CHINESE MILITARY STRATEGY

IN THE THIRD INDOCHINA WAR

The last Maoist war

Edward C. O'Dowd

ASIAN SECURITY STUDIES

Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War

This book examines the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts of the late 1970s and 1980s, attempting to understand them as strategic, operational, and tactical events.

The Sino-Vietnamese War was the Third Indochina War, and contemporary Southeast Asia cannot be properly understood unless we acknowledge that the Vietnamese fought three, not two wars to establish their current role in the region. The war was not about the Sino-Vietnamese border, as frequently claimed, but about China's support for its Cambodian ally, the Khmer Rouge, and this book addresses both US and ASEAN involvement in the effort to support the regime. Although the Chinese completed their troop withdrawal in March 1979, they retained their strategic goal of driving Vietnam out of Cambodia at least until 1988, but it was evident by 1984–85 that the Chinese Army, held back by the drag of its "Maoist" organization, doctrine, equipment, and personnel, was not an effective instrument of coercion.

Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War will be of great interest to students of Southeast Asian politics, Chinese security, and military and strategic studies in general.

Edward C. O'Dowd holds the Major General Matthew C. Horner Chair of Military Theory at the Marine Corps University, Quantico.

Asian security studies
Series Editors: Sumit Ganguly
Indiana University, Bloomington
and
Andrew Scobell
US Army War College

Few regions of the world are fraught with as many security questions as Asia. Within this region it is possible to study great power rivalries, irredentist conflicts, nuclear and ballistic missile proliferation, secessionist movements, ethnoreligious conflicts and inter-state wars. This new book series will publish the best possible scholarship on the security issues affecting the region, and will include detailed empirical studies, theoretically oriented case studies and policy-relevant analyses as well as more general works.

China and International Institutions
Alternate paths to global power
Marc Lanteigne

China's Rising Sea Power
The PLA Navy's submarine challenge
Peter Howarth

If China Attacks Taiwan
Military strategy, politics and economics
Edited by Steve Tsang

Chinese Civil–Military Relations
The transformation of the People's Liberation Army
Edited by Nan Li

The Chinese Army Today
Tradition and transformation for the 21st century
Dennis J. Blasko

Taiwan's Security
History and prospects
Bernard D. Cole

Religion and Conflict in South and Southeast Asia
Disrupting violence
Edited by Linell E. Cady and Sheldon W. Simon

Political Islam and Violence in Indonesia
Zachary Abuza

US–Indian Strategic Cooperation into the 21st Century
More than words
Edited by Sumit Ganguly, Brian Shoup and Andrew Scobell

India, Pakistan and the Secret Jihad
The covert war in Kashmir, 1947–2004
Praveen Swami

Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War
The last Maoist war
Edward C. O'Dowd

Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-making
Confucianism, leadership and war
Huiyun Feng

Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War

The last Maoist war

Edward C. O'Dowd

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2007
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-08896-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-41427-X (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-203-08896-4 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-41427-2 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-08896-8 (ebk)

In Memoriam
Denis Twitchett (1925–2006)
Scholar, Mentor, Friend

Contents

Maps

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the scholars and friends who have helped me complete this study. I owe special thanks to Professor Susan Naquin for her guidance and insight. Without her endless patience, this project could never have been completed. I wish to thank Professors Ellis Joffe, Tom Christiansen, Sheldon Garon, and Paul Miles for their contributions to this project. I also thank Professors Arthur Waldron and Denis Twitchett for their encouragement and support.

Professor Liz Lunbeck and Dean David Redman deserve special thanks for giving me a second chance to complete the dissertation upon which this study is based. John F. Corbett, Jr has generously shared his materials and knowledge about this topic. His friendship and support have been crucial to this project. Professor Paula Baker has been unceasingly helpful, and I am grateful for her comments and encouragement.

Merle L. Pribbenow made important contributions by sharing his library and translations of Vietnamese military publications. Keith, who does not need to be further identified, deserves special thanks for providing assistance, translations, and help with Chinese language material. Weber Wung also deserves special thanks for his help in this area.

Dr Lew Stern, Dotty Avery, and C. Dennison Lane loaned me important papers and shared their views on the topic. Their observations were essential to my understanding of the Southeast Asian situation.

Ralph Mavis and Professor Bob Schopp helped out by listening to a litany of strange ideas and gently skewering the worst.

Diane Bischoff, Anna Jean Shirley, and Jagjeevan Virdee made this project a reality even when my lack of administrative, computer, graphic, and other skills made it almost certain to fail.

This study could not have been completed without the support of the Marine Corps University Foundation.

Any flaws and shortcomings readers find in this volume are the responsibility of the author.

Part I

Introduction

1 Introduction

On February 17, 1979, more than 400,000 soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)[1] attacked across the Sino-Vietnamese border. Responsibility for the assault on the low, steep hills along the National Highway 4 in Vietnam's Lang Son province fell in part to the Chinese 165th Division, a body of more than 12,500 men, including almost 1,300 cadres.[2] As the campaign dragged on, the division tallied its losses and discovered that during the slow, painful advance it had "promoted on the firing line" – to replace casualties – 243 cadres.[3] Although some of the surviving cadres attributed their casualties and battlefield problems to inadequate training or weak leadership, this study shows that the fundamental cause of their problems was the Maoist ideology that in 1979 permeated the PLA. The 165th Division, like all other PLA divisions, had followed the Maoist line, holding the requisite meetings and teaching its conscripts the key tenets of Maoist ideology. But when its poorly trained cadres led the massed formations of the 165th into the waiting guns of the Vietnamese Army in the fields near Hill 339, ideology was not enough.

The actions of the 165th Division were part of China's response to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on December 25, 1978. The political objective of the Chinese strategy was to induce Vietnam to end its operations against the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia.[4] The Chinese military plan was simple: PLA troops would, in a lightning campaign, seize the capitals of Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai provinces and thereby force the Vietnamese to abandon their Cambodian campaign or to fight a two-front war. A huge force of more than 400,000 troops was to be deployed against about 50,000 regular Vietnamese troops and a few militiamen.

Rather than the expected few days of fighting, the PLA's capture of the three towns took a bitter three-week struggle. The political objective was not achieved: Vietnam did not abandon its occupation of Cambodia, nor did Vietnam transfer a large number of troops from the Cambodian operation to defend its northern border against the Chinese.

China withdrew from northern Vietnam on March 16, 1979, but it did not abandon its strategic goal of persuading the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia. From the end of its 1979 invasion until the last Vietnamese soldier left Cambodia in 1989, China continued to threaten Vietnam with another

attack: "a second lesson." In 1981 and 1984, China and Vietnam engaged in large-scale battles along the border. At other times, China pursued a strategy of "artillery diplomacy," firing massive artillery barrages at Vietnamese villages to draw Vietnamese reinforcements to the border to face the threat of a "second lesson."

The PLA, even backed with all the elements of Chinese national power, was incapable of bringing about a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. Vietnam remained in Cambodia for ten years, departing to leave China's ally, the Khmer Rouge, in ruins and Hun Sen, a Vietnamese ally, as head of the Cambodian state. In the end, the 1989 withdrawal of Vietnam was forced not by the PLA, but by the collapse of Soviet support for Vietnam, by the support of China, the United States, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the Khmer Rouge and other Cambodian opposition groups, and by the hunger of the Vietnamese people for a share in the region's economic prosperity of the 1980s. The Chinese strategy was a failure.

From a longer perspective, it is now clear that the Chinese strategic failure was a small but significant part of the story of the four decades of conflict that created contemporary Southeast Asia. The Chinese attacks on Vietnam from 1979 to 1987 were part of a wider war in Indochina. In the First Indochina War, the Vietnamese fought the French from 1945 to1954 in an effort to establish an independent socialist state under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In the Second Indochina War (1959–75), the North Vietnamese communists and their supporters in the South fought the United States and the Republic of Vietnam to unify the Vietnamese nation. In the Third Indochina War, which was fought from 1978 to 1991, the boundaries and power relationships between the Vietnamese and the Chinese were determined. In a sense, these three wars defined the shape of contemporary Southeast Asia. The Chinese incursion in 1979 and the Chinese attacks along the Sino-Vietnamese border during the following years were campaigns within the broader series of diplomatic, military, economic, and social events that made up the Third Indochina War.

If this is the case, and this dissertation argues that it is the case, then there are several important questions that must be answered. How can we best understand the Sino-Vietnamese violence of the 1970s and 1980s? Was there a "Third Indochina War?"[5] What was the Chinese objective in this war? What events made up the war? How did the Chinese armed forces perform in the war? If they performed well, then why did they perform well? If they did not perform well, then why did they not do well?

Chinese historians have not been very helpful. They have largely ignored the history of what they call the "counterattack in self-defense on the Sino-Vietnamese border" (*zhong-yue bianjing ziwei huanjizhan*),[6] disconnecting the war from its strategic objective in an effort to make the PLA appear more formidable and China appear less threatening to its neighbors. By excision, careful phrasing, and loose interpretation, China has recast the recent history of the PLA and sought to divorce itself from the Pol Pot reign of excess. Downplaying the campaign as a "border war," historians have omitted mention that it

had the strategic objective of compelling the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia; they also have glossed over the size and strength of the invasion force, saying that the "Chinese PLA border defense troops in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces" conducted the attacks. The Chinese version of history furthermore states that the war lasted from February 17, 1979 to March 16, 1979, making no mention of the battles and barrages of the 1980s that kept the region in turmoil for almost ten years. Even the name the Chinese coined to identify the war is misleading.

Western scholars have not been any more helpful than their Chinese colleagues. Marilyn B. Young, one of the most widely read American scholars of Vietnam's wars, said the Chinese invasion force comprised of about 200,000 men and that it met a Vietnamese force of one regular division and about 100,000 regional and militia troops. She described the war as lasting sixteen days, from February 17, 1979 to March 5, 1979, and made no reference to the fighting after 1979. Although a weak connection between the battles on the northern border of Vietnam and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was identified, she did not explore the relationship in any detail.[7]

Questions and arguments

A careful reading of the major works in the field reveals a series of questions.

How can we best understand the Sino-Vietnamese violence of the 1970s and 1980s? The current literature never mentions that there was a "Third Indochina War." These studies assert that there was simply a series of small-scale, disconnected attacks in northern Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. The Chinese fought a brief border war and the Vietnamese fought a series of "Dry-Season Offensives." There was no connection between any of these events. In fact, the most recent scholarship on the subject claims the "border war" between China and Vietnam was more closely related to Sino-Soviet competition than it was to the events in Indochina.[8] The most recent Chinese treatment says the Chinese incursions of February–March 1979 were just a border war; the authors make no connection with events in Cambodia or the relationship with the Soviet Union.[9]

What was the Chinese objective in the Third Indochina War? As mentioned above, recent Western and Chinese authors have different views. Elleman, cited above, claims that the hostilities were a part of the broader competition between the Chinese, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The Chinese claim the attacks responded to Vietnamese border provocations.

What were the facts of the war? Were the attacks just a few border guards engaging in a series of widely separated firefights or were there regular troops engaged in large-scale operations? Where were the battles? Did the Chinese focus their attacks on a few cities or did they attack all the provincial capitals they could reach? The Chinese claim the engagements were minor encounters in which Chinese border guards defeated Vietnamese troops. Western analysts say that as many as 200,000 PLA soldiers conducted the attacks. How can these views be reconciled?

How did the Chinese do? If they did well, why did they do well? Was the PLA in 1979 another of the many "Ever-Victorious Armies" found in Chinese history books? On the other hand, if the PLA did poorly, why did it do poorly?

This volume responds to these issues in a new way. In summary, the argument it presents can be outlined as follows.

The Sino-Vietnamese violence of the 1970s and 1980s is best understood as a Third Indochina War

It lasted from the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 to the Paris Peace Accords of 1991. The last military incidents occurred in the late 1980s. China, the Cambodian factions (communist and noncommunist), and Thailand were allied against the Vietnamese and another Cambodian faction. The Soviet Union supported the Vietnamese and the United States and ASEAN supported China and her allies. The Chinese 1979 incursion was a campaign in the broader war. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 narrate the events of this regional war.

During the Third Indochina War, the most important objective of China's national military strategy was to induce the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia

This objective remained constant. From the Chinese point of view, the developments in Indochina were all closely connected. Events in Cambodia or Thailand drew a response from China. The Chinese coordinated their military actions to meet Vietnamese military threats against their Cambodian and Thai allies. Additionally, the Chinese national military strategy sought to draw Vietnamese forces away from Cambodia and make political points by military action. Chapter 6 examines this intricate relationship.

The facts of the war have been established in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6

Chapter 5 describes the 1979 campaign. Chapter 7 explores the military operations in the years that followed. Ultimately, a military campaign depends on the success or failure of the leaders and soldiers at the tactical level. In an attempt to inform the reader about the facts of the war at this level, Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 establish the duration and scope of the war. Chapter 5 provides a detailed examination of the Battle of Lang Son.

The PLA did not perform effectively during the campaigns and battles of the Third Indochina War

There were numerous problems of every type. To understand the source of these problems, the reader must be familiar with the ideas and institutions that made the PLA a Maoist army during these years. Chapter 2 outlines the Chinese polit-

ical work system and demonstrates the unique methods and relationships of the PLA under the Maoist system.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 explore the PLA's effectiveness during the 1979 campaign by explaining the PLA's status on the eve of the war (Chapter 8), the role of political work (Chapter 8), and the relationship between politics and tactics (Chapter 9) during the 1979 campaign.

Society, ideology, and military effectiveness

The Chinese invasion of Vietnam was in reality an enormous military undertaking. But whereas in 1950 and 1962 Chinese armies had surged over their United Nations and Indian enemies in unstoppable waves,[10] this time the onrush was that of a rivulet. What had changed? If Maoist ideology had been the key to PLA success in earlier wars, why did it not inspire the same performance in this conflict?

The PLA's actions in this, the Third Indochina War (1978–91), raise important questions about the relationship between war and society in late twentieth-century China. All societies that choose to engage in warfare to achieve political objectives must develop the institutions – armies – through which to pursue their goals, and these institutions in many ways resemble the societies that create them. Any study of society that presumes to be comprehensive must include an examination of that society's wars and the armies engaged in and the strategies that informed those wars. Michael Howard observed, "to abstract war from the environment in which it is fought . . . is to ignore a dimension essential to the understanding . . . of the societies which fought them."[11]

Society shapes the tactics that armies employ, the way that they fight, and the way that they are organized, and the sum of the actions of soldiers on the battlefield dictates the success or failure of a strategy. This study examines the actions of Chinese soldiers in the Third Indochina War, analyzes their tactics, and shows the relationship of those tactics to the Chinese society of the era. Why did the PLA employ massed infantry attacks and direct artillery fire? The PLA had an extensive political work program that was the model of Maoist institutions. What was the impact of political work on the battlefield? The PLA took pride in its cadre system: why then did it run it down to the point that it took frantic efforts to resuscitate that system on the eve of the war? The answers to these questions lie in the way Chinese society shaped the PLA.

There also are important intervening variables between society and warfare. Although Mao Zedong had died in 1976, the policy of "politics in command" continued to define almost every aspect of Chinese society and had strong and clear influences on the way China shaped and used its military forces in 1979. As a result, the PLA exhibited all the strengths and weaknesses of the society from which it came. At the lowest level of the PLA, political officers used the political sayings of Mao to motivate conscripts. At the highest level, the *Selected Military Writings of Mao Zedong* influenced every operation and strategic plan. It was not until Deng Xiaoping fully assumed power in the early 1980s that

Chinese society and the PLA gradually began to dismantle the heavily politicized army and society that was Mao's legacy. Arthur Waldron has called the period of heaviest Maoist influence on the Chinese army and society "the Maoist detour" on the road to a modern China. The Third Indochina War was the last mile on that detour.[12]

The questions of the effectiveness of the PLA are central to this study, and the evidence is that the resources that the Chinese army committed to the war against Vietnam were used neither effectively nor efficiently. At the simplest level, a military unit that is capable of taking a hill in one day when exercising a three-to-one numerical advantage over the hill's defenders is more effective than a unit that requires a ratio of ten attackers to each defender. Military effectiveness, at this basic level of analysis, can be measured by focusing on three basic criteria. First, the degree to which each unit accomplished its assigned task: did the unit take the hill or not? Second, the success the unit had in gaining or holding ground, in terms of kilometers gained per day or the length of time that it held its ground against attack. Third, the number of troops that it took to achieve these results and the number of casualties sustained.[13]

There are of course other ways to assess military effectiveness. Kenneth M. Pollack, for example, has defined it as "the ability of an armed service to prosecute military operations and employ weaponry in military operations."[14] This definition emphasizes the ability of people – soldiers – to perform their military duties and usefully informs Pollack's assessment of the recent military history of the Arabs. The unavailability of essential information means that the same definition cannot be applied to Chinese military operations, however. The commonsense explanation of effectiveness must therefore here apply.

Leadership, courage, and training are at the heart of an army's effectiveness. In addition to these, the Maoist PLA had a political motivation system – an ideology – and the institutions that made it effective in every unit down to the level of the newest conscript. In 1979, the Chinese view was that the PLA's political work system made its soldiers more effective than those of its opponents. Ideology can be important to an army's effectiveness. According to Omar Bartov, the ideology of the German army in World War II made it a strong and effective fighting force despite its weaknesses in materiel and planning.[15] The PLA's earlier history accords with this view of ideology as the secret weapon that can enable an army to overcome a stronger opponent, but its experience in the Third Indochina War demonstrates that the opposite can also be the case: ideology can weaken an army. When an army relies too heavily on ideology and forsakes materiel, tactical, leadership, and organizational innovation, it can become ineffective.

This volume attempts to demonstrate that Maoism made the PLA ineffective in 1979. The PLA pitted about 420,000 troops against 50,000–60,000 Vietnamese soldiers. In every area of operation, the PLA outnumbered the Vietnamese. The soldiers of the two armies were armed with similar weapons, yet the Chinese failed to accomplish their objectives in an effective manner.[16]

The PLA ultimately was ineffective as a fighting force because after the early

1960s and until about 1991, it was not intended to be a fighting force. The 1979 PLA was designed to serve as a political model for the transformation of Chinese society, not as a tool of Chinese national strategy. Chinese society and its leaders had shaped the PLA as a political tool and then used it to refashion society. As a result, the PLA had distributed its political cadre throughout the country to create Maoist factories, Maoist farms, and Maoist culture groups. During the Third Indochina War, when it was called upon to perform on a modern battlefield, the PLA paid the price in chaos and casualties.

This study is not a history of Chinese military doctrine, foreign policy, international relations, or the intricacies of Sino-Vietnamese political affairs.[17] Nor is it about generals, diplomats, and politburo members.[18] This study is an analysis of China's use of force in the Third Indochina War. It is about warfare. "Western" historians have largely ignored the military history of China, and this study is an attempt to revise current interpretations of the war while filling the gap in our understanding of the Chinese military past.

The chapter brings new sources to bear on the interpretation of Chinese and Vietnamese actions during the 1979 campaign in northern Vietnam and the remainder of the Third Indochina War. Earlier studies of the conflict have been based on newspaper reports and interviews with Chinese and Vietnamese politicians and diplomats. This study draws most of its information from the Chinese PLA documents. After the war, the PLA collected and published reports from the units involved in the campaign. Although not all units are represented, the General Political Department of the PLA nonetheless was able to publish 167 reports in two volumes.[19] The reports cover the political cadres' attempts to implement the "three basic principles of political work" (*zhengzhi gongzuo sanda yuanze*) and the reaction of the troops to their efforts. These reports, which were only authorized for distribution within the PLA to the regimental level, explain the way that the Chinese soldiers performed in combat. The Guangzhou Military Region Front Political Department Cadre Section also published seventy reports about the status of the cadre system during the campaign.[20] These reports give a picture of the problems the cadre system faced in the 1979 battles along the border.[21]

The Vietnamese contribution to this story is based on a wide variety of Vietnamese unit histories. Unlike the Chinese, the Vietnamese have published a large number of histories of the units involved in the conflict, providing a detailed picture of the battles and battlefield movements of both sides.[22]

Both the Chinese and Vietnamese sources are full of political jargon and, particularly in the case of the Chinese sources, claim a series of victories where there may have been only starvation, death, and defeat. The Chinese sources furthermore have a weak chronological line: they were written in the first few months after the 1979 campaign and the authors typically sacrificed chronological narrative for an assessment of the things that went right and the things that went wrong. Part II of this study accordingly gives a narrative account of the incidents and Part III looks more closely at the things that the writers found significant.

The Third Indochina War was the "Last Maoist War" because it marked the end of an era in which a set of almost religious ideas, Maoism, had shaped China's society and army. This study attempts to show the battlefield implications of this situation and provides new information to fill some of the gaps in the record.

Part II

Background

2 The Chinese political work system

The PLA and the armies of the Soviet Union, North Korea, North Vietnam,[1] South Vietnam, and the Republic of China all at one time or another have had a political work system (*zhengzhi gongzuo*). Unique among these, the PLA of 1979 was Maoist, basing its system on the precepts that Mao Zedong devised during the early years of the Chinese Civil War. The PLA's strategic concepts, operational plans, and tactical schemes may have been similar to those of the other armies, but in the eyes of its leadership it had an edge on effectiveness gained through its political work. Where other armies had political work systems to ensure the reliability of their officers or to perform psychological operations against their opponents, only the PLA had a political work system that also provided a troop motivational program to enhance military effectiveness.

The PLA of 1979 had a singular set of organizational structures and doctrines that supported a core group of interlocking concepts and that supported the spread of these concepts, without challenge, as the PLA evolved. Western armies have not employed political work systems because they violate the military premise that armies and their leaders are apolitical and that soldiers are motivated by appeals to common sense and a basic hierarchy of needs. The Chinese political work system (*zhengzhi gongzuo*), in direct contrast, was intended to motivate the troops by giving them a set of ideals. It defined the relationship between the army and the people and urged the soldiers to behave properly toward civilians; it defined the relationship between the leaders and the led and helped to create a bond of comradely cooperation; and it defined the relationship between the army and the enemy. War is without exception a terrible affair, but the political work system sought to mitigate the bloodiness of war to achieve faster, more decisive results.

In the Maoist PLA, every position of responsibility, from squad leader to chief of the General Staff Department (GSD), was held by a Communist Party member, thereby ensuring that political work was the only motivational program in the PLA. This chapter identifies the components of this Maoist political work system and traces the events that created them. It also examines the ways in which the political work system and the PLA interacted with the Chinese society. By exploring the role of political work, it shows why the 1979 PLA was the "first among equals" of Maoist institutions.