

## Once Upon a Proxy War: Chinese Support to the People's Army of Vietnam (Book Review)

### Description

*The Irregular Warfare Initiative (IWI) Editorial Team is proud to present the third installment in our series featuring leading thinkers in the irregular warfare community critically engaging with recent IW-related publications. Curated by IWI editors [Barbara Elias](#) and [Lewis Fraser](#), this series goes beyond traditional book reviews. Contributors are encouraged to challenge ideas, draw connections to their own expertise, and explore how the works shape broader debates in the field.*

While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s global position and comprehensive national power have dramatically changed since its founding in 1921, Beijing's sense of geostrategic encirclement has remained constant. Shortly after declaring the People's Republic of China in 1949, the CCP faced a rapidly heating Cold War and challenges on its doorstep in the neighboring Korean Peninsula and French Indochina, modern-day Vietnam. The CCP's approach to these two struggles differed, as CCP chairman Mao Zedong pioneered what would become China's [active defense](#) policy in Korea, where the People's Liberation Army (PLA) intervened to face United Nations forces advancing toward the Yalu River.

In contrast, Beijing took a different course in Indochina. This approach is well-documented in [Building Ho's Army: Chinese Military Assistance to North Vietnam](#), by Xiaobing Li of the University of Central Oklahoma. Professor Li, a PLA veteran, eloquently demonstrates how Beijing played a leading role in supporting the rapid transformation of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) from a ragtag, ill-trained, and poorly equipped guerilla force into a modern "People's Army" that Ho Chi Minh employed to wage mobile warfare against French forces.

Li argues that Mao's decision not to directly intervene in Indochina was based on the calculation that China's interests were better served by building up Vietnam's military and political capacity to fight their colonial masters. The result was a massive effort to provide military aid, advice, and assistance to the PAVN, operationalized through the Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAG). Indeed, the CMAG had much in common in scope, if not scale, with the later US Military Assistance Command

Vietnam. Li's work challenges the popular myth of the plucky North Vietnamese guerilla who overcame superior French military technology—supplied largely by the United States—with little more than force of will, and instead details how the PLA indirectly fought the west by organizing, training, and equipping the PAVN.

## China's Geographic Reality

China is hemmed in along the Yellow Sea by an unstable Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago, both replete with American military bases. Taiwan sits just 90 miles from China's east coast, while a US treaty ally in the Philippines borders the hotly-contested South China Sea. China's once-close neighbor Vietnam lies directly south. Today, the People's Republic of China (PRC) contests this encirclement through economic imperialism in the expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while also waging an aggressive campaign of lawfare and irregular warfare activities—examples of techniques and tactics that Chinese strategists call the [three warfares](#).

Indeed, the PRC faced a similar yet broader challenge earlier in its history when confronted by perceived strategic encirclement. The geography was the same in 1950 but the players differed slightly. Violent anticolonial struggles erupted regionally while conflicts in Korea and French Indochina, modern Vietnam, flared on China's northern and southern borders. As a new government consolidating power and rebuilding following decades of war, the PRC faced tough choices to preserve its position and press for expanding communism in neighboring countries.

## The Indirect Approach in Northern Vietnam

Li relies on original Chinese sources, including interviews with CMAG veterans, to weave a well-researched narrative about China's efforts to bolster the PAVN's combat capabilities. Li starts by addressing Mao's dual imperatives of fighting against China's geostrategic encirclement while also expanding the international Communist ideology. The burgeoning Chinese-North Vietnamese relationship centered on strong leader-to-leader relationships, as showcased by Mao's willingness to provide Ho unlimited resources to achieve success. Li documents how China provided North Vietnam 155,000 small arms, 58 million rounds of ammunition, nearly 4,700 artillery pieces, 1 million rounds of artillery, 840,000 hand grenades, 1,200 vehicles, 14,000 tons of fuel, and 26,000 tons or over \$43 billion worth of food between 1950 and 1956, exemplifying the close cooperation between Beijing and Hanoi. With these provisions, Mao envisioned building a PAVN capable of conducting larger battles, mobile attacks and offensive campaigns against the French.

Perhaps more surprising, Chinese PLA military advisors directly supported the nascent PAVN. For instance, CMAG itself deployed into the wooded highlands of northern Vietnam to provide on-the-ground advisory support. CMAG's first commander was Wei Guoqing, an experienced PLA leader who served as political commissar against the Japanese and the Nationalists in China's civil war. The PLA in the 1950s had as much combat experience as any army in the world. Approximately 450 PLA personnel deployed with the CMAG to North Vietnam, directly integrating into PAVN formations and working at the high command, division, regiment, and battalion levels. These PLA advisors taught their Vietnamese counterparts the tactics, techniques, and procedures the CCP had mastered during the civil war. This advice helped the PAVN plan and execute mobile warfare designed to isolate and annihilate French field formations.

Ho Chiu Minh and Mao

**Mao Zedong** sits with **Ho Chi Minh** at a reception given for Ho in Beijing / Source: [Getty Images](#) by Bettmann

But the CMAG was only the tip of the spear. The PLA established a massive enterprise in China's southern military districts to support the group. The PLA's Guangxi Provincial Command provided initial logistical support to the PAVN. The PLA Department of General Logistics eventually took over this task. Simultaneously, the PLA 4<sup>th</sup> Army Group started up training courses inside China for newly-formed PAVN infantry divisions. The PLA provided an equal number of officers to train the Vietnamese one-on-one on Chinese tactics, followed by the deployment of key PLA advisors across the border to serve with and advise their Vietnamese counterparts in combat. By the time of [Dien Bien Phu](#) in early 1954, the CMAG had trained six infantry divisions, an artillery division, engineering units, and other independent regiments. The CMAG also institutionalized its efforts to train the PAVN, including translating Chinese doctrinal manuals and technical handbooks into Vietnamese, integrating political education across the PAVN, and establishing new training courses.

This massive effort focused as much on improving the human capital of the PAVN and its approach to warfare as it did in providing technical assistance, an effort bearing fruit on the battlefields of northern Vietnam. Chinese advisor Chen Gang convinced PAVN Commander Vo Nguen Giap to adopt a mobile warfare strategy to encircle and destroy French formations operating along Route Colonial 4 during the border campaign of August to September 1950. Although he faced strong opposition from PAVN commanders when early results appeared dubious, Chen threatened to resign unless the PAVN carried out his vision. In the end, Chen's plan was a major success for the PAVN. The strategy enabled the PAVN to destroy eight French battalions, or some 8,000 men.

The ultimate success was Dien Bien Phu. This battle was the pinnacle of Chinese support to the PAVN. There, PLA engineers constructed the siege lines, supported by artillery experts—including an entire Chinese-supplied rocket battery—who provided critical firepower assistance. Air defense personnel contested France's ability to conduct aerial resupply for the outpost. Additionally, Commander Wei played a key role in advising Giap throughout the battle, resulting in a stunning PAVN victory.

Weiguoping

*A public domain [image](#) of **Wei Guoqing**, PLA, from 1955.*

However, those strong early relations between the PRC and Vietnamese proteges rapidly declined after Dien Bien Phu. The bilateral relationship became marred by distrust and doubt, much of which decline resulted from broader competition between the Soviet Union and China over leadership of global communism. Following Ho's death in 1969, Vietnam's relations with the PRC quickly deteriorated and Hanoi turned to the Soviet sphere. Security tensions erupted. Small clashes in the Paracel and Spratly Islands sparked in the mid-1970s between Chinese and Vietnamese naval forces, and outright war came in February 1979. Hostilities lingered for another decade, and tensions between Hanoi and Beijing persist to this day.

Professor Li's work does a wonderful job in telling the story of the PLA's aid to the PAVN, particularly in the 1950s. Li's riveting tale focuses not only on what happened but also on the critical players and personalities involved. Figures like Wei Guoqing and Luo Guibo, who both at times led the CMAG, are largely unknown to Western audiences. But the role they played in the Vietnam War was as significant as those of Henri Navarre or, later, William Westmoreland. Li's work showcases the effectiveness of China's early assistance that culminated in the victory at Dien Bien Phu. It is an excellent case study in the advise-and-assist mission, and is necessary reading for security cooperation practitioners. The book suffers a bit toward the end in explaining the reasons for the Vietnam-China rift that led to the outright break in relations. But Li does effectively show how Vietnam's own misadventures in Cambodia contributed to outright hostility vis-a-vis China. The work could benefit from the inclusion of more maps to help the reader visualize action in northern Vietnam.

The PLA gradually removed itself from the business of proxy wars in the aftermath of China's war with Vietnam in 1979. Indeed, observing China's [gray zone efforts today](#) suggests that their military operations under the threshold of armed conflict are [almost exclusively carried out](#) with PLA or paramilitary formations. The PLA's overt strength demonstrated in the South and East China Seas buttresses Chinese influence in the region. Beijing's economic influence is also apparent,

particularly through the BRI and diplomatic overtures with its neighbors. Yet Li's work offers not only a case study in a highly successful advise-and-assist mission but also supports the argument that China successfully waged, sustained, and prevailed in a proxy war in the not-so-distant past. Although not addressed in the book, Li's research provokes a sentiment: if China could do it in the past, they could probably do it again in the future. The scar tissue from the collapse in Sino-Vietnam relations after such a significant early triumph must run deep collectively within the PLA and CCP. Yet when faced with strategic encirclement in the past, CCP leaders once made the decision: use proxies to break encirclement. The PRC could easily make this policy choice again.

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*Ian M. Sullivan is a career civilian intelligence professional with 29 years of experience at the Office of Naval Intelligence, U.S. Army Europe, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and at U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. He is a member of the Defense Intelligence Senior Executive Service and has held senior executive-level positions at NCTC, CIA, and the U.S. Army. He holds a BA from Canisius University, an MA from Georgetown University, and was a Fulbright Scholar at the Universität Potsdam in Germany. He is a 2022 recipient of a Meritorious Presidential Rank Award and writes frequently on national security related topics.*

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Image Credit: [Building Ho's Army: Chinese Military Assistance to North Vietnam](#) cover art, University Press of Kentucky, 2019.

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