A Communist Love Triangle?

Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese relations 1960-1968



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*Nobody ever won a war at the green table.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

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**Abbreviations**

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CPSU: Communist Party of the Soviet Union

DRV: Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)  
ICC: International Control Commission  
Lao Dong: Communist Party of Vietnam  
MAAG: Military Assistance Advisory Group  
NLFSV: National Liberation Front South Vietnam

NVA: North Vietnamese Army  
PAV: People’s Army of Vietnam

PLA: People’s Liberation Army (Chinese Army)

PRC: People’s Republic of China   
USSR: Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics)

VWP: Vietnam Workers’ Party (Lao Dong Party, Communist party of Vietnam)

**Notable Figures**

Andrei Gromyko: Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union

Ho Chi Minh: President of the DRV, Chairman of the VWP CC  
Le Duan: party Secretary of the VWP  
Le Duc Tho: Vietnamese politburo member, personal friend of Le Duan  
Leonid Brezhnev: Party Secretary from October 1964

Mao Zedong: Party secretary of the CCP

Nikita Krushchev: Party Secretary until October 1964

Nguyen Duy Trinh: Vietnamese Politburo member, Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Truong Chinh: Vietnamese Politburo member  
Vo Nguyen Giap: General of the VPA/NPA  
Zhou Enlai: Premier, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC

**Introduction**

Political analogies to the Vietnam War remain popular. The *Economist* recently compared Obama’s War on Terror to his personal Vietnam.[[2]](#footnote-2) Up to a certain extent, this comparison seems to make sense. Obama has inherited policies from his predecessors, and seems doubtful on the course of his policies and unwilling to terminate them, reminiscent of US handling of the Vietnam War. The analogy has been made frequently, as we have heard it before in comparisons on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Vietnam War analogies often go astray in the complicated situation of the Vietnam War. The complex constellation of the powers in the Vietnam War has for long been misunderstood. The Vietnam War is usually depicted as a conflict in where the US fought the communists, but who were those communists? From the communist perspective the conflict has been presented as two wars: “there were two wars in Vietnam: Vietnam with the USA, and China with the SU.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In more general terms, the Vietnam War covers two conflicts; namely the well-known conflict between the US and the Vietcong, and another conflict between the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and the PRC (People’s Republic of China). What was the role of Vietnam as a focal point of these two conflicts?

**Historiography**

A lot has been written on the Vietnam War in the past fifty years. In this phase of New Cold War history, I am standing on the shoulders of giants. We are now able to contextualize and put the Cold War into a better perspective. The opening of archives has enabled us to look at the Cold War from a multi-archival perspective.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since the Cold War is over, historians are no longer bound to either side of the world and we are able to put the Cold War in a better perspective. Odd Arne Westad, from the London School of Economics, has been at the forefront of this movement as founding editor of the journal *Cold War History*. Although much has been written about the Vietnam War from an American perspective, for example by George Herring, the archival thaw in the former Soviet Union gave rise to new experts on Soviet policy, such as Lorenz Lüthi, Ilya Gaiduk and Sergey Radchenko.[[5]](#footnote-5) One of the most prominent authors on the Chinese involvement in the Vietnam War is Qiang Zhai.[[6]](#footnote-6) The involvement and power relations in North Vietnam have been subjected to further scrutiny by Nguyen Lien Hang-T and Ang Cheng Guan.[[7]](#footnote-7) Without these historians, this thesis would not have been possible. By translating the various archival materials into English, they have made the resources available to a worldwide community of researchers.

This thesis relies on recent declassified archival material from eyewitnesses and participants, as well as well-informed hear-say by embassy staff from various Soviet satellites. Although information from the US perspective became available as archives opened up over time, the opening of communist’ archives has been a fairly recent development.[[8]](#footnote-8) After the collapse of the Soviet Union archives were opened, creating new possibilities for research. The Chinese and Vietnamese archives have remained largely sealed. Some openness has been granted, and hopefully this trend will continue, to help us get a better understanding of what happened above and beyond the 17th parallel. The declassified documents have already shed a new light onto developments in the communist world, but more detailed accounts of events would offer us with further possibilities for comprehensive analysis.

This thesis will combine the different singular perspectives on Vietnam during the Vietnam War. By combining the various perspectives I aim to shed a new light on the role of the Sino-Soviet Split in the Vietnam War. To what extent was the Vietnam War of influence to the Sino-Soviet Split? As the Vietnam War was also a frontline for the Sino-Soviet dispute, we can see that the dynamic of the Sino-Soviet Split created possibilities for Vietnam and enhanced its position in the world.

During my history major, I took the course “The Vietnam War”. It reiterated many of my beliefs about this war. As it was the first televised war, the media had an irrefutable stake in the way the Vietnam War was perceived. The course did not just focus on the causes of the war, dating back to the colonial conflict with the French, but it also focused on the emerging peace-movement throughout the western world. There was a salient point missing in the course. The handbook used for this course was *America’s Longest War*, by George C. Herring.[[9]](#footnote-9) Although Herring is a widely respected expert on the Vietnam War, the title shows the point of focus. The American perspective has received too much emphasis in historiography.

The Vietnam War was more than a struggle for independence, or a conflict of capitalism versus communism. This common misconception of the Vietnam War in public opinion is one of the reasons for this thesis. The perceived unity of the communists was absent. This thesis will therefore focus on the other conflict, the conflict between the USSR and the PRC in the communist ‘bloc’ in the period 1960-1968.

The Sino-Soviet Split, the conflict that clouded the communist world in the early cold war emanated from differences over communist ideology between China and the USSR. Over the years 1960-1968, the rift between the USSR and the PRC widened, and the differences would eventually end in military conflict in a remote region of Mongolia in 1969. The erstwhile leaders of both superpowers, Khrushchev and Mao, were instrumental to the rift. Khrushchev was deposed as leader of the USSR 1964, because of his egocentric style of leadership and policy failures, among other reasons.[[10]](#footnote-10) China’s undisputed leader Mao Zedong, had successfully created a personality cult around himself.[[11]](#footnote-11) He was more introvert than his Soviet counterpart, and also more dogmatic. Mao was disappointed in the Soviet leadership after Stalin, and from the outset this caused major frictions between Mao and Stalin’s successors. This problem arose during the tenure of Khrushchev, but continued until Mao’s retreat from politics and death in 1975-1976.

Although the Sino-Soviet split escalated over the years, there were many attempts to normalize relations between the two communist powers. Third countries presented a mediating role, but China rejected these attempts and refused to reconcile with the Soviet ‘revisionists’. When many other countries had given up on calls for normalizing relations, the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam, North Vietnam) kept stressing the importance of socialist unity. Especially Ho Chi Minh reiterated the need for a unified bloc, but his calls for solidarity went unheeded.

The conflict between the USSR and the PRC had major consequences for the conflict in Vietnam. Although Khrushchev abstained from interfering in Vietnam, his successors were actively promoting and supporting the DRV. Most of the Soviet aid to Vietnam had to be transported across Chinese soil by Chinese infrastructure. During the Vietnam War, the Chinese checked the flow of weapons from the USSR to the DRV, which caused disruptions and disputes over the Soviet aid to Vietnam. The aid to Vietnam by China and the USSR was one of the core themes to the complicated relations between North Vietnam, the Soviet Union and China. The difficult cooperation between the USSR and PRC changed into competition and eventually into confrontation.

The roots of the Vietnam War, or the American War according to the Vietnamese, can be traced back unto many events. The first and most obvious is the Communist movement that emerged in Indochina after the Second World War. When Ho Chi Minh declared the independent republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1945, he was supported by both the US and the USSR. In the ensuing struggle against the French, the USSR refrained from significant Soviet support, although Stalin did admit a DRV embassy in Moscow, granting diplomatic recognition to the DRV. After the demise of Stalin, the relation between the DRV and USSR continued along similar lines. Khrushchev, the successor of Stalin, attempted to settle the Indochina conflict via diplomatic means, enhancing east-west relations.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The colonial conflict with the French was eventually settled with the 1954 Geneva Accords. These accords led to a split of Vietnam at the 17th parallel. The separation was to be temporary, and unification was set as the final goal. The elections for a unified Vietnamese government never took place, due to unwillingness and violations of the Geneva Accords from both sides.

The American involvement in Vietnam gradually expanded. Kennedy inherited the Vietnam-policy from his predecessor Eisenhower, and was presented the choice between abandonment and further involvement. The most compelling aspect of Kennedy’s Vietnam policy is that he actually refrained from making exactly that choice. Limited Partnership was the term used to describe the policy of the Kennedy administration. Steadily the US stepped into the quagmire Vietnam proved to be.

The first chapter covers the run-up to the heightened Vietnam conflict, and mostly concerns the historical context of the Sino-Soviet Split in the Vietnam War. In the run-up to the Vietnam conflict, the situation in Laos was instrumental. The Pathet Lao, the communist faction lead by “Red Prince” Shihanouk was supported by North Vietnam, and controlled large parts of Northern Laos. This group was of the utmost importance to the NLFSV, for the latter needed this area for the transportation of supplies via the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail’ in Laos.

A rightist faction, sponsored by the United States was in control of the south. The United States considered Laos to be a country where they could curb Soviet influence in Southeast Asia, according to the well-known domino theory.[[13]](#footnote-13)

An important moment in the run-up to the Vietnam War was the decision by the North Vietnamese to accept military action as the means to achieve unification. The subsequent creation of the NLFSV is very important for the course of the conflict. The walkout of Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai at the 22nd Congress of the Soviet Union, in October 1961, was a signal of the explosive atmosphere between China and the USSR.

Chapter two covers the phase of escalation of the conflict from the overthrow of Khrushchev. This ushered in a new phase wherein the Soviet Union was trying to win back the influence in Vietnam it had lost. The competition with China takes off in this phase, as both the USSR as the PRC vie for influence in Vietnam. The Chinese tried to hold on to their significant influence in Vietnam, as China is emerging as a regional power and competes with the USSR in Southeast Asia. The different aims of both powers over the conflict were exacerbated by the radicalization in China and the related Sino-Soviet dispute. Both powers were held responsible for the conflict, and both powers attempted to steer the conflict in a favorable direction.

Chapter three starts from the Cultural Revolution in China, wherein China went through a phase of radicalization and revolution. The Vietnamese began to reorient their position away from China. The Marigold affair formed an interesting phase, for it highlighted the strategy of the DRV and the relative positions of the USSR and China. The strategy of talking while fighting was affirmed in a speech by Nguyen Duy Trinh, the DRV Minister of Foreign Affairs at the 13th plenum of the VWP Central Committee. The Tet Offensive forms the final part of this thesis, as it shows that both China and the USSR had lost the controls over the DRV, and the DRV took a more independent course.

**Chapter 1: From Geneva to the Tonkin Gulf**

To capture the intricate relation between the DRV, China and the USSR in the years 1960-1964, one has to look not just at the relation between the communist actors, but also at the setting wherein the conflict takes place. Besides the looking at the DRV, China and the USSR this means also looking at the situation in South Vietnam and the rest of the world, as the Vietnam War was a local war with global implications.

In the DRV, Ho Chi Minh, the first president of the DRV and a key figure in the foundation of the DRV, had gradually become less important and he had lost most of his power by 1960.[[14]](#footnote-14) Nevertheless, in the west he was still considered to be in charge of the Lao Dong Party. We now know that Le Duan had actually eclipsed the aging Ho and taken over the control of the party, aided by his trustee Le Duc Tho.[[15]](#footnote-15) This duo formed the central leadership in the years 1960-1968.

In China, the Great Leap Forward was coming to an end. The Great Leap Forward was intended by Mao to catapult China to the status of a world power, by rapid industrialization and collectivization of the agrarian countryside. It turned out disastrously, leaving the economy in ruins and more importantly, leaving a great famine across China.

In South Vietnam, Ngo Ding Diem, the leader of South Vietnam still enjoyed support from the United States, as President Kennedy reiterated U.S. support for the regime. President Kennedy had inherited some involvement in Vietnam from the Eisenhower administration. The Kennedy administration did not share the view of the previous administration that Laos was the country that mattered in Southeast Asia. The Kennedy administration felt the real pivot was in Vietnam. Nonetheless, behind the veil of words by Kennedy, the Kennedy administration never went beyond a ‘limited partnership’ with South Vietnam.[[16]](#footnote-16) The creation of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) showed American goodwill, but no ceaseless commitment. Slowly, the US deepened its military involvement in South Vietnam, by sending more advisers, and tons of materiel overseas. The MAAG was up scaled to a Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in 1962, setting the stage for further involvement.

The USSR was not officially supporting the uprising in South Vietnam, and managed to hold the Lao Dong Party (Vietnam Workers Party, VWP, or North Vietnamese Communist Party) from openly supporting the rebellion in in the south in 1960 as well. By refraining from open support and holding back the VWP, the USSR showed it did not have an appetite for conflict in the third world. Although the USSR did not openly support the rebellion in South Vietnam, Nikita Khrushchev voiced the USSR’s support for national liberation movements. He did so to appease more radical elements in the communist world, notably the CCP, which accused Khrushchev for not supporting national liberation movements.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Whereas the USSR lagged behind other socialist countries in their support of North Vietnam, the USSR was trying to dissuade the Americans from intervention on the international stage. This balancing act was thwarted by North Vietnam, which made de-escalation impossible by increasing their support for the uprising in South Vietnam. The escalation of the conflict in South Vietnam, and the increased support by their Northern counterparts served as a pretext for further US involvement in the struggle in South Vietnam.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**The Sino-Soviet Split 1960-1964**

The Sino-Soviet Split had started with disagreements between the USSR and China after the death of Stalin. China had always rallied to Stalin as the leader of the communist world movement. This does not mean that Mao fully trusted Stalin, but he regarded him as a true Marxist-Leninist. Mao was made aware of Stalin’s realpolitik in the Chinese civil war. At a certain point, the USSR under Stalin actually supported the nationalists under General Chang Kai-Shek against the communists, as the nationalists were deemed to have a favorable position over the communists.[[19]](#footnote-19) After Stalin’s demise, Nikita Khrushchev had taken over power in the USSR.

After Khrushchev had taken over power, he quickly centralized power into his own hands. At the 20th Congress of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) on 24-25 February 1956 he held what has become known as the ‘Secret Speech’, denouncing the crimes of Stalin. This famous ‘secret speech’ has also become known as the defamation of Stalin. Khrushchev attacked Stalin on various issues, for example his failure to see WWII coming but especially the personal cult build around Stalin. Stalin’s purges were also named, and it was seen to that those sort of crimes would never happen again. During his speech, Khrushchev used the possibility to reinstate Lenin as the most prominent communist. The party had to correct mistakes of the past. A component that came to the fore in his speech was peaceful coexistence, and although it was less important for the speech it was all the more important for world politics.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The ‘Secret Speech’, or defamation of Stalin, put heavy strains on the relation between the USSR and China. One of the biggest points of contention between the Soviet Union and China was the policy of peaceful coexistence. Where the USSR under Khrushchev was advocating peaceful coexistence as a guiding principle in their foreign policy, the Chinese regarded it as just an aspect of foreign policy. The USSR could not confront the US in all theatres, and was blamed by China for mainly looking at Europe in the 1950s.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Another issue which caused disconcert between the PRC and the USSR was the support of national liberation movements. This is coherent with the policy of peaceful coexistence, as support for national liberation movements would bring the USSR in conflict with the US and the west. This is also true in the case of Vietnam. The USSR was withholding support for Vietnam, as it tried to evade conflict with the US-backed Saigon regime. The Chinese expressed criticism over the Soviet hands-off approach. The Soviets did not agree as they were supporting national liberation movements in the third world, as were they providing political support for the DRV.

Nevertheless, many historians nowadays hold the view that the Chinese, under the leadership of Mao actually aimed for a split with the USSR to become the avant-garde, and therefore leading communist state.[[22]](#footnote-22) Mao also had personal issues with Khrushchev, which is reiterated in their communiques and meetings. A prime example of this is recalled by Henry Kissinger in his memoires ‘On China’, wherein he recollects a meeting between Mao and Khrushchev. After a tumultuous first day, Moa chose to receive Khrushchev in a swimming pool the next day, instead of in a regular office. As Khrushchev was not able to swim properly, he had to be assisted with swimming wings.[[23]](#footnote-23) This embarrassment was much to the entertainment of Mao, but was of course not contributing to the atmosphere in which the meeting took place.

The Sino-Soviet Split took a more official turn when China retreated from the world communist movement in 1961, when Mao cut the ties with the Comecon (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance).[[24]](#footnote-24) Although China was never a full member, it stopped attending the sessions. The break with Comecon was in itself not too problematic, as China stood out as a largely agrarian nation between the more industrialized nations of the rest of the Comecon. The symbolic meaning of the break with the communist movement was nevertheless of great importance.

Around the same time China also dropped from another important institution for the USSR. China had enjoyed an observer status in the Warsaw Pact (WAPA).[[25]](#footnote-25) The relation between the USSR sponsored Warsaw Pact and China was never a success, as China had different security issues than other WAPA countries.[[26]](#footnote-26) WAPA was a European oriented organization to face up to NATO in Western Europe, whereas China was emerging as a regional power in Southeast Asia. Mao therefore reoriented China’s foreign policy away from the Soviet sphere of influence, and hoped to move China to a more independent position on the world stage. The Chinese endeavor with the WAPA faltered due to both Sino-Soviet differences as the strategic focus.[[27]](#footnote-27)

An event that reflects the tension that had arisen between the PRC and the USSR is the walkout of the Chinese delegation under Zhou Enlai during the 22nd Party Congress of the CPSU, in October 1961. The 22nd Party Congress had been orchestrated in such a way as to leave no chance for the Chinese delegation to cause any problems. During the Congress, the USSR condemned Albania for breaking with the USSR.[[28]](#footnote-28) After a speech of Khrushchev, Zhou Enlai walked out to show his contempt for the USSR on the 22nd of October. Zhou Enlai did not return to the Congress and flew back to Beijing. It has to be pondered to what extent the walkout was a premeditated statement or a spontaneous reaction. China was steering towards a break with the USSR, but the walkout to show China’s disagreement with the USSR seems sincere.[[29]](#footnote-29)

After Mao cut some of the bonds between China and the Second World, it was followed in 1962 by a next step, when Mao reoriented the PRC away from the socialist bloc into the Asian-African-Latin intermediate zone. The Asian-African-Latin intermediate zone consisted of the neutral countries in the Cold War, the countries that fell between the Western (first) and the Communist (second) world. Mao did this because he thought the needs of the PRC would be better suited in the third world than as a Soviet satellite. By loosening the bonds of the Socialist movement, Mao felt that China could better fulfill its internationalist duty in the support for national liberation movements. The anti-imperialist struggle would better be served by a China as a catalyst in the intermediate zone, than as part of the Communist World.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The Soviet Union had remained aloof for the biggest part of this period, and insisted on its system of peaceful coexistence. The Soviet Union tried to push for a negotiated settlement in the Vietnam War. Khrushchev held decisive influence on USSR foreign policy. His personal preferences and ideas affected the USSR attitude to the DRV.[[31]](#footnote-31) A prime example of Khrushchev his single-handed approach stems from the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the aftermath Khrushchev was chastised by his own party for being soft, but especially in China he was portrayed as a traitor of the Communist movement. Khrushchev played down the tensions on the world stage, and although he publicly lost the battle, he averted nuclear war reaffirming the necessity of peaceful coexistence.

***Laos, a miniature of the Vietnam War***

The Laotian crisis could be regarded as a prelude to the Vietnam War, as the same forces with the same interests were at play. During the attempted settlement of the Laotian Crisis, in negotiations in Burma and in Geneva, the Soviet Union held a more compromising position than the Chinese and Vietnamese.[[32]](#footnote-32) The Soviet Union lobbied for a neutralization of Laos, by reinstating the ICC (International Control Commission) controls and eliminating the American presence. The Chinese and Vietnamese tried to hold on to the gains the Communist *Pathet Lao* had made. The Chinese and Vietnamese press to maintain these gains sprung from two ideas: they were essential to the war effort in Vietnam, and it was in line with Chinese and Vietnamese strategic thinking to negotiate from a position of strength.[[33]](#footnote-33) The gains in Laos were essential for the conflict in South Vietnam, as the DRV used the land controlled by the *Pathet Lao* to transport supplies to the South. If the *Pathet Lao* would be neutralized, it would be a lot harder to supply the rebel factions in South Vietnam.

In the run-up to the Geneva negotiations, Khrushchev relayed to Kennedy that the USSR was willing to concede Laos as a neutral country, as it was located far away from the Soviet Union and the Soviets did not hold any interests there. According to Ilya V. Gaiduk, a specialist on the Soviet Union, it seems that Khrushchev was prepared to give up Laos for a settlement of the German question.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Even though the USSR, DRV and PRC were pursuing different agendas and different ideals at the Geneva Conference on Laos, the countries managed to come to terms and disseminate a single view in the general meetings.[[35]](#footnote-35) With the Geneva agreements in 1962 the different parties agreed to a neutral Laos. The neutralization of Laos had implications for both sides. The USSR made the demand that Laos would remain outside the influence of the SEATO, the US demanded a cessation of aid to the *Pathet Lao*. As soon turned out, the Soviets were no longer in control over the situation. North Vietnam had asserted control over the conflict in Laos via the *Pathet Lao*. The North Vietnamese regarded Laos as isolated from *geopolitics*, and used Laos merely as a means to continue their war effort in South Vietnam.[[36]](#footnote-36) The bargaining between the US and USSR at the round table did not influence the Vietnamese position.

The Geneva agreements proved to be untenable for the US and the USSR, as they could not keep the different parties from fighting. The discussions held in Geneva were idealistic, and did not correspond to the reality of Laos. As all factions were still working on a military buildup and pursued their own agendas, the political compromise was instantly rendered meaningless.

What the Laotian Crisis and the Geneva Agreements show, is that although the US regarded the USSR as a representative body for the socialist world, there were other factors at play in Southeast Asia. China and the DRV, two important players in this conflict, followed their own incentives and policies. China encouraged Shihanouk, the leader of the *Pathet Lao,* that “The final settlement will be decided by force.”[[37]](#footnote-37) This showed a disregard for the neutralization and active support for the conflict. North Vietnam had a similar disregard for the Geneva accords, as it benefitted from a situation of chaos. Both the US and the Vietnamese continued their subversive activities in Laos, undermining both the Geneva agreements and the stability in South-East-Asia.[[38]](#footnote-38) The US took learning from the negotiations in Laos, and would not be easily seduced to making concessions in South-East Asia again. The USSR remained the sole party adhering to the Geneva Agreements, in line with their policy of peaceful coexistence.

**Implications for Soviet-Vietnamese relations**

In the 1960s, Soviet influence in South Vietnam was waning. At the start of the decade the Soviets had substantial influence on Vietnam because of their sizable economic aid. From the start of the Sino-Soviet Split, the Vietnamese had tried to remain neutral, and not to commit to either the Soviet or the Chinese side. Delegations between the USSR and DRV still ferried between the two countries. Nonetheless, beyond the material assistance and the façade of cordial relations, the DRV reoriented its policy to the more aggressive Chinese posture. The Chinese were openly supporting the struggle in South Vietnam, as China felt morally obliged to in their support for national liberation movements. The Chinese position suited Vietnamese interests better. The reorientation of the DRV had its repercussions on the relation between the DRV and the USSR.

The most important choice made by the VWP of North Vietnam was the creation of the National Liberation Front South Vietnam (NLFSV) in South Vietnam, at the 15th Plenum of the Lao Dong Party in 1960 in North Vietnam. This was the commencement of the takeover of the rebellion in the South, sidelining the different rebel groups and allowing the Communists to take control.

Another organization founded was the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN). The COSVN was the political, coordinating branch to the executing branch NLFSV. This coordination was necessary, because the NLFSV was not a monolith, but different groups and regional ties existed within the rebel groups in the south.

The Soviet disenchantment with this more radical course of the DRV resulted in aversion from Southeast Asia, by prioritizing Europe over Asia. The USSR commissioned an investigative thesis on the solution of the Vietnam problem. The conclusion was that a peaceful solution seemed impossible in the near future, and organizing an International Conference similar to the one on the Laotian Crisis had a small chance of success. With this sobering conclusion, the Soviets reasoned that a successful initiative to settle the Vietnam question had to be supported by the DRV. When North Vietnamese support proved absent, the USSR stopped their initiatives.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The Soviet Union was facilitating political support for the NLFSV. By promoting the NLFSV, the USSR was supporting an organization which according to its statutes was aimed at political support to overthrow the Diem Government in the South. After the removal of the Diem Government, it would have the purpose of reconciliation in the south. The NLFSV soon proved to be a front for the military activities in the South. The USSR pushed for political recognition of the organization and other communist countries accepted the NLFSV as the legitimate representative for South Vietnam.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The DRV started a strategy of fighting while negotiating, a strategy they would maintain until the end of the Vietnam War. This strategy entails a war is fought via different struggles; a political struggle, a military struggle and a diplomatic struggle. The negotiations were mainly designed as propaganda-efforts to show goodwill and win the sympathy of world public opinion.[[41]](#footnote-41) The Chinese were advocating the same strategy of fighting a protracted and small scale guerilla war. The concept of a Maoist guerilla type of warfare will be discussed later.

The Sino-Soviet split had its repercussions on internal DRV politics and party intrigues. Within the party there were two main currents; one advocating the Soviet line, and one advocating the Chinese line.[[42]](#footnote-42) The Lao Dong party was known to have internal strife between the different groups within the party. Even through these internal divisions, the party managed to keep the ranks closed to external parties. The division between hawks and doves went along the lines of the Sino-Soviet Split, with the hawks supporting the proactive Chinese policy and the doves more in favor of Soviet reconciliatory policy.

**Sino-Vietnamese relations**

After the rift at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in October 1961, the Chinese break with the Soviet Union became clear, and China reoriented its foreign policy away from the USSR towards Asia and strengthened their relation with the DRV. Chinese aid to the DRV grew significantly, eventually bypassing all other countries as foreign aid donor to the DRV by 1962.[[43]](#footnote-43) Although the Chinese were the biggest aid donors to the DRV, the Vietnamese were still reliant on certain commodities provided by the USSR. As China lacked heavy industry and the possibilities to produce complex commodities, the DRV had to look to the USSR and Eastern European countries to provide necessary complicated machinery. As a consequence, the USSR still maintained certain leverage over the DRV.

After the USSR reduced its aid for the VPA (Vietnam People’s Army, US: NVA) and adhered to the Geneva Agreements, the Chinese filled the void.[[44]](#footnote-44) The USSR seemed to be the sole party that was not openly defying the Geneva Agreements. The Chinese used this opportunity to strengthen their bonds with the VPA by sending military aid to Laos. The PRC assisted the DRV with this aid in maintaining its offensive posture in neighboring Laos. As Laos was a neighbor state to China, the PRC had security concerns with US plans for Laos. By aiding the communists in Laos, they managed to create a friendly zone in the Chinese underbelly. Chinese aid was twofold, by enhancing its standing in Vietnam and creating a friendly and likeminded neighbor.

The visits of Chinese delegations to the DRV intensified in this period. The number of Chinese delegations rose sharply, to the point where the USSR got suspicious over the emerging relation and possible Chinese influence on Vietnam. At a certain point, the USSR even complained to the Vietnamese about the numerous contacts between the Chinese and Vietnamese and the contents discussed with the Chinese visitors.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Even though China’s influence grew significantly in these years, Chinese influence on the DRV was checked by Vietnamese consent. The Vietnamese had casted doubts on certain topics of Chinese policy. For example on agricultural affairs, the Vietnamese declined to follow the Chinese example. After the failure of the Great Leap Forward in China became apparent, the Vietnamese chose a different economic course. An attempt at collectivization of the peasantry in the DRV was quickly disbanded and the responsible government officials were sidetracked.[[46]](#footnote-46)

**Lead-up to escalation**

In December 1963, at the 9th Plenum of the VWP, Le Duan expressed his views on South Vietnam. The views of the leader of the VWP were shared by the VWP CC. The military struggle in the South became the priority of the DRV regime. Le Duan was advocating the revolutionary line, and in his speech he dismissed Soviet international policy of peaceful coexistence. He praised the Maoist concept of revolutionary war of a protracted guerilla war. He also emphasized the need to create a powerful army in the south, equipped and trained for big-unit warfare.[[47]](#footnote-47)

The course the DRV took, advocated in Le Duan’s speech had implications for the international position of the DRV. The choice for a head-on attack of the US-protected south has been regarded as a going for broke strategy. The bonds between the PRC and DRV were strengthened, but the Vietnamese did not to openly choose a side in the Sino-Soviet dispute. The Soviets warned the Vietnamese about the danger of adhering too much to the Chinese, but the DRV did not heed this advice.[[48]](#footnote-48) It continued to follow its own middle-course, continually launching endeavors to reconcile the Chinese and the USSR.[[49]](#footnote-49) The relation between the USSR and the DRV remained deadlocked until the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, when ‘socialist internationalist duty’ would call the USSR to arms.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred in in August 1964, when US destroyer Maddox was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. This incident was a watershed in the Vietnam conflict. After the Tonkin Gulf incident, the conflict shifted from war by proxy to direct conflict, due to direct American intervention and the response of the two communist powers. The escalation presented a new situation for the USSR and China. Khrushchev presented the USSR as a mediator and attempted to play down the stakes and dissuade President Johnson from further involvement. Personnel from the Soviet Embassy in North Vietnam believed the Chinese were the instigators of the Tonkin Gulf incident, and that they had incited the Vietnamese to show their teeth. The USSR doubted Vietnamese military prowess, and were from the start pushing for a political settlement of the conflict.[[50]](#footnote-50) Mao was also surprised to learn of the incident.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Khrushchev did not succeed in the role of mediator and the conflict intensified, calling the USSR back to Vietnam to support a fraternal socialist country. The Soviets would allow for further involvement, but it would take another three months before a major change in Soviet policy would become discernible, only when Khrushchev was ousted.

The Soviets acknowledged Chinese support, but doubted the vast Chinese army’s quality. Compared to US and Soviet armaments, the Chinese were inferior.[[52]](#footnote-52) The Soviets assessed in September 1964, that the US would probably win the conflict, due to overwhelming military superiority. Besides the military power of the United States, the US were looking for a political victory, not a complete military victory. It seemed the USSR likely that the US would score a small military victory, and thereby acquire their political victory. The political aspect of the US mission was correctly emphasized by Soviet intelligence.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Between 1960 and 1964, the Sino-Soviet Split casted a shadow over Vietnam and affirmed a Soviet orientation towards Europe. The Soviet Union pressed for a political settlement of the issues concerning Southeast-Asia, further exacerbating the Split between China and the USSR. China and Vietnam did not have an appetite for a political approach, and supported a military approach, exacerbating the gap between the USSR and the PRC and DRV. The Chinese presented themselves as the true Marxist country aiding national liberation movements. China and Vietnam had a similar vision on the conflict in Laos and for South Vietnam, and supported the rebels in Laos and South Vietnam. This shared ideology strengthened the bonds between China and the DRV. At the same time, China was expanding with regional power aspirations. The DRV was happy to receive Chinese aid for its struggle in the south, and was not prepared to yield to pressure from the US. The crisis over Laos made the US wary of a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. In August 1964, The Tonkin Gulf Incident proved to be the spark that ignited the flames over Vietnam.

**Chapter 2: Escalation to negotiation**

The turning point in Soviet Union’s Vietnam policy lies at the ouster of Khrushchev at the 11th Plenum of the USSR on 14 October 1964. Khrushchev’s downfall subsequently led to a regime which proactively supported the Vietnamese. Khrushchev’s deposition by his close aides and prominent politburo members led to a new Presidium and Soviet leadership, a group led by Leonyd Illych Brezhnev. When change came to Moscow, it created a break between the style of leadership of Khrushchev, a single-handed autocrat, and the style of Brezhnev and his comrades, presiding over the Central Committee as *primi inter pares.* The leading figures in the Soviet leadership were Kosygin (Prime Minister) Mikhail Suslov (Party Secretariat and Politburo Member), Nikolai Podgorni (Chairman of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet) and Aleksandr Shelepin (Politburo member).[[54]](#footnote-54) This new leadership group looked to Asia, and ways to strengthen the bonds with the DRV, thereby recommitting the USSR to Vietnam.

In this period different peace initiatives were started, without conclusive results. The different peace initiatives, and whether or not negotiations should be pursued caused tension in this period in the socialist Camp. It is one of the main themes of this chapter, as it lies at the center of debate in the Sino-Soviet Split on Vietnam.

When all sides increased their aid to Vietnam after the Tonkin Gulf incident, escalation was not necessarily the only possible outcome of the crisis. When the US pledged to expand its aid programs, Khrushchev sent a letter expressing his concern on US response, presenting the USSR as a possible peace broker.[[55]](#footnote-55) After Johnson’s reelection, the US intensified the war and the US decided to send ground troops which arrived at the Air Force base at Da Nang on 8 March 1965. This date is significant because it signals the US commitment by deploying ‘feet on the ground.’ As analysts predicted, “once the first step has been taken, it will be difficult to hold the line.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

During these two years, the ideological balance in the communist camp was overhauled and in 1966 the conflict in Vietnam had changed. Vietnam acted as a catalyst for competition in the Third World between the USSR and China in the 1960s. This episode in the Vietnam War highlights the persistent struggle between the USSR and China. The renewed Soviet interest and scramble for influence caused tension between the USSR, China and the DRV, because the advice and aid of the USSR were diametrically opposed to the Chinese vision of how the conflict should be resolved. On the discussion whether or not direct or indirect negotiations should be pursued with the United States the opinions diverged greatly as well. Whereas the Chinese were opposed to negotiations, the Soviet bloc was encouraging and facilitating direct negotiations between the DRV and the US. Other options of third countries establishing contact for negotiations, notably by Non-Soviet Warsaw Pact members were also supported by the Soviets. The role of Polish initiatives will be further scrutinized as a prime example, and also because of the relative success of these attempts.

**Change in Moscow**

Brezhnev was less conservative than his direct colleagues, and functioned as a counterbalance to his more conservative colleagues. As Brezhnev had nearly no experience in international relations, he quite often had himself represented by more experienced senior Politburo members. [[57]](#footnote-57) This role was fulfilled by Kosygin in the first years of his tenure, and Gromyko later on in his career. Brezhnev completed his bid for power only in 1973, when he promoted Grechko, Gromyko and Andropov to full Politburo members.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The new leadership instigated change; in the first place, it repealed many of Khrushchev’s reforms. In an attempt to hold military parity with the west, the defense budget rose abruptly in the first few years of the Brezhnev administration. It was felt that the USSR could not be inferior to the US. Once parity with the west was achieved, the time for negotiations had come, when the USSR was able to negotiate from a position of strength.[[59]](#footnote-59)  
 Just like his predecessor, Brezhnev was a staunch supporter of peaceful coexistence. In the European theatre, Brezhnev called for stability and embraced contacts with the French president Charles de Gaulle in 1966. When the reformist government of Czechoslovakia was put back in line in 1968, The USSR declared the Brezhnev-Doctrine, which highlighted the fragility of stability in Europe. These events show the Soviet focus on Europe, and highlight the importance of a stable situation in Europe for both the US and the USSR. The Warsaw Pact was supposed to keep the various European Soviet allies in line, creating stability. The organization was used by Romania to propagate the Chinese line, destabilizing the organization.[[60]](#footnote-60)

The Chinese were in favor of a more aggressive approach in the European theatre, notably in Germany, but Brezhnev showed responsibility and thereby reaffirmed the position of the USSR as a responsible global great power. China had different security issues and a different strategic vision emanating from its position as a regional power. It did not have to negotiate and come to terms with the US on many issues, as the PRC was mainly involved in Southeast-Asia, where it took a confrontational position.

The new Soviet leadership was keen to restore Sino-Soviet relations. Especially Kosygin refused to accept the Sino-Soviet split as a fait accompli. Kosygin once said: “We are Communists and they are Communists, it is hard to believe that we will not be able to reach an agreement if we meet face to face.”[[61]](#footnote-61) The leadership believed that it was Khrushchev that had caused the split, and with Khrushchev removed relations could be rebuild.[[62]](#footnote-62) In time, Kosygin was disappointed with the Chinese communists and eventually accepted the Sino-Soviet split.

When the new leadership emerged, Kosygin went to North Vietnam in January 1965 for talks to increase credibility and influence among the DRV leadership. The Soviet leaders and Vietnamese revolutionaries came from different worlds however, and the Vietnamese decided to follow their own course of action, instead of getting involved in great power games.[[63]](#footnote-63) The USSR proved to be supportive of the Vietnamese cause and condemned US attacks on the DRV. Although the Soviet approach was received with enthusiasm, it would take more to reestablish the relation between the USSR and the DRV.

**The Sino-Soviet relation 1964-1966**

The Chinese reconsidered the relationship with the USSR after the fall of Khrushchev, and steered into the direction of a multipolar system, with China next to the USSR and the US. To enforce this claim, China detonated its first nuclear device in on 16 October 1964, signaling a Chinese claim to great power-status.[[64]](#footnote-64) By showing its ability to construct a nuclear device, China acceded to a very small group of nations with nuclear capabilities, enhancing its position in international relations.

Sino-Soviet relations were troubled during the 1960s. After the new group under the leadership of Brezhnev came to power, the Soviets and Chinese tried to realign their policies and there was an “ideological ceasefire”. The reconciliation process was of a short duration, however, and shortly after Kosygin’s visit to Vietnam the Chinese concluded for themselves that the USSR had ideologically barely changed. The Chinese aims and views were irreconcilable with the ones of the Soviet leadership. They differed widely on Vietnam policy, especially in the areas of assistance, negotiations and the relation with the US.

Quickly after the new group around Brezhnev was firmly in the saddle, the USSR probed the Chinese about a conference on Vietnam, which was rejected by the Chinese in February 1965.[[65]](#footnote-65) It is interesting to see that a conference on the future of the DRV, an independent state, was decided by China. The autonomy of the Vietnamese state in this phase of the conflict is questionable.

When the USSR got more involved in Vietnam, the Chinese rekindled their campaign against the USSR. The Chinese feared a ‘Soviet plot’ to consolidate Soviet influence and assert dominance in South East Asia. As China was emerging as a rival regional power, interests were bound to clash. The defamation campaigns between the USSR and the PRC contributed to a further deterioration of the relation. When the open slander campaigns were discontinued, the two rivaling socialist countries kept complaining behind the scenes. The strengthened ties between the Vietnamese and Soviets resulted in substantial aid, but also caused strains on the relation between the PRC and DRV.

Criticism from Beijing on Moscow did not always come with the use of distant propaganda. An example of this can be found in February 1965, when the Chinese deputy minister of foreign affairs told the Soviet Union charge d’affaires, that China is not supporting negotiations between the DRV and the US. The Chinese considered this subversive for Vietnamese morale, when the rebellion was going well. This prompted a further accusation to the Soviets, asking why the Soviets were so keen on pursuing peace negotiations when the NLFSV was under pressure. The Chinese suggested that negotiations at that moment would favor the US, and suggested the USSR was cooperating with the US.[[66]](#footnote-66)

The competition that started between the USSR and the PRC over aid to the DRV was born part out of ideological differences, part of attaining possible influence in the DRV. Ideologically, the competition was about being the leading communist country; possible influence in Vietnam would be a consequence of this aid. This competition turned into conflict in the months after the change of government in the USSR. The renewed proactive approach by the USSR led to conflict over aid, leading to a prohibition by the Chinese to use their airspace for aid to the DRV in February 1965.

This incident returns in many works on the Sino-Soviet split.[[67]](#footnote-67) In these works it is used as an example of clashes over the aid by highlighting Chinese oversensitivity and Soviet bluntness. Although many works blame the conflict over aid on Chinese obstructionism, there are other factors to consider. Besides problems and conflicts between both sides of the split, Soviet inefficiencies and bottlenecks in Vietnamese railways were found as the causes of the delivery problems of the USSR to the DRV.[[68]](#footnote-68) This is reiterated by former Chinese diplomats during a conference on the Sino-Soviet Split. They reaffirmed that Chinese aid was sincere and there were many other factors led to the problems surrounding the aid to Vietnam. During this meeting in Beijing in 2004, former Chinese diplomats stated that the Chinese always deemed aid to Vietnam essential for their support to the national liberation struggle.[[69]](#footnote-69)

A pamphlet criticizing both the policy of the “US imperialists” as the “USSR revisionists” was publicized in China in September 1965. The pamphlet, *Long live the victory of the people’s war,* attributed to party official Lin Biao,criticized the US and USSR for not having faith in the power of the masses, especially in Vietnam. The most compelling message of this pamphlet is that China is the example for the world communist movement, stressing Chinese global ambition. Besides the envisioned role on in global world politics, the article also reaffirmed a radicalization of ideology, as Maoist thought is characterized as the only correct Marxist-Leninist thought.

China was projecting itself as the one true communist power, at home and abroad. The PRC blamed the Soviet Union for turning away from true revolutionary Marxist-Leninism, and to open the system to revisionism. The term revisionist was used as an epithet intrinsically connected to the Soviets. The practice of denouncing Khrushchev continued even through the years of the Brezhnev administration. By denouncing the USSR as revisionists, the Chinese presented themselves as the sole true Marxist-Leninist movement. The use of the term revisionists was used not only in internal propaganda, but also in external communiques.

The support for the war in Vietnam also had domestic aims for the PRC. With the war effort in Vietnam, Mao hoped to expose revisionists in China.[[70]](#footnote-70) By inciting the masses for the revolutionary struggle in Vietnam, Mao hoped to inspire the Chinese to a radical and avant-garde ideology. This process fitted in with Mao’s ideal of Marxism with a continual revolution. This ideology would later lead to the Cultural Revolution, when Mao hoped to reorganize the CCP by supporting radical elements over the old party elite.

On numerous occasions, the Chinese claimed to be unable to join the representatives of the USSR at the negotiation table because of ideological differences between the two. They used ideological differences to create and enhance problems in the world.[[71]](#footnote-71) This propaganda had a major influence on large parts of the Chinese populace. Ideology and radicalism were put on the forefront of policy. This is a trend that continued until the end of the Cultural Revolution. It must be stated here that this radical course was not followed by all in the party. Zhou Enlai can be regarded as a moderate in this time of radicalization in the PRC.[[72]](#footnote-72)

**Soviet-Vietnamese Relations:**

The Soviet diplomats in Vietnam were disenchanted about the Vietnamese willingness to adopt the Chinese position, to cast a negative view on the Soviet Union and brand the Soviets revisionists aiding the imperialists cause. After the change of power at the Kremlin, the commentaries on the Soviet Union emanating from Vietnam gradually became more positive. An article in the Vietnamese VWP magazine *Hoc Tap*, which carried an ideological attack on the Soviet Union, was therefore met with surprise among Soviet officials.  
 It was an anomaly in the positive atmosphere between the two countries. Although Pham Van Dong had it rectified, the Soviets harbored a certain mistrust to the Vietnamese, and remained vigilant towards the Vietnamese press. Because the author of the article was well connected with the VWP upper cadres, it raised suspicions to the sincerity of Vietnamese compliance to the Soviet Union.[[73]](#footnote-73) The *Hoc Tap* affair shows that although at least lip service was paid to the USSR, there was division within the VWP, and there were still cadres harboring mistrust towards the Soviets. This in turn created reciprocal mistrust among Soviet officials.

This mistrust comes to the fore in the sobering relations after the initial peak stemming from the change in the Kremlin. On 23 November 1964 the Soviet Embassy counselor explained to GDR Embassy staff that the Soviet Union was disappointed in the attitude of the DRV. They found it difficult to improve the image of the USSR and Eastern European states in Vietnam, mainly the Chinese influence and propaganda were regarded as the reasons for this.[[74]](#footnote-74)

They also discussed the visit of Pham Van Dong to the USSR, which did not yield any conclusive results. Xuan Thuy, the minister of Foreign Affairs of the DRV up to 1965, who was also present at the visit, was believed to be more oriented towards the Chinese. The preferences of a few individuals within the Vietnamese party leadership negatively affected the relation with the Soviet Union. The conversation between these diplomats shows how the Soviets were still in the dark on the position of the DRV. This uncertainty on the DRV’s position towards the USSR hampered relations.[[75]](#footnote-75)

In December 1964, the atmosphere in the DRV seemed to have turned more favorable towards the USSR, with delegations travelling back and forth between the USSR and the DRV. The USSR was starting aid programs, and a major disagreement on the topic of Vietnam arose between the Soviets and Chinese. The issue would remain on the table for the rest of the conflict. The USSR supported the DRV in their preliminary talks on a negotiated settlement in the south, possible neutralization, eventually followed by reunification according to the 1954 Geneva agreements.[[76]](#footnote-76) The hardliners in the VWP leadership rejected these ideas. The Soviet Ambassador Shcherbakov complained about a Chinese faction in the Vietnamese leadership to other Embassy staff, and believed the Chinese had significant influence on VWP policy. The Chinese were opposed to negotiations as they believed the struggle had to be won on the battlefield, a point of contention between the USSR and PRC concerning Vietnam that would not abide throughout the conflict.[[77]](#footnote-77)

The Vietnamese did not hide their renewed relation with the USSR to the Chinese. Even though relations had improved after the change in Moscow, still many differences between the DRV and USSR resided. The Vietnamese supported the Soviet initiatives that tried to reconcile the CPSU and the CCP. In conversations with both parties and in independent statements, the DRV leadership called for unity of the world socialist movement.[[78]](#footnote-78) The DRV was not playing the two superpowers off against each other, but assumed the role of mediator between the communist powers. When the reconciliation process proved to be not forthcoming, the DRV left it to the USSR and the PRC to open talks. It stopped the mediation efforts and instead urged both parties separately for reconciliatory talks. Furthermore, it called onto other third countries not to intervene in the split, as the DRV concluded that would only complicate matters further.[[79]](#footnote-79)

After the failure of a trilateral meeting, the CPSU central committee and the VWP met between 11 April and 17 April 1965. There a new program worth billions of rubles was agreed upon, not only to the DRV but also to the NLF. The Soviet Union also assisted by sending military personnel, especially trainers. The DRV made clear that although it was in need of materiel and trainers for this new military hardware, no pilots or volunteers from the USSR should be sent.[[80]](#footnote-80)

The Soviet Union assisted in the diplomatic struggle, as it joined the PRC and DRV in the condemnation of allied bombing of the DRV. In their criticisms they focused not only on the cost of human lives, but also on the prevention of escalation into a world war. The USSR also joined China in warnings against invasion of the DRV. Via multiple channels the message was transmitted to the US, that invasion of the DRV would be unacceptable to the China. [[81]](#footnote-81) These Soviet and Chinese warnings had strategic implications for US involvement in Vietnam.

Regardless of US action, the DRV planned to expand its war in the South, focusing their available resources into defense in their three-year-plan in 1965. The resolve of the DRV and the NLFSV is compelling, to continue the fight even when supplies were lacking due to disagreements between the USSR and China. Even when the struggle in the south was lacking, the DRV leadership persisted.[[82]](#footnote-82) The USSR push for a negotiated settlement fell on deaf ears.

Besides this warmongering by the DRV leadership, notably by General Vo Nguyen Giap, the DRV was in fact following a two-track approach to the conflict, looking for preliminary talks with the US while continuing the conflict. The talk-fight strategy of the DRV started early in the conflict, but it would take longer for it to yield concrete results. With this strategy, talks were used to increase pressure on the US to achieve a restriction on bombing of the DRV, and yield concessions that could lead to an advantage on the battlefield.[[83]](#footnote-83) On the other hand, the fighting would continue unabated.

A Soviet mission under Alexander Shelepin went to the DRV in January 1966.[[84]](#footnote-84) During the visit the Soviets saw the split in the VWP confirmed, as party members opposed to the Soviets were absent. The officials that received the delegation were neutralists or perceived to be pro-Soviet. The split concerned the Soviet delegation, because of strong Chinese influence on the divided VWP. The contacts with Van Dong, Le Duan and Ho Chi Minh were tense.

The position of China caused discomfort to the Soviets, as they felt China overruled Vietnam in its decision making process. The Soviets feared that the Chinese would cause the Vietnamese a lot of harm, by pushing the Vietnamese to carry out a mistaken policy. After the visit of Shelepin, the Chinese in February accused the Soviets in Vietnam of looking for influence in Vietnamese politics, and push the Vietnamese into negotiations. China also claimed the Soviets were trying to sow dissention between the Vietnamese and Chinese.[[85]](#footnote-85) The Vietnamese requested the Soviets to normalize relations with China, in order not to raise problems between the DRV and the PRC. Vietnam would not subordinate itself to any of the communist big powers, according to the DRV diplomat Huan Muoi.[[86]](#footnote-86)

On the war, the Vietnamese would continue the war and believed they would be successful with socialist countries’ support. To achieve this support, the Sino-Soviet split would have to be put aside and the relation between China and the USSR normalized. One of the examples is the problems involving aid: the Vietnamese asked for understanding for the Chinese position.[[87]](#footnote-87) Problems occurred via infrastructural problems with the railways, and it took time to fix. The Chinese refused Soviet ships and referred the ships to direct aid to the DRV via the sea. The USSR refused this to avoid colliding with the US navy in the warzone around the DRV.[[88]](#footnote-88)

On negotiations, the Vietnamese had a wait and see approach. They did not reject negotiations outright, but they did not have a clear policy. The Soviets tried to convince them of the correctness of the political struggle and urged the Vietnamese to focus on the political initiatives.[[89]](#footnote-89)

**Sino-Vietnamese Relations**

The relation between the Chinese and Vietnamese came under pressure in the years 1964-1966. It is clear how the Chinese perceived growing Soviet influence as a threat to their influence, and acted accordingly. The Chinese wielded a lot of power over Vietnamese decision-making, which was regarded as the attitude of a ‘big brother’.[[90]](#footnote-90) Needless to say, this eventually caused friction between the Chinese and Vietnamese.

Van Dong agreed with Mao that the war should be limited to the south, but that the north should also prepare for war, to be ready may it come.[[91]](#footnote-91) The Vietnamese agreed with the Chinese principle of a limited guerilla in the south. Not knowing how the US would respond, preparations for escalation were made by the DRV, but also by the PRC. Escalation was not wanted but a real possibility.

Mao closed the meeting on the words “Only when you have attained the military advantage, it is time to sit at the negotiating table.” On this topic, the Vietnamese had a double response, on the one hand they agreed on the Chinese principle of negotiating from strength, but as we have seen the DRV was also looking for options to negotiate with the US. The position Mao assumed was not one of equals, but one of a preacher. He talked about the Chinese vision on the war, and hardly listened to what the Vietnamese had to say.

When Mao convened with VWP Politburo member Hoang van Hoan in December ‘64, he did not talk about the actual aid from China.[[92]](#footnote-92) He talked to van Hoan as a teacher, telling how the war should be fought, and how it could be won. He also warned the Vietnamese to be cautious in their dealings with the USSR, because the Soviets would try to use Vietnam as a bargaining chip for their dealings with the US.

The Chinese made clear that they did not wish to formulate a joint statement in conjunction with the USSR and the DRV.[[93]](#footnote-93) The PRC did not wish to formulate a joint statement due to disagreements on the course of the socialist camp. As each party has a different opinion, each party should give its own statement. The Chinese gave permission to the Vietnamese to formulate a statement with the USSR.[[94]](#footnote-94) China’s abstinence on a joint statement took the political weight off the statement, which in turn became rather useless. The Soviets and the Vietnamese were frustrated with China’s moral objections. China used ideological differences to refrain from rapprochement. Furthermore, this Chinese position on negotiations, wherein they gave permission to the USSR and DRV to formulate a joint statement again is telling on the power-relation between the PRC and DRV.

Whereas the Vietnamese were content with the change in the Soviet policy, the Chinese were disappointed with the new Soviet leadership and blamed the new leaders in Moscow for an apparent lack of change.[[95]](#footnote-95) The term Khrushchevism without Khrushchev was used to denounce the new Soviet policies. In the context between the Chinese and Vietnamese, it may also have been exaggerated to convince the Vietnamese to dissociate from the new USSR leadership.

At the same time, Zhou Enlai warned Ho Chi Minh of the aid provided by the Soviets. In a similar way of how the Soviets warned the Vietnamese of Chinese aid, Zhou told how the USSR would use aid to increase their influence and the aid would come at a price. He explained his vision: the Soviet Union was a revisionist country which aimed at peaceful coexistence instead of a proletarian revolution. Since the De-Stalinization the Soviet Union had been a revisionist country, hoping to bring about peaceful coexistence with the west, not supporting national liberation movements. The aid coming from the Soviet Union would have the goal to bring about peaceful coexistence with the US. If the Vietnamese did not keep an eye on Soviet aid, Zhou warned Ho, relations between the DRV and PRC might deteriorate.[[96]](#footnote-96) These words entailed both a warning and a threat to the DRV.

The Chinese support for North Vietnam and its military commitment, may have been one of the deterrents that kept the US from invading the DRV. The Chinese were eager to transmit the message to the US that they were committed to Vietnam. In talks with Ayub Khan, the Pakistani leader on 2 April 1965, scheduled to go to the US, Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai made clear that China was committed to Vietnam. It was meant for Ayub Khan to transmit this message to the US, and signal Chinese commitment. Zhou further reiterated China’s previous commitment to Korea, and that repetition would be possible. If the US would invade, so would China. Zhou Enlai closed the meeting with a threefold statement: “China will not provoke a war, China is prepared, China means what it says.”[[97]](#footnote-97) After the consultation with Zhou, the trip of Ayub Khan was cancelled, and the Chinese relayed the message to the US via the British.[[98]](#footnote-98) The US asked the Brits to reply that “they had received the message.”[[99]](#footnote-99)

In April 1965, a delegation from the VWP went Moscow and Beijing. In Beijing they were rebuffed by the Chinese upon the request of a trilateral declaration concerning the Vietnamese question. The Chinese were unwilling to cooperate and refused to give a trilateral declaration with the USSR. A bilateral declaration between the VWP and China was also out of question. Disappointed, the VWP delegation went on to Moscow, where negotiations were continued and a bilateral declaration was made. The Soviets emphasized the importance to include China in these talks on aid.[[100]](#footnote-100)

The DRV expressed its concern on China, after China refused to join the movement of nonaligned states. China’s foreign policy began to diverge from the socialist movement. According to the minutes of the meeting, the Vietnamese were apparently worried on the Chinese position in the worldwide communist movement. Le Duan made his dissatisfaction with the Chinese known on three questions: he did not understand why the Chinese would not sign a trilateral declaration with the Vietnamese and perhaps the USSR, why the Chinese placed importance to national liberation over unity in the world socialist camp, and why the Chinese considered China and Albania to be the only true Marxist countries.[[101]](#footnote-101)

Furthermore, the subject of negotiations with the US was discussed. When aid had risen to adequate levels, the Vietnamese wished to pursue the fight via military and political means. Once again, this is compliant with the DRV strategy of talk-fight, or fighting while negotiating. The Vietnamese stated that they would welcome negotiations with the US on the condition of cessation of bombing of North Vietnam. For a lasting peace, another prerequisite was for the NLFSV to be included as representatives of the south.[[102]](#footnote-102)

In May, conversations between Ho Chi Minh and the CCP leadership show that China provided support in rear areas, by building roads in North Vietnam.[[103]](#footnote-103) On 17 May Ho had a meeting with Deng Xiaoping, wherein the latter offered to tell the Soviet Union off on their support. “The Soviet Union provides you some support for their own purposes.”[[104]](#footnote-104) If Vietnam finds it inconvenient to expose this fact, let us do it for you. The big brother mentality showed in this fragment, as the Chinese offered to take care of business for the DRV, if the DRV did not dare. Furthermore, the negative perception on Soviet aid is reiterated.[[105]](#footnote-105)

Aid from the Chinese was again the topic during a meeting between Le Duan and the Chinese leadership in June 1965. During his conversations with the Chinese leadership, Le Duan was accused of being a revisionist. Le Duan stated that his visit to Moscow was purely functional, namely to streamline Chinese and Soviet aid to Vietnam. The Chinese replied that they were not able to join the USSR at the same table because of their ideological differences. Notwithstanding the problems due to ideology and Chinese stubbornness concerning trilateral negotiations, the Chinese offered to raise their aid to Vietnam.[[106]](#footnote-106)

The CCP defended their party line to the USSR and Eastern European countries in a statement after a visit of Soviet Ambassador Chervonenko June 1965. In a statement by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs the PRC elaborated on the various problems the Chinese held with Soviet policy. The Chinese held the opinion that the USSR was carrying out a mistaken policy, by not coordinating their actions, openly discussing secret aid programs to the DRV, and trying to win a place at the negotiation table through defamation of the Chinese aid. In the statement the Chinese also accused the Soviets of hypocrisy, because of Soviet complaints over Chinese aid without providing substantial aid themself. The policy of the USSR went against the interest of other socialist countries and was merely beneficial to the USSR according to the Chinese statement.[[107]](#footnote-107)

This statement highlights problems between the USSR and China, although the Chinese statement of course sheds a negative light on the policy of the USSR. China was the biggest provider of aid to Vietnam at the beginning of the conflict, providing over 200.000 guns, 114 million bullets, and 4.439 pieces of artillery among other materiel.[[108]](#footnote-108) The Chinese were trying to keep their massive aid secret. The USSR was openly promoting their aid, which was bound to cause tension between the PRC and USSR. Chinese aid consisted predominantly of easy to use, easy to carry aid. The Chinese aid shifted to small arms and subsistence as rice and other items, when the shift to USSR provided high-end technology assets was made. The Chinese were supplying such vast amounts of aid that Vietnamese infrastructure was overwhelmed.[[109]](#footnote-109) The polemics and blame game were in full swing in 1965. It turned out that the Soviets were leaking information on both the problems with the PRC and on the provided aid.[[110]](#footnote-110) The Chinese attempt to keep this information secret was unsuccessful, considering the CIA had fairly extensive documentation on the matter, which has now been declassified.[[111]](#footnote-111)

In a letter believed to be from July, the CPSU CC complained to the SED CC (East Germany Communist Party) that they had filed a request to the Chinese to enhance coordination of aid to the DRV. They hoped to get the Chinese on board, but the request for a trilateral meeting to discuss the logistics between the CPSU, VWP and CCP was brushed aside by the Chinese. The Chinese reiterated previous arguments, mainly that Soviet aid was insignificant and the Soviet aid program was a means to achieve a foothold in Southeast Asia, trying to assert influence over both China and Vietnam.[[112]](#footnote-112)

The provided aid continued to be a source of contention between the USSR and China. At the international department of the CPSU CC, complaints were made that the Chinese were rendering a lot of Soviet aid obsolete by their pressure not to utilize Soviet armaments. A small note from the International Department of the USSR shows the correlation between the two main issues of the Sino-Soviet Split concerning the Vietnamese question. Chinese advisers were causing problems to Soviet aid, by complaining about the quality and discouraging the use of Soviet armaments. This was intrinsically linked to the way the Chinese wanted to fight the War in Vietnam, restricting the war to a limited protracted guerilla war in South Vietnam. The DRV did not pursue its own foreign policy at that time, as it was dictated by China and the Vietnamese feared Chinese occupation, according to the Soviet official.[[113]](#footnote-113) The USSR was seeking a political solution to the conflict, just as the DRV and the US. On the other hand, the note is clear in that the USSR would not openly contest the Chinese line and promoted socialist unity.[[114]](#footnote-114)

In August 1965, USSR Vietnam specialists reckoned that the position of the USSR in Vietnam had improved, and more Vietnamese were starting to appreciate the aid from the Soviet Union. A problem concerning the distribution of the Soviet aid lay in the fact that Soviet aid did not reach to South Vietnam. The aid provided to the NLFSV, small arms, food, uniforms etcetera, was mostly provided by the Chinese. Within the NLFSV the Chinese were therefore regarded as the sponsors of the Vietnamese. Influence on the VWP leadership remained strong, partly because of successful propaganda campaigns emphasizing China’s solidarity. The Soviets were disgruntled about China beating the drum over aid, as they felt the aid from the PRC consisted more of words than deeds.[[115]](#footnote-115)

This was not the case, as both the Chinese and the Soviet Union provided massive aid to the DRV. One of the biggest problems was Chinese intransigence on the transit of Soviet aid through China.

In November 1965, top-level talks were held between the VWP and the CCP leadership. In a meeting between Mao and Ho Chi Minh, Ho made three major points; the NLFSV should become the new legal government for South Vietnam, the NLFSV should appeal worldwide for support for their struggle and finally that the NLFSV, when recognized as legal power should start negotiations.[[116]](#footnote-116) Mao agreed only on the first point, namely that the NLFSV should be in charge in South Vietnam. The other two points were rejected by Mao. He saw no need for volunteers, as he reasoned that the potential for manpower in Vietnam was abundant, and if necessary, China could step in.[[117]](#footnote-117) China’s position on negotiations was clear, and the Chinese leadership dismissed the call for negotiations with the words ‘time is not ripe’ in December 1965.[[118]](#footnote-118)

China would not directly aid in combat personnel, but conveyed to the DRV leadership that it was ready to do so. After this meeting, China did not increase its aid. It did however voice moral support, as Mao stated China could potentially send reinforcements. The focus on the NLFSV as the appropriate organization for South Vietnam accords to Chinese strategic thought on guerilla warfare.

The rejection of negotiations was in line with earlier statements from the Chinese. As Mao rejected calls for preliminary negotiations, the Vietnamese were involved in schemes to open tentative talks.

It is clear from the context and other sources that the VWP did not wish to accommodate the US in attaining a political solution to the Vietnamese question. Chinese criticisms on the eagerness of the Soviet Union to negotiate are therefore not necessarily warmongering, but a legitimate criticism on the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence.[[119]](#footnote-119)

The Chinese were building a front in Southeast Asia, to confront the US and establish itself as a regional power. The US search for allies did not go well, and even the British refrained from supporting the US.[[120]](#footnote-120) Standing alone, international support for the American action in Vietnam proved absent. This put the NLFSV on a moral high ground for vis a vis the US on the international stage. The NLFSV was convinced of the power of the media and public opinion, and used this in the struggle by presenting themselves as freedom fighters attempting to reunite their country.

**Lumbago, talk-fight in practice**

Even though the Chinese were firmly opposed to negotiations between the DRV and the US, various peace proposals and plans emanated from Eastern European countries. A particular interesting chapter in the talks between the DRV and the US came to us via the Michalowski Report.[[121]](#footnote-121) It is notable that two at first glance relatively successful attempts came from Poland. Chances for third countries appeared because the USSR was not in a position to act as a peace broker anymore. This had several reasons, but the Sino-Soviet again lay at the roots of this particular issue. The tensions had by 1965 risen so high, that the USSR did not want to antagonize China by opening negotiations with the west and sellout Vietnam, something China had blamed on the USSR and continued to do so.[[122]](#footnote-122) Therefore Poland presented an ideal intermediary, as Poland was in the orbit of the USSR, but the USSR could not be associated with a Polish push for negotiations. Besides an appealing partner for the USSR, it was also appealing to the US as Poland was a socialist country with connections in Hanoi.

During the Lumbago initiative, Michalowski flew via Moscow and Beijing to Hanoi, carrying a 14 point peace proposal drawn up by US diplomat Averill Harriman. The effort to bring about negotiations was supported by the Soviets, notably by Minister of Foreign Affairs Gromyko. Michalowski met with Gromyko in Moscow, where the Soviet Foreign Minister voiced his support for the 14 points. The initiative was condemned by the Chinese for aforementioned reasons.[[123]](#footnote-123) The Chinese were open for talks in principle, but only after military victory was achieved.[[124]](#footnote-124)

Although no tangible results came from the meeting, Michalowski recalled the open character of the meeting between Michalowski and the VWP party leadership. Michalowski stressed the sharp contrast between Vietnam and China on the 14 point plan. The Chinese regarded American peace proposals to be a strategy for the war to deceive the Vietnamese and public opinion.[[125]](#footnote-125)

Michalowski presented himself as a neutral peace broker, and conveyed the messages and proposals from Averill Harriman to Ho Chi Minh, Nguyen Duy Trinh and Pham van Dong. Duy Trinh was the on the Chinese line regarding the necessity of a military victory before talks could be opened. Pham van Dong complimented Michalowski for his efforts and ignoring Chinese pressure to cancel the talks directly. Van Dong showed to be open for talks. Duy Trinh also reaffirmed the political struggle, “not to lose the banner of political struggle from the hands”.[[126]](#footnote-126) Michalowski did not succeed in getting a clear picture of the VWP top brass.[[127]](#footnote-127)

The Vietnamese were angry with the Chinese attitude, stressing Vietnamese sovereignty. They wanted to be able to make their own decisions, not have decisions made for them in Beijing. As mentioned earlier, the Vietnamese were making an effort to remain neutral in the Sino-Soviet Split. They did not succeed in complete neutrality, as the Chinese influence on the VWP remained significant. Nevertheless it is telling that the VWP at the end of 1965 accepted these preliminary talks. Although the Chinese may have had a stake in the final rejection of the talks, disconcert between the VWP leadership and the Chinese signals a change in the attitude of the VWP.

Furthermore, Michalowski sensed tension between the NLFSV and the DRV. The DRV seemed to be more reasonable and open to negotiations. The NLFSV in the south was focusing on the war in the south, and had no interested in the bigger picture. On possible escalation to WWIII they said, according to Warsaw’s UN delegate; “They have been fighting for the liberation of their country for 20 years, World War Three is not going to make any difference to them.”[[128]](#footnote-128) In Michalowski’s analysis, the DRV had a more rational approach and was more Soviet oriented, NLF was more on the Chinese position. This came from the position of the NLFSV, who feared that a possible coalition government in the south would be detrimental to their influence. The DRV was very careful to avoid the accusation of selling out the NLFSV, for example in exchange for a stop of the bombing campaign in the north.  
 Another point from Michalowski’s account is the way the Vietnamese assessed the options for possible negotiations. The Vietnamese were following Chinese strategic thinking and stated the situation was not yet ripe for negotiations. They had the conviction you should only join at the round table from a position of strength, and that the US would try to win at the negotiation table what it failed to win on the battleground.[[129]](#footnote-129) As they underestimation US combat strength, and overestimated their own strength and the power of US public opinion, they felt that the right time would come. They needed another Diem Bien Phu before joining at the round table. The wording chosen by the VWP leaders on their strategy has remarkable overlaps with the Chinese discussions late in 1965, for example time being not ripe. The Chinese influence was still strong.

Michalowski concluded that the Vietnamese overestimated their own strength and underestimated the strength of the US. They also overestimated the power of US public opinion; they perceived negotiations at the time as capitulation of the DRV.[[130]](#footnote-130) Furthermore, he perceived that the DRV needed more aid to be able to sustain the effort. The Chinese influence on the DRV was still very important to Vietnamese policy, and they would not subject to US bombing of the DRV.

As the new Soviet administration around Brezhnev consolidated power, it tried to reestablish the relation with the DRV and PRC.[[131]](#footnote-131) The attempts to reconcile with the PRC proved unsuccessful and were soon disbanded. When the conflict in Vietnam escalated, both China and the USSR stepped up their aid and diplomatic efforts. It was also in these fields that the biggest clashed between the two communist powers were. Both the Soviet Union and China stepped up their aid scrambling for influence and power in Vietnam; the Vietnamese were reliant on both parties to be successful in the struggle against the US. The Chinese supported infrastructure and commodities, the USSR provided high-end technological assistance. Both the USSR and China perceived the increased influence of the other socialist power as a worrying development, and tried to convince the DRV leadership to keep away from the sphere of influence of the other.

The conflict over the course of the war was fought out in public, as both parties were publicly attacking the other. China and the USSR pursued different goals with the war, but China enjoyed a better position in the DRV. This is reflected in the way the Vietnamese fought the war, in accordance with Chinese strategic theory, waiting for negotiations until they could negotiate from a position of strength. As both parties grew their own group of adherents, tensions started to arise both in the VWP as between the DRV and the NLFSV.

The Lumbago peace effort showed the major issues in this phase between the USSR and Chinese relating to the war effort in Vietnam. The Soviet Union was encouraging negotiations between the DRV and the US, in accordance with the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence. China tried to build a regional bloc against the US to avoid being encircled by hostile countries. China hoped to establish itself as the true Marxist country, and show Soviet revisionism. The policy of the Soviet Union supported the national liberation movement in Vietnam, but also encouraged efforts for negotiation. It took a middle position between the more radical socialist countries in Southeast Asia and the West. The war continued and intensified into 1966.

**Chapter 3: The DRV Emerges**

The triangular relation between the Soviet Union, China and Vietnam changed further in the period between 1966 and 1968. Although Chinese aid continued to flow to Vietnam, the relation between China and Vietnam declined in this period. Chinese aid went especially to the south, where a protracted guerilla war was fought according to Maoist strategic theory. During these years, the vision on the conflict by the DRV and the NLFSV diverted. This rift was promoted by aid from China and the USSR. The USSR supplied bigger machinery and heavy weaponry used by the north, the Chinese supplied small-arms and ammunition that went to the south.[[132]](#footnote-132) As a consequence, the north and the south were more influenced by their respective providers.

China went through an unstable period of radicalization during the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution started with the creation of Maoist Cultural Revolution Group on 16 May 1966, with the goal of enforcing communism on China by removing the traditional elements from Chinese society. The Cultural Revolution and the related radicalism caused disaffection between China and the DRV, which feared that the movement would spread to Vietnam. Under the influence of the Chinese Cultural Revolution the relation between the PRC and the USSR went from bad to worse.

The issue of negotiations continued to cause friction between China and the USSR, within the Vietnamese party, as well as between North and South Vietnam. North Vietnam, under constant pressure of US bombing raids, was more inclined to negotiate with the US than South Vietnam. The strategy of talking while fighting was implemented, to achieve the best results by coordinating both elements. In this period we can the success of this strategy, and how the DRV responded to pressures from the USSR and PRC.

One example of negotiations was the Marigold initiative in November and December 1966. A mediation effort of the Poles set out to create an opening for negotiations between the US and the DRV. The Soviet Union was supporting this peace initiative, as opposed to China, which still rejected talks.

After the Marigold initiative, the fighting part of the strategy clearly comes to the fore in the Tet Offensive in January 1968. The Tet Offensive, a big military operation by North Vietnam in the South, was a watershed in the conflict, because after Tet, a new phase of the Vietnam War started. The Tet Offensive can on the one hand be regarded as a break with the earlier period of the war; on the other hand it signals how the balance of power had gradually shifted in the period 1966-1968.

**The Cultural Revolution**

In the years 1966-1968, China underwent radical change during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was aimed at reforming the party in true communist spirit. The movement backfired and had consequences for both China’s internal and external policies. The split with the USSR worsened, and it put extra stress on the relation between the DRV and China. After it became clear that the movement had failed, Mao had to yield and end the Cultural Revolution.

The roots of the Cultural Revolution went back to the Great Leap Forward. Mao’s ongoing effort to keep the party revolutionary necessitated continual change in the party. During Mao’s self-chosen reclusion, some reforms were executed in China. This caused Mao to develop fears of homegrown revisionism. Mao feared that with Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping revisionist tendencies might arise, because they had promoted some change and allowed for more liberalization. Mao got disaffected with CCP politics and he returned to the central stage of the CCP. The party was not as uniform as in the days of Mao and multiple lines had emerged within the party. The Party had to be brought back to a single socialist line, according to Mao.[[133]](#footnote-133) Deng and Liu were branded as revisionists and charged for past mistakes as they were removed from the central stage.

Mao used the term revisionists to brand his opponents, a term also used in polemics against the USSR. Mao used his cult-status to sidestep the party.[[134]](#footnote-134) The famous slogan ‘the party controls the gun; the gun will never control the party’ was disbanded due to Mao’s use of the army. The loyalty of the army proved to be with Mao and not the party, this put Mao in an advantageous position.

Because of the personality cult of Mao, many Chinese responded to this “call to arms to defend the revolution”. The revolutionaries called themselves the Red Guard, as a reference to the small bands of fighters from the Chinese civil war. The Red Guard movement was founded in Augustus 1966 and the movement quickly spread throughout the country, promoted by university professors and students.[[135]](#footnote-135)

After a successful start the Red Guard movement spun out of control and sprawled across the country to “cleanse” China of the ‘Four Olds’: Old customs, old culture, old tradition and old ideas. It was felt the party was infected from within, and the task to cleanse the party and overthrow the revisionist ruling elite had to fallen to people outside the party. It proved to be difficult to control these masses and direct them at the main targets of Mao’s envisioned Cultural Revolution, the (party) elite.

Mao used the Sino-Soviet split to promote ideological commitment from the Chinese population. He used the threat of Soviet-American collusion over Asia to create a common enemy. The alleged betrayal of the revisionist Soviet Union served as an external enemy to bind the people in the Cultural Revolution in China. The war in Vietnam was promoted in the struggle against imperialism. Mao thus used the split and the Vietnam War to promote revolutionary sentiment in China.[[136]](#footnote-136) Due to the ideological ardor of the Cultural Revolution, the gap between the USSR and China widened.

During the Cultural Revolution, Foreign Policy was put on hold, as the party was preoccupied with the reorganization of the party and the Red Guards. The Cultural Revolution signals an inward turn of Chinese politics, when radicalism and revolutionary spirit were leading elements in foreign policy, which resulted in deterioration of foreign relations.[[137]](#footnote-137) Although the Chinese cut diplomatic ties with most countries, they remained committed to the communist cause in Vietnam.[[138]](#footnote-138)

The increased conflict with the USSR negatively affected aid to Vietnam. China put more emphasis on the Sino-Soviet ideological split than on the Vietnamese war.[[139]](#footnote-139) The Cultural Revolution caused concern and disenchantment among the Vietnamese. China tried to assert more influence in Vietnam, but the Cultural Revolution casted a shadow over the relation as Vietnam feared the Chinese fanaticism and was afraid of the implications of the Chinese problematic foreign policy. The VWP reiterated its independence as Le Duan distanced Vietnam from the Cultural Revolution, when he declared that Vietnam considered the Cultural Revolution an internal affair of China.

The Cultural Revolution had other unintended consequences; trains with supplies intended for the DRV were hijacked by various groups in China. Both the USSR and the DRV complained about these thefts. By making the PLA (Chinese Army) responsible for the railway system in 1967, the Chinese managed to secure safe passage for the supplies.[[140]](#footnote-140) Other problems caused by the Cultural Revolution were the volunteering Red Guards fighting in Vietnam. China had 200.000 servicemen in Vietnam in 1967, some of which were causing problems.[[141]](#footnote-141) According to a conversation between Mao, Zhou Enlai and Pham van Dong, volunteering Red Guards from China caused “some complications”.[[142]](#footnote-142)

Eventually the PLA stepped in to remove the Red Guards from the political stage in the second half of 1968, causing many casualties among its zealous supporters. The Cultural Revolution Group, founded with lots of bravado, was disbanded in favor of the Party. An unwanted byproduct of his quest to remove the party’s rigid hierarchy and create more popular influence was that Mao enhanced the power of the army, so that at the end of the Cultural Revolution it had become a more powerful institution than the Party.[[143]](#footnote-143)

**Negotiating while fighting**

In 1965, the Vietnamese had rejected various proposals for talks with the US.[[144]](#footnote-144) The views of the US and the DRV were at that time pertinently irreconcilable. The DRV was fighting for unification, an indivisible goal not open to concessions. The resulting conflict would therefore be either lost or won.[[145]](#footnote-145) The Vietnamese stressed in talks with the Chinese that the VWP was one party for one Vietnam, and it could not accept the division of their country.[[146]](#footnote-146) The Chinese held a similar view on Vietnam, and warned that the DRV should avoid a rupture between the North and South.[[147]](#footnote-147)

The substantial Soviet aid had effect on the relation between the USSR and Vietnam, which reoriented its course and paid lip service to the USSR at least. Vietnam silenced open critiques on the Soviet “revisionists”.[[148]](#footnote-148) Eventually, the Soviets eased the pressure on the DRV and accepted the differences of opinion.[[149]](#footnote-149)

In August 1966, the DRV leadership met with the CPSU CC in Moscow. The Soviets wanted to know more about the position of the VWP CC, and the vision of the DRV leadership on the war. The DRV leadership was generally optimistic, but reiterated it would need more supplies than ever before. The struggle on the battlefield would be intensified over the dry season (October-March) and the DRV leadership reckoned the US would probably do the same. They reiterated the importance of the political struggle and stressed that this struggle should be intensified. With the political struggle, they aimed to win over world public opinion and show that the US was impeding peace talks. Conditions for actual negotiations with the US were still not ripe according to the VWP CC. The CPSU CC agreed on the point of the continuation of the military struggle, but emphasized the political struggle for world public opinion.[[150]](#footnote-150) The CPSU delegation stressed that the VWP CC should start negotiations with the US to show the real reasons behind the US ‘scheme’ and unmask the US via negotiations. The CPSU CC advised to entrust a third party to open contacts.[[151]](#footnote-151)

It is compelling to see the way in which the DRV and USSR stress the importance of public opinion. As it was the first televised war, the media were very important for the image of the conflict. They believed that internal and international pressure would press the US into retreat. The Marigold initiative started after this last meeting. In the Marigold affair contacts were opened by the Poles, and the US was denounced via the media, in accordance with the strategy from the meeting.

In January 1967, during the 13th Plenum of the VWP CC, the diplomatic struggle was stepped up.[[152]](#footnote-152) As the DRV continued its struggle, the USSR at the same time received news from Hanoi that Chinese pressure against negotiations had become less.[[153]](#footnote-153) Possibly the Chinese were trying to increase tension between the NLFSV and the DRV leadership. By placing emphasis on the diplomatic struggle, the DRV seemed to move away from the Chinese position.

A speech of Nguyen Duy Trinh at the 13th Plenum of the Central Committee of the VWP was interesting for the Vietnamese position on negotiations. The CC was the central organ to the struggle and the strategy of the DRV, as Le Duan stressed in his speech on the Talking while fighting stratagem on the 12th Plenum.[[154]](#footnote-154) The stratagem, as defined by Le Duan, could now be implemented. Duy Trinh elaborated on the talking while fighting stratagem, and the importance to maintain a high posture in the military struggle. Negotiating from strength was important, so attaining the upper hand in the military struggle was crucial before negotiations could be started.[[155]](#footnote-155)

The power of public opinion was also important in his speech, as he expected world public opinion and internal tensions in the US to force the US government to change its policy. The power of public opinion in the US was overestimated by the DRV, as turned out later in the war.[[156]](#footnote-156) This speech focused less on the dissention in the Socialist camp; nevertheless he talked on maintaining socialist solidarity and union of the socialist camp.

In April 1967, Zhou Enlai discussed the struggle in the south with Pham Van Dong. The Vietnamese expected the war to continue, but they were planning offenses to defeat the enemy in dry season. More importantly, the Chinese voiced support for the political struggle, as the Chinese considered war to be the highest form of politics. The Chinese had a different connotation to the political struggle, the Chinese mainly aimed at propaganda efforts to disunite the enemy and win international sympathy.[[157]](#footnote-157)

On 11 April 1967, the Chinese actually warned the Vietnamese against negotiations, using a story of the Chinese Civil War as example. The Soviet Union had in the past pressed the Chinese communists to negotiate in the Civil War when it was unnecessary. The Chinese refused to negotiate and final victory was won thereafter. The Vietnamese should resist Soviet pressure for negotiations as well, because they were just as able to win final victory.[[158]](#footnote-158) The Chinese reiterated their stratagem that one should only negotiate from a position of strength.[[159]](#footnote-159)

In Dec 1967, the US was seeking contact with the Vietnamese. The US probed Polish diplomat Michalowski, to reconvene the Geneva Conference. The idea of putting all involved parties back around the table kept resurfacing. Nevertheless, the Polish diplomat urged against reconvening of Geneva until all parties were interested, because the Chinese would most likely ruin the conference, thereby subverting Soviet sponsored peace efforts.[[160]](#footnote-160)

Chinese pressure against talks was fierce during the Vietnam War. One of the strategic reasons was that China was ingrained with the fear of being surrounded by enemies. If the USSR managed to convince the DRV to negotiate and conclude an agreement with the US, than China would be confronted with double fallout. It would help “US-Soviet collusion”, and at the same time complete hostile encirclement of China. By forestalling peace talks, the PRC tried to stay clear of this strategic nightmare.[[161]](#footnote-161)

***Marigold***

Attempts at finding an opening for negotiations continued in 1966. Chinese pressure to dismiss these attempts remained strong. An interesting chapter is the Marigold initiative, which took place in November and December 1966. The initiative started from Poland and Italy in conjunction with the US. Much has been written about the affair, which for long was shrouded by a veil of mystery. In 2012, the American Vietnam expert James Hershberg published the book ‘Marigold, the lost chance for peace’. This book sheds a new light on the affair. It uses ‘long hidden sources’ to show that the process actually had a better chance for success than long has been presumed.[[162]](#footnote-162)

The Marigold initiative entailed an abortive negotiation attempt between North Vietnam and the US, wherein Poland tried as peace broker. Even though the US did not have much faith in the venture, Polish diplomat Jerzy Lewandowski had US permission for exploratory talks. A prerequisite for talks by the Vietnamese was that the US would seize all acts of war against the DRV (mainly bombing of Hanoi).[[163]](#footnote-163)

The Poles had high expectations of the plan due to a number of reasons, the plan was more flexible than previous other plans, and there was hope that the Vietnamese would also be able to show greater flexibility, with easing pressure from China due to China’s preoccupation with the Cultural Revolution.[[164]](#footnote-164)

The negotiations were nevertheless influenced by the Chinese. When Le Duan went to Beijing to discuss the possible negotiations, Zhou Enlai advised against negotiations between the DRV and the US, as time was still “not ripe”, according to Zhou Enlai. Mao disagreed with Zhou on the issue of negotiations and advised that the Vietnamese would know best when to accede to negotiations, and that China would actually be glad to assist in the process of negotiations.[[165]](#footnote-165)

The Poles discussed the proposals with Brezhnev. Brezhnev told the Poles he had discussed the same plans with the Vietnamese, and that the Vietnamese had examined the proposals, but not taken any decision. The USSR gave its consent to the plan, but seemed disappointed the DRV did not contact the USSR for help with the negotiations with the US.

Both communist powers gave their consent for the negotiation-process, but where largely kept out of the actual negotiations. It seems that both sides wanted to remain in control over the situation, and if they were not allowed to participate at least be present. The DRV acted independent, and neither power objected to this development.

A meeting was set to take place on 6 December 1966 in Warsaw.[[166]](#footnote-166) Preparations on all sides were troublesome, as both sides had avowed strict secrecy. The Vietnamese acted on their own and did not inform their Chinese counterparts or the NLFSV. A Vietnamese envoy secretly went to Poland, where the first preliminary meeting was set to take place.[[167]](#footnote-167)

Although envoys on both sides were ready for contact, no meeting took place.[[168]](#footnote-168) After the failure of the parties to meet, a new phase started wherein both sides were still open for contact, but refused to take the first step. Continued bombing of the DRV made the Vietnamese entertain the thought of axing the talks.[[169]](#footnote-169) Hardliners within the US government pointed to the whole endeavor as a design to merely halt the bombing. Looking back at the Marigold affair, we can conclude that this was actually a viable explanation, as a bombing pause was one of the goals of the talking while fighting strategy.

When the bombing continued and hit targets in Hanoi, the DRV withdrew from the negotiations. The Vietnamese informed the USSR they were breaking off contact on 15 December.[[170]](#footnote-170) The Poles, Vietnamese and the Soviets condemned the US for ruining this chance for peace talks. When the Vietnamese broke off contact via the Poles however, Politburo Member Le Duc Tho requested the USSR to attempt to initiate contact with the US.[[171]](#footnote-171) On 28 (or 29) December the North Vietnamese rejected further talks, possibly under Chinese pressure.

The bombings were also used in the campaign to win over public opinion. The bombing raids sowed discontent among the American public and in the US government.[[172]](#footnote-172) The Marigold affair had thus been a success on the diplomatic level to win over public opinion. Doubt was cast by US hawks on the willingness of the Vietnamese to actually negotiate with the US. Johnson reviewed the entire process and concluded that the North Vietnamese just weren’t ready.[[173]](#footnote-173)

The Vietnamese overture to the USSR was significant, because it shows a turn in the behavior of the DRV concerning negotiations. Whereas the USSR was trying to press the DRV into negotiations before, on this occasion the Vietnamese requested Soviet mediation in an attempt to initiate negotiations. One could doubt the willingness of the Vietnamese to compromise, then again, a Vietnamese request for negotiations could be regarded as a step forward.

The spinoff from the failed Marigold initiative consisted of other proposals by the Canadians and UN General Secretary U Thant. One of these plans was to convene another session with the ICC countries. The US rebutted these proposals, stating that the ICC had not rendered the hoped-for results in the past. The US tried to use the USSR to reconvene with the Vietnamese via a new Soviet sponsored diplomatic offensive under the codename Sunflower.[[174]](#footnote-174)

The discussion on the viability of the talks has been cast before, and may be about to set again with the publications of Pierre Asselin and James Hershberg.[[175]](#footnote-175) The view propagated by Asselin is at odds with the view of Hershberg, who holds that there was a lost chance for peace. Asselin focusses on the strategy behind Vietnamese talks to argue the view that there is no lost chance for peace in Vietnam. According to Asselin, the Vietnamese were no less dogmatic than the Chinese, and were only openly requesting talks with the US to obtain public support. Joining negotiations from any other position than a victorious one was seen as yielding to the enemy. Negotiating from a position of weakness was unacceptable.[[176]](#footnote-176)

This criticism has also been voiced by Zhai, an expert on China in the Cold War. In his passage on negotiations he refers to the fighting while talking strategy of the DRV; it was a way of improving the chances of North Vietnam in the war and a way to drive a wedge between the US and the Saigon regime.[[177]](#footnote-177)

Before the 1968 change, the DRV accused the US of using negotiations as mere public opinion tools. As this was the one of the policy uses of the DRV regarding negotiations, it is easy to accuse the DRV of hypocrisy. Another aim of negotiations was of a more strategic nature, to conceal strategic intentions.[[178]](#footnote-178) The speech by Duy Trinh supports the view of Pierre Asselin, who maintains that there was no lost chance for peace before the negotiations in Paris were started in 1968.[[179]](#footnote-179)

The discussion on the possibilities of negotiations is important for this thesis, as it is inextricably linked to the Sino-Soviet Split over Vietnam. The influence and pressure of the Soviet Union could account for eventual negotiations, whereas China was opposed to these negotiations and could be accounted for the rejection. The process of negotiations has therefore been linked to the Sino-Soviet Split and the influence of the socialist powers over Vietnam. In the view of Asselin, China and the USSR were involved in the process, but eventually the DRV decided its own fate and followed its own strategy. The Sino-Soviet Split and the ensuing influence of China and the USSR on DRV policy were only of secondary importance.

**The Tet Offensive**

Using the talking while fighting strategy of, the Vietnamese built up to the Tet Offensive. The Tet Offensive in January 1968 had two main goals: the Vietnamese hoped to inspire a popular rebellion by breaking the military stalemate in the south, and to dispel the notion via the media that the US was winning the war in Vietnam. In hindsight, it is remarkable to see that whereas the first goal of inspiring a popular rebellion and breaking down the authority of the Saigon regime utterly failed, the offensive actually succeeded in their second goal of changing public opinion on the Vietnam War. By using the media in their campaign, they successfully rallied public opinion in support of their goal.

The Vietnamese strategy involved three different but related struggles as outlined by Duy Trinh, consisting of the political struggle, the military struggle and the diplomatic struggle. The political struggle focused on the inner party mechanisms and the alleged infighting in the VWP during the lead-up to the Tet Offensive. The military element consisted of the actual offensive in South Vietnam. The Diplomatic struggle was the struggle not only at the negotiation table, but also to win support from public opinion. The Vietnamese were seeking contact with the US, not for negotiations to force the US to back down and create an opportunity for the DRV to prepare for the offensive.[[180]](#footnote-180) The Tet Offensive is a case in point of the three struggles, as it used all three levels.

The Sino-Soviet Split played an important role in the run-up to the Tet Offensive, as the Split was reflected within the VWP. Since Le Duan and his comrades had taken over the lead in the Lao Dong Party, different currents in the party had emerged.[[181]](#footnote-181) A faction which was more affiliated with the Soviet Union and another faction which seemed more at the hand of the Chinese. The Vietnamese maintained a difficult balancing act to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union and with China.

Purges in the VWP in 1967 served the purpose of maintaining this balance, as the DRV leadership showed the USSR that too much meddling in Vietnamese politics would not be accepted by removing pro-Soviet elements. To the USSR, this was a disappointing, for they were still actively pushing for a negotiated settlement of the conflict*.* The USSR did not want to press the VWP harder as it did not want to estrange Hanoi.[[182]](#footnote-182) With these purges, Hanoi also showed the Chinese that the VWP was curbing too much Soviet influence. These purges enabled the DRV to avoid confrontation with its two major aid donors.

The military strategy of the Tet Offensive remains remarkable. The guerilla in the south had been fought in the countryside, giving the NLFSV the advantage of local knowledge, adhering to Maoist tradition. In a meeting between the Chinese and Vietnamese on 11 April 1967, the Vietnamese talked about intensification of the war. Mao advised against intensification and advised to maintain a low profile. He compared fighting a war to eating, one should not have too big of a bite in one time. Preservation of your forces was essential, according to Mao.[[183]](#footnote-183) The Tet offensive was not planned according to Maoist strategic principle, for the Tet Offensive involved attacks on major cities, something Mao and Zhou had explicitly warned not to. The Chinese had propagated a long war of attrition, not clashing with the US forces head on.[[184]](#footnote-184) This turned out to be one of the reasons for the tactical failure of the Tet Offensive.[[185]](#footnote-185)

The Tet Offensive also did not use Soviet military doctrine. Although some big unit warfare was prepared to lure away military forces from the cities, the main thrust of the attack was by small units in the cities. This signals that the influence of both the USSR and the PRC over military policy had become marginal. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese were still dependent on aid from the Soviet Union, especially since China’s preoccupation with the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese economy was strained by the Cultural Revolution, leading to shortages on all sorts of goods.

Even though the USSR was reluctant to supply the Vietnamese in their preparations for this big offensive, the USSR continued its aid programs. The first reason why the Soviets continued their aid was competition with the Chinese. As leaders of the Communist world, the USSR could not afford to loosen the bonds between the USSR and Vietnam. The competition with the Chinese caused worries that the Chinese might step in to fill the void. This competitive argument for influence was supplemented with a more ideological reason. Besides the vision on leadership in the Soviet Camp, the USSR also had its internationalist duty to aid socialist revolutions abroad.

This brings us to the odd conclusion that the USSR, even though they were opposed to the proactive struggle in the theater of Vietnam, ended up with providing Vietnam with aid for the Tet offensive. This was diametrically opposed to the line advocated by the Kremlin, to push the DRV into negotiations with the US.[[186]](#footnote-186) The hardliners in Hanoi scored a tactical victory on the USSR, as planning for the Tet Offensive got underway.

In this last phase of the conflict in Vietnam up to 1968, the Sino-Soviet Split and the Vietnam War became congruent. Both the USSR and the PRC had invested in the national liberation struggle of the Vietnamese.

The Cultural Revolution in China changed the dynamic of the Sino-Soviet conflict, as China became preoccupied with its internal radicalism. The Sino-Soviet Split widened, but the relation between the DRV and PRC also suffered. The stratagem fighting while negotiating was put into practice with the Marigold affair and the Tet offensive. When negotiations broke down, the DRV used the media to put the blame on the US and create goodwill for the Vietnamese cause in public opinion.

The Marigold affair showed the intention of the USSR to bring about a quick solution to conclude the war via peaceful negotiations, and the podium this offered for Polish mediation.[[187]](#footnote-187) The peaceful coexistence of the Soviets and the fear of escalation were important factors for Soviet decision-making. The Vietnamese seemed to use the negotiations for their own goals, and used the negotiations as a front in their struggle for unification of their country. China objected due to the strategic implications of a neutral Vietnam. The historical debate on the issue of whether or not peace was attainable will probably continue.

The Tet Offensive showed that neither the Chinese nor the Soviets managed to hold an influential position in the DRV, as its supporters were sidelined in the run-up to the Tet Offensive. There was factionalism in the DRV, but the VWP managed to control the differences in the party and between the north and south. The Tet Offensive is an episode in the war that highlights the Vietnamese self-determination gained through the Sino-Soviet Split.

# Conclusion

The Vietnam War was the focal point of two conflicts in the 1960s, the well-known war between the DRV and the US, and the Sino-Soviet Split. These two conflicts were interrelated, and events in one conflict reflected on the other. In this thesis I have mainly focused on the conflict between China and the USSR, and the way in which the Sino-Soviet Split reflected on the Vietnam War.

The Split that had emerged in the 1950s widened in the 1960s. Although the Soviet Union was partly to blame for the Split, the Chinese were mostly to blame for the exacerbation of the Split. The Sino-Soviet Split had started with Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech”, but turned into a conflict with worldwide repercussions. The policy of peaceful coexistence caused much friction between the communist great powers. The Chinese felt the policy of peaceful coexistence went directly against the anti-imperialist struggle, and regarded it to be a betrayal of the principles Marxist-Leninist theory.

The ideological conflict between China and the USSR also focused on which country was the leading communist country. When the Soviet Union “betrayed” the struggle, China aimed to become the leader of the communist movement. When this failed, Mao moved the PRC away from the socialist world into the Third world, as leader of the intermediate zone. After Khrushchev was ousted the new administration hoped to reconcile with China, but to no avail. The detonation of China’s nuclear device in 1964 highlighted the Chinese claim to power, and added a new dimension to the Split. With both the Soviets and the Chinese committed to Vietnam, competition for influence started.

The ideological struggle between the USSR and PRC was also reflected in the Chinese accusation that the USSR was not actively supporting national liberation movements. The USSR claimed it was supporting the anti-imperialist struggle via political means. China was directly supporting national liberation movements, hoping to gain influence in these countries and support for the PRC. This keenly reflects the position on Vietnam, where the Soviets did not want to clash with the US but supported the DRV in its struggle nonetheless, still aiming to resolve the conflict swiftly via political means.

It can be argued that the DRV was able to formulate its own policies in the 1960s exactly because of the Sino-Soviet Split. Pressure from both the PRC and USSR was never too strong, because both the Chinese and Soviets feared to estrange the DRV. If the USSR and the PRC would have been able to agree on a common Vietnam policy, the DRV would not have been able to object and the USSR and PRC would have been able to subject Vietnam to their will. The ideological disagreement between the PRC and USSR made it possible for the DRV to shift between Moscow and Beijing. The further into the 1960s, the more the DRV seemed to be able to create its own policies. In the early in the 1960s, the Chinese held significant influence over Vietnamese policy, whereas in the final phase the DRV talked with the US, and in accorded to its own strategic principles in the Tet Offensive. The DRV therefore benefitted from the widening Sino-Soviet Split for its enhanced position in the socialist world and resulting self-determination.

Although both the USSR and China had certain leverage and influence over North Vietnam, the Vietnamese were eventually able to follow their own course. As China radicalized, the DRV opened up channels for negotiations with the US, counter to Chinese advice. It did not move towards the USSR, as shown in the run-up to the Tet Offensive, when some purges were undertaken to remove foreign influences from the government, mainly aimed at the USSR. The talking while fighting strategy included negotiations, but these negotiations mainly functioned to press the US to stop their bombing campaign over Hanoi and rally public opinion. It was a tool in the war instead of a way to end the war. The Vietnamese strategy was therefore only partially supported by the Soviets, who aimed at sincere negotiations to bring the Vietnam War to a peaceful conclusion.

The military struggle was regarded as the essential struggle. Negotiations could only be joined from a position of strength, requiring military victory before the next phase of the conflict could be started. The third of the struggles was the political struggle, which was fought in the own ranks to maintain unity. The biggest challenges in the political struggle were to remain unity between the NLFSV and the DRV, and maintain unity of the socialist camp. Although some dissention and different factions emerged, the VWP remained in control over the “splits” in the VWP.

As neutral state in the Sino-Soviet Split, the DRV frequently called for socialist unity. The Vietnamese urged for normalization of the Sino-Soviet relation from their position of neutrality. Other countries in the socialist world were not able to take such a position, as they were usually connected to either the USSR or the PRC. Third countries have had influence on the course of the Vietnam War. Warsaw Pact States sent aid to the DRV, and the Poles were actively promoting negotiations. The USSR promoted the effort, but due to the tension from the Sino-Soviet Split refrained from making the effort. This created possibilities for third countries to make step onto the diplomatic world stage.

The DRV remained open about its relations to either of the communist giants, and it did not shun from talking about its affiliations with the other. Even though both the USSR and China did not appreciate the bonds between the DRV and the other, they respected it and warned of the dangers of the other party. China disapproved of rapprochement with the USSR and tried to steer the DRV away from the Soviet Union. The Chinese, notably Zhou Enlai, warned of Soviet revisionism and plots to sell out the DRV. On the other side, the USSR warned the DRV for adhering to the Chinese in a similar fashion.

As a neighbor state to both Laos and the DRV, China was well positioned for the post-colonial struggles that emerged in Southeast Asia. The struggle between China and the USSR in Vietnam turned into a competition over influence in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union as a global power was competing with China as regional opponent. Soviet aid for the DRV had to be transported via China, which was a major point of contention. The competition was not only carried out on the ground, but also along ideological lines.

One of the consequences of the split was the lack of coordination of aid to Vietnam. The Soviets and Chinese were constantly at odds over the capacity in which Soviet aid could be transported over Chinese soil. The Soviets wanted to provide additional supplies via Chinese airspace and Chinese ports, which the Chinese rejected as a Soviet attempt to infiltrate China. This lack of coordination caused delays and shortages in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese and Chinese began to grow apart for a number of reasons. The Chinese presented themselves first as compatriots, fighting together against the imperialists. Later, the Vietnamese became weary of the Chinese as they felt that the Chinese were presenting themselves more as a ‘big brother’ and with certain arrogance. This was met with suspicion among the Vietnamese, reminding them of the ancient tributary system, where Vietnam was subjected to Chinese emperors. The radicalization from the Cultural Revolution and related problems made the Vietnamese weary of their relation with China.

The role of China and the USSR in the Vietnam War has received a lot of scholarly interest. The first book on the topic originated in 1963, when P.J. Honey wrote *Communism in Vietnam, it’s role in the Sino-Soviet Dispute.* Although the assessments made by Honey were not all wrong, we have come to see many new layers to the conflict.

With the advent of the post-Cold War world, a new tradition of writing history on the Cold War has emerged. This ‘New Cold War History’ uses different sorts of information, and is multi-archival. John Lewis Gaddis and Odd Arne Westad have been important for this movement, which in recent years has come into full blossom. The more recent researchers have been living the biggest part of their lives outside of the Cold War. They are therefore less influenced by Cold War thinking in their opinions, and less subjective on their object of study. Sergey Radchenko, Lorenz Lüthi, Qiang Zhai, Ang Cheng Guan and Hang-Lien Nguyen have all written volumes on materiel which had been unavailable for decades. As these writers are still discovering their archives, there is one big criticism on these researchers. As they are all going into their respective archives, they seem to forget about the rest and write their findings from a too one-sided perspective. For example, Zhai is an expert on Chinese policy, but the Eastern European archives seem scarcely used for his analysis. A new overarching work using all the new insights we have gained on the Vietnam War has yet to be written.

In my research I have made extensive use of declassified archival material from both China and the USSR, and literature to represent all sources and points of view. This has led me to the conclusion that the Sino-Soviet Split had major implications for the War in Vietnam. It reflected negatively on the aid and the war effort in Vietnam, but on the other hand created the possibility for Vietnam to create a more independent policy. The policy of Vietnam was definitely influenced by China and the USSR, but not to the extent we long believed. Factions within the DRV leadership existed, but the Vietnamese were in the first place nationalists.

Overall, the VWP leadership was influenced by the Sino-Soviet Split, but managed to stay clear of a split between the north and south and within the party. When Vietnamese archives open further, we may be able shed a new light on the Vietnam War. For now we must conclude that the Vietnamese managed to follow a fairly independent course throughout the war in the South, using the Sino-Soviet split. Vietnam finally emerged as the winner of both Wars in Vietnam.

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72. Chi-Kwan, *China and the World*, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. “Document No. 2, Remarks by the GDR Embassy in Hanoi on the article in *Hoc Tap* No. 11/1964, 12 November 1964.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin16*,* p. 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. “Document No. 3, Note No. 131/64 on a conversation between the Soviet Embassy Counselor, Comrade Privalov and Comrade Bibow on 11/23/1964 in the GDR Embassy. 10 December 1964.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. “Document No. 3, Note No. 131/64 on a conversation between the Soviet Embassy Counselor, Comrade Privalov and Comrade Bibow on 11/23/1964 in the GDR Embassy. 10 December 1964.” *CWIHP* Bulletin 16*,* p. 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. “Document No. 4. Note No. 2/65 on Conversations with Comrade Shcherbakov about the Developmental Tendencies in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on 22 and 28 December. 6 January 1965.” *CWIHP* Bulletin 16*,* p. 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Chi-Kwan, *China and the World*. p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. “Document No. 5. Information No. 098 by the CPSU CC to the SED CC, 24 February 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. “Document No. 18. Note on Two Conversations with the Minister Counselor of the DRV Embassy, Comrade Hoan Muoi, on 26 January 1966, in the Cuban Embassy, and on 27 January 1966, on the Occasion of a Farewell Visit to Our Embassy, 27 January 1966.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. “Document No. 11 Unofficial Translation of the Letter of the CPSU CC to the SED CC.”*CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split,* p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. “Document No. 7. Note by the GDR Embassy in Hanoi on a Conversation with Ambassadors of the Other Socialist States in the Soviet Embassy on 2 April 1965, 25 April 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *Speech given by Party First Secretary Le Duan to the 12th Plenum of the Party Central Committee, 1965.* Via <http://digitalarchive.wisoncenter.org/document/113970>. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Alexander Shelepin was a powerful bureaucrat who gradually lost power after Khrushchev’s ouster, but still powerful in January 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. “Document No. 18.Note on Two Conversations with the Minister Counselor of the DRV Embassy, Comrade Hoan Muoi, on 26 January 1966, in the Cuban Embassy, and on 27 January 1966, on the Occasion of a Farewell Visit to Our Embassy, 27 January 1966.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. “Document No. 17. Letter from GDR Foreign Minister Otto Winzer to [SED Politburo Members] Comrade Walter Ulbricht, Comrade Willi Stoph, Comrade Erich Honecker, and Comrade Hermann Axen, 8 March 1966.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. “Document No. 17. Letter from GDR Foreign Minister Otto Winzer.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. “Document No. 17. Letter from GDR Foreign Minister Otto Winzer.“ *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Nguyen Vu Tung, ‘Interpreting Beijing and Hanoi: A View of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1965-1970’, Westad, Jian e.a. eds. ‘77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina’, *CWIHP* Working Paper No. 22 (Washington 1998) p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. “3. Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, Hoang van Hoan, Beijing, 5 October 1964.“ *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, pp. 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Hoang van Hoan was a VWP Politburo member, personal friend of Ho Chi Minh, more influenced by the Chinese in the VWP leadership. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. “Document No. 5. Information No. 098 by the CPSU CC to the SED CC, 24 February 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. “4. Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, 1 March 1965.” *CWIHP,* Working paper No. 22, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. “4. Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, 1 March 1965.“ *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. “4. Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, 1 March 1965.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. “6. Zhou Enlai and Pakistani President Ayub Khan, Karachi, 2 April 1965.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars,* p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars,* p.129. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. “Document No. 8 Note by the GDR Embassy in Hanoi on a Joint Conversation with the Ambassadors from other Socialist Countries in the Hungarian Embassy on 4 May 1965, 12 May 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. “Document No. 8. Note by the GDR Embassy in Hanoi, 12 May 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. “Document No. 8. Note by the GDR Embassy in Hanoi, 12 May 1965.“ *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. “9. Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, Changsha, 16 May 1965.“ *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22,p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. “10. Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and Ho Chi Minh, Beijing, 17 May 1965.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. “10. Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and Ho Chi Minh, Beijing, 17 May 1965.“ *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. “Document No. 9. Note by the GDR Embassy in Hanoi on a Conversation of Comrade Jarck with the Attache of the CSSR Embassy, Comrade Freybort, on 2 June 1965, from 10:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., in the Embassy of the GDR, 3 June 1965.“ *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. “Document No. 10. Oral Statement by the Head of the Department for the USSR and for the Countries of Eastern Europe of MFA PRC, Yu Zhan, Transmitted to the Embassy on 8 June 1965.“ *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars,* p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. *Intelligence report*, *The Sino-Soviet dispute on aid to North Vietnam (1965-1968),* via http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document\_conversions/14/esau-37.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. “Document No. 11. Unofficial Translation of a Letter of the CPSU CC to the SED CC.“ *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 382. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. “Document No. 12. Note on a Conversation with an Unnamed Representative of the International Department of the CPSU CC on the Situation in Vietnam, 9 July 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. “Document No. 12. Note on a Conversation with an Unnamed Representative of the International Department of the CPSU CC on the Situation in Vietnam, 9 July 1965.“ *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. “Document No. 13. Note by the GDR Envoy to Moscow, Rossmeisl, on Talks with Unnamed Soviet Vietnam Specialists, 19 August 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. “Document No. 15. Report by the Adviser to the Bulgarian Embassy in Beijing, Ivan Dimitrov, to the Bulgarian Ambassador, Khr. Stoichev, 14 December 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. “Document No. 15. Report by the Adviser to the Bulgarian Embassy in Beijing, Ivan Dimitrov, to the Bulgarian Ambassador, Khr. Stoichev, 14 December 1965”. *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. “17. Zhou Enlai and Nguyen Duy Trinh, Beijing, 10.30 a.m., 19 December 1965.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22,p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. “Document 12. Note on a Conversation with an Unnamed Representative of the International Department of the CPSU CC on the Situation in Vietnam, 9 July 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. “Document No. 4. Note No. 2/65 on Conversations with Comrade Shcherbakov about the Developmental Tendencies in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, on 22 and 28 December 1964, 6 January 1965.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Jerzy Michalowski was a Polish bureaucrat and leading expert on Asia and Vietnam for the Polish minister of Foreign Affairs. Michalowski was also present at the Laos peace conference earlier in 1962, as part of the Polish delegation. During the Vietnam years, he became the close aide to Polish foreign minister Rapacki. (J. Hershberg, *Who Murdered “Marigold”. New Evidence on the Mysterious Failure of Poland’s Secret Initiative to Start U.S.-North Vietnamese Peace Talks, 1966.* Cold War International History Project, Working paper No.27 (Washington 2000) p. 8.) [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. "19. Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping Kang Sheng and Le Duan, Nguyen Duy Trinh, Beijing, 19 April 1966.” *CWIHP*, Working Paper No. 22, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. J. Hershberg, *Who Murdered “Marigold”, CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 27, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. “Document 16. Reception by Soviet Vice Foreign Minister V. V. Kuznetsov for the General Director of the PRP FMA, Cde. Jerzy Michalowski, 24 January 1966.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin *16,* p. 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars,* p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. “Document 16. Reception by Soviet Vice Foreign Minister V. V. Kuznetsov for the General Director of the PRP FMA, Cde. Jerzy Michalowski, 24 January 1966.” *CWIHP*, Bulletin 16, p. 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Hershberg, *Who Murdered “Marigold*”, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Hershberg, *Who Murdered “Marigold”*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Q. Zhai, *Beijing and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965-1968: New Evidence from Chinese Sources*, Cold War International History Project, Working paper no. 18. (Washington 1997) p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. “Document 16. Reception by Soviet Vice Foreign Minister V. V. Kuznetsov for the General Director of the PRP FMA, Cde. Jerzy Michalowski, 24 January 1966.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. P. Asselin, *‘We Don’t Want a Munch: Hanoi’s Diplomatic Strategy, 1965-1968’ in: Diplomatic History, Vol. 36, No. 3 (June 2012)* p. *556.* [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split,* p. 312, 327.

     Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens,* p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. “28. Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi and Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, Beijing, 12 April 1967.” *CWHIP,* Working Paper No. 22*,* p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. M. Meisner, *Mao Zedong, A political and Intellectual Portrait* (Cambridge 2007) pp. 165-166. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. “28. Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi and Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, Beijing, 12 April 1967.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22*,* p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars,* p. 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Chi-Kwan, *China and the World,* p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Radchenko, *The Sino-Soviet Split,* p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Asselin, *We don’t want a Munich*, 572. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars,* p. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. “Document No. 21. Note on a Conversation with the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Comrade Sverev, on 8 July 1966 from 11:00 a.m. to 12:40 p.m. at the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi, 9 July 1966.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. “25. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, Beijing, 10 April 1967.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Meisner, *Mao Zedong,* p.190. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Asselin, *We don’t want a Munich*, p. 569. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Asselin, *We don’t want a Munich*, p. 570. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. “17. Zhou Enlai and Nguyen Duy Trinh, Beijing 10.30 a.m., 19 December 1965.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22*,* p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. “Document No. 21. Note on a Conversation with the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Comrade Sverev, on 8 July 1966 from 11:00 a.m. to 12:40 p.m. at the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi, 9 July 1966.” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16*,* p. 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Asselin, We don’t want a Munich 560. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. “Document No. 22. Information, [undated].” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. “Document No. 22. Information, [undated].” *CWIHP,* Bulletin 16, p. 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Hershberg*, Who Murdered “Marigold*”, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Hershberg, *Who murdered “Marigold”*, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Speech by Le Duan to the 12th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (Dec 1965) via http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113790. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Nguyen Duy Trinh, Report to the 13th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party, 23 January 1967, via http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113973. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Asselin, *We don’t want a Munich*, p. 572. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. “24. Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, Beijing, 10 April 1967.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. “27. Vietnamese and Chinese delegations, Beijing, 11 a.m., 11 April 1967.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. “27. Vietnamese and Chinese delegations, Beijing, 11a.m., 11 April 1967.” *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars,* p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/book/marigold-the-lost-chance-for-peace-vietnam [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. I. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War,* p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Hershberg, *Who murdered “Marigold”*, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Hershberg, *Who murdered “Marigold”*, p.22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Gaiduk, The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Hershberg, *Who murdered “Marigold”*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Hershberg, *Who Murdered “Marigold”*, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Hershberg, *Who Murdered “Marigold”.* p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. G. Herring, *America’s Longest War,* p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Hershberg, *Who Murdered “Marigold”*, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, p. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Hershberg, *Who murdered “Marigold”*, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War,* p. 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Asselin, *We Don’t Want a Munich;* Hershberg, *Marigold, the Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (Washington 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Asselin, *We Don’t Want a Munich*, p. 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Speech by Le Duan to 12th Plenum of the VWP CC. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Asselin, *We don’t want a Munich,* p. 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. L. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War,* p. 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Asselin, *We don’t Want a Munich*, p. 559. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. ‘27. Vietnamese and Chinese delegations, Beijing 11 a.m., 11 April 1967.’ *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War,* p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. ‘20. Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, Hoang Tung, Beijing, 23 August 1966.’ *CWIHP,* Working Paper No. 22*,* p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. A. Cheng Guan, ’Decision-making leading to the Tet offensive (1968) – The Vietnamese Communist Perspective’ in: *Journal of Contemporary History,* Vol. 33 No. 3(July 1998) p. 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Asselin, *We Don’t Want a Munich,* p. 559. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)