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In the Eye of the Storm: A Study of DPRK and DRV Foreign Policy 1964-68

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Introduction

All the communist powers seemed like a monolithic bloc to the United States and its allies, yet nothing could have been further from the truth during the 1960s. Rather than being pure puppets, the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) both independently pursued their own foreign policy goals. They deftly navigated external pressures from their titanic neighbors, China and the USSR, who were in the midst of the Sino-Soviet Split and frequently harnessed these tensions to their advantage. As time has passed since the end of the Cold War, it has become increasingly clear that many of the smaller, and presumably controlled, Communist nations were just as politically vibrant and internally pugnacious as their Western counterparts. Although there may have been some merit to the idea that the USSR dominated many

of its East Asian communist counterparts during the reign of Stalin, subsequent Soviet leaders were hardly able to maintain such supremacy because their power was "balanced" by the growing might of China.

During the turmoil of the 1960s, the DPRK and DRV were uniquely situated at the crossroads of Soviet, Chinese, and American influence. These minor states may have been embroiled in constant conflict with their neighbors, but precisely due to their importance, they were able to stand firm in their independence. In practice, neither China nor the USSR could try to enforce regime change in the DPRK or DRV without incurring the intervention of the US or their other major communist counterpart. While nearly all powers at the time saw most of their opponents' actions as part of a diverse array of deliberate conspiracies aimed at themselves, the reality was that anarchy and self-interest dominated decision-making almost universally in East Asia. This article begins in 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, which directly led to the escalation of the Vietnam War. The piece concludes in 1968, a year that witnessed a peak in instability for both Korea and Vietnam during the 1960s.

The significant threat perceived by China and the Soviet Union of a Western invasion of North Korea and North Vietnam was the catalyst within these smaller communist countries for increased autonomy and the perverse incentive to further increase tensions with the West to destabilize the region. As described by Zhai in *China and the Vietnam Wars 1950-1975*, "Mao believed that American escalation of war in Vietnam constituted a link in Washington's chain of encirclement of China. For Mao, support for North Vietnam was a way of countering the US containment of China."[1] Meanwhile, declassified internal memos from 1965 reveal that US escalation of the Vietnam War was conducted "not to help [South Vietnam], but to contain China."[2]

Literature Review

In the West, much has been written about the Sino-Soviet Split during the Cold War by historians, and countless studies have been

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[1]. Zhai, Qiang. *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*. United States, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

[2]. McNaughton, John T. "A Pentagon Official Observes the Situation in South Vietnam." Social History for Every Classroom. City University of New York. Accessed October 24, 2021. https://shec.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/806.

done on modern PRC foreign policy by political scientists. However, due to the dearth of declassified documentation, comparatively less research has been done to analyze the history of the PRC's foreign policy, let alone that of North Korea and North Vietnam.

Lorenz M. Luthi's book *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, and Radchenko et al.'s *Two Suns in the Heavens, The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* are just a few examples of the robust library that has been created on relations between Maoist China and the Soviet Union. As for books on the historic foreign policy of the PRC, *Foreign Relations of the PRC: The Legacies and Constraints of China's International Politics Since 1949* by Robert Sutter and *China's Quest: The History Of The Foreign Relations Of The People's Republic Of China* by JW Garver are some of the only comprehensive modern titles.

With that said, there are several more specific pieces about Chinese foreign relations during and after the rule of Mao that were written in the immediate aftermath of Deng Xiaoping's death in 1997, such as Cheng & Zhang's academic article "Chinese Foreign Relation Strategies Under Mao And Deng: A Systematic And Comparative

Analysis" and Roderick MacFarquahar's book *The Politics Of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng*. Besides Nguyen's book, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* and a disparate smattering of shorter papers on North Korea's involvement in specific incidents in the 50s and 60s, few sources systematically analyze North Vietnamese and North Korean decision making during the Cold War. There have also been isolated books on specifically Sino-Vietnamese relations and Sino-North Korean relations, such as Qiang Zhai's *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* and Shen & Xias' recently published *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976*. Unfortunately, little has been written to unite these disparate sources into a wider critical analysis of how these smaller nations themselves navigated the innumerable threats resulting from being at the center of a three-way battle between great powers.

Within the last decade, a number of academic articles, such as Mitchell Lerner's "The Domestic Origins of the Second Korean War: New Evidence from Communist Bloc Archives", pulling from newly declassified diplomatic documents from Eastern European sources

such as the former Czech and East German embassies to Pyongyang, have helped build a new picture of Sino-North Korean relations during the 1960s that was far more acrimonious than the West previously imagined. For example, it has recently come to light that events like the Blue House Raid by North Korea and the Tet Offensive by North Vietnam, which many officials in Washington believed to be linked, had practically nothing to do with each other despite beginning just days apart. The Wilson Center's North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP) has diligently translated into English and released online many of these declassified Eastern European documents, and without access to their library, my research would not have been possible. For my article, many of the sources were found by looking chronologically through the released documents, which have brief summaries for the months of January and February 1968, as that brief window was extremely explosive and is to a large degree the focus of this piece. Also found were occasional references to other relevant sources while reading NKIDP working papers like "The Soviet Union and the North Korean Seizure of the USS Pueblo: Evidence from Russian Archives" and "New Romanian Evidence on

the Blue House Raid and the USS Pueblo Incident", which were then fully researched within the NKIDP archives.

So many of the most reputable books and academic articles on Cold War foreign relations were written in the 1990s and early 2000s, and have been left without worthy successors. There is a new stream of information slowly leaving national archives that is ripe for analysis. We are far past due for a reevaluation of East Asian foreign policy during the Cold War, and more specifically, a renewed critical analysis of DRV and DPRK foreign relations during the 1960s.

Background

While the Soviet Union proudly considered itself the leader of the Communist world, the PRC became increasingly less willing to be treated as anything less than equal. As said by Deng Xiaoping to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989, "starting from the mid 1960s, our relations deteriorated to the point where they were practically broken off. I don't mean it was because of the ideological disputes; we no longer think that everything we said at that time was right. The basic problem was that the Chinese were not treated as equals and felt

humiliated."[3] The Sino-Soviet Split was less a feud of fundamental differences in Marxist principles than an arguably more mundane game of power politics between nations. China's desire to be seen as equal to the USSR and be respected as a great power heavily influenced its foreign policy after the Century of Humiliation (1842-1949). Chinese foreign policy was often affected by a desire to maintain parity, if not superiority, over the Soviets in terms of relations with minor powers. These insecurities often manifested in rather bizarre situations, such as when "Deng Xiaoping, secretary-general of the CCP, paid a secret visit to Hanoi after the Gulf of Tonkin incident with the promise of one billion Chinese yuan in aid if the DRV refused all aid from the Soviet Union."[4] Though the DPRK and DRV maintained a remarkable degree of political independence

[3]. Deng, Xiaoping, and Mikhail Gorbachev. "Excerpts from the Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping," May 16, 1989. Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume III (1982-1992) (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 284-287. History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119289.

[4]. Zhai, Qiang. *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*. United States, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

from the USSR and the PRC, the smaller Communist states still heavily relied on their larger counterparts for financial backing.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident is an excellent example of how the DRV leveraged the unexpected escalation of the Vietnam War to extract concessions from its Soviet and Chinese allies. This event, and the subsequent escalation of the Vietnam War with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, came as a complete surprise to the North Vietnamese and even the Chinese.[5] Mao "had originally planned to take a horse ride to inspect the Yellow River in the second part of 1964" and was stunned when the Incident occurred.[6] Though the facts around the Gulf of Tonkin Incident are hotly debated and rather controversial, what is certain is that on August 2, 1964 there was a battle between North Vietnamese torpedo boats and the American destroyer *USS Maddox* in disputed international waters. While a second attack on the *Maddox* likely did not happen on August 4, 1964, the US government believed

[5]. ibid

[6]. ibid

it occurred and took the attack as a sign of unrepentant North Vietnamese aggression.[7]

Regardless of what actually transpired in the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, it precipitated Congress passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which allowed President Johnson "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom". In practice, this meant the US was now entering a full-fledged undeclared war against North Vietnam.[8] The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution directly led to a massive shift in the DRV's relationship with the USSR and the PRC. Put succinctly, "before late 1964, Hanoi was virtually on China's side in the bifurcated international Communist movement", but that situation would not last as the Soviets became increasingly interested in the

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[7]. Ball, Moya Ann. "Revisiting the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis: An Analysis of the Private Communication of President Johnson and His Advisers." *Discourse & Society* 2, no. 3 (1991): 281–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42887746.

[8]. Bracknell, Robert. "Real Facts, Magic Language, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and Constitutional Authority to Commit Forces to War," New England Journal of International and Comparative Law 13, no. 2 (2007): 167-240

affairs of their socialist compatriots.[9] As described by Nguyen, "following the [Vietnam Worker Party (VWP)]'s tilt toward China [in December 1963], Soviet frustration with the DRV led Moscow to decrease economic aid and exports to North Vietnam, while Chinese approval of Hanoi's policies led to an increase in support and the offer to send volunteer troops. After the events of August 1964, however, Soviet policy toward Vietnam began to shift, with the confrontation between the United States and the DRV rendering aid to the fraternal socialist cause mandatory."[10] Despite China promising to provide pilots to the DRV air force if the US invaded, their refusal "must have undoubtedly contributed to North Vietnam's decision to rely more on the Soviet Union for air defense" which was critical in countering American carpet bombing.[11]

The Second Korean War

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[9]. Zhai, Qiang. *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*. United States, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

[10]. Nguyen, Lien-hang T. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam (New Cold War History)*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

[11]. Zhai, Qiang. *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*. United States, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

The Second Korean War exemplifies how the DPRK successfully leveraged its relationships with the USSR and the PRC to its own political and military advantage. With the Vietnam War escalating after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the US asked South Korea to contribute combat troops in exchange for intense economic aid and many other highly valuable incentives. Consequently, tens of thousands of American and South Korean troops left the Republic of Korea (ROK) to fight in Vietnam in 1965.[12] Though the Soviets had cut off foreign aid to North Korea in 1962, "by early 1966, it was clear that Kim Il-Sung was moving much closer to Moscow than to Beijing. He was obsessed with improving national defense, and the post-Khrushchev Soviet leaders were willing to provide military equipment."[13] In light of the West weakening on the Korean Peninsula, Kim Il Sung saw an opportunity to defeat his enemy at its most vulnerable since 1950.

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[12]. Bolger, Daniel P. *Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low-Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966-1969*. No. 19. Combat Studies Institute, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1991.

[13]. Shen, Zhihua, and Xia,Yafeng. *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976: Revised Edition*. Columbia University Press, 2020.

The Soviets rapidly began overshadowing the Chinese as sponsors of North Korea, and "in March 1967, North Korea signed a military cooperation agreement with the Soviet Union. By the time of the Pueblo Incident of January 23, 1968 (when the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK] captured a US reconnaissance ship), the North Korean armed forces had been completely reequipped with late-model Soviet military hardware."[14] Ironically, "both American intelligence and Soviet diplomats reported that Beijing pressured Pyongyang 'to unleash military operations against the Americans on the Korean Peninsula,' but North Korea resisted China's request. It is likely that Kim Il-Sung 'skillfully took advantage of Beijing's belligerent statements to depict China as the prime aggressor, and thus conceal his own growing militancy from the USSR.'"[15]

The Month the World Burned

January 1968 saw the tension in East Asia reach a new height, and what the US believed to be a careful conspiracy of Communist

[14]. ibid

[15]. ibid

offensives was in fact sheer chaos to even Communist observers. Within just this one month, the DPRK would dispatch 31 commandos to try to assassinate the President of South Korea, the DPRK would capture the *USS Pueblo*, and the DRV would launch the Tet Offensive. While it could be easy to assume that all three events must have been designed to be part of some grand conspiratorial Communist scheme, the reality was far more chaotic. Modern evidence shows in detail that the DPRK and DRV did not communicate with each other about their coordination of these operations, and instead, the diminutive communist states were careful not to share details of their plans with even the Soviets and Chinese. As described in a February 16, 1968 report from the Romanian embassy to Pyongyang, "following the [Blue House Raid] on January 21 and the USS Pueblo Incident [on January 23], one can notice a conspicuous cold attitude on behalf of the Vietnamese diplomats... toward the North Korean comrades".[16]

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[16]. Popa, N. "Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.044, Regular," February 16, 1968. Political Affairs Fond, Telegrams from Pyongyang, TOP SECRET, 1968, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113957.

These sentiments were even more precisely expressed by the DRV Ambassador to Pyongyang to his Romanian counterpart on February 19, 1968, when the Vietnamese diplomat complained that "[the North Koreans] try to draw a comparison between the war and the revolution in South Vietnam and the war in Korea … such a comparison did not make any sense, being completely unrealistic. It is imbued with wishful thinking, it denies the nature of the mass revolution of the Vietnamese people, and it does not recognize the efforts and successes achieved by the Vietnamese people".[17]

The Blue House Raid

The Blue House Raid is yet another example of how the DPRK was willing to take on risk, escalate tensions, and increase the level of uncertainty in the region purely on its own accord, without any direct approval from the PRC or USSR. On January 17, 1968, Kim Il Sung dispatched Unit 124, a commando unit consisting of thirty-one men, to

[17]. Popa, N., and Thet Hung Le. "Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.047, Regular," February 19, 1968. Political Affairs Fond, Telegrams from Pyongyang, TOP SECRET, 1968, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113959.

assassinate President Park Chung-hee of South Korea in an operation kept secret just as much from the rest of the Communist world as the South Koreans. They surreptitiously filtered through the DMZ to infiltrate the Blue House, the presidential palace. That same day, the commandos stumbled upon a small number of South Korean peasants who were cutting wood in a forest. After debating whether to kill them, the commandos gave the men a brief lecture on socialism and let them go on their way in the mistaken belief that the South Korean people inherently saw them as liberators.[18] The peasants immediately informed the local police station about the infiltration and a nation-wide search was initiated. The commandos successfully snuck into Seoul, and on January 21, approached the Blue House wearing South Korean army uniforms. After being questioned by a suspicious guard at a checkpoint just 100 meters from the building, the group opened fire and rapidly dispersed. By January 30, twenty-nine of the commandos had been killed, one was captured, and just a single soldier successfully returned to the DPRK. In a January 22, 1968

[18]. Jager, Sheila Miyoshi. *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea*. WW Norton & Company, 2013.

report by the Romanian embassy in Pyongyang, it was explicitly stated that "we believe that this action was incredibly daring and narrow-minded", a sentiment which was shared by most of the Communist World.[19]

The Pueblo Incident

The Pueblo Incident shines further light on how the DPRK was in fact acting independently and not simply following orders from the USSR or the PRC. The Incident also shows how the DPRK was willing to escalate a conflict with the West to serve its own goals. Just two days after Unit 124 came within hundreds of feet of killing the President of South Korea, DPRK torpedo boats captured an American spy ship in an event that shook the bewildered Communist world nearly as much as the Blue House Raid. The crew of the *USS Pueblo* itself had not been informed about the Blue House Raid and was operating completely oblivious to these critical developments. On

[19]. Popa, N. "Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.012, Urgent," January 22, 1968. Political Affairs Fond, Telegrams from Pyongyang, TOP SECRET, 1968, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113939.

January 22, 1968, the *Pueblo* was operating in international waters off the North Korean coast when two North Korean fishing boats passed within a hundred feet of the vessel. The following day, a small flotilla of DPRK military vessels approached the *Pueblo*, demanding it identify itself and stand down to be boarded. After hesitation on the part of the spy ship, the North Koreans resolved to capture the vessel by force, and DPRK fighter planes subsequently arrived on the scene to provide air support. With the exception of a single American killed in the skirmish, the North Koreans took the remaining 82 members of the crew as prisoners of war.

The DPRK demanded that "the United States must admit that *Pueblo* entered North Korean waters, must apologize for this intrusion, and must assure the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that such intrusions will never happen again."[20] The North Koreans were in no rush to conclude negotiations, and the American sailors would remain in captivity until December 1968. The US begrudgingly produced an apology, a written acknowledgement that the USS *Pueblo* had been

[20]. Armbrister, Trevor. *A Matter Of Accountability: The True Story of the Pueblo Affair*. London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1971.

spying on North Korea, and a promise that the US would not spy on the DPRK in the future. Despite the controversy of the incident, the Soviet General Secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, stated at the April 1968 CC CPSU Plenum that the North Koreans hoped "to bind the Soviet Union somehow, using the existence of the treaty between the USSR and the DPRK [as a pretext] to involve us in supporting plans of the [North] Korean friends that we knew nothing about."[21] The North Koreans remained extremely loath to inform their allies about their plans even after the turmoil caused by the Pueblo Incident. In a May 6, 1968 conversation between the Premier of the Soviet Union, Aleksei Kosygin, and the North Korean Ambassador to the USSR, Chon Tu-hwan, the former openly complained that "we are not aware of the considerations and plans of the DPRK government regarding the further development of events. This makes it difficult for the Soviet Union to provide the DPRK with support on the international level and, in particular, in international organizations. The Soviet comrades

[21]. Radchenko, Sergey S. *The Soviet Union and the North Korean Seizure of the USS Pueblo: Evidence from Russian Archives*. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005.

are compelled only to use materials published in the open press."[22] Best put by Radchenko, "it is perhaps ironic that while policymakers in Washington viewed North Korea as a Soviet puppet, Moscow considered the DPRK a Chinese puppet. Kim Il Sung, meanwhile, vehemently denied that he was anyone's puppet."[23]

In the midst of all this chaos unfolding in the Korean Peninsula, as much to the surprise of the DRV as the US, North Vietnam was preparing to launch its meticulously planned Tet Offensive in a bid to forcefully conquer the South once and for all.

The Tet Offensive

While the Americans may have been convinced that the Soviets and Chinese heavily influenced the planning and execution of the Tet Offensive, that was simply not the case. Decades later, critical misconceptions about the Offensive are still circulated by otherwise highly reputable American publications. To point to the most glaring example, General Vo Nguyen Giap is often lauded as the mastermind

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[22]. ibid

[23]. ibid

behind the Tet Offensive despite the fact he internally lobbied to cancel the operation and was not particularly involved in its conduct even once it began.[24,25] The Tet Offensive was rather an attempt by the militaristic faction of the Vietnam Workers Party under First Secretary Le Duan to defeat South Vietnam through obtuse military means. Nguyen describes how "even though Le Duan held firm control over the VWP leadership, his dogged persistence in winning the war militarily through big-unit warfare, rather than initiating negotiations or reverting to protracted guerrilla struggle, brought about challenges to his authority not only from rival Politburo members but also from Hanoi's allies, who coupled much-needed military and economic aid with unwanted and often conflicting advice."[26]

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[24]. Nguyen, Lien-hang T. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam (New Cold War History)*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

[25]. "Vietnamese General Who Was Key Architect of Tet Offensive Dies." NPR. NPR, October 4, 2013. https://www.npr.org/2013/10/04/229274013/vietnamese-general-who-was-key-architect-of-tet-offensive- dies.

[26]. Nguyen, Lien-hang T. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam (New Cold War History)*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Although the name "The Tet Offensive" may understandably give the impression that it was a single concerted attack, the operation consisted of three phases of offensive actions in South Vietnam between January and September 1968, each less successful than the last. The operation was first launched as a surprise attack during Tết Nguyên Đán, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year despite the fact that the DRV announced that it would respect a seven-day truce during the holiday. Due to an American underestimation of North Vietnamese military capability, the South took the statement at face value and subsequently allowed nearly half of its armed forces to go on leave during the holiday.[27,28] Despite many alarming signs that a major offensive was coming, such as the capture of "tapes [that] contained an appeal to the local population to take up arms and overthrow the government... [and] an announcement that 'the Forces Struggling for Peace and Unification' already occupied Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang", the American response remained muted to the point that US

[27]. Dougan, Clark, and Stephen Weiss. *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*. Boston, MA: Boston Publishing Company, 1983.

[28]. ibid

intelligence was hosting a pool party for over 200 of their officers the evening the Offensive truly began on January 30th.[29]

Largely due to the abysmal lack of preparation on the part of the US and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), during Phase I (January 31 – March 28, 1968), the North Vietnamese were able to make dramatic attacks on most major cities in the South. While the attacks may have been visually impressive and inadvertently helped sway the American public against the war, they utterly failed in their intended role of militarily overthrowing the RVN government and inspiring a widespread uprising. Despite seemingly having all the advantages in the world, almost every single DRV attack was beaten back with heavily skewed casualties in a matter of hours to days, while there was not a single documented case of a South Vietnamese military unit defecting.[30]

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[29]. Hoang, Ngoc Lung. *The General Offensives of 1968-69*. US Army Center of Military History, 1981.

[30]. Westmoreland, William C. *A Soldier Reports*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976.

North Vietnamese leadership initially saw the Offensive as having been an abject failure. As described by the North Vietnamese commanding officer at Hue, "in all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans and their puppets, and this was a big gain for us. As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result."[31] The Phase II (May 5 – June 15, 1968) and Phase III (August 9 – September 23, 1968) offenses were smaller scale and even less successful than the Phase I attacks. The assaults temporarily crippled North Vietnamese military capability while not substantially weakening South Vietnamese forces, and "[unofficial DRV lead negotiator] Tho's telegram, written two days before the official end of the third and final wave of the Tet Offensive, reveals that it was only after Hanoi war leaders exhausted their forces in the [Offensive] that

[31]. Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. New York, NY: Viking, 1991.

the VWP Politburo began taking the diplomatic sphere of the war seriously."[32]

In its decision to accept negotiations with the United States, North Vietnam largely did not pander to the wishes of either the Soviets or the Chinese and acted remarkably independent. Nguyen describes how "if [Soviet-style] large-unit operations aimed at urban targets made Beijing doubt Hanoi's loyalties in the Sino-Soviet Split, Hanoi's decision to engage in direct talks with the Americans made the Chinese paranoid", especially during the early months of 1968.[33] Like North Korea, North Vietnam had little loyalty in the Sino-Soviet Split except to the extent they could coerce more aid, and "Chinese fears were unfounded. Although Hanoi received military aid and weaponry from Moscow for the 1968 offensive, VWP leaders did not collaborate with Moscow on Tet strategy."[34] The DRV deceived the USSR into thinking it was open to serious negotiation. In reality, the

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[32]. Nguyen, Lien-hang T. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam (New Cold War History)*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

[33]. ibid

[34]. ibid

North Vietnamese were stalling for time during most of 1968 as they still hoped to militarily conquer the South, which was best showcased when "the Soviet Union was ecstatic when the United States, which had independently begun to explore Paris as a possible meeting place, immediately accepted Hanoi's proposal [to stage negotiations in that city]....The VWP leadership had no intention of pursuing Moscow's desire for a speedy settlement in 1968; instead, Hanoi used the public meetings for 'probing' purposes only."[35] By the end of 1968, the complete failure of the Offensive to take South Vietnamese territory convinced North Vietnam to earnestly come to the negotiating table.

Meanwhile, shocking televised images of the Offensive convinced the American public that the Vietnam War was unwinnable, pushing US politicians to find an out to the War. In the background to these highly visible pressures, Sino-American Rapprochement saw its beginnings in the late 1960s as China began seeing the USSR as an even greater threat than the US. American intervention in the Vietnam War was largely influenced by a desire to contain China, and with the

[35]. ibid

PRC slowly becoming benign if not an ally, America lost its original motive to stay in Vietnam. In January 1973, the United States, the RVN, and the DRV signed the Paris Peace Accords.

Epilogue

As a result of the Paris Peace Accords, the United States agreed to withdraw from Vietnam fully and an almost-immediately-broken ceasefire was put in place. Within weeks, the peace treaty was little more than a memory, and Vietnam was fully back at war. The United States refused to recommit troops to the conflict, and North Vietnam slowly but steadily gained ground over the next two years. On April 30, 1975, DRV forces entered the RVN capital of Saigon, winning the Vietnam War.

By 1979, the diplomatic circles of East Asia had shifted dramatically in comparison to the 1960s. That year saw the practically simultaneous Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in an intense display of inter-Communist open warfare. Almost a decade after the Tet Offensive, Soviet-backed Vietnam invaded Chinese-backed Cambodia. In response, China invaded Vietnam, but not before secretly informing their American

ally of their intentions with ample notice in advance.[36] North Korea, meanwhile, much as prophesied by Kim Il Sung, had missed its window of opportunity against South Korea with economic parity and military superiority in the 1960s. By the late 1970s, the South Korean economy began growing rapidly while its North Korean counterpart stagnated.[37]

Conclusion

Many studies have analyzed individual events like the Blue House Raid or the Tet Offensive, but few Westerners have comprehensively explored them from the Communist perspective, let alone tried to analyze these events in series using primary source documents. This article ties all these disparate events into a vivid picture of the 1960s in East Asia, where every communist power, big and small, was operating practically completely independently of each

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[36]. "MILESTONES: 1977–1980." Office of the Historian. U.S. Department of State. Accessed November 20, 2021. https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/china-policy.

[37]. Paulsen, Erik. "Economic Perspectives on North Korea." Joint Economic Committee. U.S. Senate, December 20, 2018. https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/5d22fa61-29ba-4cdf-a88c-80782b207d81/north-korea.pdf.

other. The years of 1964-68 saw both the DPRK and DRV carve out near total immunity from the whims of their more powerful neighbors precisely due to the ongoing danger that these minor states would be overthrown by competing powers. None of the neighboring powers trusted each other, and the conflict and instability in the region allowed these smaller communist nations to maintain their autonomy. The turmoil of the era actually created a perverse incentive for North Vietnam and North Korea to increase instability in the region by escalating their hostilities against the West. Larger lessons can be drawn from this study, namely that in foreign policy, many nations should give more merit to the idea that the world is anarchic, so the fact that a pattern exists does not mean a conspiracy must be behind seemingly connected events.

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