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Author(s): Frank E. Rogers

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Sino-American Relations and the Vietnam War, 1964-66

Frank E. Rogers

Perceptions as well as realities have always played an important role in international politics and it is frequently difficult to separate the two. By the 1960s the realities of increased American involvement in Southeast Asia and a more militarily and politically influential China heightened the possibility of a Sino-American confrontation. It is the thesis of this study that the United States and the People's Republic of China, both fearful of that possibility as a spill-over from the conflict in Indochina, reached a tacit understanding limiting their involvement. This understanding was transmitted through a series of subtle public signals and, quite possibly, by a number of confidential communications. The primary motive was to prevent an unwanted Sino-American confrontation which could have resulted from a misperception of intentions. As will be demonstrated in this study both Peking and Washington sought, on a number of occasions, to transmit their intentions in order to prevent misperceptions and possible over-reactions.

American Escalation

When Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed the presidency in 1963 he continued the policy of the Kennedy Administration of trying to help the South Vietnamese "help themselves" while avoiding a heavy American military involvement.¹

Another American objective at this time was to "contain China." Using the falling domino logic, many American advisers in the Johnson Administration argued for a strong stand in Indochina. According to a National Security Action Memorandum of 17 March 1964, unless the United States maintained an "independent non-Communist South Vietnam,"

. . . almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), accommodate to Communism so as to remove effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence

* I wish to thank the Consortium on Research Training at Winston-Salem State University for its support during the writing of this study as well as John Israel and William F. Sheppard for their constructive comments.

1. *Pentagon Papers: The Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Vol. III, pp. 17-19.

(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 in the West, Australia and New Zealand to the South, and Taiwan, Korea and Japan to the North and East would be greatly increased.²

But the deteriorating situation in Vietnam in 1964 led to a change in American policy. By early 1965 the domino perspective of South-east Asia led many American policy analysts to three options: (1) attack the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (D.R.V.); (2) negotiate; or (3) "keep plugging" in South Vietnam.³ The policy ultimately adopted was a combination of (1) and (2). In February 1965 President Johnson approved a limited programme of sustained bombing of the D.R.V., dubbed operation "Rolling Thunder."⁴

After three months of apparently fruitless efforts to bomb Hanoi to the conference table, emphasis in Washington soon shifted to winning the war in the South. From 13 to 18 May 1965 President Johnson approved a temporary halt in the bombing of North Vietnam which, in his words, was aimed at "clear[ing] a path either toward restoration of peace or toward increasing military action, depending upon the reaction of the Communists."⁵

After a temporary setback in the spring the Vietnamese Communists seized the initiative and by the summer began mounting large-scale attacks. President Johnson responded by authorizing an increase in American troop strength to over 70,000. By July 1965, barely five weeks later, he increased this to 125,000 and declared that more troops would be sent if required.⁶ The United States, although escalating the

2. National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288 (17 March 1964) quoted in *ibid.* pp. 50–51. NSAM 288 was a policy statement and used language that was as strong as possible to justify its objectives. A less pessimistic and undoubtedly more realistic estimate of the situation was the answer that the CIA Board of National Estimates gave to President Johnson's question, "Would the rest of Southeast Asia necessarily fall if Laos and South Vietnam came under North Vietnamese control?":

"With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, a continuation of the spread of communism in the area would not be inexorable, and any spread which did occur would take time – time in which the total situation might change in any of a number of ways unfavorable to the communist cause."

This estimation was a "worst case" condition and in anything less than a "clear-cut communist victory" the results "would probably be similar, though somewhat less sharp and severe." *Ibid.* p. 178.

3. *Ibid.* pp. 686–87.

4. Johnson approved the programme on 13 February 1965 with the restriction that air strikes be limited to below the 19th parallel and only selected military targets be attacked. See *ibid.* p. 321.

5. *Ibid.* p. 366.

6. *Ibid.* p. 416.

conflict, was still unable to improve its own position. Despite troop increases and sustained bombing of North Vietnam, the situation in South Vietnam was, according to the assistant secretary of defense, John T. McNaughton, “worse than a year ago (when it was worse than a year before that).”⁷ Regardless of these developments the secretary of state, Dean Rusk, urged a total American commitment even if it might lead to a “general war.” Rusk argued that: “The central objective of the United States in South Vietnam must be to insure that North Viet-Nam does not succeed in taking over or determining the future of South Viet-Nam by force. We must accomplish this objective without a general war if possible.”⁸

Although the Johnson Administration did not adopt Rusk’s policy of total commitment the air war against the North incrementally expanded throughout the latter half of 1965. The secretary of defense, Robert F. McNamara, recommended an expanded bombing programme, noting that limitations and restrictions were required to avoid “bombing which runs a high risk of escalation into war with the Soviets or China and which is likely to appall allies and friends.”⁹ By the year’s end the American troop commitment had increased to over 180,000 and recommendations had been made to double that number by the end of 1966. The situation was developing into one of limitless expansion until the enemy relented.

By the end of 1965, therefore, the United States had increased its forces eight-fold, undertaken a programme of sustained bombing of North Vietnam, initiated major combat offences by American troops and in general taken command of the land war in South Vietnam. By November 1965 General Westmoreland had submitted a request for a force level of 375,000 troops to be in the country by mid-1967.

An indication of the American dilemma in 1965 is contained in the “Plan of Action for South Vietnam” written by McNaughton to his boss, McNamara. McNaughton perceived three primary American aims in Vietnam, each with a different value. The first was “to avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor),” valued at 70 per cent. The second was “to keep SVN (and its adjacent) territory from Chinese hands,” valued at 20 per cent. The final objective worth only 10 per cent of the total was “to permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.”¹⁰

From this perspective it was apparent that the United States did not deem the conflict so vital to American interests that it was worth a Sino-American confrontation, yet it was still considered crucial enough for the United States to be willing to increase its involvement and pay the costs of an enlarged though still limited commitment.

7. *Ibid.* Vol. IV, p. 21.

8. *Ibid.* p. 23.

9. *Ibid.* p. 29.

10. *Ibid.* Vol. III, p. 695.

While the United States saw itself as increasingly committed to the South Vietnamese cause the Chinese had a more ominous perception of the developments.

The Chinese Response

As late as 1964, the Chinese leadership was not overly concerned about the developments in Indochina. The New Year's Day editorial in the *People's Daily* (*Jen-min jih-pao*) characterized the international situation as being "very favourable to the Chinese people" and made no mention of Vietnam.¹¹

In March Foreign Minister Ch'en Yi sent a message to Xuan Thuy, foreign minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, expressing China's official support and indicating increasing interest. He stated that the Chinese Government and people were "deeply concerned about the grave situation created by U.S. imperialists in southern Viet Nam and are firmly opposed to the U.S. imperialists' crime of stepping up their war of aggression there."¹²

By April the Chinese leadership perceived a new threat. A *People's Daily* editorial accused the United States of stepping up activities in Indochina and planning to use Chinese Nationalist forces. The editorial explicitly stated that such a development threatened China's security and that Peking could not "remain indifferent to this."¹³

Although China was increasingly concerned about the escalating conflict it made clear to the United States that it did not want to go to war over Vietnam. In late July, Ch'en Yi, identified only as a "top-ranking Chinese Government member," gave a lengthy interview to a foreign correspondent which was later broadcast on Chinese radio. The interview stressed that China had neither the capability nor intention to start a war but was seriously concerned about the Indochina situation. He made the point that, if forced to, China would enter the conflict when American attacks on North Vietnam endangered the Vietnamese-Chinese border region.¹⁴

China's concern and apprehension over the escalating conflict in Indochina had a substantive basis. Just prior to this interview the United States in an "off-the-record" briefing indicated that it was ready to go to war with China to prevent further communist gains in South-east Asia.¹⁵

Despite its apprehensions of the American threat China still declared its strong support to the North Vietnamese. On 19 July 1964 an

11. *Peking Review*, No. 1 (3 January 1964), pp. 6-8.

12. *Ibid.* No. 10 (6 March 1964), p. 25.

13. *Survey of China Mainland Press (SCMP)*, No. 3210 (1 May 1964), pp. 36-37.

14. Reported in the *Kurier* (Vienna), 1 August 1964, and Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report, People's Republic of China* (FBIS), 3 August 1964, BBB, pp. 11-15.

15. *New York Times*, 20 June 1964.

official Chinese Government statement expressed its support for the Indochinese people and noted that China “has expressed the utmost self-restraint. . . . China has not sent a single soldier to Indo-China. However there is a limit to everything.”¹⁶

By late summer of that year the situation deteriorated even further. The American reaction to the Tonkin Gulf incident in August established the precedent of direct American air attacks on North Vietnam. The Chinese immediately responded by sending a squadron of MiG-17s to Hanoi for use against future American air attacks.¹⁷ By the autumn of 1964 construction had begun on a number of new airfields in South China. According to Allen S. Whiting, former director of the State Department Office of Research and Analysis for the Far East, both the timing and the location of these were a direct reaction to the threat of American escalation in Vietnam.¹⁸

By the end of 1964 China was clearly signalling to the United States that it did not want to go to war over Vietnam but that it would continue to aid its ally and defend itself if attacked. The United States either failed to apprehend or simply ignored these signals. It was another year before both powers managed to arrive at a mutual understanding of their objectives in the conflict and thus prevent misperception and an inadvertent clash.

Prior to the sharp American escalation in 1965 the Chinese leadership still looked at Vietnamese developments optimistically. Chairman Mao Tse-tung expected a favourable resolution to the conflict within two years at most.¹⁹ But Washington’s increasing role in the conflict coupled with Moscow’s reawakened interest in South-east Asia necessitated a Chinese reassessment of its basic policy in Indochina. One aspect of this reassessment took the form of a publicized “strategic debate.”²⁰ The debate centred about the question of how to respond effectively to the American escalation in Vietnam without either “selling out” the Vietnamese or militarily confronting the United States. During this debate the dynamic triadic relationship between Peking and Washington, Peking and Moscow, and Peking and Hanoi substantially shaped and motivated Chinese foreign policy.

Early 1965 brought a further intensification of the Vietnam conflict

16. *Peking Review*, No. 30 (24 July 1964), pp. 5–6.

17. Allen S. Whiting, “How we almost went to war with China,” *Look*, 29 April 1969, p. 76.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Edgar Snow, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 218. Mao Tse-tung, in a January 1965 interview with Edgar Snow, thought that the fighting in Vietnam “would go on perhaps for one to two years. After that the United States troops would find it uninteresting and might go home or go somewhere else.”

20. Two perceptive studies of the debate are Michael Yahuda, “Kremlinology and the Chinese strategic debate 1965–66,” *The China Quarterly* (CQ), No. 49 (1972), pp. 32–75, and Harry Harding and Melvin Gurtov, *The Purge of Lo Jui-ch’ing* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, February 1971, R-548-PR).

and a new level of warfare. In February 1965 the United States carried out a series of reprisal air attacks on North Vietnam while the Soviet premier, Aleksei Kosygin, was visiting Hanoi. The Chinese Government issued a strongly worded statement that "aggression by the U.S. against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam means aggression against China."²¹ There were also implications that Chinese troops might be sent to Vietnam. According to Liu Ning-yi, "We are closely watching the developments and are ready at any time to join our Vietnamese brothers in dealing resolute counter-blows to the U.S. aggressors."²²

On 25 February 1965, after President Johnson had decided to authorize a programme of sustained bombing of North Vietnam, the United States informed China at the Warsaw talks that it had no designs on the territory of North Vietnam nor any desire to destroy it.²³ The United States transmitted the same message to North Vietnam through a third party, but the Chinese had already informed the Vietnamese before the message could be delivered.²⁴

From the limited information available it is apparent that the Warsaw talks were an important medium of communication. As the United States began to enlarge its military role in Vietnam it also informed the Chinese that this escalation should not be considered a threat to them. A late 1965 press report noted that the United States made it "crystal clear" in the Warsaw talks that it had no intention of invading China or destroying North Vietnam.²⁵ According to Kenneth Young, a State Department participant in some of the earlier Warsaw talks, Washington used the talks to "lessen the chance of policy miscalculation and increase the precision of policy presentation. . . ."²⁶

Initially Washington's new policy heightened China's declarations of support for its ally. The Chinese foreign minister, Ch'en Yi, officially stated what had until that time been only unofficially acknowledged, that Chinese troops would be sent to assist the Vietnamese if required: "The Chinese people will exert every effort to send the heroic South Vietnamese people the necessary material aid, including arms and all other war material, and stand ready to dispatch their men to fight

21. Chinese Government statement on 9 February 1965 in *SCMP*, No. 3395 (11 February 1965), pp. 34-35.

22. Liu Ning-yi's speech at a Peking rally on 10 February 1965, translated in *Support the People of Viet Nam, Defeat U.S. Aggressors (Support Viet Nam)* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1965), Vol. I, p. 29.

23. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, p. 330. It is unclear from the *Papers* if the U.S. actually informed China that it was about to begin bombing the D.R.V. on a sustained basis.

24. *Ibid.* The U.S. had the Canadian International Control Commission representative, Blair Seaborn, transmit to the D.R.V. the same message when he visited Hanoi in March 1965.

25. Quoted in Kenneth Young, *Negotiating with the Chinese Communists: The United States Experience 1953-1967* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 270.

26. *Ibid.* p. 248.

shoulder to shoulder with the South Vietnamese people whenever the latter so require.”²⁷

This explicit declaration of support was still highly qualified and somewhat ambiguous since: (1) the Chinese people rather than the Chinese Government made the offer, (2) the Chinese were “ready” to send troops although they “will” send arms and material support, and (3) forces would be sent when they were required, implying a future possibility rather than a present contingency.

One of the motivating factors behind Ch'en Yi's public declaration to send volunteers may have been the Soviet Union's offer to do likewise.²⁸ The Soviet Union's February 1965 offer – to adopt “new measures to protect the security and strengthen the defensive capability of the DRV” – clearly indicated that Moscow would now compete for Hanoi's support in the Sino-Soviet dispute as well as challenge Peking's influence in Indochina and South-east Asia.²⁹

A *People's Daily* editorial declaring support for the Vietnamese and offering Chinese forces if necessary also stated that those Vietnamese who were regrouped in North Vietnam in 1954 “have every right to return to their native places to take up arms once again to defend their own homes and families.”³⁰ Although returning South Vietnamese had been infiltrating South Vietnam since at least 1960, this was the first time that China publicly acknowledged and supported this movement. Peking was less explicit in acknowledging North Vietnamese infiltration. An official Chinese Government statement declared that American air attacks on North Vietnam gave the latter the “right of action to fight against U.S. aggression.”³¹ There was never any explanation of exactly what this “right of action” encompassed.

China's overriding concerns in South Vietnam were two-fold: to prevent an escalation of the conflict which might necessitate overt Chinese involvement, and to prevent a large-scale build-up of American forces. While supporting the proposals offered by Hanoi and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLFSV), China stressed the necessity of complete American withdrawal from South Vietnam even more than North Vietnam or the NLFSV. A *People's Daily* editorial declared “there will be peace in Viet Nam and Indo-China only when the United States has withdrawn all its aggressive troops from South Viet Nam.”³²

By April 1965 Chinese declarations to send military forces to Vietnam

27. Ch'en Yi's reply of 28 March 1965 to Xuan Thuy, foreign minister of the D.R.V. *Support Viet Nam*, Vol. I, p. 38.

28. A Hanoi broadcast on 16 March 1965 mentioned that the Soviet Union, China and other countries offered volunteers; FBIS, 16 March 1965, JJJ, pp. 5–6.

29. Quoted from Pham Van Dong's speech at Kosygin's departure. See FBIS, 10 February 1965, JJJ, pp. 18–19.

30. *Jen-min*, editorial, 25 March 1965, in *Support Viet Nam*, Vol. I, p. 64.

31. Chinese Government statement of 9 February 1965, *ibid.* p. 3.

32. *Jen-min*, editorial, 25 March 1965, in *Support Viet Nam*, Vol. I, p. 74.

became less intense. The American build-up, the unsettled developments within Vietnam, plus a growing disparity of views within the Chinese hierarchy regarding means to deal with the Vietnam question, contributed to this shift.

An additional factor limiting China's reaction to American escalation may have been President Johnson's handling of Vietnam policy. He was very concerned about the possibility of a strong Chinese reaction. He would only approve a slow step-up in the air war so that the United States could maintain the option of slowing the pace of the bombing if there was a reaction from China.³³

As the year progressed and the war escalated the Chinese leadership placed increasing emphasis upon the capability of the Vietnamese themselves to defeat the Americans. On 20 April the standing committee of the National People's Congress of the P.R.C. adopted a resolution supporting the Vietnamese. The resolution outlined a programme to indoctrinate and educate the Chinese people, to strengthen national defence, and called upon the country "to make full preparations to send our own people to fight together with the Vietnamese people and drive out the U.S. aggressors if imperialism continues to escalate its war of aggression and the Vietnamese people need them."³⁴

Once again China's offer of military support was ambiguous and highly qualified, even more so than in past pronouncements. If the United States continued to intensify the war, if the Vietnamese needed them, and if full preparations had been made, then Chinese forces would be sent.

In addition to urging the Vietnamese to rely on their own efforts Peking also advocated a worldwide united front to oppose U.S. aggression in Vietnam and thus defeat American imperialism. On 25 March 1965 a *People's Daily* editorial stated:

The people of the socialist countries and peace-loving peoples of the world have the unshirkable duty to give all-out support and assistance to the south Vietnamese people in their heroic fight. . . . At this critical moment the people of the whole world should swing into action and resolutely stand on the side of the south Vietnamese people to wage a joint struggle to drive the U.S. aggressors out of south Viet Nam and the rest of Indo-China.³⁵

By April the Chinese stridently raised the call for world support in an editorial entitled "People of the world, act now and force the U.S. aggressors to get out of Viet Nam."³⁶ The editorial admonished the "people of the world," declaring that it was their "common and sacred duty" promptly to "launch a powerful mass movement" in order to drive the United States out of Vietnam and thereby fully support "the just struggle of the Vietnamese people."³⁷

33. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. III, p. 354.

34. *Support Viet Nam*, Vol. III, pp. 5-6.

35. *Ibid.* Vol. I, p. 65.

36. *Jen-min*, editorial, 16 April 1965, in *ibid.* Vol. II, pp. 29-36.

37. *Ibid.* p. 36.

P'eng Chen, mayor of Peking and member of the Politburo, in a lengthy speech before the Indonesian Communist Party, outlined the Chinese conception of the international scene and the means by which imperialism and modern revisionism could be defeated.³⁸ The four basic contradictions in the world not only still existed but were “becoming increasingly acute.”³⁹ The contradiction between American imperialism and the “oppressed nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America” had developed into the “principal” contradiction. In non-ideological language the United States was now the greatest threat to the Third World. P'eng argued that the only way to counter such a development was to recognize this fact and to unite against it:

The people of the world can definitely defeat this ferocious enemy provided that they already recognize U.S. imperialism as their chief enemy, unite with all the forces that can be united and form the broadest possible united front against U.S. imperialism and its lackeys.⁴⁰

While arguing for a broad united front P'eng explicitly excluded the Soviet Union (“Khrushchev revisionists”) because it sought to suppress the revolutionary movement in the Third World and was thereby serving imperialism and promoting neo-colonialism. Mere opposition to imperialism was not enough; it must be combined with and even preceded by opposition to revisionism. China's policy of a broad united front was not only aimed at countering the American threat, but also at bringing the Third World nations to the Chinese side in the Sino-Soviet dispute. The Chinese hoped that the “Second Bandung” Conference would solidify its Third World support.

For a number of political reasons the Second Bandung Conference, a prospect which China and Indonesia had been working towards since 1961, was postponed in 1965.⁴¹ Chinese manoeuvres to bring off the conference and its complete about face in September 1965 resulted in a major diplomatic defeat for Peking. Foreign Minister Ch'en Yi, aware of the opposition to the conference, remarked that it would be better to postpone the meeting if the first item on the agenda was not the “condemnation of U.S. imperialism,” or if the Soviet Union or any other nation represented in the United Nations was invited.⁴² Thus by the autumn of 1965 China's hopes of establishing a broad united front

38. Speech at the Aliarcham Academy of Social Sciences, 25 May 1965, in *Peking Review*, No. 24 (11 June 1965), pp. 10–20.

39. The four basic contradictions were those between the socialist and the imperialist camps, between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in capitalist countries, between oppressed nations and imperialism, and between imperialists themselves; see *ibid.* p. 13.

40. *Ibid.*

41. For more detailed discussion of the planned conference, see John Gittings, *Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute: A Commentary and Extracts from Recent Polemics, 1963–1967* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 247–53.

42. Ch'en Yi's press conference in Peking on 29 September 1965, *Peking Review*, No. 41 (8 October 1965), pp. 10–11.

with the Third World nations, in order to counter both United States imperialism and Soviet revisionism, were dashed. The subsequent abortive coup d'état in Indonesia and virtual extermination of the Indonesian Communist Party further contributed to the failure of China's Third World policy. By the end of 1965 the strategy of a worldwide united front to oppose American intervention in Vietnam was no longer a viable option.

At the same time that China sought to develop a Third World united front it also underwent the internal debate regarding the need for a specific Chinese response to the American escalation. The Chinese leadership was unified in its opposition to the escalating American involvement in Vietnam yet divided over the appropriate response.

In May 1965 the Peking press published two lengthy articles ostensibly commemorating the 20th anniversary of V-E Day, but which were actually two thinly veiled arguments concerning the proper Chinese response to the escalating Vietnam war.⁴³ Lo Jui-ch'ing, a member of the Communist Party Central Committee, vice-premier and chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army, developed a pessimistic military-oriented case. He urged preparations "for the most difficult and worst situations that may possibly arise." He took a very dim view of negotiations although he did not completely rule them out as an alternative.

[Only] under given conditions [should] . . . socialist countries . . . enter into negotiations and reach certain agreements with imperialist countries. But in no case should they pin their hopes for the defence of world peace on such negotiations and agreements . . . we must never forget that no agreements and treaties can stop imperialism when it is bent on war.

Lo stressed an "active defence" and the establishment of some type of a defence line either around cities or natural boundaries, such as mountain ranges. After blunting the initial enemy attack Lo then recommended taking the offensive and ultimately adopting a policy of "strategic pursuit to destroy the enemy at his starting point, to destroy him in his nest."

In contrast, the *People's Daily* editorial was less pessimistic and stressed the political rather than the military aspects of Chinese strategy. Negotiations with imperialists were "perfectly permissible and even necessary" so long as the "basic interests of the people are not violated." This was a much more flexible and conciliatory position than that advocated by Lo Jui-ch'ing. Military strategy or tactics received minimal attention and the overriding message emphasized politics as the decisive factor. The editorial argued that it would have been impossible

43. Lo Jui-ch'ing, "Commemorate the victory over German fascism: carry the struggle against U.S. imperialism through to the end," *Hung-ch'i (Red Flag)*, No. 5 (1965), translated in *Peking Review*, No. 20 (14 May 1965), pp. 7-15, and "The historical experience of the war against fascism," *Jen-min*, editorial, 9 May 1965, in *Peking Review*, No. 20 (14 May 1965), pp. 15-22.

to defeat Hitler, and thereby implicitly the United States today, without the unity of all the forces that could be united against fascism and without a broad, worldwide, united anti-fascist front. This tied in with Peking's general Third World policy. While Lo Jui-ch'ing contended that the United States was "preparing" to extend the Vietnam war to China, the *People's Daily* editorial noted that "the whole world is faced with the grave danger of the extension of the war of aggression in Viet Nam by U.S. imperialism." The latter view played down the possibility of an imminent attack on China. There are other less explicit differences between the two articles which have been discussed in greater detail by others, but it is apparent that serious questions were being raised and had yet to be resolved regarding Peking's military and political role in the Vietnam war.⁴⁴

As the Vietnam conflict escalated the Chinese debate continued, but by September 1965 it seems to have reached its climax. To commemorate V-J Day the defence minister, Lin Piao, published his now famous essay, "Long live the victory of people's war," and Lo Jui-ch'ing gave a speech entitled "The people defeated Japanese fascism and they can certainly defeat U.S. imperialism too."⁴⁵ Lin's essay was a major theoretical formulation of the Maoist conception of a people's war and its application to the current international scene. It argued that by adopting this strategy the Third World nations could counter American-Soviet "collusion" and defeat the "U.S. imperialists' policy of seeking world domination."

Lo Jui-ch'ing also stressed the importance of a people's war more than he had previously, giving emphasis to the political aspects of the struggle. Still maintaining his pessimistic, "worst possible case" outlook, Lo warned: "It is possible that U.S. imperialism may go mad in trying to save itself from its doom; we must take this into full account and make preparations against its expansion of the war of aggression in Viet Nam and against any war it may impose on us."⁴⁶

Lo took an even harder line towards negotiations with the United States, arguing that American proposals were merely "smokescreens" to obscure their actual intentions, to sow discord among forces opposed to them, and to allow them time to gain "breathing space" so that they could consolidate their forces for future assaults. This sharp attack

44. For a more detailed analysis of these two articles, see Yahuda, "Kremlinology," and Harding and Gurtov, *The Purge of Lo Jui-ch'ing*. In an interview with the French author, André Malraux, Foreign Minister Ch'en Yi appears to have somewhat ambiguously supported the latter position when he remarked: "If the United States does not extend its aggression, it will not be necessary for China to take a hand in the [Vietnam] operations; but if it does she will." Quoted in "I am alone among the masses," *The Atlantic*, October 1968, p. 101.

45. "Long live the victory of people's war," *Peking Review*, No. 36 (3 September 1965), pp. 9–30. Lo Jui-ch'ing's speech is in Harding and Gurtov, *The Purge of Lo Jui-ch'ing*, pp. 31–39.

46. *Ibid.* p. 37.

on negotiations indicates that some factions of the Chinese leadership were adamantly opposed to negotiating with the United States.⁴⁷

Although unapparent at first glance Lin's essay can be interpreted as a "major policy statement on the Vietnam War." A study by David P. Mozingo and Thomas W. Robinson makes this point⁴⁸ and argues that Peking reached the conclusion that: (1) the war had taken on a new character since America's massive intervention and it should now be treated as a fully fledged war of resistance against the United States; (2) the Vietnamese Communists should adopt a united front strategy and abandon mobile warfare, retreat to revolutionary bases in the countryside and carry out smaller-scale protracted guerrilla war; and (3) the Vietnamese must adopt a policy of self-reliance since the most decisive factor in the war would be their strength and determination.⁴⁹ China's criticism of North Vietnam's handling of the Vietnam war and the need to revise its strategy failed to convince the Vietnamese policy-makers.

The initial response of the North Vietnamese to Lin's essay was essentially "no comment." It was not until mid-1966 that North Vietnam publicly and critically referred to Lin's recommendations.⁵⁰ The Vietnamese argued that the United States could be defeated by taking the offensive and that foreign revolutionary experience was not necessarily adaptable to the Vietnam situation. Later developments indicated that the Vietnamese leadership ignored Lin's advice and, as they had for the past 20 years, followed their own political and military time-table irrespective of their ally's wishes. Although Peking was Hanoi's northern neighbour as well as its political and military ally, China's influence over the Vietnamese and the conduct of the Vietnam war was minimal.

The purge of Lo Jui-ch'ing in December 1965 indicated that the Mao-

47. The problem of negotiations was not discussed in Lin Piao's essay nor in a related *Jen-min* editorial entitled "U.S. imperialism can be defeated as well" (*SCMP*, No. 3541 (21 September 1965), pp. 7-13) which commemorated V-J Day, but directly alluded to the current conflict in Vietnam. This would seem to indicate that the question of negotiations was also sharply disputed and probably the Mao Tse-tung-Lin Piao faction, which came to dominate the situation in China, was less averse to negotiations than others. Following this argument through one would expect that there would have been a softening of the Chinese position during late 1965 or early 1966. Although publicly the Chinese adamantly opposed Vietnamese negotiations with the U.S., unless they were preceded by an American withdrawal, there is evidence that privately they reached an understanding with the U.S. limiting their involvement in the conflict.

48. D. P. Mozingo and T. W. Robinson developed this thesis in their study of Lin's essay, *Lin Piao on "People's War": China Takes a Second Look at Vietnam* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, November 1965, RM 4814-PR). My discussion of this aspect of Chinese foreign policy is taken essentially from this study.

49. *Ibid.* p. 4.

50. Donald S. Zagoria, *Vietnam Triangle: Moscow, Peking, Hanoi* (New York: Pegasus, 1967), pp. 83-86.

Lin Piao faction had dominated the opposition. Lo's purge was the first of many which occurred throughout the Cultural Revolution. According to a study of Lo's downfall the major issues involved centred upon domestic policy rather than foreign policy or strategic doctrine.

. . . the most important issue was Lo's insistence that the PLA reorder its priorities, reduce its domestic activities, and make urgent preparations against an American attack. To the Maoists, these proposals involved unacceptable political and economic costs, and placed Lo's loyalty and reliability in serious question.⁵¹

Therefore, although there was disagreement over the most appropriate strategy of defence against the escalating Vietnam war and differing perceptions of the imminence of an American attack on China, these differences were within tolerable limits, at least while the questions were being debated.

By the latter part of 1965 or early 1966 major decisions were reached on China's response to the Vietnam war. China decided to limit its involvement in the Vietnam conflict but it was not sure that the United States would not escalate the conflict and make China's active involvement inevitable. As a precautionary measure various domestic activities were undertaken. In southern China limited evacuation of the major cities was initiated.⁵² This and related measures were primarily defensive, indicating that the Chinese leadership did not expect an imminent attack, but still could not rule out that possibility. While the Chinese reportedly adjusted their economic planning to take into account the possibility of an American attack, efforts were made to avoid war hysteria which might affect production. The main thrust of the economy continued to be directed towards national development rather than preparation for war.⁵³

During this period the Chinese press toned down its statements of support for the Vietnamese, and references to earlier pledges to send volunteers were virtually non-existent. Offers of support were ambiguous and non-committal, such as "we . . . will give the Vietnamese people as much support as they require for as long as they need it."⁵⁴ An official Chinese Foreign Ministry statement in November 1965 merely declared that "the people of the whole world, the American people included, stand on the side of the Vietnamese people and support their

51. Harding and Gurtov, *The Purge of Lo Jui-ch'ing*, p. 48.

52. On 23 November 1965 the U.S. State Department confirmed that the elderly, and others able to leave, were being evacuated from some of the larger southern cities. There was no official evacuation order but primarily a word-of-mouth campaign. See *New York Times*, 24 November 1965, p. 4.

53. *Ibid.* 3 December 1965, p. 1.

54. *Jen-min*, editorial, 14 December 1965, in *Peking Review*, No. 51 (17 December 1965), p. 17.

just and patriotic struggle.”⁵⁵ In January 1966 the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued another statement supporting the Vietnamese cause: “We wholeheartedly support the Vietnamese people in their just struggle and consider it our bounden international duty to sternly condemn the atrocious crimes of the United States and thoroughly expose the U.S. plot of peace talks.”⁵⁶

Even though declarations of support were muted, Chinese aid and supplies continued to flow into Vietnam. In fact there may have been a direct correlation between these two factors. Since the Chinese wanted a communist victory in Vietnam, but not a Sino-American confrontation, China may have been toning down its public declarations of support while increasing its military aid. In December 1965 Peking reportedly made increased commitments of material aid to Hanoi, and assigned several thousand service troops to Vietnam to help maintain the logistics routes between China and North Vietnam.⁵⁷

Actual Chinese troop movement into North Vietnam began in the autumn of 1965.⁵⁸ The dispatch of troops was apparently a compromise between the strategy of Lo Jui-ch’ing, who advocated a more activist policy, and that of Lin Piao, who stressed Vietnamese self-reliance. The movement expanded until the spring of 1966 when it totalled 30–50,000 troops. These were regular forces of the Chinese army who were primarily engaged in constructing and strengthening the North Vietnamese transportation network.

Although the United States intensified its bombing attacks on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and substantially enlarged its armed forces in South Vietnam, Chinese criticism was less hostile than it had been previously. By late 1965, the Chinese seemed to be mainly concerned with averting a spill-over of the war into China and avoiding a Sino-American confrontation. Since the Chinese did not want to become overtly involved in the conflict, were unable to deter an American escalation through threats or declarations of possible intervention, and failed to obtain the support of the Third World nations, one of the few alternatives left was to reach a tacit understanding with the United States to establish some type of limit on the actions of both nations.

Ch’en Yi’s September 1965 press conference clearly indicates that there was considerable concern that the United States might attack China, even though China consistently declared that it would never initiate such a conflict.

The Chinese people are ready to make all necessary sacrifices in the fight against imperialism. It is up to the U.S. President and the Pentagon to

55. Chinese Foreign Ministry statement of 28 November 1965, in *Peking Review*, No. 49 (3 December 1965), pp. 7–8.

56. Chinese Foreign Ministry statement of 14 January 1966, in *ibid.* No. 4 (21 January 1966), pp. 7–8.

57. *New York Times*, 1 December 1965, p. 1.

58. Allen Whiting, “How we almost went to war with China,” p. 77.

decide whether the United States wants a big war with China today. We cherish no illusions about U.S. imperialism. We are fully prepared against U.S. aggression. If the U.S. imperialists are determined to launch a war of aggression against us, they are welcome to come sooner, to come as early as tomorrow. . . .

Should the U.S. imperialists invade China's mainland, we will take all necessary measures to defeat them. By then the war will have no boundaries. It is the United States, and not China, that will have broken down the boundaries.⁵⁹

Chou En-lai further emphasized this point at a reception celebrating the fifth anniversary of the NLFSV.⁶⁰ Chou asserted that, since the United States was nearly defeated in Vietnam, there was still a possibility that it "will go a step further and extend its war of aggression to the whole of Indo-China and to China. And indeed U.S. imperialism is now making preparations for this eventuality." If the United States attacked, Chou declared, China was prepared and would fight to the finish.

Although the Chinese were concerned about the possibility of an American attack, there was no sense of imminent danger, rather a sense of cautious concern. As the *People's Daily* New Year's Day editorial stated:

We must maintain sharp vigilance and arrange all our work on the basis of coping with the eventuality that U.S. imperialism will launch an early and large-scale war. If the U.S. aggressors should dare to invade our country, we shall wipe them out resolutely, thoroughly, wholly and completely.⁶¹

An Understanding

In order to avoid misperceptions and in recognition of their mutual power and capabilities, by early 1966 the United States and China arrived at a tacit understanding. Through a series of subtle signals and by the measured pace of American involvement, particularly the bombing of North Vietnam, both powers indicated that a Sino-American confrontation was neither desired nor encouraged.

Both Washington and Peking sought to avoid a conflict arising from misperceptions, a factor which had contributed to the Sino-American confrontation in Korea over a decade earlier. In that conflict the United States had failed to heed China's warnings. It also underestimated China's capabilities and its intentions if the United States crossed the 38th parallel in Korea. But the results of the Korean conflict and a more realistic and pragmatic attitude taken by both powers served to strengthen efforts to avoid another such encounter.

59. *Peking Review*, No. 41 (8 October 1965), p. 14.

60. "China is ready to take up U.S. challenge" (20 December 1965), *ibid.* No. 52 (24 December 1965), pp. 5–6.

61. *Ibid.* No. 1 (1 January 1966), p. 8.

The most noticeable shift in attitude occurred in late 1965. Prior to that time American policy-makers had depicted the People's Republic of China as aggressive, expansionist, hostilely anti-American and one of the initiators of the Vietnam war. The secretary of defense, McNamara, alleged that North Vietnam controlled the NLFSV and was in turn "supported and incited by Communist China." According to McNamara the People's Republic of China advocated violence and wars of liberation "as the preferred means of extending the sway of communism. . . . Throughout the world we see the fruits of these policies and in Viet-Nam, particularly we see the effects of the Chinese Communists' more militant stance and their hatred of the free world."⁶²

By the latter half of 1965, however, there had been a slow shifting in the American position. Less specific references were made to Peking's objectives and intentions in South-east Asia. In July 1965 President Johnson had stated that the Vietnam war "is guided by North Viet-Nam and it is spurred by Communist China. Its goal is to conquer the South, to defeat American power, and to extend the Asiatic dominion of communism."⁶³ By January 1966 President Johnson stopped referring to China as the instigator of the Vietnam war. The conflict was referred to strictly as a North Vietnamese initiative.⁶⁴ In December 1965 the United States Government had announced that the travel ban to China and other communist countries was being lifted for doctors and medical students "for purposes directly related to their professional responsibilities." On 9 March 1966 the ban was also lifted for scholars and writers.⁶⁵ These were minor shifts but, in view of the rigidity of past American policy, they were movements forward.

An even more significant turnabout was the major foreign policy speech of William P. Bundy, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs. On 12 February 1966 he called for a reassessment of American policy towards China.⁶⁶ Although noting that the United States and China had "antithetic" objectives in Asia, Bundy de-emphasized the necessity of militarily containing China and argued that the major thrust of Chinese policy in Asia "must be countered by their neighbors," rather than the United States. He also added that China was "tactically cautious" and did not seek a "confrontation of military power" with the United States. America's basic military policy in Asia would be to assist its allies if they were externally attacked. This particular strategy left open the possibility of an American response if an internal revolution developed. Bundy described the Sino-American Warsaw talks as very effective and a means through which the United

62. *Department of State Bulletin (DSB)*, 30 August 1965, pp. 370-71.

63. *Ibid.* 16 August 1965, pp. 262-63.

64. *Ibid.* 31 January 1966, p. 153.

65. For a discussion of these changes, see James C. Thomson, Jr, "On the making of U.S. China policy, 1961-9: a study in bureaucratic politics," *CQ*, No. 50 (1972), pp. 232-38.

66. *DSB*, 28 February 1966, pp. 310-18.

States had told China that it had “no hostile designs” on it. Bundy also foresaw the future possibility of increased Sino-American contacts, particularly with a “new generation of leaders” in China.

Bundy’s address set the tempo and format for succeeding American foreign policy statements on China. President Johnson in a speech on 23 February reiterated Bundy’s point that the United States did not want a war with China.⁶⁷ Specifically addressing his remarks to Peking, President Johnson said: “We seek the end of no regime. . . . We observe in ourselves, and we applaud in others, a careful restraint in action. We can live with anger in word as long as it is matched by caution in deed.”⁶⁸

Another change instituted at this time was the use of the name “Peking,” rather than “Peiping,” when American officials referred to the capital of China.⁶⁹ Commencing with Bundy’s February speech the word “Peking” became officially accepted and was used thereafter by practically all American officials.⁷⁰ The secretary of state, Dean Rusk, was the exception, however, and after February he reverted to using “Peiping.”⁷¹

Although Peking publicly noted this shift in American policy it did not believe that the American threat had completely subsided, but there was a discernible modification in China’s criticism of the United States. In March a *People’s Daily* article stated that “recently” American Government officials “struck up the old tune of ‘improving’ relations with China.”⁷² The article denounced the “blasts of ‘good will’” as “quite absurd and ridiculous” since they did not reach down to the question of Taiwan, the source of Sino-American tensions. Since the United States refused to alter its policy towards Taiwan, “the

67. *Ibid.* 14 March 1966, p. 393.

68. *Ibid.*

69. For typical examples in late 1965 and early 1966, see Dean Rusk’s news conferences of 9 December 1965, 21 January 1966 and 31 January 1966, in *ibid.* 27 December 1965, p. 1009, 7 February 1966, pp. 194–95, and 14 February 1966, pp. 223–28, respectively; President Johnson’s remarks to the AFL-CIO convention on 9 December 1965 (*ibid.* 27 December 1965, p. 1014) and his 31 January 1966 address (*ibid.* 14 February 1966, p. 224). I can find no example of American officials referring to “Peking” rather than “Peiping” in any speeches contained in the *DSB* from 1964 to 1965.

70. The ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, referred to “Peiping” on 31 January 1966 but thereafter used the word “Peking” (*ibid.* 14 February 1966, p. 332, 4 April 1966, p. 542). Both Dean Rusk and General Maxwell Taylor called the Chinese capital “Peking” while testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 18 February and 17 February 1966 respectively (*ibid.* 7 March 1966, pp. 346–56).

71. See, for example, Rusk’s address at Boston University, 14 March 1966 (*ibid.* 4 April 1966, pp. 514–21), news conference on 25 March 1966 (*ibid.* 11 April 1966, pp. 557–64), and “Face the Nation” interview on 20 March 1966 (*ibid.* pp. 565–70).

72. “Old tune, new plot,” *Jen-min*, Observer, 27 March 1966, in *Peking Review*, No. 14 (1 April 1966), pp. 13–15.

normalization of Sino-American relations is entirely out of the question." The article did not rule out the possibility of increased contacts which could occur outside the scope of strictly normalized relations. The Chinese also reiterated their doubts and apprehensions over American intentions in Asia.

Could it be that the eastward shift of the focus of the U.S. global strategy and the U.S. military build-up around China are not for aggression against China, but for the "improvement" of Sino-American relations? Could it be that while working feverishly to escalate its aggressive war in Vietnam one step after another, the United States is not preparing for a trial of strength with the Chinese people, but for the "improvement" of its relations with China. . . ? ⁷³

Although highly critical of American policy and intentions, the Chinese leadership did not perfunctorily dismiss the American initiative. This same article concluded with a conciliatory note:

The Chinese people have always drawn a distinction between U.S. imperialism and the American people. Chairman Mao Tse-tung has said: "The Chinese people know that United States imperialism has done many bad things to China and to the whole world as well; they understand that only the United States ruling group is bad, while the people of the United States are very good." There is a profound friendship between the Chinese and American peoples. We Chinese people understand full well the American people's desire for resuming contact with us. . . .⁷⁴

This response was soon followed by Premier Chou En-lai's four-point statement on China's policy towards the United States, further contributing to the Sino-American dialogue. Chou stated that (1) China would not take the initiative in provoking a war with the United States; (2) the Chinese would support and help any country which "meets with aggression by the imperialists headed by the United States"; (3) China was prepared if the United States attacked it; and (4) if a Sino-American war erupted it would have "no boundaries."⁷⁵

The most significant aspect of Chou's proposal is that it concentrated directly on Sino-American relations and significantly played down the importance of the Vietnam war. On the Taiwan question Chou implied that China was willing to work on that problem through negotiations. He also implied that if a Sino-American war could be averted other areas of dispute could also be resolved. Thus both China and the United States were publicly declaring that they did not want a confrontation and would not initiate one.

There appears to be considerable evidence that policy-makers in Washington and Peking reached a tacit understanding regarding their involvement in Vietnam. In an effort to avoid a confrontation, both

73. *Ibid.* p. 15.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.* No. 20 (13 May 1966), p. 5.

the United States and China placed self-imposed limits on their actions in Indochina. Through a series of public statements, press reports and private discussions at Warsaw both sides clarified their positions and intentions. There developed the tacit understanding that so long as the United States did not invade North Vietnam or China, nor seek to destroy North Vietnam as a viable nation, then China would limit its military involvement in the conflict.

Although most of the evidence is circumstantial and neither government has publicly acknowledged any such understanding a strong case can be made that such an understanding existed.⁷⁶ As developed in this paper a significant shift in policy took place in Washington and Peking during the latter part of 1965 and early 1966. Throughout 1966 and until the termination of American military activities in Vietnam this policy was essentially unchanged.

By 1966 American officials began to stress the more moderate aspects of Chinese foreign policy and were more optimistic in their evaluations of China's intentions and policies in South-east Asia. Although the Chinese doubled the size of their construction force in North Vietnam during the first half of 1966, raising it to an estimate of about 40,000 engineers and construction workers, the U.S. State Department said that the build-up was politically motivated to demonstrate China's support for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and did not seem to portend Chinese military involvement.⁷⁷ The surprising thing is not the explanation of China's intentions, since the North Vietnamese were making similar remarks, but the fact that the State Department was publicly stressing these interpretations.⁷⁸

When the United States began to attack the North Vietnamese POL stores at the end of June the Chinese responded with their usual denunciations, but these were less vituperative and even more ambiguous than in the past. An official Chinese Government statement on 3 July 1966 stressed that the new American bombing policy had "further broken" the line of demarcation between northern and southern Vietnam; therefore the Vietnamese people, both North and South, were free to "adopt all measures to defend their motherland."⁷⁹ Thus China not only supported any actions taken by North Vietnam, but urged that they increase their activities in the South. This was not

76. According to William P. Bundy "there was no clear understanding between Peking and ourselves although I think it could be accurately said that we *understood* each other" (Bundy's emphasis). Personal correspondence from Bundy to myself dated 20 June 1972.

77. *New York Times*, 2 July 1966.

78. On 16 March 1966, Truong Chinh, in a major address, stressed the necessity of fighting a "protracted war" in which the Vietnamese would have to rely mainly on their own forces, thus indicating that they could not expect foreign forces to intervene directly on their behalf. See FBIS, 16 March 1966, JJJ, pp. 2–3.

79. *Peking Review*, No. 28 (8 July 1966), pp. 19–20.

a new policy for Peking, but merely a re-emphasis of past public statements on Vietnam. The Chinese Government also declared that the new escalatory move by the United States freed the Chinese from any restrictions on supporting the Vietnamese. But this statement was couched in cautious and ambiguous terms emphasizing that it referred primarily to political, moral and material aid.

China has consistently and reservedly done its utmost to support and aid Vietnam politically, morally and materially and in other fields. The development by U.S. imperialism of its war of aggression to a new and still graver stage has now further freed us from any bounds or restrictions rendering *such support and aid*. In accordance with the interests and demands of the Vietnamese people *we will at any time take such action as we deem necessary* [emphasis added].⁸⁰

By the summer of 1966 China's policy towards Vietnam was fairly well defined. At the 11th Plenary Session in August 1966 the Eighth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party rubber-stamped it, declaring that the Committee "fully agrees to all the measures already taken and all actions to be taken as decided upon by the Central Committee of the Party and the Government in consultation with the Vietnamese side concerning aid to Vietnam for resisting U.S. aggression."⁸¹

One apparent contradiction to this thesis is Mao's March 1966 statement to a delegation from the Japanese Communist Party. According to Mao:

A war between China and America is inevitable. This year at the earliest or within two years at the latest such a war will occur. America will attack us from four points, namely the Vietnam frontier, the Korean frontier and through Japan by way of Taiwan and Okinawa. On such an occasion, Russia, with the Sino-Russian defence pact as its pretext, will cross the frontier from Siberia and Mongolia to occupy China, starting at Inner Mongolia and Northeast China. The result will be a confrontation across the Yangtze of the Chinese Liberation Army and the Russian Army. . . .⁸²

But Mao's discussion on this point seemed to be as much anti-Soviet as anti-American, and primarily aimed at trying to dispel the delegation's efforts to establish a united communist front (which would include the Soviet Union) to assist the war effort in Vietnam.⁸³ This

80. *Ibid.* p. 20.

81. "Communique of the 11th Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China" (12 August 1966) in *ibid.* No. 34 (19 August 1966), p. 7.

82. Quoted in Kikuzo Ito and Minoru Shibata, "The dilemma of Mao Tse-tung," *CQ*, No. 35 (1968), p. 67.

83. See the discussion of this point in Edward E. Rice, *Mao's Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 235-39. In two 1965 interviews Mao indicated no major concern or apprehension of a Sino-American conflict resulting from the Vietnam war. See Snow, *The Long Revolution*, and Malraux, "I am alone among the masses."

latter position was apparently favoured by some of Mao's domestic opponents who were purged or humiliated during the Cultural Revolution that soon followed. Therefore the impending Cultural Revolution and Mao's hostility towards the Soviet Union were probably the major factors activating Mao's prediction of a Sino-American confrontation rather than a realistic belief that such a war was imminent. In fact, by the summer of 1966 the Cultural Revolution's disruptive efforts soon began to be felt, which seemed to indicate that the most serious threats to the Chinese political system were perceived by Mao and others to come from within the body politic rather than from without.

Rumours of the tacit understanding began to appear in the foreign press in late 1966. In September *Izvestia* commented on a Japanese interview with Ch'en Yi, when the latter allegedly remarked that Peking did not necessarily preclude the idea of negotiations with the United States in order to resolve the Vietnam question. This report also included an Agence France-Presse dispatch which stated: "It was said in informed circles that the Chinese and American ambassadors in Warsaw clearly defined conditions which will prevent a 'clash' between the two countries in Vietnam."⁸⁴

The Soviet Union continued to follow this line in later publications. In November *Pravda* charged that the Chinese were "pursuing a line calculated to leave them outside the struggle against imperialism" and it was not surprising that "... the bourgeois press is now disseminating reports about a tacit agreement of China with the U.S.A. and other capitalist countries which are pleased with China's present policy."⁸⁵

The western non-communist press also carried reports of a Sino-American agreement. René Dabernat, a European correspondent and foreign editor of *Paris-Match*, reported that in early 1966 the Chinese Embassy in Paris contacted the Quai d'Orsay and asked it to inform Washington that Peking would not enter the Vietnam war if the United States did not invade China or North Vietnam, nor bomb the Red River dykes in North Vietnam. According to Dabernat, American officials accepted the Chinese offer and "gave the necessary signals to Peking in various public speeches to show that they agreed to the conditions."⁸⁶

The general thrust of Dabernat's account corresponds with other public reports that China and the United States reached some form of an understanding regarding the Vietnam conflict. One of the most appropriate forums for arriving at such an understanding was the Sino-American ambassadorial talks at Warsaw. Although both sides denied that any explicit agreement was reached, there was no denial that

84. *Izvestia*, 22 September 1966, translated in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Vol. XVIII, No. 38 (12 October 1966), p. 8.

85. *Ibid.* No. 47 (14 December 1966), p. 5.

86. "How a French authority sees U.S. role in Asia," *U.S. News and World Report*, 23 January 1967, p. 97.

Vietnam was a continuing and important subject of discussion at the talks. According to Kenneth Young, the Warsaw talks “at least implicitly set forth the extent of the interests and delimited the boundaries of the [Vietnam] conflict.”⁸⁷

In early 1967 the *Peking Review* responded to reports in the American, Soviet, French and Indian press that the United States and China had reached a “tacit understanding” on the Vietnam conflict.⁸⁸ The *Peking Review* disparaged such reports as rumours, nonsense and fabrications, and accused Washington, Moscow and New Delhi of conspiring together to try to divert world attention from the Vietnamese struggle and to undermine the “militant solidarity between the Chinese and the Vietnamese people.” Irrespective of such denials the mood and trend of policies emanating from Peking and Washington were towards accommodation rather than confrontation. Their mutual concern and interest in avoiding a clash over Vietnam led the policy-makers to establish self-imposed limits on their actions and to transmit this clearly to their rival counterparts through public pronouncements and private discussions.

This did not mean that Peking would not respond to an apparent American threat or confrontation but only that such a reaction would initially at least be restrained. In August 1967 at the height of the Chinese Cultural Revolution the United States stepped up the pace and extent of its bombing raids on North Vietnam. The self-imposed 25-mile buffer zone along the Sino-Vietnam border had been reduced to less than 10 miles.⁸⁹ The Chinese reacted to these developments with restraint and caution, but when two American planes overflew the Chinese border they were shot down by Chinese MiGs. The United States soon suspended such close air attacks.⁹⁰ According to Allen Whiting:

Both countries acted coolly throughout 1964–67. China risked war but avoided extreme provocation. The United States was not deterred from escalation against the North but took every precaution not to blunder into war with China. Korea remained a restraining memory for both sides.⁹¹

87. Young, *Negotiating with the Chinese Communists*, p. 275.

88. *Peking Review*, No. 7 (10 February 1967), pp. 30–31.

89. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. IV, pp. 197–201.

90. *Ibid.* and Allen Whiting, “How we almost went to war with China,” pp. 77–79.

91. Whiting, “How we almost went to war with China,” p. 79.