2023–24 WILSON CHINA FELLOWSHIP

Logics of War in the Era of Reform and Opening

Jason M. Kelly is a Senior Lecturer at Cardiff University and a 2023–24 Wilson China Fellow

Abstract

One of the earliest major foreign-policy initiatives of Reform and Opening during the late 1970s was China's brief, bloody war with Vietnam between February and March 1979. China's invasion of Vietnam demonstrated a willingness among post-Mao leaders to use military force abroad in pursuit of policy aims. But the war itself raises questions about how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reconciled the attack on Vietnam with the emerging logic of Reform and Opening, which emphasized peace, stability, and development. This essay draws on declassified documents from China, the United States, and the United Kingdom to investigate the logic deployed by Chinese leaders, especially Deng Xiaoping, to link the 1979 invasion to the context of Reform and Opening. It finds that Deng and others framed the war not as a departure from Reform and Opening, but rather as a military campaign to achieve it. A short war would foster the regional stability China desperately needed to achieve economic development and modernization, which the party viewed as essential to reinforcing its own legitimacy in the post-Mao era. The United States, committed to strengthening US-China relations, did little to disabuse Chinese leaders of this conviction, which only reinforced it. The essay concludes by identifying lessons for policymakers today from this moment in the history of US-China diplomacy.

Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

- The CCP legitimacy narrative matters. US officials who analyze Chinese security policy should devote time and resources to building expertise on the nuances of the CCP's evolving legitimacy narrative and its implications for the use of force.

- The United States and China have shared an interest in regional stability as a prerequisite for development and growth since the late 1970s. The United States should emphasize this common ground in bilateral security exchanges to help foster productive narratives and escalation management despite ongoing territorial disputes in the region.

- China's 1979 war with Vietnam highlights the potential risks to China's neighbors of deepening security ties with the United States, particularly if US-China relations remain tense and the neighboring state in question is locked in territorial or other longstanding disputes with China. Under these circumstances, the CCP leadership may become more inclined than otherwise to use military force against its neighbor to disrupt what it perceives as a trend toward strategic encirclement.

- The past can help policymakers prepare for the future in US-China relations. The Department of State, in coordination with historians and experts from other federal agencies, should develop a series of "lessons-learned" studies focused on the history of US-China diplomacy. This initiative should mine past crises, triumphs, failures, and pivotal moments to produce short, nuanced capsule histories for busy policymakers and diplomats.

War and Development in Reform and Opening

In the early post-Mao period, two events appeared to pull Chinese foreign relations in different directions. In December 1978, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched domestic reforms designed to spur economic growth and jumpstart China's modernization. Central to this strategy, known today as Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang*), was the belief that rapid economic development in China required a peaceful international environment and cooperative relations with other nations. Peace and cooperation would unlock the foreign capital, technology, and expertise China needed to grow its economy, improve living standards, and accelerate China's modernization. Yet two months later in February 1979, China lashed out at Vietnam in a brief, bloody war. The conflict was more than a skirmish. For over two weeks, some 200,000 Chinese troops attacked 26 sites along the Sino-Vietnamese border.[1] The war demonstrated to the world a willingness among post-Mao leaders to use military force abroad in pursuit of policy aims. Yet the decision to pursue cooperation and conflict in tandem also suggests a tension at the heart of China's foreign-policy agenda in the era of Reform and Opening.

For over forty years, these two dimensions of post-Mao Chinese foreign policy—one committed to peace and economic development and another willing to use military force to achieve policy aims—have driven debate over the true nature and intentions behind Chinese foreign policy. Scholars have examined each element separately, but few have probed the underlying connections between them.[2] Missing is a detailed exploration of how the CCP sought to reconcile China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 with the logic of Reform and Opening. The result is a fragmentary understanding of Chinese foreign policy in the post-Mao age, an academic deficiency with important policy implications. How can policymakers today understand the intentions behind a globally integrated, militarily modernized China if fundamental assumptions about the roots of these intentions and the logics that underpin them remain insufficiently examined?

This essay investigates the logic for war deployed by CCP leaders in late 1978 and early 1979 for insights into how China justified its use of military force against Vietnam to accord with the emerging framework of Reform and Opening. Based on an examination of declassified documents from China, the United States, and the United Kingdom, the essay shows that Chinese

leaders, especially Deng Xiaoping, framed the decision to attack Vietnam not as a departure from Reform and Opening, but rather as a military campaign to achieve it. Both publicly and privately, CCP leaders invoked the long-term needs associated with economic growth, especially the imperative for stability as a prerequisite for rapid development, to justify near-term war with Vietnam. US policymakers knew of China's plans for war beforehand but failed to dissuade Deng from launching the invasion. Instead, bilateral relations blossomed as though no conflict had occurred, creating the impression that the United States had condoned Beijing's new logic for war in the age of Reform and Opening.

The essay proceeds in four sections. First, it traces the emergence of a new stability imperative in post-Mao China with roots in the party's ambitions for rapid economic growth. During the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, the party jettisoned its emphasis on class struggle and shifted its focus instead to economic development as the key to China's future and CCP legitimacy. The party hoped to reinvigorate its legitimacy following the trauma and disappointments of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) by overseeing rapid economic development and improving daily life in China. This shift created powerful incentives within the CCP to foster stability at home and abroad, which party leaders believed was essential to economic development.

Next, the essay examines how CCP leaders fused this stability imperative to the logic of conflict. Party leaders believed the Soviet Union posed the greatest threat to global stability. They also identified Vietnam as a growing menace to regional stability, especially following Moscow's Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Hanoi in November 1978 and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, China's ally, in December 1978. Scholars have identified multiple reasons why China attacked Vietnam in 1979, with many rightly noting the fear in Beijing of strategic encirclement.[3] But party leaders also framed the conflict as a move to prevent regional threats from upsetting the stability deemed necessary for China's new development agenda. According to this logic, which Chinese leaders articulated publicly and privately, China attacked Vietnam not just to safeguard national security, but also to create a safer world for Reform and Opening by standing up to Vietnam and its enablers in Moscow.

The essay then examines the role of the United States in cementing Beijing's logic for war. CCP leaders shared this logic with foreign officials during a flurry of diplomacy before, during, and after the war, including a prominent visit by Deng Xiaoping to the United States just weeks before the war began. In the United States, Deng consistently linked his plans for war to a desire for peace and stability. US leaders did little to challenge or discourage this linkage. Torn by a perceived need to maintain positive momentum in US-China relations and fears that China's war could protract or escalate, US officials adopted an ambivalent posture that bolstered bilateral relations but also appeared to sanctify Beijing's war.

The final section identifies legacies from China's 1979 war with Vietnam and four lessons for policymakers today. First, the CCP legitimacy narrative remains as central to understanding China's potential use of military force today as it was in 1979. CCP leaders are likely to reconcile any future use of military force to the prevailing legitimacy narrative at the time of conflict. This narrative may change over time. US policymakers and security analysts should devote resources to building expertise on the nuances of this evolving legitimacy narrative and its implications for the use of force.

Second, the United States and China have shared an interest in regional stability as a prerequisite for development and growth since the late 1970s. Emphasizing this common ground may prove useful for constructing productive narratives and escalation management throughout the region despite ongoing territorial disputes.

Third, the 1979 war illuminates the potential risks to China's neighbors today of deepening security ties with the United States, particularly if US-China relations remain fraught and the neighboring state in question is locked in territorial or other longstanding disputes with China. Under these circumstances, a closer strategic bond between a neighboring state and the United States could increase the CCP's willingness to use military force to disrupt what it perceives as a trend toward strategic encirclement, just as China's post-Mao leaders did against Vietnam in 1979.

Fourth, US policymakers should support the development of concise but nuanced case studies in US-China diplomatic history to sensitize US officials to themes, challenges, and opportunities from the past that could illuminate diplomacy and policy today. A core premise of this essay is that a detailed

examination of past episodes in diplomatic history can enlighten policymakers despite the passage of time and changes in context. Much has changed in China and the world since the advent of Reform and Opening. Yet many of the operating logics that emerged four decades ago, including fundamental connections between stability, development, and defense, continue to shape Chinese foreign policy and US-China relations today.

Reform, Opening, and the Stability Imperative

Before Reform and Opening was fully underway, the CCP had identified stability and peace as essential for rapid economic development and modernization in China. Deng addressed the issue at a news conference in Tokyo on October 25, 1978, weeks before the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, which launched the Reform and Opening era.[4] He was in Japan to ratify a Treaty of Peace and Friendship that had been signed in August. Also at the top of his mind was a desire to discuss technology, management, and modernization. Deng wanted to learn from Japan's experience, but he had already decided stability and peace were essential prerequisites for China's own rapid development. "We too need a peaceful environment in which to build up our country and achieve the four modernizations as soon as possible," he said.[5]

The Central Committee elaborated on this view in December at the close of the Third Plenum. In a communique issued on the final day of the plenum, December 22, the Central Committee declared a "new era" of rapid economic development and modernization was emerging. The age of "violent mass class struggle" had "basically concluded," the document announced. China now needed stability at home.[6] Stability would permit the nation to devote itself fully to rapid growth in four key sectors, the so-called four modernizations (*si ge xiandaihua*): agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense. The Central Committee said development in these sectors would enable China to transform into a "great socialist power" (*weida de shehui zhuyi qiangguo*) by the close of the twentieth century.[7] To create the proper conditions for economic growth, the Central Committee called on the party, the army, and the entire population to "work with one heart and one mind to develop a stable and united political situation."[8]

Stability abroad was also essential in China's "new era" of economic growth, the CCP believed. Tension or conflict abroad, particularly near China's borders, could imperil modernization by diverting resources and attention away from economic construction and toward national defense. Hostile foreign relations might also impair China's ability to import the capital, technology, and expertise Deng and others believed would fuel China's economic development.[9] More gravely, an attack on Chinese territory could upend the domestic economy entirely by damaging industry, agriculture, and production. A serious conflict, such as a Soviet invasion from the north, could pose an existential threat to the state. Chinese forces had clashed with Soviet troops just a decade earlier over a territorial dispute, and Moscow still maintained roughly 50 divisions along the Sino-Soviet border, all of which made the possibility of an attack seem feasible to Chinese officials.[10]

The Central Committee believed that if these threats to stability could be kept at bay, and China leaned into breakneck development, the nation and the CCP itself would have much to gain. Rapid growth would propel China's rise in the ranks of global power, Deng believed. "If our material foundation [and] material power become stronger," he told party members in 1980, "our role [in international affairs] will be greater."[11] Economic growth would also aid unification with Taiwan, not just by creating greater military capacity to compel unification through defense modernization, Deng reasoned, but also because superior economic development in China would demonstrate to Taiwan and the world the superiority of CCP governance and modernization.[12]

Yet rapid economic growth, and the stability it required, also held a deeper significance for Deng Xiaoping because of its connection to the party's pressing legitimacy challenge. Mao's revolution had failed to produce the justice, equality, and prosperity the CCP had long promised the Chinese people. Instead, the Cultural Revolution brought tumult, bitterness, and exhaustion, all of which had cracked the party's legitimacy and raised questions about its ability to lead China to a better future.[13] Sensing this mood and its latent threats to party legitimacy, Deng turned to rapid economic development as a mechanism for improving everyday life under CCP rule. "Whether or not [we] can realize the four modernizations, will determine the fate of our country and our nation," he said in early 1979.[14] If it determined the fate of the nation, it also determined the fate of the party.

By this reasoning, growth and stability became essential to the rejuvenation of CCP legitimacy.

The urgency behind Deng's push for growth reflected his view that the international environment seemed auspicious for the four modernizations, though only fleetingly so. Peace and stability were possible, he believed, but another global war remained inevitable in the long run. "We have always believed [another] world war is unavoidable and will be fought sooner or later," Deng told senior officials in an internal speech in February 1979. "We hope world war will not break out until at least the end of this century," he said. "This will help us realize the four modernizations. This is our true strategic intention."[15]

Whether a global war erupted was beyond own Beijing's control, CCP leaders believed. Much depended on events elsewhere, particularly in Moscow. Party leaders said often in the late 1970s that the Soviet Union posed the greatest threat to global peace.[16] This assessment drew from the conclusion, based on nearly two decades of Sino-Soviet hostility, that the Soviet Union was a "social-imperialist" power bent on global hegemony. CCP leaders worried about Soviet actions around the globe but paid particular attention to Moscow's tightening bonds with Hanoi. Sino-Vietnamese relations had soured during the late 1970s for many reasons, including ongoing territorial disputes, border skirmishes, Hanoi's mistreatment of the ethnic Chinese community in Vietnam, and Hanoi's aspirations for dominance in mainland Southeast Asia.[17] What alarmed Beijing most about these actions was their apparent link to the Soviet Union. As China's relations with Vietnam worsened, Hanoi's ties to Moscow seemed to improve. Hanoi's decision in June 1978 to join the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), a Soviet-orchestrated trade bloc, further raised suspicions. A Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, signed in November, raised the alarm in Beijing still higher. Finally, when Vietnam invaded China's ally, Kampuchea (now Cambodia), in December 1978, it seemed to confirm for Deng and others not only Vietnam's "regional hegemonism" (*diqu baquan zhuyi*) but also Moscow's role in supporting Vietnam's actions.

These conjoined threats—one from the north, one from the south—endangered (*weihai*) the four modernizations, the Central Committee said in early 1979.[18] These threats also raised questions about the durability of peace and stability in the near term. Yet Deng and other party leaders believed

Beijing could diminish, if not control, the likelihood of a world war by adopting certain strategic positions.

Deng proposed three actions that might delay global war during a discussion with senior officials in February 1979. These private comments were more forthright but broadly consistent with his public commentary at the time.[19] First, since Moscow presented the main danger, China should unite with others to "destroy every strategic position, strategic deployment, and strategic plan of the Soviet Union." He expected Moscow to pursue gains around the world, from access to petroleum in the Middle East to air and naval bases in regions elsewhere. To forestall these gains, he argued, China should urge others, especially the United States, to stand firm against Soviet maneuvering. Second, China and its partners should reject a policy of appeasement when dealing with the Soviet Union and its allies.[20] In the case of Vietnam, he said, Beijing should prevent Hanoi from concluding mistakenly that "Chinese are weak and can be bullied."[21] Finally, China should strengthen preparations for war alongside the United States and other developed and developing nations. Serious preparation for war would induce caution in Moscow, Deng reasoned.[22]

When Deng made these private remarks, he had already brought China to the brink of war. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) had made extensive logistical arrangements to support the war. PLA troops stood poised at the border, ready to invade. In other words, as Deng reflected on the need for peace and stability, both of which he believed essential to China's modernization and CCP legitimacy, he was also preparing for war. A short war with Vietnam, he reasoned, would help make the world safe for Reform and Opening.

Fighting for Stability and Development

Deng outlined the logic behind China's attack on Vietnam on February 16, 1979. That afternoon, hours before PLA troops crossed into Vietnam, he delivered somewhat unstructured remarks to the Central Committee. His speech, intended for internal use by party, state, and military officials, offered several reasons for the impending war. But it also established clear connections between the war and China's ambition for peace, stability, and economic development.

Deng explained that the conflict offered a chance to mobilize the Chinese people to unite behind the CCP and the four modernizations. The CCP had already framed ongoing border skirmishes with Vietnam as evidence of Chinese victimization at the hands of Hanoi. Deng invoked this narrative in his speech by claiming that Vietnamese troops had attacked China along the border for years, creating hundreds of incidents and harming Chinese people in the region. China had not enjoyed a single day of peace in the past two to three years, he said.[23] This framing, inspired by the Mao-era technique of using international tension to promote domestic mobilization, was effective because it resonated with a pervasive "victim mentality" in China, a scar from China's sense of humiliation at the hands of foreign imperialism beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.[24]

Deng's emphasis on Vietnamese aggression offered more than a mobilization device. It also provided a pretext for war that aligned with China's need for stability. If Vietnam had already broken the peace, then China had no choice but to attack to restore it. In this sense, China's attack became an act of aggression today in search of stability and growth tomorrow. The war became a "self-defense counterattack" (*ziwei fanji*) in the parlance of the party, an act of self-defense to achieve a stability that had yet to emerge.

Reinforcing the coherence of this narrative was its consistency with the CCP strategic concept of "active defense" (*jiji fangyu*), which had framed and guided the party's military thinking since the mid-1930s. The concept had evolved over time, but at its core it meant the party's armed forces must use active, offensive measures for fundamentally defensive purposes.[25] Socialist China fought only defensive wars, in other words. This outlook, rooted in the CCP's sense of the justness of its own revolution, imputed strategic intentions based upon the political character of the state itself. Just as Chinese leaders could infer Soviet intentions from the "social-imperialist" nature of the regime in Moscow, so too could they construe China's invasion of Vietnam as an act of self-defense in pursuit of stability, peace, and development.

The Central Committee also reasoned that an attack on Vietnam would expose Soviet and Vietnamese weakness, thereby undermining the threat they posed to international peace and stability. In early March, after China had declared the war a success and as the last troops had withdrawn from Vietnam, the Central Propaganda Department claimed in a secret report that the war

had destroyed the prestige (*wei feng*) of the "polar bear." No one else had dared to stand up to Moscow, the report claimed: not the United States, not Britain, neither France nor Japan. When China alone struck Vietnam, it had shamed the Soviets.[26] The war exposed the Soviet Union as a paper tiger, the report said, because it failed to intervene on Vietnam's behalf.[27] This public shaming undermined Soviet and Vietnamese pretensions to hegemony and, perhaps, would goad China's partners to resist Soviet hegemony as well.

The Central Committee believed joint resistance with allies could inhibit Soviet and Vietnamese aggression and, by extension, promote regional and international stability. Inspired by Mao's concept of a "line" of anti-hegemonic forces united to encircle the Soviet Union, Deng also called for a "single line" (*yi tiao xian*) uniting China with the United States, Japan, Europe, and parts of the developing world.[28] China's peace and friendship treaty with Japan in August 1978 began to knit this line together. Normalization of relations with the United States in January 1979 added another critical link. Deng's public diplomacy tour in the United States on the eve of the war with Vietnam further solidified US-China relations.

Despite this progress, Deng believed the emerging united front also needed to send a strong message of defiance to the Soviet Union and Vietnam, one that others seemed unwilling to deliver. Lashing out at Vietnam would achieve this aim. "The United States and Japan say they want restraint" (*kezhi*), he said in his internal speech the day before the war began. "Don't read those official writings," he told the audience. "[They ask China] not to take risks no matter what, [not to] cause more trouble," he said. "In fact," he continued, "these countries are considering that a weak China is of no use to them, but a more powerful China is."[29] Believing he was reading between the lines of cautious statements in Washington and Tokyo, Deng had concluded that China's war would inject firmness into the anti-Soviet united front that the United States and Tokyo needed to help forestall the outbreak of a world war, even if they would not acknowledge it openly.

The war did create risks for the four modernizations and China's national security, Deng acknowledged.[30] But the Central Committee thought them worth taking in early 1979. Short-term conflict for long-term stability seemed a sensible gamble for CCP leaders committed to China's new economic development agenda. This rationale fit with a persistent "window logic" in CCP

strategic thinking: the view that if force is not used soon, a window of vulnerability might open or a window of opportunity might close.[31] In 1979, Beijing justified its war in part as a bid to prop open a window of opportunity. China had to fight to safeguard development and modernization. "To defend the four modernizations and build a powerful socialist country," Hu Yaobang, China's famed economic reformer, argued during the war, "we must dare to fight and win against hegemonists and aggressors."[32]

A Missed Chance to Challenge Emerging Logic for War

The United States had its own window of opportunity to influence the CCP's emerging logic for war with Vietnam. Deng Xiaoping visited the United States in 1979 from January 29 to February 5, just weeks after the United States and China normalized relations on January 1 and less than two weeks before China invaded Vietnam. The timing was ideal for the United States to exert influence on Deng's thinking. Fresh from the success of normalization, Deng needed US support. He hoped to discuss investment and exchanges in science, technology, management, and education, all of which he believed China needed to fuel economic development. Yet Deng also wanted to discuss China's plans to attack Vietnam in the weeks ahead and to gauge the reactions of Carter Administration officials.

Before Deng arrived in Washington, US officials had been monitoring the buildup of Chinese troops and equipment along the Sino-Vietnamese border and had already concluded that the United States should deter China's plans for war.[33] A war between China and Vietnam risked escalation and Soviet involvement, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance wrote to President Carter on January 26th. It might also induce Moscow to increase its military aid to Vietnam, which would heighten tensions in Southeast Asia. It would also conjure images of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, Vance wrote, which would weaken the Carter Administration on Capitol Hill because the White House had said repeatedly and in public that normalization of relations with China would foster stability and peace in the Pacific.[34] Even Zbigniew Brzezinski, the president's national security advisor and a leading advocate of deepening US-China relations, urged Carter to do what he could to deter a Chinese attack on Vietnam during Deng's visit.[35]

But, ultimately, US officials did little to puncture Deng's willingness attack Vietnam during the visit. Nor did US policymakers challenge the CCP narrative of the impending conflict, publicly or privately, in ways that may have undermined CCP confidence in what the war would achieve or how it might be perceived abroad, including by key partners along the "single line." By not challenging more forcefully China's logic for war during Deng's visit, the United States not only missed an opportunity to deter the conflict; it also reinforced the logic deployed by Beijing to justify the war.

Deng raised the subject of Vietnam with Carter on the first morning of his visit. During a 50-minute discussion with the president and other top officials, Deng reviewed the threats posed by the Soviet Union and Vietnam—the "Cuba of the East," he said. Deng also reiterated that China needed a prolonged period of peace to pursue the four modernizations, and he stressed the need for China, Western Europe, Japan, and the United States to unite to confront global threats.[36] No one from the US side challenged any aspect of Deng's strategic overview, aside from Carter observing at the close of the meeting that the United States and China "differ in some places."

Deng became more explicit about Vietnam during another meeting later that afternoon, this time with a smaller group that included the president, Deng, six top officials, and translators.[37] Vietnam had become "totally Soviet controlled," Deng said. He offered several reasons why Vietnam must be attacked, ranging from hegemonic aspirations to Vietnam's "conceited" behavior, but he did not explain which reasons were more important than others when explaining his thinking about the coming war. Deng also did not discuss whether addressing one or some of his concerns might change China's willingness to attack Vietnam. Nor did Carter or any other senior official question Deng on these points or probe his reasoning. Nobody suggested the war might undercut momentum toward deeper US-China relations or jeopardize China's future access to technology, expertise, or investment, all of which were top priorities for Deng because of their importance to the four modernizations. Had US officials raised these points, it may have prompted Deng to reevaluate the risks to modernization of a war with Vietnam. At the least, it likely would have highlighted for Deng that US reactions could not be taken for granted in the new relationship.

President Carter did express trepidation about the prospect of a Sino-Vietnamese war. He said a Chinese attack on Vietnam would be a "very serious

destabilizing action."[38] He also said it would be difficult for the United States to "encourage violence." But Carter also appeared to accept Deng's determination to attack Vietnam by offering to share relevant intelligence with China.[39] Ultimately, Carter said, "this matter requires more study." Deng interpreted this ambivalent response as tacit consent. "We have noted what you said to us, that you want us to be restrained," he said. "We intend a limited action," he explained. "Our troops will quickly withdraw. We'll deal with it like a border incident."[40]

Again, no one challenged Deng's plans or objected to his rationales. Instead, Carter requested to meet again the following morning. During this exchange on the morning of January 30th, Carter read from a prepared script. He said an invasion would be "a serious mistake" because it could escalate into a regional conflict. It might create sympathy for Vietnam just as it was being criticized for regional aggression. It would also cause serious concern in the United States about the general character of China and the future peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question. A war would also refute "to some extent" the claim by the United States and China that normalization would foster peace and stability. Because of these and other reasons, the president concluded, he had to "strongly urge" Deng not to approve the invasion.[41]

But this note of caution had no discernable effect on Deng's thinking, in part because he recognized the Carter administration had invested too much in normalization to inject tension into the new relationship by pushing back forcefully. He also sensed a "China fever" had emerged in the United States and elsewhere.[42] Deng expected a "scolding" from the international community after the invasion, he told senior party officials in Beijing shortly after he returned from his trip. But it would be gentle from the United States, Japan, and Western Europe.[43] He even claimed Americans had expressed support for a Chinese assault on Vietnam during his trip.[44]

Deng's assessment of the situation was broadly correct. Zbigniew Brzezinski had concluded that China was too important to US global strategy to alienate. China had become a "central stabilizing element of our global policy and a keystone for peace," he wrote.[45] On the eve of Deng's visit, Brzezinski had written to the president that the United States needed to deepen its relationship with China from "cooperation" to "coordination" on issues of shared interest, including Southeast Asia.[46] Criticizing Beijing or refuting Deng's logic too forcefully would push in the wrong direction.

Deng took full advantage of the leverage he perceived in the relationship. Not only did he press his views consistently in private meetings with US officials, he also used the trip to encourage the public impression that Washington and Beijing were cooperating to plot the war. In an interview with *Time* magazine four days before he left for Washington, Deng reiterated the global threat posed by the Soviet Union and drew attention to Vietnamese aggression. He also stressed the importance of unity among China, the United States, and Japan in the face of these threats.[47] In Washington, he threatened Vietnam publicly. "If you don't teach them [the Vietnamese] some necessary lessons," he told reporters at a lunch, "it just won't do."[48]

US officials recognized what Deng had been up to once the war began. He was "using [relations with the United States] as an umbrella," Brzezinski said during an emergency meeting called just after the attack began.[49] Brzezinski had predicted before the visit began that Deng might use the trip to "hit Vietnam with the appearance of United States acquiescence."[50] Secretary Vance had also recognized the possibility that if China attacked Vietnam shortly after Deng left, it would be viewed widely as US complicity in the attack.[51] Both senior officials had anticipated this outcome, but neither offered a solution to avoid it.

President Carter sought to dispel the notion of US support for the war as soon as it began, but his efforts only seemed to confirm suspicions of collusion. He wrote privately to Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, thinking a personal letter from the president would demonstrate the United States was responding to Chinese attack on its own, without Chinese coordination. Yet the president's letter linked the "Chinese action" to the "Vietnamese invasion" of Cambodia in November. It also reiterated the importance of stability and peace in Asia, points Deng had made in his own justifications for initiating the conflict.[52] Brezhnev interpreted the letter just as Deng would have hoped: the United States was tacitly supporting China's attack and the logic that justified it. In his reply, Brezhnev observed that Deng had visited the United States just before the war. The Soviet leader also noted—correctly—that Deng had made remarks "openly inimical to the cause of peace" while in the United States.[53] In private meetings elsewhere, Brezhnev bluntly accused Carter of having "sanctioned the Chinese aggression against Vietnam."[54]

US actions during the war only reinforced the appearance Washington's support for Beijing's decision to attack Vietnam. The US-China relationship

gained momentum as though no war existed. The administration proceeded with a previously scheduled visit to China by Treasury Secretary Michael Blumenthal, who arrived in China on February 27, while the war raged. On March 1, with still no end to the war in sight, the United States and China opened new embassies in Beijing and Washington. Behind the scenes, US officials worried the conflict might escalate. Beijing contributed to this unease in Washington by not providing updates on the fighting or telling US officials when the fighting might stop, despite numerous appeals for information from senior US officials, including Carter himself.[55] Torn by a desire to support a new partner, fearful of an escalating conflict, and concerned about being perceived as abetting China's attack, the Carter Administration sought a balanced position that, ultimately, missed the opportunity to challenge China's war and the new logic that justified it.

Lessons for Policymakers

China announced the conclusion of its war against Vietnam and began to withdraw its forces on March 5, 1979. From that day forward, Deng and the CCP touted the war as a victory and a vindication of the logic that underpinned it. On March 16, the Central Committee circulated an internal notice to party members explaining that the war had achieved all its objectives. China had given its neighbor a "severe lesson," the notice said, with the aim of creating stability along the border for a considerable period.[56] Looking ahead, the Central Committee reaffirmed that, for China, "the most important thing is to concentrate efforts on socialist modernization [and], at the same time[,] always remain vigilant, repel attacking enemies at all times, defend border security, and defend socialist modernization."[57] The war had proved the correctness of the party's policies, the Central Committee said.[58] It had also validated the logic used to justify the attack from the outset.

The Central Committee also learned lessons from international responses to the conflict. China's attack had won sympathy and support in international public opinion, the Central Committee claimed.[59] Not everyone supported the war publicly, the committee acknowledged. Some nations expressed "regret" or "condemnation" toward China, but most of these nations spoke "not from the heart."[60] In other words, these nations adopted a public posture of

opposition, but in truth supported the war, a clear reference to the United States' ambivalent response.

US analysts and policymakers drew their own assessments from the conflict. A CIA analysis concluded China had made a major gamble with the war. Beijing risked rich nations refusing to sell technology to China in response, for example. The war may have delayed modernization in the near term by diverting resources to the war effort.[61] China had also failed to achieve the stability it claimed. Border clashes between China and Vietnam continued despite Beijing's upbeat predictions.[62] Despite these shortcomings, Chinese leaders were probably more confident than before that a short invasion would not prompt foreign refusals to extend credit or sell technology to China, the CIA assessed.[63] China could use military force abroad, in other words, without necessarily losing access to foreign resources required for China's rapid economic development. As the Central Committee's own postwar analysis made clear, this was precisely the lesson Beijing had learned.

For policymakers and analysts today, more than four decades later, China's war with Vietnam in 1979 offers at least four key insights with direct policy implications.

First, the CCP legitimacy narrative matters. US officials who analyze Chinese security policy should devote time and resources to building expertise on the nuances of the CCP's evolving legitimacy narrative and its implications for the use of force. Expertise in Chinese strategy, doctrine, forces, and capabilities is essential. But so too is a working knowledge of how any potential use of force by China might be shaped by CCP political frameworks and associated legitimacy concerns. If the 1979 war is any guide, CCP leaders would likely reconcile any future use of military force to the party's own prevailing legitimacy narrative. Party leaders did not invent new rationales to justify China's invasion of Vietnam. Nor did they disregard the four modernizations agenda or depart from its underlying logic. Rather, they justified the war as a necessary step to achieve economic development and modernization because these objectives were linked to CCP perceptions of the sources of its legitimacy.

For US security and defense analysts today, monitoring the CCP's legitimacy narrative can aid efforts to anticipate how and when Chinese officials might build a case for conflict, rationalize the use of force should conflict

arise, or avoid conflict altogether. Perhaps more important, understanding this narrative would sensitize analysts to the dangers of policies or actions that threaten CCP legitimacy. Any such moves could be perceived as existential challenges to CCP leaders, whether intended or not, and could precipitate or exacerbate a crisis. Legitimacy threats are hidden red lines. Because they involve regime insecurities, party leaders are loathe to discuss these concerns openly, making it all the more important that security analysts understand them.

Second, the United States should emphasize that it shares with China a longstanding commitment to regional stability as a prerequisite for economic growth. The nexus linking legitimacy, development, and defense forged under Deng Xiaoping remains just as relevant in Xi Jinping's China today. According to the "basic line" of the party constitution, which was updated in 2022, the party remains focused today on economic construction and Reform and Opening. The CCP also remains committed to building a prosperous and modern socialist country and to safeguarding national "development interests" (*fazhan liyi*).[64] CCP leaders today link these ambitions to an imperative for peace and stability, just as Deng Xiaoping did decades ago.

The United States should stress that it shares this commitment to stability and economic growth in bilateral security exchanges and in the defense realm more broadly to highlight common ground and aspirations. For example, underscoring this shared legacy could be useful for crafting US responses to "gray-zone tactics" used by Chinese air and naval assets near disputed territories in the region. US responses to these tactics often highlight the importance of international rights, rules, freedoms, and lawful use of the sea. By also framing these actions consistently and prominently as violations of a shared investment in regional stability and development, the United States would be responding in terms that correspond to China's own ambitions and the party's legitimacy claims.

Third, China's 1979 war with Vietnam also highlights the potential risks to China's neighbors of deepening security ties with the United States. This is particularly so if US-China relations remain fraught and the neighboring state in question is locked in territorial or other longstanding disputes with China. Under such circumstances, a closer strategic bond between a neighboring state and the United States could increase the CCP's willingness to use

military force to disrupt what it perceives as a trend toward strategic encirclement, as China's post-Mao leaders did against Vietnam in 1979.

In late 1978 and early 1979, CCP leaders feared that Soviet-orchestrated encirclement threatened China's national security and the stability China required for rapid economic development. Bilateral tension between Vietnam and China certainly helped to convince Deng and other top leaders to attack Vietnam, but the growing strategic bond between Moscow and Hanoi encouraged CCP leaders to view Sino-Vietnamese tension in a more ominous light. Despite many changes since the late 1970s, the possibility exists today that US efforts to deepen security ties with China's neighbors could provoke similar fears of encirclement in Beijing and, perhaps, trigger a similar response.

Fourth, the past can help policymakers prepare for the future in US-China relations. Yet policymakers and diplomats who recognize the importance of diplomatic history to contemporary affairs face practical challenges. Demanding schedules, divided attention, and urgent priorities leave little time for reading and reflecting on lengthy histories of US-China relations. The decline of diplomatic history as an academic sub-discipline has compounded the problem by stanching the supply of clear, accessible studies of US-China diplomacy.

To surmount these challenges, the Department of State, in coordination with historians and experts from other federal agencies, should develop a series of "lessons-learned" studies focused on the history of US-China diplomacy. This initiative should mine past crises, triumphs, failures, and pivotal moments to produce short, nuanced capsule histories for busy policymakers and diplomats.

A capsule history of US-China exchanges during Deng's trip to Washington in 1979 might prompt policymakers to consider the risks of unclear communication, for example, by sensitizing them to Carter's efforts to dissuade Deng from attacking Vietnam without upsetting positive momentum in the bilateral relationship, an approach that Deng interpreted as tacit approval for the war. The same capsule history might prompt policymakers to reflect on the importance of perceived leverage in US-China relations and its impact on actual leverage. Deng assessed correctly that the United States believed it needed China as a check against the Soviet Union, and he used this perceived leverage to mute the Carter Administration's objections to China's attack on Vietnam

despite the president's own concerns about risk. No matter the themes emphasized or episodes selected in these studies, they should avoid pat solutions to current diplomatic challenges. Instead, they should offer vicarious, concentrated experience to spur busy policymakers to reflect on the limitations and possibilities in their own daily work through the lens of the past.

The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the US Government, Carnegie Corporation of New York, or the Wilson Center. *Copyright 2024, Wilson Center. All rights reserved.*

Notes

1. Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 531.
2. Insightful examples of each dimension include Lawrence C. Reardon, *A Third Way: The Origins of China's Current Economic Development Strategy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021); Isabella W. Weber, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Julian Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China* (Cambridge, MA: 2017); Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003); M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).
3. Zhang Xiaoming, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Robert S. Ross, *Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); King C. Chen, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis," *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 3, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1983): 233–263.
4. The Third Plenum in December 1978 is usually identified as the start of Reform and Opening, although the phrase "reform and opening" became the official slogan for this development period later, in the mid-1980s. Long Pingping, "Lun Deng Xiaoping Kaichuan Gaige Kaifang Weida Shiye de Lishi Gongxian" [On Deng Xiaoping's Historic Contribution to the Great Cause of Reform and Opening], in Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi Keyan Guanli Bu, eds., *Gaige Kaifang Sanshi Nian Yanjiu Wenji* [Research Anthology on Thirty Years of Reform and Opening] (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian, 2009), 99.
5. Percy Cradock (Peking) to Foreign & Commonwealth Office, untitled cable, January 15, 1979, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), FCO 21/1685, FEC/014/1.
6. CCP Central Committee, "Zhongguo Gongchandang Di Shiyi Jie Zhongyang Weiyuanhui Di San Ci Quanti Huiyi Gongbao" [Communique of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party], December 22, 1978, in Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiu Shi, eds., *Gaige Kaifang Sanshi Nian Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian, shang* [Selected Important Documents from 30 Years of Reform and Opening, first volume] (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian, 2008), 15.
7. CCP Central Committee, "Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Jiakuai Gongye Fazhan Ruogan Wenti de Jueding (cao'an)" [Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Several Issues Concerning the Acceleration of Industrial Development (Draft)], April 29, 1978, 3, Hebei Provincial Archives (hereafter *HPA*), 984-8-53-20.
8. CCP Central Committee, "Zhonggong Gongchandang Di Shiyi Jie Zhongyang Weiyuanhui Di San Ci Quanti Huiyi Gongbao," 15.
9. On the importance of foreign capital and technology to China's modernization, see Li Xiannian, "Zai Zhongyang Gongzuo Huiyi Shang de Jianghua" [Speech at the Central Work Conference], April 5, 1979, in *Li Xiannian Lun Caizheng Jingrong Maoyi, 1950–1991, xia*

juan [Li Xiannian on Finance and Trade, 1950–1991, second volume] (Beijing: Zhongguo Caizheng Jingji, 386–425.

10. For Soviet deployments along the border, see M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 139.
11. Deng Xiaoping, "Muqian de Xingshi he Renwu" [(Our) Current Situation and Tasks], January 16, 1980, in Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi, eds, *San Zhong Quanhui Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian, shang* [Selection of Important Documents Since the Third Plenum of the CCP Central Committee, first volume] (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian, 2011), 266.
12. Ibid.
13. Chen Jian, *Mao's China & the Cold War* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press), 277.
14. Deng Xiaoping, "Jianchi Si Xiang Jiben Yuanze," [Adhere to the Four Basic Principles], March 30, 1979, in Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi, *San Zhong Quanhui Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian*, *shang*, 76.
15. CCP Central Committee, "Dang Zhongyang Zhaokai de Zai Jing Dang, Zheng, Jun Fubuzhang Yishang Ganbu Baogao Dahui Jilu" [Record of Report by the Party Central Committee to Party, State, and Military Cadres above the Deputy Minister Level], February 16, 1979, 6–7, *HPA*, 855-31-2-3.
16. For example, Zbigniew Brzezinski (Tokyo) to President Jimmy Carter, untitled cable, May 23, 1978, "China (People's Republic of) – Brzezinski's Trip (5/23/78–6/20/78)," Box 9, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (hereafter *JCPL*).
17. For detailed accounts of Sino-Vietnamese tensions in the late 1970s, see Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy, The War After the War: A History of Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon* (New York: Collier Books, 1986); Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*.
18. CCP Central Committee, "Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Dui Yue Jinxing Ziwei Fanji, Baowei Bianjiang Zhandou de Tongzhi" [CCP Central Committee Notice on the Self-Defense Counterattack and Border Defense Fight against Vietnam], February 14, 1979, 2, *HPA*, 855-31-2-1.
19. For examples of Deng's public commentary at the time, see Hedley Donovan, "World: An Interview with Teng Hsiao-p'ing," *Time Magazine* 113, no. 6 (February 5, 1979), 32–35; "Vice Premier Deng in Washington," *Beijing Review* 22, no. 6 (February 9, 1979), 12–14.
20. CCP Central Committee, "Dang Zhongyang Zhaokai de Zai Jing Dang, Zheng, Jun Fubuzhang Yishang Ganbu Baogao Dahui Jilu," 7.
21. Ibid, 3.
22. Ibid, 7.
23. Ibid, 4, 15.
24. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 203.
25. For the origins of "active defense" and its evolution, see Fravel, *Active Defense*, 61–63.
26. CCP Central Propaganda Department, "Zhuazhu Ziwei Huanji Zhan Shengli Jieshu zhi Ji[,] Guangfan Shenru de Jinxing Aiguo Zhuyi Jiaoyu" [Seize the Opportunity of the Successful Conclusion of the Self-Defense Counterattack (and) Conduct Extensive and In-Depth Patriotic Education], *Xuanchuan Dongtai* [Trends in Propaganda], March 12, 1979, 2–3, *HPA* 1057-8-26.

27. Ibid, 5–6.
28. CCP Central Committee, "Dang Zhongyang Zhaokai de Zai Jing Dang, Zheng, Jun Fubuzhang Yishang Ganbu Baogao Dahui Jilu," 6.
29. Ibid, 25.
30. Ibid, especially 18–22.
31. Thomas J. Christensen, "Windows and War: Trend Analysis and Beijing's Use of Force," in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, ed. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 50–85.
32. Hu Yaobang, untitled speech at a Central Propaganda Department meeting to discuss press work, February 28, 1979, in "Dangqian Xuanchuan Gongzuo Yao Zhuyi de Ji Ge Wenti" [Several Issues (We) Should Pay Attention to in Current Propaganda Work], *Xuanchuan Dongtai*, March 5, 1979, 4, *HPA* 1057-8-26.
33. Director of Intelligence, "National Intelligence Daily (Cable), January 20, 1979, 2–3, General CIA Records, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, CIA-RDP79T00975A031000120002-2.
34. Memorandum from Secretary of State Vance to President Carter, "Scope Paper for the Visit of Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping of the People's Republic of China January 29–February 5, 1979," January 26, 1979, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1977–1980, vol. XIII, eds. David P. Nickles and Adam M. Howard (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2013), 731.
35. Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, "Your Meeting with Deng Xiaoping," January 25, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, vol. XIII, 722.
36. Memorandum of Conversation, "Summary of the President's First Meeting with PRC Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping," Washington, January 29, 1979, 10:40 a.m. – 12:30 p.m., *FRUS*, 1977–1980, vol. XIII, 747.
37. Memorandum of Conversation, "Vietnam," Washington, January 29, 1979, 5:00 p.m. – 5:45 p.m., *FRUS*, 1977–1980, vol. XIII, 766.
38. Ibid, 769.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. "Oral Presentation by President Carter to Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping," January 30, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, vol. XIII, 770.
42. CCP Central Committee, "Dang Zhongyang Zhaokai de Zai Jing Dang, Zheng, Jun Fubuzhang Yishang Ganbu Baogao Dahui Jilu," 22.
43. Ibid, 27.
44. Ibid, 27.
45. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977*–1981 (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 197.
46. Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, "Your Meeting with Deng Xiaoping," January 25, 1979, 721.
47. Donovan, "World: An Interview with Teng Hsiao-p'ing," 34.
48. Fox Butterfield, "Teng Again Says Chinese May Move Against Vietnam," *New York Times*,

February 1, 1979, A16.

49. Michel Oksenberg, "SCC Mtg. on Asia – Vietnamese Conflict, Feb 17, 79," February 17, 1979, n.p. [2], "Sorted Memoranda of Conversation: Carter Administration, Not to Be Viewed Until After Death," Box 68, Michel Oksenberg Papers, 1960–2001, University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.
50. Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, "Your Meeting with Deng Xiaoping," January 25, 1979, 720.
51. Memorandum from Secretary of State Vance to President Carter, "Scope Paper for the Visit of Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping of the People's Republic of China January 29–February 5, 1979," January 26, 1979, 731.
52. President Carter to President Brezhnev, untitled letter, February 17, 1981 [sic], Folder 2, Box II:94, Zbigniew Brzezinski Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
53. President Brezhnev to President Carter, untitled letter, n.d., Folder 2, Box II:94, Zbigniew Brzezinski Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
54. Zbigniew Brzezinski to President Carter, untitled memorandum, April 4, 1979, 1, Folder 19 ("NSC Weekly Reports, 4–9/79"), Box 29, CREST [CIA Records Search Tool] Collection, JCPL.
55. Conversation Notes, "Vance/Chai, Feb 20, 79," Washington, February 20, 1979; Conversation Notes, "ZB Good Bye [sic] Lunch for Han Xu," Washington, February 21, 1979; Conversation Notes, "Pres/Chai," Washington, March 1, 1979, all from "Sorted Memoranda of Conversation: Carter Administration, Not to Be Viewed Until After Death," Box 68, Michel Oksenberg Papers, 1960–2001, University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.
56. CCP Central Committee, "Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Shengli Jieshu Ziwei Fanji, Baowei Bianjiang Zhandou de Tongzhi" [CCP Central Committee Notice on the Successful Conclusion of the Self-Defense Counterattack Against Vietnam and the Battle to Defend the Border Areas], March 16, 1979, 2, *HPA*, 855-31-2-2.
57. Ibid, 7.
58. Ibid, 5.
59. Ibid, 4.
60. Ibid.
61. National Foreign Assessment Center, "China's Vietnam War: Preparations, Combat Performance, and Apparent Lessons: An Intelligence Assessment," January 1, 1980, iii-iv, Folder 18 ("China (PRC), 3–80"), Box 9, CREST Collection, JCPL.
62. Ibid, 21.
63. Ibid.
64. CCP Twentieth National Congress, Zhongguo Gongchandang Zhangcheng [Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party], October 22, 2022. https://www.12371.cn/special/zggcdzc/zggcdzcqw/.

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027

Wilson Center

- wilsoncenter.org
- woodrowwilsoncenter
- @TheWilsonCenter
- @thewilsoncenter
- The Wilson Center

Kissinger Institute

- wilsoncenter.org/program/kissinger-institute-china-and-united-states

© 2024, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars