provocation and all forms of hostile activities violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the other side and threatening its security.

c) The zone lying on either side of the line of actual control mentioned above and wherein the armed forces of the two sides will be no longer present, shall become a demilitarized zone. The status of this demilitarized zone shall be agreed upon between the two sides.

d) The two sides shall exchange at once lists of people captured by the two sides during the war so that they may be returned as soon as possible.

e) To set up a joint commission of the two sides to supervise and control the implementation of the above-mentioned measures.

2. Restoration of the normal relations between the two countries on the basis of the principles of peaceful coexistence: respect for independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity; non-aggression, refraining from the use of force or the threat of the use of force; non-interference in the internal affairs of the other side; settlement through negotiations of disputes and differences in the relations between the two sides, development of economic and cultural relations in a spirit of mutual respect and mutual benefit.

On that basis, to restore railway, civil aviation, postal, etc. relations.

To resolve the question of the aftermath of the war.

3. Settlement of border and territorial problems between the two countries on the principle of respect for the status-quo of the border-line left by history and delineated by the 1887 and 1895 Conventions signed between the French Government and the Tsing Government, as agreed upon between the Vietnamese and Chinese sides; respect for independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.