

China and the Escalation of the Vietnam War

The First Years of the Johnson Administration

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Introduction: The China Factor Reconsidered

Scholars now agree that the period from November 1964 to July 1965 was pivotal in Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation of the war in Vietnam.¹ During this time, Washington fundamentally deepened the U.S. commitment to Saigon by initiating the regular bombing of North Vietnam and by sending American ground combat troops to South Vietnam. Yet historians often disagree about why and how U.S. leaders chose to do what they did in Vietnam in this important period.² The connection between Vietnam and the Johnson administration's concern about China has failed to receive sufficient emphasis from most scholars.

The Johnson administration, this article shows, escalated the war in Vietnam to protect America's global credibility as the leader and defender of the non-Communist world in the face of the threat posed by China's "wars of national liberation" strategy in Vietnam. The Johnson administration evaluated this threat in the context of the broadening Sino-Soviet split. This thesis goes

1. See, among many scholars who hold this position, H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000); and George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th rev. ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

2. For useful historiographical articles about the Vietnam War literature, see Robert A. Divine, "Vietnam Reconsidered," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 1988), pp. 79–93; Gary R. Hess, "The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (April 1994), pp. 239–264; Robert J. McMahon, "U.S.-Vietnamese Relations: A Historiographical Survey," in Warren I. Cohen, ed., *Pacific Passage: The Study of American-East Asian Relations on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 313–336; and David L. Anderson, "The Vietnam War," in Robert D. Schulzinger, ed., *A Companion to American Foreign Relations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), pp. 309–329.

beyond merely confirming the conventional wisdom that U.S. officials regarded Communist China as a major enemy in Vietnam. In fact, the Johnson administration's perception of the Chinese threat to America's global credibility was much more complicated.

In the early years of the Johnson administration, Washington saw contrary trends in the ongoing Cold War. On the one hand there was détente between Washington and Moscow after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. On the other there was a radical Chinese ideological offensive toward the Soviet Union that had the potential to drive Moscow back to a Stalinist hard line. In 1964 and early 1965, a series of international events convinced Washington that China's "wars of national liberation" strategy must not be allowed to become the wave of the future. Should Hanoi, a regime openly supported by Beijing as a star in the "wars of national liberation," take over South Vietnam, Johnson and his advisers believed, the Soviet Union might then be forced to discard the "peaceful coexistence" principle and the trend toward détente would be reversed. In sum, concerns in the Johnson administration that a failure to contain China in Vietnam would induce the Soviet Union to return to a hard line toward the West greatly contributed to the escalation of the Vietnam War.

The China factor looms large in the literature on Vietnam. Pioneered by authors such as Harry G. Summers, the so-called revisionist critique of the limited war efforts in Vietnam dwells on Washington's concern about a possible massive Chinese intervention on behalf of Hanoi. According to these authors, American leaders' unreasonable fear of direct Chinese intervention precluded a more decisive military option in Vietnam. Because the United States "allowed (itself) to be bluffed by China throughout most of the war," Summers writes, the gradual escalation actually granted Hanoi time to adjust to U.S. pressure and lost the war by making American soldiers fight with one hand bound behind their backs.³ Although the debate over whether the fear

3. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1984), p. 94. Allen Whiting has a slightly different view. He regards America's concern about Chinese intervention more as a successful case of deterrence by the Chinese than a failure of American policymakers to see through China's bluff. See Allen Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975). This revisionist school includes Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam In Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978); U. S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978); Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell, 1980); Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984); Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985); Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988); C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Frank Cass, 2002); and Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For a review article about the revisionist school, see John W. Garver, "China

of Chinese intervention was well-founded is far from settled, historians now generally agree, especially after the appearance of Yuen Foong Khong's *Analogies at War*,⁴ that this fear played a crucial role in the Johnson administration's war planning.

U.S. concern about Chinese intervention is at least partially justified by historians who, from the early 1990s onward, documented China's involvement in the Vietnam War based on newly released Chinese sources. Historians now recognize the depth of China's involvement, especially Beijing's assistance to Hanoi and the link between the war and China's domestic revolution.⁵ However, these works mainly focus on the foreign policy of China and deal with how Chinese leaders viewed the war in Vietnam, not how U.S. policymakers regarded China's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Revisionist or not, historians who deal more exclusively with the American side focus on the impact of concerns about China on military strategy in Vietnam, not on how concern about China contributed to the escalation of the war in the first place. As a result, a crucial dimension of the Johnson administration's deliberations on the U.S. stake in Vietnam is missing.

The need to reexamine the Johnson administration's concerns about China becomes even more urgent when one turns to the vast body of scholarship scrutinizing factors that prompted the escalation. Most scholars emphasize long-term factors when they explain the origins and developments of the war. Some explain the war in terms of American cultural imperatives.⁶ Others

and the Revisionist Thesis," in William Head and Lawrence E. Grinter, eds., *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: A 1990s Perspective on the Decisions, Combat, and Legacies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 105–117.

4. Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

5. Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–1969," *China Quarterly*, No. 142 (June 1995), pp. 356–387; Qiang Zhai, "Beijing and the Vietnam Conflict, 1964–1965: New Chinese Evidence," *Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Bulletin*, No. 6/7 (Winter 1995/1996), pp. 233–250; Zhang Xiaoming, "The Vietnam War, 1964–1969: A Chinese Perspective," *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (October 1996), pp. 731–762; and Qiang Zhai, *China and The Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

6. Loren Baritz, for example, argues that a national myth, created out of a combination of cultural and technological superiority, encouraged U.S. involvement in Vietnam and made defeat unthinkable. See Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into the Vietnam War and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: W. Morrow, 1985). See also James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 23. Lloyd C. Gardner asserts that "fascination with technocratic solutions to political problems" was the underlying impulse of Johnson's escalation. See Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), p. 23. Orrin Schwab proposes that the American "technocratic" state, through an institutionally grounded belief system, transformed the realities in Vietnam into perceptions consistent with American societal and institutional interests. See Orrin Schwab, *Defending the Free World: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and the Vietnam War, 1961–1965* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998). David Halberstam and Frances Fitzgerald argue that arrogance about American culture and ignorance of the Vietnamese revolution and nationalism produced an unnecessary war. See David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972); and

cite long-term economic forces.⁷ Mainstream scholarship, in response to the cultural and economic explanations, dwells on long-term Cold War assumptions and strategies.⁸ On this ground, the analysis of U.S. strategic calculation regarding China is justified. Yet even here, the nuanced consideration of China by the Johnson administration in the Cold War context has not been fully examined.

Mainstream scholars agree that Washington's Cold War containment strategy greatly shaped U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Successive administrations, from Harry Truman to Richard Nixon, pledged to stand firm in Vietnam because America's credibility as the defender of the free world was at stake. George C. Herring's argument is typical: "U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a logical, if not inevitable, outgrowth of a world view and a policy—the policy of containment—that Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades."⁹ Herring's masterful synthesis, originally published in 1979, was quickly followed by the work of other scholars, such as Stanley Karnow and Gary R. Hess.¹⁰ Today, the thesis that the Vietnam War could have been avoided if U.S. leaders had adopted a more realistic conception of the limited interests at stake in Indochina has become an overarching theme of many works, including Robert S. McNamara's controversial memoir.¹¹

Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co., 1972).

7. These scholars argue that America's interests in world markets and the global capitalist system made the Vietnam War necessary, and even inevitable. A more sophisticated argument of this school, while admitting the lack of direct U.S. economic interests in Vietnam, nevertheless insists that the need to stimulate the economic recovery of Japan, the Philippines, and Western Europe made the goal of preserving a free Vietnam highly desirable. See William S. Borden, *The Pacific Alliance: United States Foreign Economic Policy and Japanese Trade Recovery, 1947–1955* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Howard Schonberger, "The Cold War and the American Empire in Asia," *Radical History Review*, No. 33 (Fall 1985), pp. 140–148; Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Patrick Hearden, *The Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); and Thomas McCormick, *America's Half Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

8. The phrase "mainstream scholarship" refers to the majority of scholars who deal with the Vietnam War in terms of strategic factors of the Cold War.

9. Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. xiii.

10. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983); and Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990).

11. Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1979); Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War: Vietnam, 1945–1975* (New York: Avon Books, 1981); James Pinckney Harrison, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1982); William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954–1975* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986); George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A.

Of course, some historians are less critical of U.S. policymakers. Some early writers believed that the United States made an honorable mistake in Vietnam and that its idealism was shattered by cruel international realities.¹² Others maintain that the historical circumstances left American leaders little choice.¹³ Still others argue that Americanizing the war in Vietnam was necessary because a non-Communist South Vietnam was indeed crucial to U.S. national interests.¹⁴

Although individual writers naturally differ from each other in emphasis, tone, and approach, they all use long-term Cold War strategy as a dominant paradigm to explain the Vietnam War. However, the explanatory power of long-term factors—be they cultural, economic, or strategic—is limited. Long-term factors alone cannot sufficiently explain the timing of the escalation. To understand why the Johnson administration, not others, made the fateful decision in early 1965, one has to take immediate factors into consideration. Scholars must examine more carefully the Johnson administration's perception of the international Cold War dynamics in the "long 1964," to borrow a term from Fredrik Logevall.¹⁵ The U.S. perception of China played a crucial role in prompting Johnson and his advisers to stand firm in Vietnam.

That the Johnson administration's deliberation about China has been an understudied theme in the Vietnam War literature becomes even clearer when one reviews the works dealing with the immediate causes of the escalation of

Knopf, 1986); Anthony Short, *The Origins of Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (London: Longman, 1989); George Donelson Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990); James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945–1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Marilyn Blatt Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1954–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000); and Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: The Viking Press, 2002).

12. Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The US In Vietnam, 1946–1966* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); and Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co, 1970).

13. Gabriel Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Power and Purpose* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ralph B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, 3 Vols. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984–1990); Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

14. Michael Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam*; and Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*.

15. Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. xiii–xiv.

the war. Larry Berman, among other authors, stresses that Johnson's fear of a right-wing backlash should he lose Vietnam to Communism, which would destroy his Great Society program at home, pushed him to escalate the war.¹⁶ Such domestic political conservatism, although in retreat in the 1960s, did exist.¹⁷ However, many scholars now agree that concerns about domestic politics alone cannot explain Johnson's decision. After all, Johnson once remarked that "losing the Great Society was a terrible thought, but not so terrible as the thought of being responsible for America's losing a war to the Communists. Nothing would be worse than that."¹⁸ Other scholars focus on Johnson and his advisers' personalities and their working relationship for an answer. H. R. McMaster, for example, argues that Johnson's "fixation on short-term political goals, combined with his character and the personalities of his principal civilian and military advisers, rendered the administration incapable of dealing adequately with the complexities of the situation in Vietnam."¹⁹ Logevall argues that Johnson and his senior advisers favored Americanization of the Vietnam War "less out of concern for America's credibility . . . than out of fears for their own personal credibility" and careers.²⁰

Although these scholars have contributed substantially to our understanding of the war, their treatment of the Johnson administration's perception of the immediate international realities is not satisfying. It is true that foreign policy-makers are influenced and constrained by their personalities and domestic politics; yet they have to make policies in the context of fluid international conditions. To understand the Johnson administration's decision on Vietnam, scholars must integrate immediate concerns about the changing Cold War context with nuanced perceptions of the Communist world.

One of the key concerns of the Johnson administration in its first year-and-a-half was the changing relationship among the Soviet Union, the United States, and China. U.S. officials wanted to contain Communism in Vietnam. The Soviet Union and China were the most important enemies from this perspective. But the Johnson administration did not view the two Communist powers as a monolith. Scholars so far have seen the Johnson administration as holding a far more moderate view toward the Soviet Union than toward China regarding Vietnam. R. B. Smith even suggests that "perhaps the most

16. Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982).

17. See, for example, Ross Y. Koen, *The China Lobby in American Politics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960); and Stanley D. Bachrack, *The Committee of One Million: "China Lobby" Politics, 1953-1971* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

18. Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 337.

19. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, p. 325.

20. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 389. See also Ellsberg, *Secrets*, p. viii.

serious failing of both the Kennedy and the Johnson Administrations was their assumption that China was the principal ‘enemy’ in Asia, and that the Soviet Union was potentially a ‘friend.’”²¹ “Failing” or not, historians now have revealed that the Soviet Union’s involvement in the Vietnam War during the Kennedy and the early Johnson administrations was far less than once imagined. Ilya V. Gaiduk, drawing on Soviet archives, demonstrates that the overarching policy of the Soviet Union toward Vietnam in the early 1960s was to “eliminate the Vietnam problem from the Soviet foreign policy agenda so it is not an impediment to the solution of other issues of primary importance to the Kremlin—Soviet-U.S. relations and détente with the West.” “It is in this light,” he continues, “that one should regard all Soviet efforts with respect to the Vietnam War.”²²

Although some researchers use the limited Soviet involvement to accuse Johnson of unwisely dragging the United States into a war in which even the principal enemy saw little at stake, others turn to China to explain the Johnson administration’s justification of the war. Historians have now generally concluded that China was perceived as the principal enemy of America in Vietnam. Authors such as Gordon H. Chang, Noam Kochavi, Victor S. Kaufman, and Evelyn Goh agree that after the Korean War, China gradually replaced the Soviet Union as a more radical and militant Communist power aiming to dominant Asia.²³ These scholars, however, focus on Sino-American relations per se; therefore their discussions about the Vietnam War are limited. Moreover, the thesis that merely argues China was regarded as the principal enemy of America in Vietnam is not fully satisfying. Containing China was also a long-term Cold War strategy, and the fear of China reached its peak in the early 1960s.²⁴ Thus, merely acknowledging the long-standing U.S. attitude toward China cannot sufficiently explain the timing of the escalation. More important, the simple “China-as-the-Principal-Enemy” thesis fails to do justice to the highly complicated deliberations of Johnson and his

21. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, Vol. 2, *The Kennedy Strategy*, p. 17.

22. Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003), p. 211. Also see Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996).

23. Gordon H. Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948–1972* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Victor S. Kaufman, *Confronting Communism: U.S. and British Policies toward China* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Noam Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated: China Policy During the Kennedy Years* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002); Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961–1974: From “Red Menace” to “Tacit Ally”* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, “Threats, Opportunities, and Frustrations in East Asia,” in Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, eds., *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963–1968* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 99–134; and Kaiser, *American Tragedy*.

24. See, for example, Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated*.

advisers about the impact of not containing China and losing Vietnam on the nuanced relationship among the Soviet Union, the United States, and China.

Mark Moyar's recent book, *Triumph Forsaken*, pays serious attention to China when dealing with the Johnson years. Moyar argues that the Cold War domino theory was valid and that successive U.S. administrations were justified in standing firm in Vietnam. Only the lack of decisive military action in Vietnam, he insists, rendered America's efforts futile. Moyar goes to great length to show that China and North Vietnam were actively seeking to topple the dominos in Southeast Asia, and he argues that the Soviet Union tried to keep Vietnam as a back-burner issue. Although Moyar acknowledges that the Johnson administration treated the Chinese threat in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, he does not fully examine the Johnson administration's concerns about the impact on Soviet behavior of losing Vietnam. Moreover, at one point Moyar explicitly rejects the argument that the Johnson administration decided to escalate the war in Vietnam to protect America's global credibility, arguing that the "distribution of power within Southeast Asia" was a more important reason to defend South Vietnam.²⁵ Yet it is not always easy to distinguish the "credibility" issue from the "power" issue in Moyar's analysis of the domino effect because he sometimes suggests that the Johnson administration actually realized the limited power of China and thus deemed Beijing primarily as a threat to America's credibility.²⁶

Given the current status of the Vietnam War literature, therefore, the thesis laid out here will deepen scholars' understanding of the Johnson administration's Vietnam policies during the "long 1964." The Johnson administration justified the Vietnam War on the ground that America's credibility as the defender of the "free world" was at stake. Washington was concerned that the Sino-Soviet split might cause unexpected dangers for the emerging Soviet-American détente. Should Hanoi take over South Vietnam, Johnson and his advisors feared, the Soviet Union might be convinced that the United States was indeed a "paper tiger" and that the militant Chinese "wars of national liberation" strategy, not the Soviet "peaceful coexistence" strategy, represented the future for international Communism. Although Moscow repeatedly warned in public that America's escalation of the war would do harm to U.S.-Soviet relations, Soviet leaders hoped in private that the United States could prove the Chinese aggressive strategy wrong in Vietnam.²⁷ The Johnson ad-

25. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 290.

26. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 320–321, 416.

27. See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 360.

ministration, on the other hand, was less concerned about the U.S.-Soviet relationship in the immediate future than about the long-term prospect for détente. To dissuade Moscow from abandoning the policy of détente and to show America's resolve to stand firm in the face of Communist aggression, therefore, the Johnson administration decided to escalate the war in Vietnam to thwart the Chinese "wars of national liberation" strategy.

History is multicausal. In explaining such a complicated historical event as the Vietnam War, the historian's task is to evaluate various factors and determine the hierarchy of causes. Although the singling out and careful examination of one factor is legitimate, scholars must be aware of the risk of oversimplification and overestimation. This article, therefore, does not claim that the Johnson administration's immediate concern about China in the "long 1964" was the only important reason for the escalation of the war in Vietnam. Neither does the article deny the importance of the long-term factors and other short-term causations. Rather, the purpose here is to contribute to a more balanced explanation of the Vietnam War by addressing a hitherto underexamined aspect of that historical experience.

Vietnam and "Wars of National Liberation"

Lyndon B. Johnson is primarily remembered as the Vietnam War president. His administration gradually transformed a limited partnership with Saigon into an open-ended commitment to preserve an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. Concerns about China played a significant role in deciding whether American soldiers should fight the war for the South Vietnamese. First, during the "long 1964" the Johnson administration perceived an intensified Chinese expansionism in the so-called Third World, especially in Southeast Asian countries. Accordingly, more and more U.S. officials came to regard China as America's major enemy when they were deliberating the Communist threat in Vietnam. Second, the Johnson administration believed that the threat of China, primarily manifested in its support for the so-called wars of national liberation and perceived in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, constituted a major challenge to America's credibility as the leader of the "free world." To meet this challenge, Johnson and his advisers believed, the United States had to prove, by standing firm in Vietnam, that the Chinese strategy of "wars of national liberation" would not succeed.

In fact, an explicit expression of concern about China surfaced on 13 December 1963, when Roger Hilsman, then assistant secretary of state for Far East affairs, made a speech in San Francisco, with the acquiescence of Secre-

tary of State Dean Rusk and Johnson himself. The speech was welcomed by most people as a much delayed foreign policy initiative toward the People's Republic of China in acknowledging that the United States could not just ignore that government as a "passing phenomena" and called for a more flexible "open door" policy toward Beijing.²⁸ However, the speech conveyed a mixed message. Hilsman made it clear that the viability of this initiative depended on Chinese leaders—they must abandon their commitment "to a fundamentalist form of Communism which emphasizes violent revolution even if it threatens the physical ruin of the civilized world," halt "their determination to spread their system everywhere," and "admit that there are common interests which cross ideological lines." But Hilsman hardly expected that Communist China would change its behavior because "the differing circumstances and opportunities on the peripheries of the Soviet Union and Communist China" made it easy for Beijing to pursue its ambitions:

The Soviet Union and European members of its bloc border on long-established—as well as more distant—deterrent and defensive forces. Communist China's neighbors, on the other hand, include newly established states struggling to maintain their independence, with very limited defense forces. . . . [Therefore,] there is a wider range of opportunities for aggression and subversion available to Peking, which renders it even more important that in dealing with Peking we do not permit that regime to underestimate free world firmness and determination.

Hilsman thus warned that if China wanted to gain "toeholds within the so-called National Liberation Movements or among the dissatisfied and disgruntled," especially among the Southeast Asian countries, the United States would not "betray our interests and those of our Allies to appease the ambitions of Communist China's leaders."²⁹

Although Hilsman was soon to leave the Johnson administration, the themes in his speech were shared by senior policymakers in Washington and later developed into a key rationale of the Johnson administration's escalation of the Vietnam War. His speech appeared as the entrenched U.S. containment policy toward China reached a breaking point. During the first months of the Johnson administration, Washington had to acknowledge that the eco-

28. In his oral history, Dean Rusk confirmed that he and Johnson knew of Roger Hilsman's speech before it was released. He also confirmed that no one opposed it beforehand. See "Rusk on China: Transcript," pp. 10–11, in Dean Rusk Oral History Collection, Richard B. Russell Library, The University of Georgia Library, Athens, GA.

29. "Roger Hilsman's Speech on China Policy to the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, CA, 13 December 1963," in Roderick MacFarquhar, *Sino-American Relations, 1949–71* (Newton Abbot, UK: David & Charles, 1972), pp. 201–205.

conomic embargo against China had largely failed, in no small part because of increased trade between China and key U.S. allies such as Japan, Canada, Australia, and Britain.³⁰ Moreover, as Hilsman emphasized, the Chinese strategy of “wars of national liberation”—the willingness and determination to stimulate and support Communist-oriented anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism revolutions in the form of armed struggle among the Third World countries—had become a serious challenge to the defense of the “free world.”

Indeed, on 14 December 1963, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi started a two-month tour of Africa and emphasized China’s support of “wars of national liberation.” On 16 December, Zhou told Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of the United Arab Republic, that China would “support the anti-imperialism revolutions waged by Arab countries to win national independence.”³¹ On 20 December, Zhou declared in a press conference that “the major goal of China’s foreign policy should be the active support of national liberation movements in Asian, African, and Latin American countries.”³² Five days later in Algeria, Zhou praised the Algerian war for independence and argued that the armed revolution for national liberation in Algeria created “a correct strategy for all oppressed peoples.”³³ On 13 January 1964, Zhou declared in Ghana, “we can not beg for peace; only through armed struggle can we win the war against imperialism.”³⁴ As it turned out, Zhou’s and Chen’s diplomatic tour was a big victory for Communist China. Soon afterward fourteen African countries recognized Beijing, leaving only fifteen to continue their relations with Taipei.

Beijing was greatly encouraged. Soon after the trip to Africa, Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi visited several Asian countries. On 16 February 1964, Zhou told General Ne Win, head of Burma’s military junta, that the current situation in Africa and Asia was “excellent for revolutionary struggle against imperialism

30. On the American economic blockade against China, see Zhang Shuguang, *Economic Cold War: America’s Embargo against China and the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949–1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001). Dean Rusk, for example, once urged Johnson to remind the prime minister of Australia that Washington had become “uneasy about . . . problems that might arise should the livelihood of too many Australians come to depend on sales to Communist China.” See Memorandum from Dean Rusk to LBJ, 22 June 1964, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. XXV, p. 2 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers); emphasis in the original.

31. The CCP Central Documentary Research Department, eds., *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976* [A Chronicle of Zhou Enlai’s Life, 1949–1976], Vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), p. 601.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 603.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 604.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 610.

and colonialism.”³⁵ Zhou and Chen then proceeded to Pakistan, where Zhou announced that China would support Pakistan’s position on Kashmir. Zhou further declared that “America must abandon its hostile policy toward China, which is the only way to improve the Sino-American relationship.”³⁶ On 20 March, in an open telegram to the second Afro-Asia Conference, Beijing declared that “the Afro-Asian national liberation movement is an inevitable trend of history and no one could thwart this trend.”³⁷ On 4 April, the premier of Laos, Prince Souvanna Phouma, visited China and appealed for assistance in bringing peace to his country. Beijing replied by blaming Laotian chaos on the United States, demanding that American forces be withdrawn from South Vietnam, and announcing China’s support of the “just war of national liberation in Laos.”³⁸

Beijing also caused serious trouble in Indonesia. In the early 1960s, Indonesian President Sukarno mobilized the Indonesian Army and Communist Party (PKI) behind his “Confrontation” policy toward Malaysia and the West. Under this policy, Sukarno developed a doctrine of continuing revolution against neocolonialism, swore to crush the British-backed Malaysia, and openly invited help from the Communist world. Indonesia was one of the most important “dominoes” in Southeast Asia,³⁹ and the Johnson administration feared that Beijing might take over Indonesia through the PKI, the third largest Communist party after the Soviet and the Chinese. On 7 January 1964, with Beijing supporting Sukarno in his conflict with Malaysia, McGeorge Bundy, the president’s special assistant for national security affairs, told Johnson that “we are contending for the long-range future of a country of 100 million with great resources in a strategic location” and this is “essential to our national interest.”⁴⁰ On the same day at a National Security Council (NSC) meeting, senior officials agreed that “if the Indonesians turn against us and seize U.S. investments, the Chinese Communists might get the U.S. oil companies, thereby altering the strategic balance in the area.”⁴¹

Reports and memoranda flowing into the White House consistently confirmed Washington’s anxiety about Beijing. In January 1964, for example, the

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 619–621.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 622–623.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 627.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 631–632.

39. Belief in the importance of Indonesia was carried over from the Eisenhower administration and the Kennedy administration. For an up-to-date analysis, see John Subritzky, *Confronting Sukarno: British, American, Australian and New Zealand Diplomacy in the Malaysian-Indonesian Confrontation, 1961–5* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

40. McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, 7 January 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXVI, p. 13.

41. NSC Meeting, 7 January 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXVI, p. 19.

U.S. embassy in Laos reported that instead of publicly responding to Hilsman's speech, "[t]he Chinese Communists have furnished fighter aircraft to Hanoi within the past few days" and "[i]t is possible therefore that the Chinese may introduce 'volunteer' ground elements into North Vietnam as a means of reassuring Hanoi of Peiping's support."⁴² On 20 February, when China finally responded to Hilsman's speech, Beijing's "insistence on [the] sacred obligation to give active support to [the] national liberation struggle in Asia and [the] reiteration that Peiping's sine qua non for détente is for US to get out of Asia" became, in the words of the U.S. consulate in Hong Kong, "further testimony to unreconstructed ChiCom commitment to subversion and insurgency as instruments of national policy."⁴³ That same month, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concluded that "the Chinese Communist Army will continue to be the strongest in Asia and will provide a powerful backing for Chinese Communist foreign policy," which would make continued "efforts to achieve recognition as a major world power and the dominant power in Asia." Unless the United States stood firm before Communist China, the JCS warned, China

would probably feel that the United States would be more reluctant to intervene on the Asian mainland and thus the tone of Chinese policy would probably become more assertive . . . [and] generally, Asians probably will become more reluctant to assume a strong stand in opposition to China in the absence of credible guarantees of Western protection.⁴⁴

Fully aware of China's threat to its neighbors, the Johnson administration saw a larger conspiracy behind the curtain. "It became increasingly clear that Ho Chi Minh's military campaign against South Vietnam was part of a larger, much more ambitious strategy being conducted by the Communists," Johnson later recalled. "Peking was in a bellicose and boastful mood. . . . [It] was promising Hanoi full support and was urging 'wars of national liberation' as the solution to all the problems of non-Communist underdeveloped nations." Moreover, Johnson believed that the domino theory could be applied to China. "The Chinese were training Thai guerillas." In Indonesia, Sukarno "went to Communist China" for support and to "destroy the new Malaysian Federation." Cambodia also quickly became "a principal supply point for

42. Vientiane to State, "No Reaction to Assistant Secretary Hilsman's Speech on China Policy," 1 January 1964, in Box 2019, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-1966, Record Group (RG) 59, General Records of the Department of State, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD.

43. Hong Kong to State, "Chinese Response to Hilsman's Speech," 20 February 1964, in Box 2019, CFPF 1964-1966, RG 59, NARA.

44. "Paper Prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff," February 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. X, pp. 26-41.

Chinese military equipment going to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.” “In Laos Chinese influence was dominant in the country’s two northernmost provinces,” and Johnson “had no doubt the North Koreans were only waiting for us to be thrown out of Vietnam before launching their own offensive against South Korea.” Thus Johnson saw a “Jakarta-Hanoi-Peking-Pyongyang axis, with Cambodia probably to be brought in as a junior partner and Laos to be merely absorbed by the North Vietnamese and Chinese.” From this perspective, he believed that “the decisions we were making would determine not merely the fate of Vietnam but also the shape of Asia for many years.”⁴⁵

Standing firm against Communist expansionism in Asia was, in Johnson’s view, a continuation of the long-standing U.S. Cold War containment policy. Johnson and his senior advisers fully embraced the “lessons” of the 1930s—from the Japanese attack on Manchuria, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and especially Germany’s advance in Europe—that is, that appeasing aggressors only leads to further aggression. As vice president from 1961 to 1963, Johnson had already regarded Vietnam as the present-day Czechoslovakia of Southeast Asia. In May 1961 Kennedy sent Johnson to visit government chiefs of Southeast Asia countries, and when Johnson returned, he pressed the case for a greater commitment to the defense of South Vietnam. “The battle against Communism must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination.” Johnson warned Kennedy that the United States “must decide whether to help these countries to the best of our ability or throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a ‘Fortress America’ concept.”⁴⁶ To Johnson, South Vietnam was clearly the domino Communist China would pull down first.

Johnson’s perception of the Chinese threat to Vietnam and his determination to protect U.S. global credibility persisted into his own administration.⁴⁷ Indeed, Johnson’s alarm about China was shared and reinforced by his key advisers. For example, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director John A. McCone argued that the chaos in South Vietnam could be understood only in terms of “the ‘armed liberation’ strategy of both Mao Tse-tung and

45. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963–1969* (New York: HEC-Public Affairs Foundation/Henry Holt and Co., 1971), pp. 134–136.

46. Quoted in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 12–20; and LBJ to JFK, 23 May 1961, in *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Vol. I, pp. 135–178.

47. Clark Clifford, one of Johnson’s closest unofficial advisers until he replaced Robert McNamara as the secretary of defense in 1968, observed that, from the beginning of the Johnson administration’s involvement in Vietnam, “memories of Munich and appeasement were fresh, especially in the minds of Dean Rusk and Lyndon Johnson.” See, Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 403.

Ho Chi Minh.”⁴⁸ On 16 December 1963, Dean Rusk told French President Charles de Gaulle that America was “concerned at the evidence of Chinese militancy—one aspect of the dispute with the Soviet Union.” Rusk further pointed out that

we felt that Hanoi and Peking together had blocked the implementation of the Laotian accords. There was also some evidence that the Chinese were stimulating Sukarno in his present courses of action; they were active in Latin America, particularly with Castro; and finally Chou En-lai was at present in Africa. We felt it important that Peking not be given any impression that any such policy would pay dividends.

De Gaulle agreed that “the Soviets seemed to have calmed down while Peking was taking on ‘as a trial gallop’ the task of promoting revolution.” Rusk responded that the current Soviet attitude was attributable to the West’s firmness in Berlin and Cuba. By implication, therefore, the West now must stand firm against China and “it would be a great mistake to let the Chinese or their Communist allies get any idea that (their) policies paid off.”⁴⁹

Johnson’s other advisers also believed that Vietnam was the key place to meet the threat of Chinese “wars of national liberation.” In December 1963, when Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield proposed a political settlement in Vietnam through negotiation, the Johnson administration insisted that a settlement should not be considered until Hanoi and Beijing were defeated in South Vietnam. McGeorge Bundy, for example, argued that “[w]hile diplomacy may eventually play a role we believe this will happen only after the North Vietnamese become convinced that they cannot succeed in destroying the Republic of Vietnam by guerilla warfare.” Therefore, “when we are stronger, then we can face negotiation.”⁵⁰ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara argued,

[i]n the eyes of the rest of Asia and of key areas threatened by Communism in other areas as well, South Vietnam is both a test of U.S. firmness and specifically a test of U.S. capacity to deal with “wars of national liberation.”

If the United States withdrew from Vietnam, all the Southeast Asian countries would bow to Beijing. “Thus, the stakes in preserving an anti-Communist

48. John A. McCone to McGeorge Bundy, “Viet Cong Quasi-governmental Activities,” 29 November 1963, in Box 1, National Security File, Vietnam File (hereinafter referred to as NSF VN), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL), Austin, TX.

49. Telegram, from Dean Rusk to LBJ, 16 December 1963, in *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Vol. XXII, pp. 409–410.

50. Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, “Response to Mansfield,” 7 December 1963, in Box 1, NSF VN, LBJL; and Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, “Comments on Senator Mansfield’s Memorandum on Vietnam,” 9 January 1964, in Box 1, NSF VN, LBJL.

South Vietnam are so high that, in our judgment, we must go on bending every effort to win.”⁵¹ Walt W. Rostow, chairman of the Policy Planning Staff for the State Department and the eventual replacement for McGeorge Bundy, argued in a separate memorandum that

until it is demonstrated that the game of “Wars of National Liberation” is not viable and that the borders of China and North Vietnam are firm, the acceptance of Communist China within the world community and in the UN could be a major disaster. The present combination of circumstances, if not reversed, would signal to those on the spot that we have granted Chinese Communist hegemony in Southeast Asia.⁵²

However, the domestic political atmosphere after Kennedy’s assassination deterred the Johnson administration from dramatically escalating America’s involvement in Vietnam. Johnson put high priority on maintaining order at home and creating a political coalition on Capital Hill favorable to passing a tax cut bill, a Civil Rights Act left over by Kennedy, and later his own sweeping domestic reform legislation known as the Great Society. When more and more members of Congress—including Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright and Senators Mike Mansfield, Wayne Morse, Ernest Gruening, and Richard Russell—expressed their concern about getting bogged down in Vietnam, Johnson was reluctant to make any major new move there. In fact, the president’s desire to maintain the status quo in Vietnam was established at the beginning of his White House tenure. On 26 November 1963, Johnson approved National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273, which declared U.S. support for the new government of Duong Van Minh and stressed that the level of economic and military assistance to Saigon would be maintained at least as high as to the Diem regime while the war remained basically a South Vietnamese affair to win or lose.⁵³

Yet the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate. On 30 January 1964, the Minh government in Saigon was overthrown by a coup led by General Nguyen Khanh. In February 1964, a report from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency confirmed the increased Chinese intervention: “Certain signs of new North Vietnamese and Chinese Communist military activities, together with an upsurge of Viet Cong activity in South Vietnam . . . raise the question whether the situation in South Vietnam may be on the verge of col-

51. Memorandum from Robert McNamara to LBJ, “Response to Mansfield,” 7 January 1964, in Box 1, NSF VN, LBJL.

52. Memorandum from Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy, “Southeast Asia and China,” 10 January 1964, in Box 237, NSF, Country File (CF), LBJL.

53. *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel., 5 Vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971–1972), Vol. 3, pp. 17–20 (hereinafter referred to as *PP (Gravel)*, with appropriate volume and page numbers).

lapse.”⁵⁴ Together with reports about intensified Viet Cong activities in South Vietnam, the instability of Saigon’s politics eroded Johnson’s confidence about maintaining the status quo. “I just can’t believe that we can’t take fifteen thousand advisers and two hundred thousand people (South Vietnamese) and maintain the status quo for six months,” Johnson complained to Bundy.⁵⁵ Determined that he could not give up yet, in March 1964 Johnson sent Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the JCS, to Saigon on a fact-finding mission. McNamara’s report affirmed that the close relationship between Hanoi and Beijing was now making trouble for Washington:

Since July 1, 1963, the following items of equipment, not previously encountered in South Vietnam, have been captured from the Viet Cong: Chicom 75 mm recoilless rifles; Chicom heavy machine guns; U.S. . . . 50 caliber heavy machine guns on Chicom mounts. . . . In addition, it is clear that the Viet Cong are using Chinese 90 mm rocket launchers and mortars.

Of ammunition captured from the enemy, “ninety percent was of Chicom manufacture.”⁵⁶ Washington became even more alarmed when it learned that the Chinese regarded the McNamara-Taylor mission as a clear sign that “in South Vietnam as elsewhere the U.S. policy of aggression in Asia is facing a total collapse.” Beijing confirmed its support of Hanoi, insisting that “there is no longer any question of whether or not the war was being lost; the argument is over how fast the U.S. and South Vietnam government are losing it.”⁵⁷

After McNamara’s March 1964 mission to Saigon, the Johnson administration no longer doubted that Vietnam was becoming the hottest arena for China’s support for “wars of national liberation” and America’s defense of the free world. When Johnson approved NSAM 288 on 17 March 1964, based on the report of the McNamara-Taylor mission, the memorandum comprehensively stated the rationale of America’s commitment to Saigon and enlarged Washington’s objectives in South Vietnam. “Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam,” it argued,

almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), accommodate to Communism so as to re-

54. “Paper Prepared in the Defense Intelligence Agency,” 12 February 1964, in *PP (Gravel)*, Vol. 3, p. 71.

55. “Conversation between LBJ and McGeorge Bundy, 2 March 1964,” in Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963–1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 263.

56. Memorandum by McNamara to the President on South Vietnam, 16 March 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. I, pp. 156–157.

57. Hong Kong to State, “Communist China Joint Weeka, No. 11,” 13 March 1964, in Box 2009, CFPE, 1964–1966, RG 59, NARA.

move effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence (Burma), or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely then to become so (Indonesia taking over Malaysia). Thailand might hold for a period without help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India on the West, Australia and New Zealand to the South, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the North and East would be greatly increased.

This was a classic version of the domino theory. But the timing was crucial: maybe now was the time for devoting America fully to the defense of South-east Asia.

All of these consequences would probably have been true even if the U.S. had not since 1954, and especially since 1961, become so heavily engaged in South Vietnam. However, that fact accentuates the impact of a Communist South Vietnam not only in Asia but in the rest of the world, where the South Vietnam conflict is regarded as a test case of U.S. capacity to help a nation to meet the Communist “wars of liberation.”⁵⁸

NSAM 288 thus recommended gradual military pressure on Hanoi.

The Johnson administration by this point had concluded that the war in Vietnam was primarily a manifestation of the Chinese strategy of “wars of national liberation.” The consistently deteriorating situation in South Vietnam and the growing confidence in Hanoi and Beijing that they would eventually win the war convinced Washington that U.S. credibility as the leader and defender of the non-Communist world faced a serious challenge in Vietnam. Yet this point is not sufficient in understanding the Johnson administration’s eventual decision to escalate the war. To understand that decision, we have to examine the relationship between the war in Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet split.

Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet Split

If Johnson was not surprised by Beijing’s support of Hanoi, he seemed to be confused by America’s principal Cold War enemy—the Soviet Union. Johnson could not understand why the Soviet Union was indifferent to saving Vietnam from the influence of the Chinese Communists: “Looks like to me that the Russians would be more interested in saving Vietnam than we are,” he remarked to McNamara in March. “You can’t be sure what their position is,” McNamara answered. Johnson mused, “I thought they just had an um-

58. *PP (Gravel)*, Vol. 3, pp. 50–56.

brella over them, just like de Gaulle does, and thought we'd do it and they didn't need to do it."⁵⁹

Johnson was pondering a crucial factor in U.S. calculations—the Sino-Soviet split. Compared with the Soviet Union, China now became a more aggressive and not more dangerous Communist power with its eyes focused on Southeast Asia.⁶⁰ The Johnson administration watched the growing Sino-Soviet split closely.⁶¹ Although the dispute between the two Communist powers had many sources, Washington was primarily concerned about the contest between the Soviet policy of “peaceful coexistence” and the Chinese policy of “wars of national liberation.” Through 1964, the Chinese and Soviet Communist parties exchanged the most trenchant polemics ever seen in the international Communist movement. When the Soviet Union prepared to begin détente with the West, China accused Nikita Khrushchev and his colleagues of betraying the true Communist spirit. “Dean Rusk said the USSR was becoming a moderate power in the world,” *People's Daily* and *Red Flag* reported. “This shows that Nikita Khrushchev's revisionism has completely surrendered to American imperialism . . . and the Khrushchev clique is allowing American imperialism to carve up (oppressed people).”⁶² The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was annoyed by China's open challenge to its supremacy in the

59. “Conversation between LBJ and Robert McNamara, 21 March 1964,” in Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge*, pp. 293–294.

60. As one of the most sensitive and controversial issues of the Cold War during the 1950s and 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split loomed large in America's involvement in Vietnam long before Johnson took charge of the White House. During the Eisenhower administration, Washington had already begun to regard Communist China as a more reckless enemy than the Soviet Union, given that the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, started so-called de-Stalinization and stressed “peaceful coexistence” with the West. The Sino-Soviet split became apparent at the end of the 1950s and continued to widen during the Kennedy administration. On 6 January 1961, after deciding to pull Soviet technicians out of China, Khrushchev reiterated his commitment to peaceful coexistence with the West. Early in 1961, the CIA noted the frictions between the two Communist powers, concluding that “it is certain that the Sino-Soviet dispute was genuine, serious and bitter, and that it still continues.” See “The Sino-Soviet Dispute and Its Significance,” 1 April 1961, in *CIA Research Reports*, Reel 1, 0580, p. 2 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America microform, 1982). In 1962, the CIA argued that “by any definition, the USSR and Communist China have already broken, breached, ruptured, rived, or split.” See “Prospects for the Sino-Soviet Relationship,” 20 February 1962, in *CIA Research Reports*, Reel 1, 0680, p. 12. By 1963, the CIA reported that Sino-Soviet relations had reached a “new crisis.” Ideological and national differences had become so fundamental that “the USSR and China are now two separate powers whose interests conflict on almost every major issue.” China, the CIA believed in mid-1964, would become a more aggressive and more dangerous enemy than the Soviet Union in Vietnam. “China apparently believes that the U.S. is greatly weakened (a paper tiger). . . . [T]he U.S. is likely to engage in local wars to retain its positions and the Communists should not hesitate to participate in such wars. Moscow, on the other hand, believes . . . the (Communist) bloc should avoid getting involved in such wars.” See “Remarks of the Chief of the Nanking Military Academy and other Chinese Military Leaders on the Situation in South Vietnam,” 25 June 1964, in *CIA Research Reports*, Reel 2, 0045, pp. 1–3.

61. The Johnson administration closely monitored the growing Sino-Soviet split, a topic that had already come up in U.S. deliberations about the Vietnam War.

62. “Niuping Sugong Zhongyang de gongkaixin” [The Ninth Public Critique of SCP], 14 July 1964,

Communist camp. Soviet leaders saw China as a dangerous partner, even an enemy. Khrushchev was troubled by Mao's announcement that "America is a paper tiger." "The Chinese don't recognize any law except the law of power and force," he recalled. Such a reckless China would cause much trouble, especially in Vietnam, where "it will be a great pity" if "the infectious growth of pro-Chinese influence will be able to spread."⁶³

Watching the disputes going on between the two Communist powers, Washington came to link Vietnam more often to Beijing than to Moscow. "Hanoi is encouraged on its aggressive course by Communist China," McNamara declared. "Hanoi's victory would be only a first step toward eventual Chinese hegemony over the two Vietnams and Southeast Asia and toward exploitation of the new strategy on other parts of the world." "Communist China's interests are clear," McNamara cautioned.

It has publicly castigated Moscow for betraying the revolutionary cause whenever the Soviets have sounded a cautionary note. It has characterized the United States as a paper tiger and has insisted that the revolutionary struggle for "liberation and unification" of Vietnam could be conducted without risks by, in effect, crawling under the nuclear and conventional defense of the free world. Peiping thus appears to . . . use Vietnam as a test case.⁶⁴

Johnson likewise believed that the Sino-Soviet split would have an enormous impact on America's policy in Vietnam. On 20 March 1964, he told Ambassador Lodge he would hold fire in Vietnam until the implications of the Sino-Soviet split for future policy became clear. "There is additional international reason for avoiding immediate overt action," Johnson ordered, "in that we expect a showdown between the Chinese and Soviet Communist parties soon and action against the North (Vietnam) will be more practicable after than before a showdown." Lodge fully agreed.⁶⁵

But why should the Johnson administration be so concerned about the impact of the Sino-Soviet split on Vietnam? Although the Sino-Soviet split was real, most officials in Washington regarded it as a dispute over methods not objectives. True, the Chinese favored a military approach toward the "wars of liberation" while the Soviet Union stressed "peaceful coexistence"; yet

in *Jianguo Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian* [A Selection of Important Documents since the Founding of the PRC] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1992–1998), Vol. 19, pp. 57–60.

63. Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1970), pp. 470, 478, 485.

64. Robert McNamara, "United States Policy in Vietnam," 13 April 1964, in *PP (Gravel)*, Vol. 3, pp. 714–715.

65. LBJ to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, 20 March 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. I, pp. 185–186; and Ambassador Lodge to LBJ, 23 March 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. I, pp. 185–186.

they both struggled for ultimate Communist domination of the world. Moreover, some U.S. officials worried that escalated actions in Vietnam would drive the Chinese and the USSR together again. Yet, at the moment Washington was more concerned about the Communist methods than remote Communist aims. For Johnson and his advisers, the aggressive Chinese Communists, if unchecked, could kill the nascent trend toward détente with the Soviet Union and push the latter back to a militant hard line.

This point can best be understood in the context of the evolving deliberations in Washington on the best strategy for protecting U.S. global credibility. Many officials believed that they were facing a so-called credibility gap.⁶⁶ They argued that this gap, as a result of the realization that it was no longer feasible to deter Communist aggression by threatening nuclear war, should be surmounted by a conventional limited war capability designed to meet any local Communist aggression. Instead of rushing to the brink of nuclear war or retreating, the United States should be able to use controlled force to contain Communism. This limited war theory became more important in the light of Communist support of “wars of national liberation,” which often took the form of local insurgencies. Among the supporters of the limited war theory were McNamara and Maxwell Taylor. As early as 1962, McNamara began

66. Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (New York: Random House, 1975). Troubled by the heavy cost of the Korean War in terms of casualties and the burden on the domestic economy, the Eisenhower administration developed a lower-cost strategy for national defense in 1953. As part of this “new look,” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles announced in 1954 that the United States would depend on the capacity of nuclear weapons to retaliate instantly to achieve a maximum deterrent at a bearable cost, a strategy known as “massive retaliation” that was based on U.S. nuclear superiority—the capability of attacking the Soviet Union from a variety of angles while remaining invulnerable. This superiority, however, was shattered in 1957 when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, which proved that the USSR had the ability to build intercontinental missiles. The panic caused by the “missile gap” soon faded, however, when U.S. leaders realized that they had enough second-strike power to deter a possible Soviet attack. Yet, soon the two superpowers reached a dangerous nuclear balance—each country had the ability to destroy the other even after absorbing a first strike from its counterpart. In McNamara’s words, the United States and the Soviet Union reached a state of mutual assured destruction (MAD). Under this situation, the so-called credibility gap, as Jonathan Schell puts it, implied that the best way to contain Communist expansion was to preserve American credibility—the unwavering determination to use force to meet Communist aggression whenever and wherever it happened. By showing determination to contain Communism, the United States could most efficiently defend the free world. However, the strategy caused a serious problem. The core rationale of nuclear deterrence in the “new look” was the use of nuclear weapons against the enemy if deterrence failed. Yet under the situation of MAD, this surely meant suicide. Calculating that the United States would not really use nuclear weapons, the Communist powers would ignore the warning and subvert the world piecemeal, leaving the U.S. government with only two choices: an all-out nuclear war or retreat. The best solution, therefore, was so-called limited war. For nuclear strategy development, see Philip Windsor, *Strategic Thinking: An Introduction and Farewell*, IISS Studies in International Security (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); Moti Nissani, *Lives in the Balance: The Cold War and American Politics, 1945–1991* (Carson City, NV: Hollowbrook Publishing, 1992); and John Lewis Gaddis, Philip H. Gordon, Ernest R. May, and Jonathan Rosenberg, eds., *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999).

proposing a “flexible response” strategy involving the use of all kinds of conventional means short of nuclear war to contain Communism.⁶⁷ Three years earlier, Taylor had argued that reliance on the threat of “blasting [our enemies] from the face of the earth with atomic bombing if they commit aggression against us or our friends . . . offers no alternative other than reciprocal suicide or retreat.” The only way out was limited war. He called for the expansion of U.S. ground forces overseas and a robust reserve of ground and air forces.⁶⁸

However, the limited war theory had its own inherent dangers. When the United States met the Communist-supported “wars of liberation” head-on, the limited confrontation might escalate to nuclear war. The Cuban missile crisis highlighted this risk but also helped to diminish the danger. After realizing the real possibility of nuclear slaughter, the two superpowers sought to relax tensions. They signed a limited nuclear test ban, established a hotline between the Kremlin and White House, and began the trend of *détente*. As one CIA report remarked, “Soviet behavior since the spectacular failure of the Cuban missile venture has reflected a growing recognition that the wide-ranging political offensive against the West has run its course without yielding the expected results.”⁶⁹ The conclusion was clear: the Soviet Union had learned its lesson.

China, however, had not:

Peiping has chosen the underdeveloped, ex-colonial world as its most advantageous arena of conflict. In this “Third World”, the Chinese not only aim to erode US strength but to displace Soviet influence. . . . The greatest impact of Peiping’s policy is felt in Southeast Asia. The theater of primary interest is Indochina, where Peiping is seeking a decisive and humiliating defeat of the US.⁷⁰

No one disagreed with this argument. Because Vietnam was now a test case for “wars of national liberation,” it could also serve as a perfect classroom to teach China a lesson. At stake in Vietnam were not only an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam but the long-term impact of a victory on Hanoi and Beijing. If the Communist Chinese should prevail, then not only would Beijing’s influence be felt everywhere, but the Soviet Union would also

67. Windsor, *Strategic Thinking*, pp. 66–67.

68. See Maxwell Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1959), ch. 8.

69. “Special Report Prepared by CIA: Khrushchev at 70,” 17 April 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XIV, p. 62.

70. “National Intelligence Estimate: Communist China’s Foreign Policy,” 5 May 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 169.

be forced to be more aggressive, both militarily and politically, toward the West. If the United States failed to teach China a lesson, the Soviet Union might drift toward Beijing's hard line. Moscow itself might be persuaded that the United States was a paper tiger.

The Johnson administration quickly realized the importance of defeating the Chinese-supported "wars of national liberation" in Vietnam. As early as February 1964, a policy paper argued that

[o]f all these troubled and vulnerable areas, South Vietnam presents by far the most serious and direct threat to United States power and influence. In recent months Peiping has given many signs of the high priority it assigns to a Viet Cong victory. . . . Peiping has an almost compulsive need to bring about a recognizable and reasonably early victory for "people's revolutionary struggle" in South Vietnam to offset Khrushchev's "capitulationist" line and prove a whole set of Mao's axioms.

Should China achieve a complete victory on its own terms, the paper elaborated, the Soviet Union would be forced to yield to the Chinese hard line. On the other hand, if the United States could preserve an independent South Vietnam, it would be "a profound setback not only to Communist Chinese objectives per se, but to the 'thought of Mao Tse-tung' from which Peiping's entire approach to international affairs derives its inspiration." Thus "the United States is confronted with new and vastly complicated challenges from Peiping which will test the wisdom, firmness and flexibility of our China policy as never before."⁷¹

Ambassador Lodge agreed. "Ho Chi Minh . . . would have a hard time stopping the war in South Vietnam even if he wanted to, because Communist China would move heaven and earth to keep him fighting," Lodge argued,

The war in South Vietnam is advertised by them all over the Communist world as a "war of liberation"—on which they base their propaganda line that their brand of Communism is superior to the Soviet brand; and that the United States is both the world's greatest imperialist power and also a paper tiger which is unable or unwilling to use the power which it has. . . . If the Communist Chinese . . . were to take over South Vietnam, it would be interpreted as a vindication of the fanatic Chinese methods over that of the Soviets. It would also be regarded in the free world as reflecting a general lack of ability or lack of will power by the United States to prevent Communist aggression.⁷²

71. Hong Kong to State Department, "Communist China 1964 and Recommendations for U.S. Policy," 21 February 1964, in Box 2009, CFPE, 1964–1966, RG 59, NARA.

72. Lodge to State, "Persistence in Vietnam," 3 March 1964, in Box 2, NSF VN, LBJL.

The remainder of 1964 saw more and more U.S. officials reason along these lines. In May, for example, Rusk pointed out in a telegram sent to all major U.S. allies that the war in Vietnam

represents a challenge not only to Vietnam and to Southeast Asia but to any nation in the world in which there exists an economic, social or political situation which can be exploited by means of subversive insurrections. . . . The Chinese Communists' stake in this action extends not only to their conflict with the Free World but also to their conflict with the Soviet Union in their drive to assume domination of the International Communist Movement and to increase the violence and irresponsibility of that movement.⁷³

Preoccupied by the need to defeat the Chinese strategy in Vietnam, Johnson drifted further toward escalation as his administration reinforced its foothold domestically. On 2 July 1964, Johnson signed the historic Civil Rights Bill into law. Four months later, he was formally elected president in a landslide victory. Along the way Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which authorized the president to use whatever means he deemed necessary to protect U.S. interests in Vietnam. By the end of the year, Johnson felt he could be more assertive in foreign affairs with a solid domestic political foundation.

The Tonkin Gulf incidents of early August 1964 had failed to change the attitude in Hanoi and Beijing. The U.S. intelligence community reported that although “no significant Soviet military reaction to the crisis has been reported” and “the USSR’s verbal attacks on the US in the present crisis have been so reserved that they have aroused Chinese criticism,”⁷⁴ the incidents “indicate a Chinese Communist desire to provoke an ‘explosion’ in the Far East that would force the USSR to decide between ‘peaceful coexistence’ and ‘support of a socialist state threatened by imperialism.’”⁷⁵ William Bundy, now the assistant secretary of state for Far East affairs, argued that “Hanoi and Peiping are certainly not persuaded that they must abandon their efforts in South Vietnam and Laos” and “a solution . . . will require a combination of military pressure and some form of communication under which Hanoi (and Peiping) eventually accept the idea of getting out.”⁷⁶ Maxwell Taylor, the new ambassador to Saigon, argued that “there are two wars being fought in this country: a war between Vietnamese and a war between communist China and the United States (now that the Soviet Union seems to have become less inter-

73. Telegram, “Call for More Flags,” 1 May 1964, in Box 4, NSF VN, LBJL.

74. “CIA Weekly Report: The Situation in South Vietnam,” 6 August 1964, in Box 7, NSF VN, LBJL.

75. U.S. Information Agency, “Summary of Initial Reaction to Vietnam Situation,” 7 August 1964, in Box 7, NSF VN, LBJL.

76. William Bundy, “Next Courses of Action in Southeast Asia,” 11 August 1964, in *PP (Gravel)*, Vol. 3, pp. 525–526.

ested in a Chinese victory.)” Because it was urgent to defeat the “wars of national liberation” in Vietnam, Taylor proposed stronger U.S. military action, insisting that “without the prospect of the battlefield being shifted elsewhere, and in particular, to North Vietnam, then one thing is certain: in the long run, South Vietnam will be the scene of defeat rather than victory.”⁷⁷ In September 1964 the CIA further reported that

nothing that has occurred since the beginning of August suggests any change in Asian Communist plans as a result of US air strikes against DRV naval installations. . . . Peiping has already taken advantage of Soviet reluctance to become involved to belabor Moscow for cowardice. Success for the Chinese formula of armed resistance to “imperialism” would greatly strengthen Peiping’s position in the Sino-Soviet struggle which may now be approaching a crucial stage.⁷⁸

China’s first test of a nuclear weapon on 16 October 1964 further convinced U.S. leaders that actions must be taken toward Beijing. Although Johnson publicly downplayed the event, assuring the American people that it “comes as no surprise to the United States Government” and “our defense plans take full account of this development,”⁷⁹ his reaction belied a deeper concern about China’s nuclear weapons program.⁸⁰ True, the Chinese bomb could not become a real military threat to the United States in the immediate future, but most officials agreed that it would greatly boost China’s prestige.

Another unexpected change came from the Soviet Union—Khrushchev was ousted on 14 October 1964. Astonished by this change, the Johnson administration was concerned about the new government’s policy. Immediately after the Soviet Union announced Khrushchev’s removal, the NSC staff noticed that “significant in all this is the new government’s attempt to reassure other governments (Western governments) of Soviet intentions to continue on the Khrushchevian course of peaceful coexistence.”⁸¹ The U.S. embassy in

77. Telegram, Taylor to Rusk, 21 August 1964, in Box 7, NSF VN, LBJL.

78. CIA Report, “Communist Reaction to Increased US Pressure against North Vietnam,” 9 September 1964, in Box 8, NSF VN, LBJL.

79. “Statement by the President on the First Chinese Nuclear Device,” 16 October 1964, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965), Vol. 2, p. 1357; and “Recent Events on Russia, China, and Great Britain,” 18 October 1964, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64*, p. 1379.

80. The Johnson administration had foreseen the Chinese nuclear bomb test, and on 15 September 1964 senior officials held a national security meeting on the matter. According to Bundy, one conclusion was “that there are many possibilities for joint action with the Soviet Government if that Government is interested. Such possibilities include a warning to the Chinese against (nuclear) tests, a possible undertaking to give up underground testing and to hold the Chinese accountable if they resist in any way, and even a possible agreement to cooperate in preventive military action.” See McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, “Memorandum for the Record,” 15 September 1964, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. XXX, p. 94.

81. NSC Staff to McGeorge Bundy, 16 October 1964, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. XIV, p. 131.

Moscow also reported that the USSR's foreign policy statement "essentially repeats previous coexistence line. . . . This not only calculated to reassure Soviet military and dissuade any who might contemplate attempt exploit change but should give pause to speculation that strategy toward Chinese may be shifting."⁸² The State Department predicted that no immediate change would be made in the peaceful coexistence policy or the Sino-Soviet split, and the CIA concluded that the new leaders would "continue the broad policy lines of the Khrushchev era" and had made it clear "to the Chinese Communists that they should have no illusions that the USSR may now be disposed to abandon or compromise the 'principled' positions it has long defended against Peiping's assaults."⁸³

Thus, in the immediate aftermath of Khrushchev's downfall, the Johnson administration seemed to conclude that the Sino-Soviet split and Moscow's moderate approach to the West would continue. When the Chinese resumed their attacks on the Soviet Union after a temporary wait-and-see period, Johnson felt so convinced by the breakdown of Sino-Soviet fellowship that he told Senator Mansfield that "it is most unlikely that these events [direct military pressure on North Vietnam] will have the effect of driving the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communists closer together."⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the Johnson administration fully understood the dilemma Moscow faced in Vietnam. Compared with Communist China, the Soviet Union was in a disadvantageous position. A State Department memorandum concluded that

Khrushchev had virtually disengaged Soviet policy from the Indochina problem, presumably because since mid-1963 Hanoi's alignment with Peking had been complete and the USSR no longer had any real influence on the conduct of the warfare in South Vietnam and Laos.⁸⁵

Because U.S. officials tended to believe that the discontent with Khrushchev's handling of Sino-Soviet relations contributed to his downfall, they noticed that

the new leaders are trying to play a more active role to discourage the U.S. from broadening the war and to promote negotiations of some kind. This change

82. Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, 16 October 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XIV, p. 133.

83. State Department to McGeorge Bundy, 17 October 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XIV, pp. 136–141.

84. LBJ to Mansfield, 9 February 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. II, p. 209.

85. Memo Prepared by the Policy Planning Council, "Soviet Policy in the Light of the Vietnam Crisis," 15 February 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XIV, p. 244.

probably reflects their belief that Khrushchev had left a dangerous situation largely in the hands of Peiping and had perhaps even encouraged the U.S. to be more aggressive by his responses in past incidents.⁸⁶

Faced with the Chinese challenge to the USSR's leadership of the international Communism movement, Soviet leaders "almost certainly" would "prefer" the course "to combine a strong display of support for Hanoi with diplomatic action to contain the crisis" in Vietnam. However, there was "little chance that a 'wider war' would develop over South Vietnam and so involve the USSR in a risky commitment."⁸⁷ Because "*in time* experience may persuade the Soviet leaders that competition with China on the latter's terms is unprofitable and that a hard-line foreign policy is inconsistent with efforts to promote domestic economic growth," the USSR would not "undertake the military defense of the DRV or run very high risks to protect it."⁸⁸

Senior officials in Washington were considering long-term Soviet-American relations. Fully aware of the short-term pressures on Moscow in Vietnam, the Johnson administration wanted to shape the long-term Cold War situation. "At a crucial juncture in Sino-Soviet relations," the State Department argued in favor of signing a bilateral air agreement with the USSR: "it would provide the Soviets with evidence of the success of their 'peaceful coexistence' policy as an alternative to the Chinese hard line."⁸⁹ Meanwhile, the administration decided that the Soviet Union must be warned of any slide toward the Chinese stance. During a meeting with Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin in July 1965, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large Averell Harriman carefully warned that "in view of the Soviet dispute with Peiping, he would have thought that the USSR would not favor the use of force as a means for the settlement of problems in the Far East." Harriman also "assured Kosygin that the U.S. will not stand by and see country after country fall under Peiping's heel."⁹⁰

Keeping the Soviet Union quiet was not enough. The U.S. administration also wanted to set back China's ambitions in Vietnam. Otherwise, more and more countries would follow suit, and the Soviet Union would be pushed back to a hard line. At an NSC meeting in September 1964, Johnson asked "if anyone doubted whether it was worth all this effort." General Wheeler of the JCS remarked that if South Vietnam were lost, "country after country on the

86. "National Intelligence Estimate: Main Trends in Soviet Foreign Policy," 27 January 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. XIV, p. 226.

87. "Soviet Policy in the Light of the Vietnam Crisis," pp. 245-246.

88. *Ibid.*, pp. 226, 289; emphasis added.

89. Memo by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs to Rusk, 9 November 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. XIV, p. 171.

90. Memo of Meeting, 15 July 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. III, pp. 147-152.

periphery would give way and look toward Communist China as the rising power of the area.” McNamara, McCone, Taylor, and Rusk agreed.⁹¹ In November, a policy paper argued that “the Chinese Communists’ opposition to any détente between the Communist world and the United States . . . is one of the issues which lie at the heart of the Sino-Soviet quarrel.” Should China take over South Vietnam “[w]hen Moscow is clearly revealed as no longer the undisputed capital of the Communist world, more countries are bound to send envoys to the eastern capital of that world.” Thus “we should let it be known in no uncertain terms that we have both the power and the determination to use it in defense against Chinese Communist encroachments.”⁹² Rostow argued in early 1965 that the United States should respond positively to Soviet efforts to explore a possible political settlement in Vietnam. In this way, the United States could deepen the Sino-Soviet split and make clear that “the contrary Chinese View, if put to the test, was likely to entail swift disaster.” Therefore, to discourage the Chinese from adopting a more reckless course toward the West, it was “critically important that South Vietnam maintain its independence and that the present North Vietnam offensive be frustrated.”⁹³

Other officials expressed similar ideas. After the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Johnson named William Bundy chairman of an interdepartmental NSC working group that focused on future U.S. actions in Vietnam. In the group’s working papers, containing China and keeping U.S. credibility were linked together. One joint memorandum argued that Hanoi and Beijing expected the United States to give up. If so,

such an image of a United States which will back down from defense of its vital interests in response to mere words (the paper tiger) would be one of the strongest encouragements to further communist adventures, in Southeast Asia and everywhere else.⁹⁴

Michael Forrestal from the NSC staff argued that

Communist China shares the same internal political necessity for ideological expansion today that the Soviet Union did during the time of the Comintern and the period just following the Second World War. . . . [Therefore,] we should de-

91. Memo of Meeting, 9 September 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. I, pp. 749–755.

92. Hong Kong to State, “Communist China and Recommendations for US Policy,” 6 November 1964, in Box 2, NSF CF, LBJL.

93. Memo Prepared by W. W. Rostow, “Some Reflections on National Security Policy,” 5 March 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. X, pp. 220–226.

94. “Joint Memo,” 10 November 1964, in *PP (Gravel)*, Vol. 3, p. 621.

lay China's swallowing up Southeast Asia until (a) she develops better table manners and (b) the food is somewhat more indigestible.⁹⁵

John McNaughton of the Defense Department claimed that a key goal was to "protect US reputation as a counter-subversion guarantor." Thus he favored a gradual escalation of the war. "If the DRV or China strike or invade South Vietnam, US forces will be sufficient to handle the problem." By taking this risk, "it would demonstrate that US was a 'good doctor' willing to keep promises, be tough, take risks, get bloodied, and hurt the enemy badly."⁹⁶

High-ranking officials discussed the Sino-Soviet split and its implications more directly. In late 1964, McGeorge Bundy ordered a special study on the Chinese strategy of "wars of national liberation." According to this study, after the Cuban missile crisis the Soviet Union "wants 'maximum quiet' for all revolutionary movements. The Chinese, however, seek world peace secured by combined pressure of all anti-imperialist forces in the world, thwarting and holding down and overcoming imperialism bit by bit." In fact,

the Chinese Communists . . . have returned to a statement in one of his (Lenin) pamphlets—"National wars against the imperialist powers are not only possible and probable, they are inevitable, they are progressive, and they are revolutionary"—to argue against the Russian leaders' more peaceful road.

Bundy thus argued that a non-Communist South Vietnam would defeat the Chinese militancy and strengthen the emerging détente with Soviet Union.⁹⁷

Rusk also believed that a Chinese victory in Vietnam would push the Soviet Union back toward a Cold War hard line against America. "If Peiping can demonstrate that their course of policy is paying substantial dividends, as successes in Southeast Asia and Indonesia would indicate," he testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 1965, "then there is a much greater possibility that Moscow would attempt to close the gap between Moscow and Peiping by moving toward Peiping's more militant attitude toward the world revolution."⁹⁸ Several days later, Rusk argued again that

I do think that if Peiping achieves a stunning success in Southeast Asia or against India, it would increase the prospect that the Soviet Union would tend to close the gap with Peiping by moving toward Peiping's ideological orientation and

95. "Memo," 4 November 1964, in *PP (Gravel)*, Vol. 3, p. 592.

96. "Memo," 7 November 1964, in *PP (Gravel)*, Vol. 3, pp. 601–604.

97. Ray S. Cline to McGeorge Bundy, "Peiping's Views on 'Revolutionary War,'" 14 December 1964, in Box 2, NSF CF, LBJL.

98. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Commit-*

tactical orientation. On the other hand, if the Red Chinese are stopped along their present frontiers, the chances are improved that Peiping, at least by stages, will move further toward more of a line of peaceful coexistence.⁹⁹

On 11 March 1965, in congressional testimony, McNamara emphasized the need to contain China through limited war: "As U.S. retaliatory capabilities have made the certain destruction involved in a full-scale nuclear exchange increasingly obvious to any potential aggressor, aggression has sought new and more subtle outlets," he declared. "But if free and independent nations are to survive in the world, limited, nonnuclear aggression must be deterred no less effectively than we have deterred the use of nuclear weapons and all-out, general war." In Vietnam

there are two paramount reasons why we must succeed in helping that country resist the aggression. . . . First, a Communist victory in South Vietnam would immediately open the way for further adventures by the Hanoi regime, and by China. . . . Second, it is vital that the United States prove to the world that the form of aggression being tested in South Vietnam is not the "wave of the future."¹⁰⁰

During another congressional hearing Maxwell Taylor also divided the Communist world into two camps, the Soviet camp and the Viet Cong-Hanoi-Beijing camp. When asked why he did not mention the Soviet role in Vietnam, Taylor answered that

[I]t is the Peking Chinese wing of the Communist block which would gain primarily by success in this part of the world. Actually their success to some extent might even embarrass the Soviet Union because they . . . are known to be the conservative force tending to discourage any escalation in this part of the world. The Soviet Union has no national objective to gain here, and they have a great deal to lose if, in the course of events, it brought them into confrontation with the United States.

Therefore,

a simple statement of what we are doing in South Vietnam is to say that we are engaged in a clash of purpose and interest with the militant wing of the Communist movement, represented by Hanoi, the Viet Cong, and Peking.

tee Together with Joint Sessions with the Senate Armed Service Committee, Vol. 17, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 1965 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), pp. 99–100.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

100. "Testimony of Robert McNamara," 11 March 1965, in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Hearings on the Foreign Assistance Act of 1965*, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 1965, Pt. 4, pp. 627–628.

The aim of these Communist leaders, he said, was to “demonstrate the efficacy of the so-called ‘War of Liberation’ as a cheap, safe, and disavowable technique for the future expansion of militant Communism.” If they achieved this goal, the technique “will be widely used about the world,” and even the Soviet Union would be forced to see the “‘War of Liberation’ as not only admissible but inevitable.” Thus, the United States must show the world that “far from being cheap, safe, and disavowable,” the “War of Liberation” is “costly, dangerous, and doomed to failure.”¹⁰¹

The most systematic deliberation on the need to contain China in Vietnam was revealed when the Subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs arranged a series of hearings on the Sino-Soviet conflict and its implications for the United States. From 10 March to 31 March 1965, the Subcommittee held nine hearings and heard the testimony of more than twenty witnesses, including government officials, military officers, and scholars. The subcommittee intended to study the origin and development of the Sino-Soviet conflict, as well as its implications for U.S. foreign policy in Europe and the Third World. The hearings actually revealed mainstream thought on the connection between the Vietnam War and the Sino-Soviet conflict.

Hilsman was the first witness. The Sino-Soviet dispute, he told the subcommittee, was concerned about ideology, power struggle, grand strategy, and policies toward the in-between world. In the future “the Chinese Communist price for healing the [Sino-Soviet] breach will be too high for the Soviets to pay,” because “the Chinese will insist on abandoning the policy of easing international tensions that the Soviets adopted following the Cuban missile crisis and returning to a very aggressive, very Stalinist Cold War.” In Hilsman’s view, Soviet leaders felt hard pressed not to abandon the current line of peaceful coexistence but might return to the high-risk Cold War because of

very weighty reasons—if we [the United States] adopt policies that they feel force them into it, or if the Chinese high-risk policies are so successful that the Soviets are in danger of losing their position of leadership in the bloc. . . . [T]he real test of our capacity to deal with the Chinese Communists both firmly and wisely is in Southeast Asia and South Vietnam.

U.S. military action in Vietnam would be required, Hilsman continued,

[L]imited wars are a fact of life in the nuclear age. The Communists, and especially the Chinese Communists, will continue to present limited challenges . . .

101. “Testimony of Maxwell Taylor, 17 February 1966,” in J. William Fulbright, ed., *The Vietnam Hearings* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 168–170, 194–195.

in uninviting places in Southeast Asia and in Africa. . . . If we do not face the possibility of fighting on the ground now, in Southeast Asia, then we will surely have to face it later . . . in even more unfavorable circumstances. . . . [W]hen they (the Soviets) put missiles in Cuba we dealt with them firmly, very firmly, but a few months later we had the flexibility to negotiate a test ban treaty.

He believed that this would also be the “only sound approach for the long run” toward China.¹⁰²

Hilsman’s concerns were shared by others who testified in the following days. In George Kennan’s eyes, the Sino-Soviet conflict was of immense importance:

[I]f they (the Chinese) can bring about a complete and irreparable break of some sort between the Russians and ourselves and the other Western countries, then they will have the Russians in a position of isolation where the Russians will have no alternative but to put their hopes on China and give them what they want.

Kennan believed that the Soviet position was “more useful to the cause of world peace” and that it was up to the United States to make sure that the Chinese “wars of liberation” strategy could not work. Standing firm in Vietnam would “strengthen their [Moscow’s] hand vis-a-vis the Chinese. . . . They will go to the Chinese and say: ‘Look here, we have been telling you all along you would get in trouble if you continued this thing.’”¹⁰³

Kennan’s arguments were supported by academics. Thomas Wolfe from George Washington University argued that withdrawal from Vietnam “would surely be interpreted in many places in the world as a vindication of the militant revolutionary approach espoused by Hanoi and Peiping”:

Should the new Soviet leaders yield to the Chinese argument that the United States can be safely opposed and ultimately defeated by waging the political struggle more militantly at the level of small wars and insurgency actions, they will have taken a fundamental decision of far-reaching consequences.¹⁰⁴

Donald Zagoria from Columbia University concurred:

Defeat for the United States in Vietnam . . . would almost certainly encourage the Chinese and other Communist parties in underdeveloped areas to believe that the Chinese model of “liberation war” is neither so risky nor so pointless as

102. “Testimony of Roger Hilsman,” 10 March 1965, in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Far East and Pacific, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications, Together with Hearings Held by Subcommittee on the Far East and The Pacific, March 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 23, and 31, 1965*, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 1965, pp. 2–6.

103. “Testimony of George Kennan,” 11 March 1965, in House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, pp. 76, 67, 48, 69.

104. “Testimony of Thomas Wolfe,” 11 March 1965, in House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, pp. 50, 52, 81.

the Russians have contended. Chinese prestige in the international Communist movement, particularly among those parties in the neutral camp, would be enhanced and the “paper tiger” thesis would probably be more widely accepted.

According to Zagoria, U.S. actions in Vietnam “would take place in the broader context of a common interest between Moscow and Washington in not allowing Peiping to be the victor in Soviet-American confrontation in which both have much to lose and nothing to gain.”¹⁰⁵

The consensus among the witnesses on the connection between the Sino-Soviet conflict and the war in Vietnam gained extra strength when officials from the State Department provided their own insights. Marshall Green, deputy assistant secretary of state for Far East affairs, argued that the Chinese Communists must be taught a lesson in Vietnam. “I conclude that the Chinese Communists are a real threat and perhaps pose their greatest threat in terms of their ability and efforts to identify themselves with the underdeveloped areas of the world,” Green told the subcommittee “As Peiping seeks to gain victories for its more activist and militant support for ‘wars of national liberation,’ the threat to the free men and nations is increased.” According to Green, the Chinese had to “vindicate their militant revolutionary thesis. . . . If Peiping succeeds in vindicating this thesis it will have an alarming impact on the whole Communist world and upon the rest of the world.”¹⁰⁶ James F. Leonard, chief of the Asian Communist areas division, agreed. He noted a new round of polemics between the two Communist powers, mainly focused on the Vietnam War. Should Soviet leaders yield before the Chinese, they would be forced to “admit before the Communists and people of the world that Khrushchev revisionism, chauvinism, and splitism is wrong,” and the result would be a return to a hard Cold War line.¹⁰⁷ Richard H. Davis, deputy assistant secretary of state for European affairs, observed that

the present situation in Southeast Asia is illustrative of the caution which Moscow apparently wishes to exercise in conflict undertaken by Communist movements which do not follow Moscow’s lead and which do not involve vital Soviet national interests and security.

If the United States could not keep its credibility before Communism in Vietnam, Soviet caution would disappear because “efforts by Moscow to maintain

105. “Testimony of Donald S. Zagoria,” 15 March 1965, in House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, pp. 116, 130, 134.

106. “Testimony of Marshall Green,” 23 March 1965, in House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, pp. 330, 319, 332.

107. “Testimony of James F. Leonard,” 23 March 1965, in House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, pp. 325–326.

reasonably good relations with us are considered a betrayal of Communist interests by Peiping.”¹⁰⁸

The strongest remark on the need to contain Communist China in Vietnam came from Dean Rusk. As the last witness at the hearings, Rusk told his audience that containing China in Vietnam had become an established policy of the Johnson administration. “It was suggested that the United States show a firm determination to stay in Southeast Asia; that we should fight in Vietnam chiefly to convince Communist China that her strategy of violent revolution and subversion will not succeed.” Otherwise,

if Peiping can demonstrate in Southeast Asia that Peiping’s doctrine of communism, of militant communism, is the correct one and the successful one, this will almost certainly bring about a greater unity of the Communist world behind the point of view of Peiping. It will almost force Moscow to say: “We were wrong in this ideological argument,” and force Moscow to move over toward Peiping.¹⁰⁹

Given the strong consensus on the need to contain Communist China, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs made clear in its final report on the Sino-Soviet conflict and its implications that the assumptions behind the Johnson administration’s Vietnam policy should not be questioned:

Arguments were being made in the United States against any attempt by the United States to escalate the war on the premise that it would only bring the USSR and Red China closer together. However, the limited escalation since early this year has produced, so far, precisely the opposite effect. If anything, the increased U.S. military pressure on North Vietnam has tended to exacerbate the dispute. . . .

Vietnam appears to be a key test of the conflicting Communist strategies which is the root of the Sino-Soviet dispute. Peiping, whose strategy is a militant and aggressive revolutionary struggle, does not believe that such a policy entails any high risk of military escalation. Moscow, on the other hand, since the Cuba confrontation, has been forced to recognize the danger of nuclear war and their policy of peaceful coexistence is designed to relieve international tensions. They fear being drawn into a larger war through China’s miscalculation of the degree of provocation the United States will take.

By standing firm in Vietnam, the United States confirms the Soviet contention in the Communist world that America is a power to be reckoned with. Should the United States withdraw from Vietnam, this would tend to support the Chinese contention that their revolutionary activities represent only a small risk of escalating into a larger conflict. The immediate impact on the Soviets

108. “Testimony of Richard H. Leonard,” 23 March 1965, in House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, pp. 323–324.

109. “Testimony of Dean Rusk,” 31 March 1965, in House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, pp. 357–358.

within the Communist community would be a loss of prestige and influence. It would probably result not only in the complete abandonment by them of their peaceful coexistence policy but start them on a return to the very aggressive, Stalinist Cold War.¹¹⁰

Thus throughout 1964 and early 1965, the perceived Chinese expansionism in the Third World and the more aggressive Communist China viewed in the context of Sino-Soviet conflict led the Johnson administration to conclude that if the United States hoped to keep its credibility in a nuclear age, it must dissuade the Soviet Union from moving toward the Chinese Cold War hard line. The only way to do this, in the administration's view, was by meeting the threat from Hanoi and Beijing head-on in Vietnam. To be fair, the "China factor" was not the only factor that determined U.S. war efforts in Vietnam. America's involvement in Vietnam was deeply rooted in Washington's long-established Cold War assumptions and strategies. Still, such long-term factors alone could not explain the timing of the war's escalation. Only by focusing on Washington's perception of China in the shifting Cold War context can historians understand why, in the year of "long 1964," the need to uphold U.S. credibility as the defender of the free world in Vietnam suddenly gained unprecedented urgency. After all, Moscow had learned from the Cuban missile crisis, and the world then saw a growing détente between the two superpowers. If leaders in Moscow could be taught to be civilized, so could the Chinese. If Cuba had been the classroom for Moscow, then Vietnam would be the classroom for China. And so it began.

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110. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications*, pp. 8R–9R.