Chapter III

SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS AND THE ESCALATION OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM
Chapter III

Sino-American relations were thus quite hostile by the end of 1964. China's detonation of a bomb in October created a political and psychological climate detrimental to the development of any degree of warmth in the relations between the two.

The United States, however, declared publicly that it was not against improvement of relations with China. The first indication of this line of thinking in the US Administration came in a speech delivered by Rogers Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, on 13 December 1963. A remarkable point in his speech was his acceptance of China as an established fact. He nevertheless criticized China for its "outdated theories" and its "parochial nature". He noted China's suspicion of the outside world, which, he said, far exceeded "even that of the Soviet Union". He still advocated a hard-line policy towards China in view of his belief that the regime in China had no common ground with those whose ideal it did not share and that it had used hatred as an engine of national policy.

In spite of this gloomy picture of China, Hilsman saw certain evolutionary forces at work there. This justified an "open-door" policy towards China. He would not like the United States to shut the door against developments which might advance its national interests. He said:

We will not sow the dragon's seed to hate which may bear bitter fruit in future generations of China's millions. But neither will we betray our interests and those of our allies to appease the ambitions of Communist China's leaders. (2)

Another speech, a major one, which was significant in this context was a speech made by Senator J. W. Fulbright in the Senate on 24 March 1964. The American policy in the Far East, he said, was handicapped by the divergence of old myths and new realities. With respect to China and other areas, the United States had been committed to "inflexible policies of long standing". Under the circumstances then obtaining, he declared, there was no question of the United States either according recognition to Communist China or supporting Communist China's admission into the United Nations in view of the "implacable hostility" of China toward the United States. However, he did not believe that the "present state of affairs with respect to China" was permanent.

It is not impossible that in time our relations with China will change again, if not to friendship then to "competitive coexistence". It would therefore be an extremely useful thing if we could introduce an element of flexibility, or, more precisely, the capacity to be flexible, into our relations with Communist China. (3)

He said that, as recommended by Roger Hilsman, the United States should maintain an "open door" towards China. It must take account of certain realities about China that there was

2 Ibid.

only one China, mainland China, "ruled by communists and likely to remain so for the indefinite future". Fulbright argued that once this fact was accepted it would be possible "to reflect on the conditions under which it might be possible for us to enter into relatively normal relations with mainland China".

China too while still taking a very hard line was not totally unwilling to keep the door just a little open for further developments. Observers in Jen-min Jih-pao argued that the talk in the United States about the need to retain a measure of flexibility of policy towards China was a pretension. The United States had not opened "a door of friendship as desired by the Chinese and American peoples". The door had been closed "tight" by the U.S. Government.

Commenting on Fulbright's speech, a Jen-min Jih-pao correspondent said that it would be a myth to think that there were people among the imperialists who wanted turn over a new leaf.

On 20 June 1964 Foreign Minister Chen Yi said that the relations between the United States and China were under strain because of the U.S. policy of hostility towards China. Improvement of relations depended on the United States. If the United States gave up its occupation of Taiwan and withdrew its armed forces from Taiwan and from the Taiwan Straits area, relations would

4 Ibid., p. 40.


6 Ibid., no. 3193, 9 April 1964, p. 33.
improve. Chen Yi referred to the talk in the United States about adopting a realistic policy towards Communist China, and said that the United States was still in occupation of Taiwan and that there was no "fundamental change".

The talk in the United States about Communist China and the nature of relations that the United States should develop with that country and the reaction of the Communist Chinese leadership indicate that the mutual relations between the two countries continued to be hostile and that there was no immediate prospect of improvement of relations in view of the political climate that obtained at that time. There were large areas of misunderstanding. However, the door was kept open for the future. But the tensions were still very sharp and immediately developments at this stage continued to keep them at a high point, particularly because of misperceptions of each other's intentions.

The strain in the relations between the two countries was exacerbated with the escalation of the war in Vietnam. It would be our endeavour to show how the two countries misperceived the aims and intentions of each other and how these misperceptions became the basis of policies that brought both countries to a dead end both in regard to their mutual relations and in the matter of bringing peace to Vietnam. Indeed the misperceptions led to a disastrous escalation of the war in Vietnam and added to the bitterness of the hostility between China and the United States.

---

7 Ibid., no. 3245, 24 June 1964, p. 43.
In the view of the United States, the war in Vietnam was a war brought on by China's ambition to spread its influence in Southeast Asia and establish communism there. North Vietnam was under the direct influence of China, and it conducted the war in consultation with China. China was interested in defeating American power. It was still wedded to the Yenan philosophy of violence and sought to conquer Southeast Asia by force. Any success of the Communists in Vietnam would mean Chinese domination over Southeast Asia. In a speech at Baltimore President Lyndon B. Johnson of the United States expressed the view that China's aggressive appetite was insatiable and that if the United States retreated from one place, it would still be forced to fight in order to defend its position in another country.

General Wheeler projected a similar scenario, with the argument that "if South Vietnam was lost, Southeast Asia would be lost—not all at once, and not overnight—but eventually, one country after another would give way and look to Communist China as the rising power in the area".

The United States thus saw China as the villain of the piece in Southeast Asia. It exaggerated the threat posed by China.

---


11 Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (Delhi, 1973), p. 120.
in the light of the so-called domino theory, viz that failure to make a stand against communism in one place might lead inevitably to a series of failures. All the same, it is undeniable that the Americans saw a serious threat to their position unless they countered China in Vietnam.

The Americans were afraid that any Communist success would have far-reaching implications. Firstly, they perceived the struggle in Vietnam as China's struggle. They felt that if China won the war in Vietnam, it would result in loss of "freedom" not only in Vietnam but also in the United States. The US policy-makers used this fear extensively in their propaganda at home to justify US intervention in Vietnam. They thus linked US security to the survival of South Vietnam. They also linked the issue of the war to the credibility of the United States. If China should win, they pointed out, it would lead to a serious decline in US prestige. Thus, by extending the notion of US security to countries as far away as Vietnam and by evincing exaggerated concern for the maintenance of US power and position, the US policy-makers embarked upon wrong strategies as regards China.

The United States aimed at containing China by denying it victory in Vietnam. It sought to teach a lesson to China and North Vietnam, namely that adventurous policies on their part were too risky and would provoke unacceptable punishment. US officials openly said so on occasions like the Tonkin Gulf Incident (August 1964), the bombing of North Vietnam in February 1965, and the introduction of US ground forces in Vietnam in mid 1965.
Indeed, initially at any rate, US policy in Vietnam was primarily directed at China. The Pentagon papers reveal that the US objective was "not to 'help friend' but to contain China". This kind of misperception was the result of an exaggerated estimation of the Chinese role in Vietnam. It will be seen in the following pages that China's involvement in the Vietnam war was limited and that US officials misperceived the aim and extent of China's role in Vietnam right from the start.

The aim of the strategies that the United States employed in Vietnam was, as regards Peking, to prove the futility of use of military means. The United States also wanted to isolate China. It, however, failed to do so. Its strategies led only to a situation of "no victory and no defeat" in Vietnam. The policy of isolating China failed also for the reason that China already had extensive contacts with the world outside for diplomatic and trade purposes.

During the period of the escalation of the war in Vietnam the United States generally avoided negotiation on the Vietnam issue, for it felt that so long as China saw aggression paying dividends, it would not negotiate. It also feared that any negotiation with China from a position of weakness would strengthen China's commitment to the theory of national liberation and

13 China's role was exaggerated, see McLaughton draft, ibid., p. 367.
undermine the capacity of the countries of Southeast Asia to resist aggression. Yet another reason why the United States did not wish to negotiate was that it might give the impression that China had been able to stand its ground in spite of all the might of the United States. This might in its turn hinder the efforts of the United States to achieve a détente in its relations with the USSR and uphold the correctness of China's choice of a policy of national liberation for its dealings with the West as against a policy of peaceful co-existence. The United States also sought to justify its stand against negotiation on the ground of lack of readiness on the other side. It alleged that China was not willing to host any meaningful negotiations. Besides, it held that if negotiations were undertaken with the "aggressors", viz China and North Vietnam, it would give the impression that the aggressors were being rewarded for their aggression. Furthermore, if negotiations failed, it would have dangerous consequences. William J. Bundy even apprehended that Sino-American relations would never improve as the tendency towards moderation in Communist countries might disappear altogether.

It was thus obvious that in Washington's perception the main danger in Vietnam came from China's policies. A policy of containing China became the "logical" policy for the United States.

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., vol. 52, no. 1390, 10 March 1965, p. 713.
18 Ibid., vol. 52, no. 1357, 8 February 1965, p. 171.
However, as the Vietnam war expanded, the United States became increasingly disillusioned about the correctness of this policy. There was increasing questioning about Washington's earlier assessment of China's role, and slowly the China element in the Vietnam policy of the United States began withering away. This, however, took considerable time and continued with other developments kept Sino-US relation at a high level of hostility.

Chinese Perspectives

A number of factors influence the Chinese perspective on Vietnam. Of them, the international environment was one of the most important. With its conflict with the USSR escalating, China became even more of an anti-status quo Power. Initially it thought that it could force the United States to withdraw from Vietnam through the policy of national liberation and armed struggle. It regarded Vietnam as the most suitable ground for its confrontation by proxy with the United States.

As Vietnam was strategically located and the United States was pursuing policies intended to contain China, China had no choice but to oppose the United States in Vietnam. It felt that the Americans had shifted "the spearhead of their opposition from the Soviet Union to China" by "strengthening the control and enslavement of the countries and areas around China...."

China also saw its security endangered in Vietnam. It emphasized this point on several occasions. As early as March 1965, a Jen-min Jih-pao editorial argued that if the United States succeeded in occupying Vietnam, it would immediately proceed to occupy China. Early in 1965, China reacted with genuine concern to the US bombing of Vietnam in view of the geographical proximity of Vietnam. The relationship between China and Vietnam was often likened in Peking to the relationship between the "lips and the teeth".

In the initial stages of the conflict, China showed an exaggerated concern for its security in the face of the US military actions in Vietnam. This was due partly to a misperception of the nature of US involvement there.

As regards the strategy to be employed in the war against the United States also, China suffered from a misperception. China initially nursed illusions about the possibility of achieving success with its strategy of "people's war". It also underestimated the determination of the Americans to hold on to Vietnam. It, therefore, thought of deterring the Americans through threats of intervention, but failed to make any impression.

Since China chose "people's war" as a major instrument to be used in its struggle with the United States, it is necessary

---


to discuss this aspect here in some detail.

The Politico-Ideological Aspect: China's Support for People’s War

On 2 September 1965, during a crucial phase in the war in Vietnam, Lin Piao published his famous article "Long Live Victory of the People's War". This made it clear that China intended to apply the concept of people's war in Vietnam. China's intentions became further suspect in Washington. Often there was confusion even in well-informed circles about China's foreign-policy objectives. Let us, therefore, examine the concept of people's war as propounded by Lin Piao before discussing its implications.

Lin Piao underlined the universal validity of the concept of "people's war" in the fight against imperialism. He regarded the United States as the chief spokesman of imperialism and as the most notorious among the powers that oppressed the various peoples of the world, "encroached upon their sovereignty, and interfered in their internal affairs". He, therefore, declared that "every people and country that wanted revolution, independence, and peace cannot but direct the spearhead of its attack against imperialism".

Lin stated that the only available instrument to fight imperialism was Mao's theory of "people's war". He underlined


23 Ibid., p. 90.
Mao's view on the inevitability of the use of violence for the seizure of power, the view that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun", he took that as the starting-point for his own plan for the implementation of the theory of "people's war", and said that the issue of liberation of peoples from imperialistic exploitation should be settled once for all by war. War waged for such a purpose, he said, was "the central task and the highest form of revolution".

According to Lin Piao, in a "people's war" the victory of the people was inevitable. The masses themselves participated in this war. The "reactionary classes" opposed the war. In effect they opposed the "truth" or the just cause which the masses represented. Defeat of the "reactionary classes" was hence inevitable. It is significant to note Lin's reference to Mao's theory of "people's war" as particularly applicable to Asia, Africa, and Latin America, areas with situations similar to China's. Those areas, Lin declared, constituted the "rural areas of the world" encircling the cities of the world comprised of North America and Western Europe.

Lin reiterated Mao's view that in spite of its apparent strength, the United States was not strong enough. The secret of this paradox, according to him, was the insufficiency of its human and financial resources for the fulfilment of its ambition

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 91.
26 Ibid.
for world domination. By its very aggression the United States had put "a noose around its own neck", because it was encircled by the peoples of the world. 27

For several reasons China championed the cause of the "people's war". One important reason was the feeling that only a "tit-for-tat" struggle against the United States would help check its aggressive impulses. In view of the international situation then prevailing and its own inevitable position as an anti-status quo Power, China saw no alternative to a policy of struggle against the United States.

Another reason was China's desire to enlist the support of the Asian-African countries against the US involvement in the Vietnam war. China stressed that the cause for which Vietnam was fighting was actually also the cause of all the oppressed nations. It used the concept of "contradictions" between the United States and the oppressed countries in order to isolate the United States in the world opinion.

Yet another reason was the need to bolster up the morale of the Vietnamese people, who were pitted against the vastly superior military strength of the United States. Peking argued that the course of history was not determined by weapons, however sophisticated, but by the quality of the people involved. The

27 Ibid., p. 101.


mobilization of the masses was possible only in a "people's war". Such a mobilization the "counter-revolutionary" forces were incapable of achieving. Hence, in spite of difficulties and temporary reverses, a "people's war" invariably resulted in the victory of the people. Peking also tried to belittle the effectiveness of nuclear weapons possessed by the United States. It argued that the moral aspect of a struggle always prevailed over the military aspect.

We have said that China's policy towards the United States was based on certain misperceptions. In saying it is not our intention to suggest that by supporting "people's war" China took its stand wholly on ideology. It is, however, a fact that China used ideology as an instrument for the realization of its basic goal as a state. At times, as during the Vietnam crisis, its use of ideology as an instrument was prompted by misperceptions of its intentions and policies. As we have seen already, China's basic policy was determined by its situation as an anti-status quo Power for the realization of important foreign-policy goals like securing admission in the United Nations, liberation of Taiwan, etc. As the United States was able to checkmate its moves, China found no alternative but to fall back on ideology and use it to force the United States to retreat. However, China's calculations went wrong. Its posture

as a state committed to revolution enabled the United States to canvass wide publicity for its portrait of China as an aggressive power. China's misperception as regards the success of its ideological weapon proved costly. Its very security lay exposed to danger for a prolonged period. Also the achievement of some of the main goals in its external affairs like admission in the United Nations was delayed. It can, of course, be argued that if China had projected itself differently, with the focus sharply on the achievement of its interests, much of what happened in the countries on its periphery could have been avoided. China's national interests were well defined. It went wrong only in its choice of the then ideological strategy as an instrument for the realization of its national interests. This mistake in its turn stemmed from its misperception of the proportions of the role and activities of the anti-Chinese lobby in world affairs headed by the United States.

II - Sino-American Confrontation in Vietnam

As stated before, there was much misunderstanding between China and the United States regarding each other. Each devised strategies to bring about the other's defeat in Vietnam, which both considered as the decisive arena of confrontation. American involvement in Vietnam dates back to the mid fifties. It was only in the changing perspectives that the Americans saw China as constituting the main danger to their interests and felt it necessary to defeat Vietnam to frustrate China's "ambitions".
Having identified China as the main threat, the United States took steps in the direction of involving itself massively in Vietnam. In March 1964 the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maxwell Taylor, visited South Vietnam, and suggested that the United States should furnish assistance and support for as long as time as might be required to bring the Communists under control. On 22 May 1964 the U.S. Secretary of State disclosed that the United States wanted to strengthen the South Vietnamese air force and that the U.S. President had asked the Congress to appropriate (US) $500 million in military assistance to South Vietnam in the budget request for 1965. A high-level conference of American officials was held in June 1965. This conference endorsed the measures proposed to be taken in Vietnam on the highest priority and worked out the details. U.S. officials generally saw China as the main threat. They emphasized that the United States should seek to meet China head-on instead of allowing itself to be forced out of Southeast Asia through Chinese militancy. Thus, a misperception of China's aims and objectives in Southeast Asia led to the devising of strategies aimed at containing China in Vietnam.

33 Ibid., vol. 50, no. 1293, 3 April 1964, p. 522.
34 Ibid., vol. 50, no. 1380, 8 June 1964, p. 397.
35 Times of India (New Delhi), 24 June 1964.
China recognized that it was the main target of US strategies. Accordingly it condemned US plans in Vietnam. It viewed Southeast Asia as one of the key areas in US strategy and as a focal point in the US scheme of aggression in Asia. It saw in US involvement in Vietnam an "undeclared war" initiated by the United States. It criticized the "flexible response strategy" of the United States and compared it to the "massive retaliation strategy" of Eisenhower. In its view both the strategies were strategies of repression. In an editorial Jen-min Jih-pao highlighted the danger inherent in the internalization of the war in Vietnam, and warned that China "cannot remain indifferent to the grave steps taken by the US". In another editorial Jen-min Jih-pao accused the USA of being "unbridled in its hostile activities against the Chinese people". It also expressed concern at the alleged violation of China's air space, frequent visits of US officials to Taiwan, and US war threats.

In July 1964, on the eve of the Tonkin Gulf Incident, a statement issued on behalf of the Government of China denounced

36 Commentary, Ta-hung pao (Hong Kong), 14 April 1964. See also Survey of China Mainland Magazines (Hong Kong), no. 296, 19 April 1963, p. 30.

37 See the Chinese Minister's reply to the Foreign Minister of North Vietnam, 11 September 1963. See SCMP, no. 3035, 23 October 1963, p. 31.

38 Hsu Yung Ying in Shih-Chien Chih-shih (Peking), no. 24, 25 December 1963. See also SCMP, no. 401, 27 January 1964, p. 2.


the US role in Vietnam, and stated:

Despite the fact that the United States has introduced tens of thousands of its military personnel into southern Vietnam and Laos, China has not sent a single soldier to Indo-China. However, there is a limit to everything. The United States would be wrong if it should think that it can do whatever it pleases in Vietnam and Indo-China with impunity. We would frankly tell the United States: the Chinese people will by no means sit idly by while the United States extends its war of aggression in Vietnam and Indo-China. (41)

This statement reflected an aggravation of the situation in Vietnam and the serious repercussions witnessed in Sino-American relations. However, there was no indication as to the course of action China wanted to follow. The above statement only extended verbal support to Vietnam.

The Tonkin Gulf Incident

As the United States became increasingly involved in Vietnam, China's concern mounted. In August 1964 a serious incident took place in the Gulf of Tonkin which marked the commencement of a major period of hostility in Sino-American relations.

Two versions are available of the incident. According to the American version, on 2 August 1964, while the US destroyer Maddox was patrolling, it was fired upon by the North Vietnamese patrol boats. On 4 August, there was another attack. The United States retaliated. On 5 August, President Johnson asked for a Congressional resolution in support of what he called retaliatory actions called for against North Vietnam. A resolution

passed by Congress on 7 August vested in the President a lot of constitutional powers to deal with the situation in Vietnam.

The Chinese version entirely blame the United States and alleged that the US President's statement was a fabrication. According to China, the United States first intruded the air space of North Vietnam on 1 August. Later it sent warships and carried out provocative manoeuvres against North Vietnam. All that North Vietnam did was only by way of retaliation.

We now know on the basis of the secret papers that from about six months prior to the Tonkin Gulf Incident the US Government had been mounting clandestine military attacks against North Vietnam to get a Congressional resolution passed. The incident was used to secure the passage of a suitable resolution which had been carefully drawn up weeks earlier and kept ready. It was all part of the a kind of "provocation strategy". Even after the incident the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Assistant Secretary of State McNaughton recommended continued use of such a strategy.

China's reaction to the incident was expectedly very sharp. It was especially exercised by the frequent US statements to the effect that its actions in Vietnam were intended to contain China. In an editorial on 7 August Jen-min Jih-pao criticized the US.

---


44 Sheehan, n. 12, pp. 244-8.
action in Vietnam as a desperate one intended to facilitate the re-election of Lyndon Johnson in the forthcoming Presidential election, as also to involve US allies in the war. In another editorial, on 8 August, it characterized the US action as premeditated.

Though a showdown was avoided in the Gulf of Tonkin, China continued to express its concern at the continued deployment of US forces in Southeast Asia and the concentration of a large number of warships and aircraft in the South China Sea and in the vicinity of Vietnam. Chen Yi alleged on 17 August that Johnson was following a policy of war. He said that even John Foster Dulles had been content with "playing brinkmanship."

In September there was an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin. According to the US version, North Vietnamese patrol boats had attacked certain US warships and that the US ships had only retaliated. The United States stated that its warships had fired on the basis of what they saw on the radar screens. China criticized it as a fabricated incident, and said that the whole US purpose was to create a pretext for acts of war against North Vietnam.

48 SCKT, no. 3681, 20 August 1964, p. 37.
The most major event intensifying the bitterness in Sino-US relations was the air bombing of North Vietnam on 7 February 1965. The decision to bomb North Vietnam was made, according to the Pentagon papers, long before the grave step was actually taken. The papers also reveal the aims of the planning and the objectives of the bombing.

The papers reveal that the Johnson administration reached a "general consensus" at a White House strategy meeting on 7 September 1964 to launch air operations against North Vietnam. On 13 August Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, had cabled from Saigon that the Vietcong guerrillas could not be defeated, that the Saigon Government was using just ordinary counter-guerrilla methods inside South Vietnam, and that it was necessary to bomb North Vietnam with 1 January 1965 as "a target D-day". On 20 August, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had also submitted a memorandum to Secretary McNamara supporting air action.

At the White House meeting held on 7 September 1965 the US President ordered a number of measures which included the decision to bomb North Vietnam. The "provocation strategy" of the Tonkin Gulf type was also considered at the meeting.

The Pentagon study says that the way Johnson was re-elected President a meeting was held. The purpose was to decide on some action on the pattern of the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

50 Sheehan, n. 10, pp. 312-15.
51 For the Willing Bundy draft on "Handling World and Public Opinion", ibid., p. 53.
Different other types of action were also considered, but the final decision was to undertake bombing of North Vietnam.

The decision of the United States to bomb North Vietnam was a major event which further intensified Sino-American hostility. By this time its misperception of China was so deep that it had no time for second thoughts as to its real objectives and the strategies needed to achieve them. The Administration did not undertake military operations against the North partly for fear of incurring public displeasure.

After taking the decision to bomb North Vietnam the US Administration waited for what the Pentagon Papers refer to as "D-day". On 7 February 1965, following an attack by the Vietcong on the US military advisers' compound at Plakhu, this long-awaited "D-day" came, enabling the US Administration to make an "appropriate and fitting" response. According to an analyst of the Pentagon papers, Neil Sheehan, this response, which it code-named "Flaming Dart", transformed the character of the Vietnam War, as also that of the US role in it. The White House announced

52 Ibid., p. 345. According to Sheehan, the different options considered included the question of withdrawal and fall-back positions which were rejected in favour of action against the North. It was a question of time prevented by (a) the shakiness of the Saigon Government; (b) a wish to hold the line militarily and diplomatically in Laos; (c) the need to design whatever actions were to be taken so as to achieve maximum public and Congressional support, and (g) the implicit belief that military operations against North Vietnam at that time might bring pressures for premature negotiations.

53 Ibid., p. 362.
on 7 February 1965 that it had asked South Vietnamese "air elements" to launch retaliatory attacks against barracks and staging areas in the southern parts of North Vietnam. It justified this action on the ground of Hanoi's role in training in Vietcong personnel and facilitating their infiltration into South Vietnam. It added that it would seek "no wider war" if North Vietnam stopped the infiltration of its personnel into South Vietnam.

On 11 February, the US President ordered a heavier air attack, code-named "Flaming Part II". He justified the action in view of the increased killing of US and South Vietnamese personnel in ambushes and attacks by Vietcong guerrillas. He reiterated his anxiety not to spread the conflict any further.

The New York Times maintained in an editorial that the war had entered upon a new stage and that the United States was approaching a point where there was a strong possibility of its coming to a major engagement with North Vietnam. James Reston, commenting in the New York Times, emphasized the possibility of a confrontation between the United States and China in the event of continued bombing.

After the air attacks on 8 and 11 February the United States decided to launch a sustained air war against North Vietnam under the code name "Operation Rolling Thunder". This decision left no

54 Schlesinger, n. 9, p. 491-2.
55 White House statement of 11 February 1965, ibid., p. 492.
room for negotiations. It was assumed that the war would continue for a prolonged period without any major escalation. As for the role of China, it was felt that China would not start air operations though it might supply air defence equipment to North Vietnam.

The United States did not visualize that China would play the role of a "proxy" in Vietnam. Although China took care to keep its involvement limited, all US strategies in Vietnam were aimed at containing China. This clearly was due to a wrong view of China's role: the United States was fighting an enemy in Vietnam who was not all there.

China was only mounting verbal attacks on the United States. In spite of US involvement in a big way, China was not in favour of participating in the war directly. Mao told Edgar Snow subsequently that China was not considering any step to intervene in Vietnam at that time. He said that China was not expecting an American attack on itself and that, in the absence of such a grave step on the part of the United States, China had no plans directly to intervene in Vietnam. China confined itself advisedly to making verbal protests only. Of course, a statement issued on behalf of the Government of China on 1 February 1965 expressed the view that China's security was at stake in Vietnam in view of the

58 Edgar Snow, The Long Revolution (London, 1973). One can argue on the basis of Mao's observation that China felt no need to support Vietnam; for, as Mao observed, China was "busy" in its own internal affairs. Also, China thought North Vietnam capable of fighting its own battles. Ibid., pp. 215-16.
geographical location of China and Vietnam, a location making the two countries as close as the "lips and the teeth". China also declared that it would consider any aggression on Vietnam as an aggression on itself and that it would not "stand idly by" and was "well prepared" for any eventuality. It warned that it was "in battle array". And yet it did not intend any direct participation in the war. It only wished to notify Washington that it should not expand the war beyond acceptable limits, as well as to derive propaganda advantage.

On 8 and 9 March US marines landed at Danang. China protested, saying that the step was a violation of the Geneva Agreements. It argued that although the United States was pretending that it was acting in Vietnam in an advisory capacity, the dispatch of marines and unmasked its pretensions.

Meanwhile the war acquired serious proportions. The United States involved itself massively in Vietnam. Although China was clearly avoiding direct participation in the war, the United States continued to look upon China as an aggressive power. This added to the bitterness in Sino-US relations.

**American Justification of the War and Chinese Statements**

Air actions were intensified, and a secret decision was made to wage ground war as well. The US Administration tried to

---

59 SCHR, no. 3386, 11 February 1965, pp. 34-35.


justify its actions in Vietnam not only with a view to avoiding possible international pressure to negotiate but also for the purpose of building up public opinion at home in its own favour. There was much confusion among the people in the United States itself as regards the justifiability and advisability of getting involved in a long-drawn war in Vietnam.

On 27 February 1965 the U. State Department published a white paper. The idea was to show that North Vietnam had committed aggression on South Vietnam and to advance a legal justification for its own actions. The US Administration maintained that these who constituted the hard core of the Communist forces attacking South Vietnam had all been trained in the North and that they were operating in the South under the direction of Hanoi. It alleged that Hanoi regularly sent them ammunition and other supplies. It also referred to the "overall direction" by which the Communists in North Vietnam had established "an extensive machine, both political and military, for carrying out the war against South Vietnam". It declared that all these actions allegedly committed by North Vietnam were in violation of international law and international agreements, in particular the Geneva Accords of 1954 and the Agreement on Laos. It charged that Hanoi's aggression once, covert and indirect, had now turned into an "open, armed aggression" carried out across the internationally agreed demarcation line of 1954 between North and South Vietnam, and across international frontiers between Vietnam

---

62 Senate, Committee of Foreign Relations, Background Information relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam (Washington, D.C., 1965), shr. 4, p. 148.
and Laos. It said that the actions of North Vietnam violated the UN Charter as well. It thus argued that the actions it was taking were fully justified and were defensive in character. It also reserved to itself the right of continued air action until Hanoi decided to limit its intervention or until the United Nations took effective steps to restore peace and freedom in the area.

China sharply reacted to this justification advanced by the United States. A Government of China statement issued on 4 March 1965 charged the United States itself with violating the Geneva Agreements of 1954. It referred to the unpopular rule in South Vietnam, and said that in view of the unpopularity of the Saigon Government, the armed struggle in South Vietnam could by no means be called a campaign waged by Hanoi. The struggle, it declared, was due entirely to the suppression of the people of South Vietnam.

A Jen-min Jih-pao editorial of the same day maintained that the US purpose in Vietnam was "to perpetuate and legalize its aggressive attacks".

Another Government statement, on 9 March, warned the United States that if it involved itself further by introducing ground forces, it would make its own position more precarious.

China noted that the escalation of the bombing was related to the publication of the White Paper. An editorial in Ta-Kung Pao

63 Ibid., pp. 148-51.
64 SCMP, no. 3412, 9 March 1965, p. 35.
65 SCMP, no. 3411, 8 March 1965, p. 35.
pointed out how, three days after the publication of the White paper, the United States had bombed North Vietnam. It ridiculed the United States for seeking to justify its actions on the ground of self-defence. "In a place thousands of miles away, the United States has gradually escalated its aggressive war, spread the war flames step by step from South Vietnam to North and carried out bombing far into the interior of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. If this can be called self-defence, what then is aggression?"

Inevitably, the escalation of the war by the United States sharpened the hostility between China and the United States. However, as before, in spite of its scathing criticism of the United States, China gave no indication of any intention on its part for direct involvement in the Vietnam War.

Besides the arguments offered by the White Paper in justification of the war in Vietnam, the US President, Lyndon Johnson, gave his own reasons for the US actions in Vietnam in a speech at Baltimore in April 1965. He tried to convince the American people of the need not only to fight in Vietnam against the "aggression" of Hanoi but also to resist China's attempts to cast its shadow over Vietnam:

Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India, and which has been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea. It is a

---

67 Editorial, Ta kung-pao, 5 March 1965. See also Sino-P., no. 3413, 10 March 1965, p. 39.
nation which is helping the forces of violence
almost in every continent. The contest in Vietnam
is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes. (68)

President Johnson also justified American bombing on the
ground of North Vietnamese attacks on South Vietnam. He declared
that the goals that the United States had set before itself had not
been changed as a result of the air action. The air action itself
was something that was required to realize US goals as defined
before. Johnson maintained that the United States was interested
in negotiations and that it was ready for unconditional discussions.

China ruled out unconditional discussions. A Jih-min
Jih-gao editorial on 21 April 1965 said that any negotiations
with the United States, conditional or unconditional, would amount
to acceptance of the US occupation of South Vietnam. As before,
China ruled out any possibility of peace as long as the United
States occupied Vietnam.

The Ground War and China's Perception of the Situation

President Johnson's decision to launch the ground war on
1 April 1965 marks the commencement of the third phase of US in-
volveinent in Vietnam according to the analysts of the Pentagon
Papers. There was intense debate in the Pentagon on this subject,
the consensus being that the only alternative to ground war was

68 Department of State Bulletin, vol. 52, no. 1343,
28 April 1965, p. 627.
69 Ibid., p. 600-10.
70 JPUS Communist China Digest, no. 151, 20 July 1965,
pp. 19-20.
71 Sheehan, n.13, p. 383. Also see Order Increasing Ground
Force and Shifting Mission, ibid., pp. 442-3.
US withdrawal from Vietnam, a proposition utterly unacceptable to
the Pentagon. Then, on 8 June, the US State Department announced
that the military commander in South Vietnam had been given the
necessary authority to use US troops to repel aggression. This
fateful decision was related to the offensives mounted by the
Vietcong earlier.

The first major ground operation was carried out from
27 to 30 June 1965. It was intended to convince Hanoi that it was
not winning. In an interview on 6 August 1965, Robert McNamara
explained that the US decision was designed to prove to the North
Vietnamese that they could not win in the South.

In view of the unanticipated build-up by the Vietcong,
General Westmoreland, Commander in Vietnam, requested more troops.
Accordingly the strength of the US forces was raised from a total
of 175,000 men in June 1965 to 275,000 men in July. President
Johnson's approval for thus raising the strength of the US forces
was not, however, made public. The expansion of the war continued.
American military commanders felt confident about defeating the
Vietcong by applying the strategy of "search and destroy". Indeed
General Westmoreland forecast that the Vietcong would be defeated
"by the end of 1967". In Johnson's view the crucial question

72 Ibid., p. 383.
73 The Times (London), 8 June 1965.
75 See analysis by Fox Butterfield, in Sheehan, n. 12, p. 459.
76 Ibid., p. 452.
related to the use of substantial ground forces to prevent the
loss of that region to the Communists. According to McNamara,
three alternatives were considered: (i) cutting the losses in
Vietnam and withdrawing; (ii) continuing at the existing level;
and (iii) expanding promptly and substantially. The third alter-
native was finally accepted.

By November the picture was changing and there was growing
disillusionment in Washington about this strategy. On
30 November, Secretary McNamara wrote a memorandum to the President
expressing doubt about the usefulness of the ground war. Yet he
supported expansion of the troops to a total of 400,000 men in
Vietnam by the end of 1965. In the meantime vigorous attacks on
North Vietnam continued; the number of sorties was increased from
900 a week during July to 1,500 in December 1965. Whereas the
original purpose was "to break the will of North Vietnam", now it
included the need to cut the flow of men and supplies from the
north to the South.

Simultaneously the United States kept up its stance that
it was ready to negotiate. On 28 July 1965 Johnson openly declared
that he was ready "to move from the battlefield to the conference
table". On 9 December he again expressed the desire to take
evory possible step to settle the issue peacefully before taking

77 Johnson, n. 11, pp. 144-5.
78 See Sheehan, n. 12,
79 See analysis by Fox Butterfield, ibid., p. 468.
80 Department of State Bulletin, vol. 53, no. 1364,
16 August 1965, p. 264.
other, hard steps. He regretted that Hanoi had not cared to accept his offer to talk. He also noted with sorrow that Peking, too, had failed to respond.

Before we discuss the Chinese reaction to the American ground war, let us consider the differences among China's rulers as to the best strategy to face the American escalation of the war in Vietnam. There is now no doubt that the Chinese leadership was divided. The group opposed to Mao's thinking took US escalation of the war in Vietnam extremely seriously as a threat to China's security. One of its spokesmen, General Lo Jui-ch'ing, saw a real possibility of the Vietnam war being extended to China. He, therefore, pleaded for "effective preparations" against such a war. In his view there was "a world of difference" between a war with preparations and a war without preparations. He did not want to be caught unawares by a sudden US attack on its territory. Hence he supported the concept of "active defence".

The Maoists on the contrary ruled out entirely the possibility of the United States involving itself in a land war with China.

As regards strategy, the Maoists wanted politics to be in command. In their view, even an ill-equipped but politically-conscious army could defeat a more powerful "reactionary" one.

---

61 Ibid., no. 1388, 27 December 1965, p. 1014.
62 Lo Jui-ch'ing, "Commemorate the Victory over German Fascism - Carry the Struggle through to the End", News from Hainhua News Agency, 11 May 1965, Supplement, p. 3.
63 Ibid., p. 4.
64 Ibid., pp. 3-7.
Lin Piao championed this view in his article, "Long Live Victory of the People's War" published on 3 September 1965. Lo Jui-ch'ing did not neglect the importance of politics, but stressed the need for a professionalisation of the army. He wanted the army to be well-equipped in modern techniques of war. He also devised strategies that might help in countering any US attack.

Yet another point of difference between the Maoists and his opponents related to the question of modernization. Those who held views opposed to those of Mao on this question wanted to mend fences with the Soviet Union so that the two great Communist countries might work together in Vietnam. They thought that they might learn certain modern techniques of warfare from the Soviet Union, techniques which they had not yet developed or perfected. Lo Jui-ch'ing declared that "on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism", the U.S.A. and China should "fight shoulder-to-shoulder against our common enemy, i.e., imperialism". In contrast the Maoists ruled out altogether any kind of "concerted action" with the Soviet Union. They regarded the Soviet Union as an enemy no less than the United States, and hence they argued that there should be no let-up in the campaign against Moscow.

---

86 Lin Piao, "Long Live Victory of the People's War", n. 22.
87 Lo Jui-ch'ing, n. 82, p. 14.
In the event the views of the Maoists prevailed.

Although the policy-makers in Peking saw the seriousness of the threat to their country's security, they did not take a desperate view of it like Lo Ju-l-ch'ing. To be sure, they criticized the American ground war, but they did not apprehend a sudden American attack on the Chinese mainland. They naturally reacted sharply to the US decision to send combat troops, and in the public statement issued on behalf of the Government of China they equated it with an open declaration of war. And yet it is significant that they confined their reaction to verbal criticism.

From July 1965 onwards there were repeated bombing of targets in North Vietnam by US planes. Some of these even intruded into China's airspace. China denounced the US doings in harsh language. On 11 July a report put out by the New China News Agency (C.CNA) alleged "direct military provocation" over the area of Hokow in the Yunnan Province of China. An editorial in Jen-min Jih-pao of 11 July 1965 characterized US intrusions as "calculated and premeditated war provocations", as "dangerous steps" on the path of the US escalation of the war. It warned: "We have taken into full account the madness of US imperialism and made all preparations to meet its adventurous plans. The Chinese people's liberation army is in battle array. We will not attack unless we are attacked; if we are attacked, we will certainly counter-attack".

The above statement reflected China's growing concern over its national security, although China made it clear at the same time that it would take only defensive actions. The United States had already started its ground war, and China did feel troubled lest the US involvement in Vietnam should eventually escalate into a full-scale war on the Chinese mainland, whether by accident or by design. The Maoists believed that there was no need for a war between China and the United States and that sheer common sense would deter the two nations from taking a collision course. The Maoist misperception of US intentions had diminished somewhat, and Mao was far more concerned about the conflict with Moscow. From this time onwards, therefore, China made it fairly apparent by its words and deeds that it would not intervene so long as the United States exercised restraint and respected Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity.

That China's language should acquire increasing acerbity with each attempt by the United States to escalate the war as only natural. When US President Johnson decided to send additional troops on 28 July 1965 for the war in Vietnam, China accused the United States of playing with fire. It also promised to further extend its support to North Vietnam. The promise, however, was more an indication of China's anxiety for its own security than of its readiness for an open war with the United States. Indeed, in spite of its sense of concern over its security, it took care to avoid provoking the United States. Chinese policy towards

---

92 Ibid., no. 3515, 11 August 1965, pp. 30-33.
Vietnam did show a change—in that China did not want to involve itself in the war if only the United States would avoid taking any overt action against China itself.

On 20 November the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement supporting the struggle of the people in Vietnam. It predicted that US policy in Vietnam was doomed to failure. China also criticized events like the visit of McNamara to Vietnam. Reporting on his plans, a commentator in Jen-min Jih-pao vehemently criticized the United States for extending the war in South Vietnam.

Not only did China oppose the gradually deepening involvement of the United States, but it also came down heavily on the US "peace talks". It stated that these talks were intended to be used for the purpose of blackmail. In its view the opinion of the Vietnamese people was crucial for any settlement of the issue of Vietnam. China's opposition to the US "peace talks" seemed to have been guided by the military situation in Vietnam and by certain political factors. Above all, China was still not quite certain as regards US intentions and plans in Vietnam.

US Bombing Halt and China

The United States decided to halt the bombing of targets in North Vietnam from 24 November 1965 to 31 January 1966 and informed

---

93 Ibid., no. 3589, 2 December 1965, pp. 37-38.
94 Ibid., no. 3591, 6 December 1965, pp. 28-29.
96 SCMP, no. 3506, 28 July 1965, p. 31.
the North Vietnamese Ambassador in Saigon accordingly. The pentagon papers reveal that the purpose behind a bombing pause was to clear the way "for an increase in the tempo of the air war in the absence of a satisfactory solution from Hanoi". Johnson and his advisers were sure that Hanoi rebuff their diplomatic initiative, for the conditions they had laid down for the bombing pause were tougher than Hanoi could accept with a good face. Everybody, therefore, would start bombing again. Meanwhile the open offer to stop bombing would act as a pressure on Hanoi to respond to the US plan for "peace talks".

On 5 January, an editorial note in Jen-min Jih-pao maintained that "the previous performance of the US showed that the bombing pause was the second phase of its 'counter-revolutionary dual tactics'". Elaborating this further, it pointed out how the United States was having setbacks in the battlefield, and how it was using the bait of "peace talks" to save its own face. If the peace talks failed, the United States would gain and excellent pretext for expanding the war. Furthermore, whenever it wanted to expand war a little further, the United States first used the "trick" of peace gestures.

China criticized the United States for its 14-point formula, which, it said, was full of contradictions. It argued that the

97  Sheehan, n. 12, p. 471.
98  Ibid., p. 471.
99  Ibid., pp. 470-1.
100  Ibid., no. 3610, 10 January 1966, p. 43.
101  Ibid.
very first point in the formula contradicted all other points. By way of expansion it pointed out how the first point made the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962 the "basis" for negotiations without preconditions. How could that happen when the Accords had themselves not been fulfilled? Johnson, China declared, had given many indications of his mind as regards the Geneva Agreements. It was no secret that he had no intention to honour the Geneva Agreements. The US proposals were, therefore, a prelude to war - "a means to be used when applicable, given up when it is not and taken up again when it is convenient".

China thus used all the old, familiar arguments with a view to exposing US policies. It did not believe that the United States was serious about arriving at a solution through negotiations. In the absence of any clear idea as regards the US position, China thought that it would be best for it to keep up the tempo of its propaganda war against the United States. It is necessary to state here that by this time it had gradually become evident that the war in Vietnam was not "China's war" and that North Vietnam was an independent factor in its own right. Although China and the United States continued to criticize each other, many of the misperceptions underlying their bitter relations were giving way to somewhat clearer understanding of the nature of the problem.

Assumptions of Bombing and China

The United States resumed its bombing on 31 January 1965.
Hanoi and Peking had, by their rebuff to his proposal for talks, left him with no alternative. Though bombing was thus resumed, there was disillusionment in US circles. At the Honolulu Conference held in February, Johnson reiterated the US resolve to continue to fight in Vietnam. He availed himself of the opportunity afforded by the conference to consult the leaders of South Vietnam. His purpose was to justify to the US public the policies he was pursuing in Vietnam. On 8 February 1966 the United States and South Vietnam signed a communiqué pledging to fight aggression in Vietnam.

China reacted by claiming that what had happened at the Honolulu Conference had shown how the US talk of "peace talks" had been a fraud. It also reiterated its public position, viz that Johnson's consultations in Honolulu were a desperate effort to save the situation. It argued that the Government of South Vietnam was a puppet regime only and that the National Liberation Front was the true representative of the Vietnamese people.

China said that the United States had not learnt any lesson from its debacle in Korea. The Supreme Commander of the US forces in Korea, Matthew B. Ridgway, had admirably summed up Korea's
lesson for the United States, viz that the United States should not involve itself in any land war on the mainland of Asia, and had on that ground opposed US participation in the Indo-China war of 1965. China regretted that neither President Johnson nor others had cared to learn any lesson from Korea. They were repeating the same mistake in Vietnam.

**Frank Statements on War and Relations**

Although the United States continued to appeal for "peace talks" simultaneously with waging war in Indo-China, both China and the United States gave sufficient indication that each wanted to avoid a war with the other. China in its statements criticized the widespread speculation in the United States on the possibility of a Sino-American war. Obviously to make its position clear and to reduce the risk of war, Peking declared that although it was prepared for war, it issued statements, not to threaten, but to clarify its exact position. One such statement was the four-point statement made by Chou En-lai on 10 April 1966. The first point that Chou made was that his country would not "take the initiative to provoke a war with the United States". He pointed out although the United States had occupied Taiwan, China was still trying its best to solve the Taiwan issue through negotiation. Chou's second point was a unilateral declaration that his country would extend "support" and "help" if countries in Asia and Africa faced US aggression. The third and fourth points dealt with the dangerous

consequences that would follow if the United States imposed a war on China. In the event of such a war, Chou warned, the United States would not be able to "pull out" of China. Referring to the plan of the U.S. strategists to rely "on their air and naval superiority" while avoiding a ground war, he declared that, the United States would not be able to avoid a ground war. Thus, while warning of dangerous consequences in the event of the United States imposing a war on China, Chou made it clear in his statement that China would not be the first to start a war. Indeed, if we read between the lines, Chou's statement reflected China's desire to avoid a war with the United States.

The United States bombed Hanoi and Haiphong in July 1966. Its purpose clearly was to break the will of North Vietnam without provoking China. In its public statements it argued that as petroleum products were one of the important items in North Vietnam's aid to the South, it had decided to hit the oil depots around Hanoi and Haiphong. Thus, in its statements in this period the United States gave a clear hint of this shift in its thinking. Its misperception of China as the aggressive Power had been greatly modified.

China's statements also showed a change in its perception of the USA. The language now was vastly less provocative. China spoke only in terms of "aid" and "support" for beleaguered Vietnam in its terrible confrontation with the United States. It placed

---

109 *Peking Review*, vol. 8, no. 20, 13 May 1963, p. 5.
110 Ibid.
emphasis on the fraternal ties between itself and Vietnam rather than on the hostility of the USA towards itself. No doubt Chou En-lai still made it a point to declare that "whatever the risk and whatever the price, we are determined to support the fraternal Vietnamese people", but the statement had an unmistakably defensive ring about it. Indeed this was true of all statements coming out of Peking. Even Liu Shao-chi's statement that "the Chinese people" had made "every preparation" to take "such action" as the "people of China and Vietnam" might deem necessary, was deliberately vague and involved no obligation on the part of Peking to enter the land war in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Thus, much of the misunderstanding in Sino-US relations was due to misperceptions in the earlier stages of the confrontation. Neither China nor the United States succeeded in achieving its objectives. This made them both take a second look at the whole situation.

The conflict between China and the United States became sharper with the Tonkin Gulf Incident in August 1964. At first the United States acted in an advisory capacity and then directly involved itself in Vietnam by sending its ground forces to fight there. China, however, confined itself to verbal criticism of the United States and refrained from being drawn directly

113 SCMP, no. 3737, 13 July 1963, p. 41.
114 ibid., no. 3747, 27 July 1963, p. 27.
into the war. This made Washington realize that China's involvement was limited and that its earlier perception of China as an aggressive state fighting a war through proxy in Vietnam was mistaken. Hence it gradually stopped referring to China as the main enemy and concentrated its ire on North Vietnam for committing "aggression" in the South.

As the conflict progressed, both China and the United States realized the dangers inherent in any direct confrontation between them. The United States saw that a military victory was by no means easy. However, having involved itself wholesale, it could not withdraw abruptly without loss of face. It had no alternative but to continue the war. Late in 1965 and 1966, it talked of the desirability of securing a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. This talk went unheeded in North Vietnam and China, for they were not sure of US intentions. Hanoi, particularly, suspected a trap.

About the middle of 1965 and after, the statements issued by the Peking Government started indicating that China's commitment was confined to extending its "support" to Vietnam. There was never any specific declaration as to what it would do. Its criticisms of the US might be characterized as defensive in character, and they were so worded as to avoid giving unacceptable offence to the US. At times, as in late 1965, Peking harped upon the US war in Vietnam and dwelt at length on the bitterness this had introduced. At the same time it said that it would retaliate only if there was any US military attack upon its own territory. One could see that US military activities in Vietnam would not by
themselves provoke China to resort to war.

It has been argued that from about late 1965 onwards there was a "tacit agreement" between China and the USA to avoid confrontation. Both countries set out their position from time to time in public statements. The Warsaw talks also helped in mutual communication and averted a showdown between China and the USA in Vietnam.

---

116 Rogers, n. 21, p. 293.