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## **People's Liberation Army Documents on the Sino–Vietnamese Conflict, 1979 (I)**

### Guest Editor's Introduction

On February 17, 1979 several hundred thousand Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops surged across the border and attempted to seize three provincial capitals in northern Vietnam. The year 2009 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Chinese invasion and affords the opportunity to reexamine this conflict. This issue of *Chinese Law and Government* provides new information on the conflict extracted from a unique set of documents—classified after-action reports by participating PLA units—contained in an official PLA publication, *A Collection of Selected Materials on the Special Subject of the Counterattack in Self-Defense Against Vietnam* (Due yue ziwei huanji zuozhan ruogan zhuanji jingyan huibian). Secret PLA reports like these do not fall into the hands of scholars every day. Like almost all military institutions, the PLA attempts to control access to its methods of operation, the state of morale of its troops, and the problems it encounters during its combat operations. Not since the publication of the *Politics of the Chinese Red Army: A Translation of the Bulletin of Activities of the People's Liberation Army* in 1966 has a similar set of classified reports been published for scholarly analysis.<sup>1</sup> The information translated herein provides scholars with new material to be used in reexamining the 1979 Sino–Vietnamese conflict.

Early on that February morning, Chinese troops advanced along several approaches to seize the cities of Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son. Smaller cities located along the avenues of approach were also seized or bypassed.

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The Chinese advance was met with bitter and stubborn resistance by the Vietnamese defenders. Although the Chinese had massed forces against the Vietnamese—sometimes as many as five or more Chinese attackers faced one Vietnamese defender—the Vietnamese were able to hold back the Chinese in many places. The PLA simply had too many troops, too many artillery pieces, and too many tanks. But in the end, of course, the Chinese achieved all their military goals. On March 5, when the Chinese captured their last tactical objective, Hill 413 in the southwestern part of Lang Son, and began their withdrawal, all the tactical and operational objectives of their campaign had been accomplished. However, although the campaign had been a success on the battlefield, the strategic objectives had not been achieved.

The war came about for many reasons. The emergence of Deng Xiaoping and the American courting of China as a potential friend in the cold war had led to a Chinese foreign policy that devalued Chinese friendship with Vietnam. The apogee of that friendship had been reached in 1968, but in the following years, the two nations had gradually drifted apart. The Chinese had grown concerned with the emerging friendship between the Soviet Union and Vietnam. The Vietnamese believed that Chinese leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, had not shown appropriate deference to them while U.S. sea, air, and land forces were pummeling Vietnam. When Saigon fell and a united state was created to represent the peoples of the north and the south, additional irritants became evident. The newly arrived North Vietnamese cadres had little respect for South Vietnam's Chinese Hoa minority. Many Hoa left Vietnam to avoid Vietnamese economic and political pressure. The border between China and Vietnam, which had never been well demarcated, became a problem when the peace that emerged in Indochina after the war with the United States could not conceal the fact that both sides had compromised the border to suit their local needs. Furthermore, interpretations of the border truce were more closely related to the political needs of the respective parties than they were to a surveyed, mutually agreed-on line.

These problems drove the Chinese and the Vietnamese apart, but it was the issue of Cambodia that accelerated the strains in the relationship to the breaking point. When Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge communists took power in Cambodia in 1975, they had a very weak notion of the strategic realities in the Vietnamese-Chinese-Cambodian triangular relationship. The new Khmer state had had close relationships with both the Chinese and the North Vietnamese states for many years. But the relationship with Vietnam had been strained by Vietnamese troops on Cambodian soil during the war with the United States (parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail crossed Cambodia) as well as by the resurgence of the traditional Khmer distrust of the Vietnamese based on perceptions of ancient wrongs. As Cambodia's relationship with China

remained strong and relatively untroubled, Vietnam's own relationship with China was deteriorating. By 1979, the Chinese saw an opportunity to intervene in support of Cambodia as a way to limit Vietnamese prerogatives in the region and, in so doing, sent a message to the Soviet Union by militarily challenging its ally, Vietnam.

These diplomatic trends and forces might have been contained, but Pol Pot's faction of Cambodian communists saw the regional tensions as an opportunity to use an external issue as a weapon against their domestic political opponents. So, while there were clashes in 1975 (and earlier) between Vietnam and Cambodia, it was not until 1976, when Pol Pot moved against his domestic opponents, that the conflict rose to a dangerous level. The combination of circumstances in which Pol Pot and his political allies needed a Vietnamese threat for domestic and international reasons and the existence of racial and land disputes along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border made their relationship dangerously unstable.

Initially, the Vietnamese attempted to negotiate their differences, but as time went by without a resolution they opted for a military solution. By 1977–78, regimental- and division-sized operations had begun along the border. In December 1978, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia with a force of several divisions. On January 8, 1979, the Vietnamese crossed the Mekong river and entered Phnom Penh; the remainder of Cambodia fell to the Vietnamese army within a few months of the seizure of Phnom Penh. The stage was now set for China to intervene.

The strategic goal of the Chinese campaign in northern Vietnam was to pressure the Vietnamese to leave Cambodia. This would visibly demonstrate the success of China's support for its ally and the futility of Vietnam's reliance on the Soviet Union. However, despite the 1979 invasion and intermittent combat that continued from 1979 to 1987, the Chinese military pressure on Vietnam's northern border did not force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. The Chinese strategy had failed.

The documents that have been collected in this issue are after-action reports drafted by PLA operations cadres shortly after the withdrawal of Chinese troops from northern Vietnam in March 1979. The documents were forwarded to Beijing, where it is very likely they were circulated among the organs of the Central Military Commission, the PLA general departments, and the service headquarters. At the same time, between March 16, 1979, and May 1979, the PLA Military Academy's Training Department assembled the reports into a single volume of teaching materials and circulated them to PLA units for studying the February–March campaign.

It is important to note that PLA cadres who had served as operations officers and commanders during the campaign drafted these reports. The

reports, because they are the work of the staff planners, chiefs of staff, and unit commanders, reflect the realities of the campaign as they saw it. These cadres had the responsibility for making the plans, supervising the preparations for the invasion, and executing the operations they had been assigned by higher headquarters. As a result, we learn more about PLA operational techniques such as establishing artillery grids or setting up communications networks than about the slogans and indoctrination methods associated with PLA political work. These reports can be treated as primary-source material on the 1979 campaign because they were prepared by the individuals who served in the units that conducted the campaign and who had direct knowledge of the units' activities.

The documents, once compiled in a single volume, were classified "secret" (*jimi*), the classification used for "after-action" reports in the aftermath of the 1979 campaign. For example, at least one other compilation of after-action reports was prepared by the Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department in May 1979 that also was classified as secret.<sup>2</sup> The political documents had the additional notation that they could be distributed to the division level (*fazhi shi*). It is possible that further distribution of the operational reports (translated in this issue) was not authorized because the material was too sensitive (operational reporting) or because the original compilation was a first draft (*chugao*) of a volume that was to be reedited, redacted, or "sanitized" at a later date.

The authors of these documents appear to have followed a common pattern or format. The author introduces the unit's actions by summarizing the unit's axis of advance and the results of the operation, which are stated with great precision. The author then lists the number of enemy troops killed, wounded, and captured. He lists the enemy matériel the unit captured and concludes his introduction by noting that the unit accomplished its missions.

After this comprehensive introduction, the report turns to the actual activities the unit conducted during the campaign. These activities are listed in a very broad chronological order. Training activities before the invasion are generally listed ahead of actions in contact with the enemy, but it is not a strict chronological order. Instead, a report will explain the unit's activities in a certain functional area. For example, tank-infantry operations (combined arms) are frequently discussed in several succeeding paragraphs. Dates may appear in these sections but there is no systematic chronology. After the author has reported the activities of the unit, he turns to the problems the unit encountered in conducting its part of the campaign. In some cases this section is drafted as a simple list or a set of sentences that do little more than identify the issues; in other cases, this section is drafted as several pages of problems and the attempts to solve them.

The reports have several glaring gaps: They do not list victims of friendly fire except in a few cases in which the authors want to make a point of some flaw in their unit's preparations. They do not routinely list the numbers of casualties incurred to accomplish their missions. They do not identify friendly units. Units have been listed as "XXX" Division or "XX" Army. Therefore, the reader can only guess at the identity of the unit. This pattern is obviously a security measure to protect the extent to which certain units and leaders had difficulties. The omission of unit identifications is typical of after-action reports at the *jimi* level of classification at the time. Moreover, there is no systematic rendering of the names of the smaller Vietnamese towns, rivers, mountains, and passes. These details would be very helpful for an analysis of Chinese movements during the campaign, but without a systematic rendering of the local names this level of translation may prove difficult to accomplish.

This issue of *Chinese Law and Government* includes five documents, listed in Table 1, that provide a cross-section of the available reports that the PLA assembled to support its study of the campaign.

The five documents provide details on the Chinese assault along several broad axes of advance against the Vietnamese cities of Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son. For command and control purposes, the Chinese envisioned operations against these three cities as separate areas of operations. The PLA deployed a force of about eleven armies in these three areas of operations.<sup>3</sup> The five documents provide the battlefield perspective at the army as well as the division level for the Cao Bang and Lang Son areas of operations and the artillery perspective for the Lao Cai area of operations. The next issue of *Chinese Law and Government* will extend the range of units and operations in these three areas.

The first document presents the experiences of a PLA army in the Cao Bang area where the army set out to conduct a *blitzkrieg*-style thrust. To achieve this goal, the unit trained for at least thirty days and took great care in selecting its routes. It studied the enemy situation and the tactics the Vietnamese were likely to employ. The unit made advance coordination for some of its infantry to ride on its tanks. The army's artillery and infantry operations were also coordinated so the infantry units had artillery support along many of their routes. Command, control, and communications had been a high priority so that the advancing fighters could swiftly seize their objectives. However, the unit encountered problems. They found that the Vietnamese tactics still surprised them and that command and control in combat was a difficult art to master. Tank-infantry coordination was inadequate and the logistical support of a *blitzkrieg* army could still be slow and poorly focused.

The second document reports on the experiences of a PLA army in the Lang Son area. It is likely that this unit's true identity was the 43d Army because

Table 1

**PLA Combat Reports on the 1979 Campaign**

Document	Short title	Area of operations
1	Main Experiences Gained by the XX Army	Cao Bang
2	Main Experiences Gained by the XX Army	Lang Son
3	Main Experiences Gained by the XXX Division	Lang Son
4	Combat Report of the XX Army Artillery Forces (Regt)	Lao Cai
5	Combat Report of the XX Division's Artillery (Regt)	Lao Cai

the author of the report, presumably in an unguarded moment, identified the 129th Division as one of the unit's divisions. (The 129th Division has been a part of the 43d Army since the Chinese Civil War).

The army had problems preparing for its campaign assignments. Two of its three divisions had been engaged in production or training base activity for several years and were not combat-ready. At least one of its regiments had been filled with new recruits, and these new soldiers made up 42 percent of the regiment's effectives. The army launched an extensive training program and took steps to ensure that they had organized in a way that allowed the army's leaders to mass combat power. The unit still encountered a wide range of formidable problems. They lacked intelligence information on the Vietnamese. The attempts to organize an effective command and control system had not been entirely successful. Coordination between the army's tank and infantry units was poor. Inadequately trained troops tended to gather in mass groups when moving against tactical objectives, and this habit caused heavy casualties. In addition, logistics support was inadequate.

The third document presents the experiences of an infantry division in the Lang Son area. Based on the locations identified in this report, it appears that this division was one of the divisions of the 55th Army tasked with the mission of moving from its line of departure at Friendship pass (Youyiguan) (VN: Huu Nghi Quan) to seize Lang Son from the north. The division spent a great deal of its preparation time analyzing the Vietnamese defenses it expected to face. Since the Vietnamese believed that the defense of Lang Son was the key to their overall defense,<sup>4</sup> it was time well spent. The unit also conducted the typical precombat training that has been mentioned in connection with the two armies discussed earlier.

The problems this division encountered appear to be the same ones that plagued PLA units across the board: weak command and control; poor soldier skills; and difficulty coordinating the infantry with the artillery, armor, and supporting arms. But this division also noted a new problem that may have

had a significant deleterious effect on the ability of the Chinese forces to fix and destroy the Vietnamese. This division reported that reconnaissance forces that supported its operations “captured no prisoners, took a great many casualties, and failed to accomplish their missions.” Even assuming the division “only” had the typical problems of any 1979 PLA division in combat, the lack of competent reconnaissance support turned the division commander into a blind man groping in difficult terrain with a very determined Vietnamese opponent.

Documents 4 and 5 deal with the activities and problems the Chinese artillerymen faced during the 1979 campaign. Since both units were regiment-sized and conducted their operations in the Lao Cai area, it is interesting to consider the range of both similarities and differences in their methods of operations. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the reports by these units devote the smallest number of pages to the problems the units faced. These documents assume an additional importance because they give the scholar and analyst insight into the way Chinese artillery operated and was employed in the early post-Mao era.

In an effort to reproduce the form as well as the substance of the original documents, the guest editor has shaped the translation as close to the original as possible, which partially explains the fact that parts of the text may seem poorly constructed or redundant. Where inconsistent paragraphing or formatting have been included in the translation, the reader can be assured that they appear in a similar fashion in the original documents. Where time, technology, and the evolution of the Chinese language have conspired to create vague or seemingly illogical phrases, every effort has been made to make the concepts understandable to a modern scholarly audience. Of course, this has not been totally successful. The failures remain the responsibility of the editor of these papers.

## Notes

1. J. Chester Cheng, *Politics of the Chinese Red Army: A Translation of the Bulletin of Activities of the People's Liberation Army* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1966).

2. Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, *Zhong Yue bianjing ziwei huanji zuozhan ganbu gongzuo ziliao huibian* (Compilation of Materials on Cadre Work in the Counterattack in Self-Defense on the Sino–Vietnamese Border) Classified: Secret (*jimi*): Distribute to division level (*fazhi shi*) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Cadre Department, May 1979).

3. The Chinese character *jun* has been translated as “corps” or “army.” The editor has chosen to use the translation “army” because it is consistent with most work on this subject, and it reflects the most common Chinese usage. A *jun* was a corps-level

unit of about 43,000 men. It controlled subordinate units of several arms and support services. The modern-day PLA variant of a corps-level unit is the group army or *jituanjun*.

4. Of the three provincial capitals the Chinese attacked, Lang Son was the provincial capital closest to Hanoi. Also, it was on a main rail and road route to the capital.

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