

China Encircled

by

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Abstract

China is a country with unique geographic position surrounded by twenty nations big and small (including Taiwan) around its periphery. China's greatest security concern has always been a strategic encirclement – its neighbors aligning with one another or with strong powers such as the United States to isolate China. How does this sense of encirclement influence China's strategic behavior? Can China's resort to military force be linked to the fear of encirclement?

This study develops the theory of strategic encirclement. When nations encounter an increasing nonmilitary and military involvement by other powers around their periphery, they have options of various kinds of strategies to mitigate such threats. The states have choices of carrots and sticks to either punish or to provide positive incentives to convince periphery states not to align with hostile great powers. This study argues that under certain conditions, non-coercive approaches to deal with strategic encirclement are improbable. This research offers underlying and proximate conditions under which an encirclement leads to an interstate conflict. Military encirclement is an underlying condition that paves the way for an interstate conflict while the strategically important geographic area, threats of two-front conflicts and the national leadership's mobilization intent are considered as proximate conditions.

Major arguments about China's conflict behavior basically agree upon the notion that China's use of force often involved issues of Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity. In other words, China opted for military force when its border security was threatened, or its territorial integrity or sovereignty was challenged. This thesis has challenged this major argument, suggesting that China has employed military force externally mostly for greater strategic reasons – beyond the mere defense of its borders – avoiding strategic encirclements by the strong powers. This study, examining four cases on China's external conflicts since 1949, concluded that central

to Chinese calculation to use force was securing its strategic position to avoid being encircled by its adversaries.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

In a recent editorial from the *Global Times*, Beijing accused Washington of building a ring of encirclement surrounding China. The *Global Times* editorial says, “Building a ring of encirclement against China is a prominent strategic vision of US President Donald Trump's administration. Some Japanese forces are also enthusiastic about it. Joe Biden's team has stressed on repairing the alliance between the US and Europe, and how the ring of encirclement against China under Biden develops will tell the future world geopolitics trend.”¹ The editorial indicates that China's strategic behavior as well as the regional security would be subject to the US and its allies' encirclement intent.

Beijing's greatest concern has always been a strategic encirclement – its neighbors aligning with one another or with strong powers such as the United States to isolate China. How does this sense of encirclement influence China's strategic behavior? Can China's resort to military force be linked to the fear of encirclement? Since its establishment in 1949, the People's Republic of China engaged in three major wars - in Korea (1950-1953), against India (1962), and against Vietnam (1979), as well as in several small conflicts against the Soviet Union (1969), in the Taiwan Strait, in the South China Sea, and on its border with Vietnam (1979-1987). A great deal of work has addressed China's conflict behavior, but China's propensity to use force in terms of geographical factors is little studied. China's foreign policy, most importantly its decision to use force, is shaped by its threat perception emanating from its geographic position and opportunities provided by its external security environment. Linking strategic encirclement with coercive

¹ “Encircling China is arduous and thankless for the US: The Global Times Editorial,” *Global Times*, December 07, 2020, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1209247.shtml>.

strategies of military force, this research approaches the puzzle of China's wars from the geopolitical perspectives, namely strategic encirclement.

This study first develops the theory of strategic encirclement. As there is no fixed definition of the strategic encirclement, this study, based on the basic principles of the military tactic of an encirclement, provides definition for the strategic encirclement. The *strategic encirclement* is determined as a condition in which a target state encounters a hostile great power's nonmilitary or military involvement in two or more states on its strategic periphery, which is aimed at undermining its influence in a given strategic area or region. When nations encounter an increasing nonmilitary and military involvement on their periphery, they have options of various kinds of strategies to mitigate such threats. The states have choices of carrots and sticks to either punish or to provide positive incentives to convince periphery states and hostile great powers to abandon their encirclement intent. What strategy a state chooses might depend on what kind of encirclement that state encounters: nonmilitary or military encirclement. Nonmilitary encirclement occurs when great powers increase their involvement in periphery states through a variety of economic, political and diplomatic means. The military encirclement, on the other hand, occurs when great powers increase their military involvement such as establishing a military alliance treaty or defense cooperation agreement, building military bases and deploying troops in multiple peripheral states.

This study, examining China's external conflict cases, suggests that under certain conditions, non-coercive approaches to deal with strategic encirclement are improbable. This research offers four major conditions that guide potential pathways to conflict escalation. Military encirclement serves as an underlying condition that paves the way for an interstate conflict. Although this network of military alignment or cooperation between encircling states is not likely

to lead directly to a war, it increases the target state's sense of vulnerability. The research hypothesizes that military encirclement might lead to an interstate conflict when encircling states undermine China's influence in geographic regions or areas with strategic value vital to China's security. The strategically important areas might include those with strategic locations, or in geographic proximity. When an enemy dominates them, it can threaten a state's security. Other sensitive areas might include the geographic areas where the major ethnic minorities border with prospective adversaries.

The research also hypothesizes that military encirclement may lead to an interstate conflict when China faces threats of conflicts in two or more separated areas on its strategic periphery. Encountering threats of conflict on two or more fronts on its strategic periphery has many negative implications on a state's security. For example, sustaining defensive forces along multiple fronts would be expensive, drawing off the target state's economic resources, and a state also might lose its freedom of maneuver in foreign policy against encircling states due to military besiegement.

These two conditions offer explanations solely based on the external security environment. This study offers a third hypothesis that brings domestic factors into encirclement theory. When the country is encircled by a network of military alliance or alignment on its strategic periphery, the national leadership might prefer to engage in conflict to strengthen their position. This study suggests that the national leadership's intention to use external threats for their domestic political purposes increases the likelihood of choosing military force as a counter-encirclement strategy. The leadership's mobilization intent is an important factor that explains how domestic politics fit into an encirclement theory. This study aims at gaining greater understanding of China's conflict behavior by contributing explanations based on this counter-encirclement model.

China today is rapidly building up its military, aiming to become strong enough to protect its interests, and possibly to surpass the US. The Chinese president Xi Jinping, as soon as he took power, announced a drastic military reform program, modernizing weapons and technology and improving the People`s Liberation Army`s (PLA) organization, training and preparedness. The PLA has geared to “basically complete the modernization of national defense and the military by 2035 and to fully transform the people`s armed forces into world-class forces by the mid-21st century.”² As the country pushes for developing the strongest army in the world, it raises the question: would China be peaceful or belligerent? The policy relevance of this study is to find out what China`s greatest security fear is and how this fear might impact China`s conflict behavior.

This thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 briefly introduces the topic and reviews the existing literature. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework and the research design. Chapter 3 tests hypotheses examining four cases studies on China`s external conflicts since 1949. Chapter 4 summarizes key findings and discusses policy implications. The rest of this chapter surveys the literature on China`s strategic preferences and provides a summary of competing hypotheses on China`s conflict behavior.

² “The full official English translation of the 2019 Chinese Defense White Paper-*China`s National Defense in a New Era*,” The State Council Information Office of the People`s Republic of China, Xinhuanet, 2019, accessed April 4, 2021, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/whitepaperonnationaldefenseinnewera.doc>.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Pacifist or parabellum? China`s strategic preferences

The strategic culture is an important concept in understanding China`s strategic preferences about how to deal with external threats. The scholarship often explained China`s conflict behavior based on two major strands of Chinese strategic culture: Confucian-Mencian non-violent pacifist and parabellum realpolitik. The Confucian-Mencian pacifist strand holds that China favors accommodationist strategies while the realpolitik parabellum paradigm holds China is not averse to use of force. Johnston (1996) in his “Cultural realism and strategy in Maoist China”, argues that China`s strategic behavior was often dominated by a parabellum paradigm while accepting that the Confucian-Mencian pacifist paradigm did exist in China`s strategic culture.

Johnston (1996) emphasized “absolute flexibility” as the key in understanding Chinese strategic behavior. He argues that China uses accommodationist strategy, but just as a prelude to its main strategy – the strategic offensive (Johnston 1996). In other words, China, being pacifist is just carefully assessing its opponent and environment, awaiting a ripe condition for the offensive strategy. When the condition is ripe, China shifts its strategy from the accommodationist to more assertive stances (Johnston 1996).

Andrew Scobell (2003) in his book *China`s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, argues that China has dualistic strategic culture, a mixture of both pacifist and parabellum strands, which he referred to as the Chinese cult of defense. The central tenet to the Cult of Defense is that China uses force for “self-defense counterattack” (*ziwei fangji*). This constitutes the view that China does engage in offensive military operations in pursuit of its national goals but rationalizes such military moves, as a purely defensive measure (Scobell 2003). For example, China intervened in the Korean War in 1950, attacked India in 1962, and Russia in

1969 and initiated war against Vietnam in 1979; however, in the Chinese view, these were defensive measures as the adversaries first made aggressive moves (such as Vietnam triggered the war in 1979 by invading Cambodia and the US intervened first in the war on the Korean Peninsula) (Scobell 2003).

Huiyun Feng (2007) in her book *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, highlighted that Confucian-Mencian strategic culture does not completely repudiate the use of force, instead, it favors “righteous” or “just war” that China uses force, punishing the “evils” or defending itself against “aggressors.” Feng (2007) argues that this Confucian and Mencian cultural tradition and moral principles had impacts on Chinese leaders` decision-making – using force for “just” or righteous reasons as a “last resort” only for defensive purposes. In other words, China is not aggressive, indeed it just “goes abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” This supports Scobell’s notion of defensive characteristics of Chinese strategic behavior and contrasts with Johnston`s argument that China`s strategic culture is offensive.

Overall, the scholars argued that China has historically featured both pacifist and parabellum paradigms. The pacifists explained the Chinese strategic behavior based on Confucian-Mencian tradition of portraying China as a peaceful, righteous and benign nation. On the other hand, the advocates of the parabellum strategic culture explained that China, when a favorable opportunity avails, would not hesitate to use force to defeat its enemy.

1.2 Summary of competing hypotheses on China`s conflict behavior

There are plenty of studies on China`s external conflicts since 1949, yet most are single, specific case studies. There exist few but prominent comparative small case analyses that attempted to theorize the causes of China`s wars. There are two major quantitative analyses on

China's conflict behavior: Alastair Iain Johnston's "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behavior 1949-1992: A First Cut at the Data", and Xiaoting Li's "The Taming of The Red Dragon: The Militarized Worldview and China's Use of Force, 1949–2001", and both authors used MID data from the Correlates of War project to explain China's conflict behavior. Based on suggestions from these quantitative analyses and the explanations discussed in the most prominent historical works on China's external conflicts since 1949, this section will examine when and why China uses force based on four major explanations: 1) territorial disputes; 2) diversion and domestic mobilization; 3) ideological explanations and dissatisfaction with international status; and 4) deterrence and preemption.

Territorial disputes

Most of the PRC's conflicts have involved territorial issues and long-standing territorial claims. Allen Whiting (1975) considered the perceived threats to its territorial security as the most common pattern in China's conflict behavior. Any situation involving China's territorial integrity is certain to raise concern in Beijing (Whiting 1975). Alastair Iain Johnston, in his article, "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behavior 1949-1992: A First Cut at the Data", finds that almost half of China's MIDs were related to territorial issues, and suggests that China would become less conflict prone as long as its territorial integrity is not challenged.

On the other hand, Taylor Fravel (2008), in his book *Strong borders, Secure Nation*, contends that China has been more likely to compromise over disputed territories and less likely to use force. According to Fravel (2008), China has participated in 23 unique territorial disputes with neighbors on land and sea since 1949, but it has pursued compromise and offered concessions in seventeen of these conflicts. However, Fravel's (2008) findings on China's conflict proneness in the disputes over the South China sea islands contradict his argument, showing that the disputes

over territories that have important economic and strategic value do not fit the “friendly China” theory. Nevertheless, Fravel (2008) assumes the possibility of cooperation in the offshore island disputes, suggesting that China might be more willing to trade territorial concessions in the Spratlys and Paracels for improved ties with regional states when the competition between China and the US for influence in Southeast Asia escalates. Critics would argue that this seems to overestimate pacifist nature of China and underestimate the strategic value of the areas for the country’s security. Also, he treats a Taiwan case as separate from foreign conflicts, emphasizing China is less likely to compromise in disputes over territories that are considered as homeland areas, part of the Han Chinese core (Fravel 2008).

Overall, China might tend to use force around its strategic periphery in territorial disputes involving its sovereignty, namely Taiwan. China’s behavior towards disputes or crises in areas or territories of strategic value deserves further research. The escalation of territorial disputes is major but just one of several different categories of China’s use of force, while it also can serve as an opportunity for China to implement its coercive strategy to achieve certain domestic or foreign policy goals rather than being itself an actual cause of war.

Diversion and domestic mobilization

The second major argument suggests that China initiated conflict either to divert public attention from domestic crisis or to unite and mobilize the population in support of the government’s policies.

Allen Whiting (1975) emphasized the Chinese notion of “disorder within -danger without”, which perceives “the worse the domestic situation, the more likely the external situation will worsen” because 1) a superior power will take advantage of it; 2) two or more powers will combine against China if they temporarily overcome their conflicts of interests; 3) one must prepare for the

worst and try for the best. He suggests that the worst-case scenario” resulted from the combination of serious internal crisis and a perceived enemy on the border. Whiting (1975) perceived China’s decision to attack India in 1962 as diverting public attention from economic collapse and domestic political crisis following the Great Leap Forward when Mao was sidelined from central decision making, especially with regard to economic issues. Goldstein (2001) considered the Sino-Soviet border conflict in 1969 as China’s diversionary strategy wherein Chinese leadership initiated international conflict in order to divert public attention from domestic troubles during the Cultural Revolution.

On the contrary, Johnston’s (1998) quantitative analysis on China’s militarized interstate dispute behavior, finds that domestic unrest is negatively related to an increase in external use of violence. His findings suggest that in China’s case, contrary to a diversionary use of violence, the domestic turmoil leads to a decrease in the interstate militarized disputes (Johnston 1998). He contends that a “preoccupation model”, that is, preoccupation with domestic disorder is associated with a lower level of external conflict, provides better explanation than a diversionary model (Johnston 1998). Similarly, Fravel (2005) in his article, “Regime insecurity and International cooperation,” claims that “internal conflicts often create condition for cooperation, producing a ‘diversionary peace’ instead of diversionary war”. Fravel (2008), examining China’s decision to cooperate or escalate in its twenty-three territorial disputes since 1949, argues that leaders in the domestic crisis situation preferred to compromise on disputes rather than to resort to military force. Fravel (2008) finds that China has been more likely to compromise, especially when it faced internal threats to its security. This includes China’s concessions to Burma, Nepal, and India in 1960 due to the Tibetan revolt, settlements with Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Soviet Union due to the ethnic unrest in Xinjiang in 1962 and economic crisis following the Great Leap

Forward, and cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the 1990s due to unrest in Xinjiang following the Tiananmen crisis. According to Fravel (2005, 2008) the internal threats to regime security best explain China`s reluctance to use force in territorial disputes.

Chen Jian (1994), Christensen (1998) and Qiang Zhai (2000) perceived domestic mobilization as China`s leader`s motive behind pursuing coercive strategies. Chen Jian (1994) argues that China`s decision to intervene in the Korean War in 1950 was determined by concerns more complicated than safeguarding the China-Korea border. He believes that China`s entry into the Korean War was influenced by Chinese leaders` goal to consolidate CCP authority in their newly established country. Christensen (1998) argues that the intent behind Mao`s decision to attack Quemoy and Matsu islands in 1958 was to mobilize society for the Great Leap Forward. The Chinese leader manipulated the conflict to mobilize the Chinese people for his industrial modernization program for the greater purpose of achieving his grand strategy of joining the class of great powers (Christensen 1998). Zhai (2000) contends that Mao employed coercive strategies against the US in Indochina in 1960s in order to prepare the masses for the Great Cultural Revolution. As Qiang Zhai (2000) described, in the wake of external threat, Chinese leaders first wanted to “put their own house in order”. It should be noted that these scholars treated domestic mobilization as a part in the “mixed bag” of Chinese leaders` policy calculations, rather than the sole reason for China`s external aggressions. Also, all of them emphasized the dominant role of Chinese paramount leader Mao Zedong in foreign policy decision making, especially in matters of use of force. However, Johnston (1998) found no correlation between mobilization or the “militarization” of Chinese society in the Mao era and China`s external conflict involvement.

Overall, existing literature suggests that domestic mobilization rather than diversion provides better explanations for China`s use of force for domestic purposes. Also, the contrasting

explanations between quantitative and qualitative analyses indicates the need for further improving the causal mechanisms explaining connection between China`s internal and external threats.

Ideological /revolutionary commitments and dissatisfaction with international status

In the last century, China had greater ambition to restructure international order by supporting revolutionary wars abroad. Most of China`s major conflicts including in Korea, against India, against the Soviet Union, and intervention in Vietnam are partially explained through the model of ideology or revolutionary state model. Chen Jian (1994) contends that the 1950 Korean War was seen as an opportunity to expand the Chinese revolution in East Asia. Qiang Zhai (2000) argues that the Chinese leader Mao Zedong`s assistance for communist movements in Asia was shaped by an ideological factor, that is, China`s self-image in the world as a supporter of national liberation movements against imperialism and colonialism. On the other hand, Johnston (1998) posits that the conflicts between the United States and China are better explained by geopolitical interests than ideology, although ideological competition between communism and capitalism was apparent in Sino-US conflict in the 1950s.

Another basic argument explains China`s use of force connecting to its dissatisfaction with its international status. The scholars have argued that China`s use of force is linked to its ambition to improve its international status. Johnston (1998) argues that China is more likely use force over territorial disputes, and it occurs when Chinese leaders perceive a growing gap between desired and ascribed status. Lintner (2018), in his book *China`s India War*, posits China`s decision to resort to force against India in 1962 was influenced by China`s intent to replace India as leader of the Third World because Mao believed China, not India, deserved to be leader of the developing countries.

Overall, the ideological/revolutionary and status dissatisfaction explanations seem to be interrelated. Simply put, China's intention to expand communist revolution in Asia was made, to some extent, because of its dissatisfaction with its international status. But ideology seems to have served as a justification rather than direct cause of conflicts.

In other words, ideology appears to be a "disguise" for China's geopolitical ambition to expand its influence in the South and East Asian region and desire to raise its international status. It had security implications as well. Supporting revolutionary movements in its neighboring countries, such as Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the PRC sought to improve its external security environment through creating peer-communist states or friendly powers around its strategic periphery. Therefore, the explanations based on revolutionary commitments and international status have profound geopolitical implications.

Deterrence and preemption

The fourth major argument suggests that China uses military force to strike against an approaching threat. Whiting (1960), in his book *China Crosses the Yalu*, explained that China militarily intervened in the 1950 Korean war in order to forestall perceived threats. China seized the initiative to preempt the United States and UN forces' advance to the Yalu river when its deterrence efforts failed (Whiting 2001). Whiting (1960) pointed out that China employed the military force following the series of deterrence signals, including both the verbal warnings and the mobilization of troops. In several conflict cases during the Cold War, Beijing often attempted to first deter impending conflicts by sending consistent signals (Whiting 1975). When it became evident that deterrence was no longer succeeding, Chinese leaders took the initiative to strike first in order to gain advantage, especially in the fight against superior enemies such the United States (Whiting 2001). Whiting (2001) also emphasized "exaggerated threat perceptions" as the primary

motivating factor in China's use of force. Before entering the Korean War, Mao's calculations greatly exaggerated the threats posed by American policy in Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam (Whiting 1960). Especially, the US deployment of the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait led Chinese leader Mao to perceive the US intent as threatening (Whiting 1960).

Summary

The common ground where scholars mostly agree is that China tends to use force externally when its territorial integrity is challenged. But Chinese leaders' employment of coercive strategies is explained by goals beyond mere defense of borders. The scholars often treated China's conflict decision making as a complex calculus composed of several factors.

However, existing literature on China's conflict behavior appears to be mostly centered on Mao's dominant influence on decision making, and Cold War mentality. It seems to have, to some extent, overlooked the personal influence of the paramount leaders who came after Mao. Despite some remarkable examples of comparative conflict case studies, the literature is mostly case centered and does not offer explanations of overall PRC conflict behavior.

Thus, this study will advance the literature by focusing on China's perceptions of internal and external threats emanating from its geographic position. As geographic location is the least changeable and most consistent factor in a state's foreign policy decision-making, this study aims to develop a hypothesis that might contribute to explaining China's conflict behavior beyond Mao and Cold War era. This is not to assert individual leaders are not important, but to give more attention to their consideration of the imperatives of the external security environment in their foreign policy making.

Chapter 2 - Strategic encirclement

Encirclement is a military term for a condition when a target is isolated and surrounded by enemy forces. There is no fixed definition of strategic encirclement. Henry Kissinger claims that China's greatest geopolitical fear is strategic encirclement, that is, a single hegemonic rival or an alliance of multiple weaker ones will surround its territory and work to destabilize its periphery.³ John Garver and Fei-Ling Wang, in their article "China's anti-encirclement struggle," described encirclement as a condition in which Chinese neighbors move into alliance with a great power such as the US and with one another to counter China's rise.⁴ Changhee Park in his article "Why China attacks: China's geostrategic vulnerability and its military intervention," explained the strategic encirclement connecting to a situation when China faces attacks on two different fronts at the same time. As two or more of China's neighbors in geo-strategically important regions or areas become hostile and align with stronger rivals of China, China's strategic vulnerability deepens, further increasing its likelihood of using military force to regain its control in its traditional sphere of influence.⁵

The fear of strategic encirclement is deeply rooted in China's history, geography and culture. In the last century, China was concerned about strategic encirclements by both of the global superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. The People's Republic of China was surrounded with a ring of military alliances and bases on its southeastern and southern periphery when the United States signed bilateral security treaties with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia and Taiwan in the early 1950s, and this was seen as a "new-moon shaped encirclement"

³ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011).

⁴ John W. Garver and Fei-Ling Wang, "China's Anti-Encirclement Struggle," *Asian Security* 6, no.3 (2010): 238.

⁵ Changhee Park, "Why China attacks: China's geostrategic vulnerability and its military intervention," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 20, no.3 (2008): 263-282.

targeted against China.⁶ China also has worried about Soviet encirclement by both land and sea after the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s. The Soviet Union forged a new defense treaty with Mongolia in 1966 and deployed troops and missiles along the Chinese northern border. Moscow announced the proposal for an Asian collective security agreement in 1969, which intended to extend its influence all around China's periphery, and Beijing feared this was an attempt at politico-military encirclement of China.⁷ When the Soviet Union expanded its naval presence in Asian waters close to China's mainland in the 1970s, Beijing saw this as Moscow's strategy to complete its encirclement by sea.⁸

Geography is the other important factor that explains why China fears the encirclement by its neighbors, and their allies. To compare with the US that has only two neighbors, China, in order to secure its frontiers, has to deal with twenty nations big and small (including Taiwan) around its periphery. This central geographic position of China provides both opportunities and challenges. The downside of this middle position is that it makes the country exposed to potential strategic encirclement by its adversaries and vulnerable to potential conflicts all around its periphery.

Moreover, a fear of being encircled by an enemy is inherited in Chinese culture. *Wei qi* is an ancient board game focused on encircling a space or territory. *Wei qi* represents Chinese culture in strategic thinking. In the *wei qi* game, players compete for key strategic positions and postures for gaining spheres of influence.⁹ From a *wei qi* perspective, the worst strategic nightmare for China is to be encircled on multiple fronts, especially on strategic spaces.

⁶ "On the C-Shaped Encirclement by the U.S. – Huang Yingxu, China Academy of Military Science," Chinascope, July 26, 2010, http://chinascope.org/archives/6313?doing_wp_cron=1609371704.2805380821228027343750.

⁷ Francis J Romance, "Peking's Counter-Encirclement Strategy: The Maritime Element," *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* 20, no. 2 (July 1976): pp. 437-459, 439.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David Lai, "China's Strategic Moves and Counter-Moves," *Parameters* 44, no. 4 (2014):12.

Given this historic experience, geopolitical vulnerability, and cultural strategic thinking, Beijing appears to be sensitive towards the presence of great powers on its periphery, suspecting hostile great powers of conspiring with nations in its neighborhood to tighten a noose around China's neck.

Overall, there is no exact definition of strategic encirclement. The scholars, in their works, have emphasized the role of China's encirclement concerns in its decision-making regarding the use of force, but there is no study of how exactly encirclement leads to interstate conflict. This research seeks to fill this gap.

2.1 Developing a theory of strategic encirclement

Although the concept of strategic encirclement is not clearly defined, the scholars often emphasized its main feature as a network of military alliance or alignments encircling a target state. To operationalize the concept of the strategic encirclement, three attributes of strategic encirclement can be identified using the main principles of the military tactic of encirclement. First, an encirclement is a phenomenon closely related to geographic setting. In an encirclement operation, a target can only be besieged from a relatively close distance on carefully chosen strategic terrain, becoming subject to attacks from at least two sides. Applying this logic on strategic encirclement, it comes to the point that the target state could be encircled as it encounters enemies from at least two fronts on its strategic periphery.

Second, encirclement is designed to defeat a target by isolating it. At the military tactical level, in an encirclement operation, a target is cut off from supplies and reinforcements. Strategic encirclement efforts undermine the target's influence in a given region or strategically important

area, either with diplomatic efforts or a ring of military forces, making it hard for the target state to maneuver its foreign policy against challengers.

Third, encirclement is successfully executed when the offensive force, to some extent, has superiority in military technology, organization or the number of forces. Strategic encirclement is often conducted by major powers since it may require military capabilities such as power projection capability to place troops surrounding a target state and significant resources to economically support their partners for encirclement efforts.

Based on these three main attributes, this research defines *strategic encirclement* as a condition in which a target state encounters a hostile great power's nonmilitary or military involvement in two or more states on its strategic periphery, which is aimed at undermining its influence in a given strategic area or region.

Encirclement and counter-encirclement strategies

Faced with encirclement, states have choices of carrots and sticks to induce challenger states to give up their encirclement attempts. The sticks could be different punitive methods, ranging from military coercion involving the threat or actual use of force to nonmilitary coercion such as political and economic sanctions and trade embargo. Countries often use carrots or various non-coercive methods to avoid strategic encirclement. China, for example, used a combination of carrots and sticks in its efforts to persuade its neighbors not to enter into anti-China alignments with great powers such as the United States and with one another. Carrots or positive inducements included frequent high-level leadership visits, initiation of dialogues of various sorts, and concessions on outstanding issues.¹⁰ Positive inducements might also include various economic

¹⁰ John W. Garver and Fei-Ling Wang, "China's Anti-Encirclement Struggle," 239.

tools such as providing economic aid and increasing trade and investment. For example, when the George W. Bush administration attempted to play India as a counterbalance against China, Beijing quickly took counter measures, using positive inducements to convince India not to align with America. Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited India in 2002, and among many other measures, China promised to increase trade with India from about \$3 billion at the time to \$100 billion in 10 to 15 years. Beijing believed that by increasing the economic stake between China and India, the two nations will have less incentive to fight.¹¹

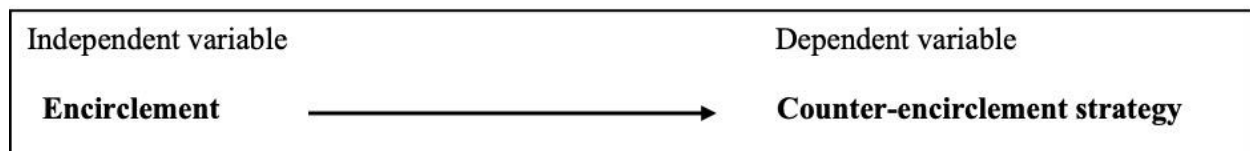


Figure 2.1. Independent and dependent variables (*Source:* Author)

The independent variable in the theory underlying this research is an *encirclement*, and the dependent variable is a *counter-encirclement strategy* that is, indeed a *behavior* that would indicate the presence of a counter-encirclement strategy. This includes non-coercive and coercive strategies of various kinds. What strategy a state chooses to counter an encirclement depends on variations of encirclement.

Indicators of encirclement

In order to study threats from encirclement and its impact on a state's strategic choices, it is, first and foremost, important to study the value of any encirclement. It seems that there are three possible values on the independent variable of encirclement: no encirclement, nonmilitary encirclement and military encirclement.

¹¹ David Lai, "China's Strategic Moves and Counter-Moves," 15.

states. Great powers use various military cooperation methods to extend their military presence in their adversaries' backyard.

2.2 Argument: under what conditions does China use coercive strategies of military conflict to counter strategic encirclement?

Linking strategic encirclement with coercive strategies of military force, this research introduces a threat perception-based counter-encirclement strategy model to explain some conditions that guide potential pathways to conflict escalation. This study suggests that under certain conditions, non-coercive approaches to deal with strategic encirclement are improbable. The research argues that the level of threats China perceives from the encirclement in concert with domestic political reasons shape China's possibility of choosing military force as a counter-encirclement strategy. The perceived threat here referred is the target state's interpretation of challenger states' intention. In other words, the perceived intention, itself independently, can be regarded as the source of threat (Walt 1985). The threat may be perceived even when the opponent possesses no malicious intent (Cohen 1978). In this regard, how the target state interprets the challenger state's intent plays the critical role. Threats can be verbal, and physical. The verbal threats often take the form of statements while non-verbal threats can be various signaling actions such as the mobilization of troops to the contested border (Stein 2013). Thus, the target state's threat perception may come from the both the challenger state's statements and actions. The threat is often perceived in two stages: observation and appraisal. At an initial state of *observation*, the cues are perceived, and at a secondary stage of *appraisal*, the cues are evaluated and defined as threatening or benign. In non-psychological explanations of the threat perception, information plays an important factor (Cohen 1978). In a context where the intention of the challenger is perceived as threatening, the target state may resort to limited use of military force to forestall the

perceived threats. Sometimes, states do not have enough information to evaluate a challenger's intent. Major rationalist accounts of threat perception argue that leaders perceive threat and go to war because they don't have complete information (Stein 2013). In a condition where the intention of the challenger is uncertain or difficult to read, the target state may resort to force to probe the intent of the opponent. This study offers four conditions under which China is likely pursue coercive strategy to counter a strategic encirclement.

Independent variables:

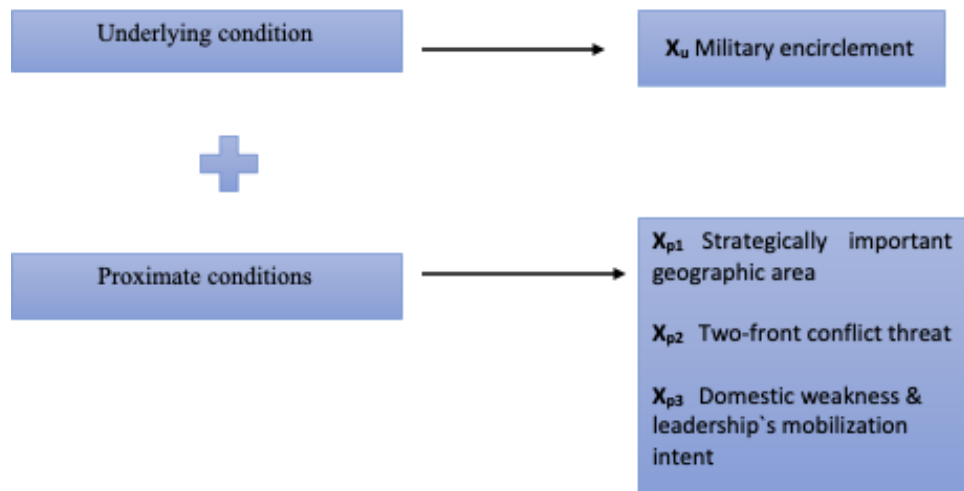


Figure 2.3 Independent variables (Source: Author)

Underlying condition: Military encirclement:

When a hostile great power establishes military involvement in multiple states on the target state's periphery, this greatly weakens the target state's strategic position, making it vulnerable to attacks from different directions.

There are various military cooperation tools that help to build close military ties between great powers and peripheral states. The stronger the commitment the great power's involvement in periphery states represents, the more hostile it is likely to be perceived by the target state.

Establishing military bases or deploying troops surrounding the target state is a significant indicator of attempts at military encirclement. Great powers deploy troops abroad to create, consolidate and expand their spheres of influence (Bell et al. 2020). Deploying additional troops in the same region may signal a major power's intent to consolidate its sphere of influence while dispatching troops to a new region might indicate intention to expand (Bell et al. 2020). For a protégé, major power troop deployments are a strong security commitment while for a major power, overseas troop deployments demarcate its spheres of influence (Bell et al. 2020). From the perspective of the target state, troop deployment by its adversary surrounding its periphery is one of the most serious forms of threat to its security.

Establishing a military alliance treaty or defense cooperation agreement is another important indicator for the target state to see itself as militarily encircled. During the Cold War, each great power forged military alliance treaties with its rival's neighbors, legitimizing its troop deployments and establishment of military bases. The Soviet Union, for example, established a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with most of China's neighbors such as Mongolia, India, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam. The Soviet "Friendship and Cooperation Treaty," depending on with whom it was established, varied significantly in its purposes. The USSR's Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with Mongolia (1966) served as a mutual military alliance while the Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with India facilitated mutual defense cooperation.

In the post-Cold War era, the defense cooperation agreement emerged as a common form of military cooperation arrangement. When governments pursue cooperation on military and security

issues, they increasingly turn not to alliances but to a type of framework treaty known as a defense cooperation agreement (Kinne 2020). The contemporary version of defense cooperation agreement promotes wide-ranging activities such as defense policy coordination, joint research and development, weapons production and arms trade, joint military exercises, training and exchange programs, peacekeeping, and information exchange (Kinne 2020).

Great power military involvement such as establishing a military alliance treaty or defense cooperation agreement, building military bases and deploying troops in multiple states on a target's periphery indicates its intent of military encirclement. Although this network of military alignment or cooperation is not likely to lead directly to a war, it increases the target state's sense of vulnerability and serves as an underlying condition for an interstate conflict.

Proximate conditions:

1. Strategically important geographic area

A geographic area with strategic importance is the key to determine how an encirclement leads to an interstate conflict. Strategic worth describes the security value of a given geographic area (Toft 2014). Geographic areas with security value might include the following: (1) a bordering area that provides an outlet to the sea for an otherwise landlocked challenger; (2) a bordering area that provides a desirable location from which the challenger could project military power offshore in close proximity to major shipping lanes; (3) a bordering area that is in close proximity to the choke points of narrow straits; (4) a bordering area that the target state utilizes as a military base; (5) a bordering area located in close proximity to naval bases of the neighboring state ; and (6) a bordering area that blocks a primary route through which a challenger would attack a target state (Huth 1996). For many states, neighboring areas are considered strategically important due to

their geographic proximity and strategic locations. When an enemy dominates them, it can threaten a target state's security. Also, the security importance of geographic areas is closely connected to a state's security interests. With regard to China, for example, in addition to those areas with strategic locations, the geographic areas with security value might include regions or areas bordering with its major ethnic minorities such as Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang. As a multiethnic country, one of China's greatest security interests is to maintain domestic stability. Hostility from a neighboring state bordering with its major ethnic minority groups might increase China's security concerns.

Faced with military encirclement or increased military involvement in multiple periphery states, weakening control in strategically important geographic areas increases the likelihood of choosing military force as a counter-encirclement strategy. China might prefer to resort to military force in order to ensure its influence and limit influence by outside powers in strategically important regions or areas for the greater purpose of avoiding strategic encirclement.

2. Two front-war threats

Strategic encirclement has potential negative implications for a target state's security. Being militarily besieged on its strategic periphery, facing conflict threats on two fronts due to escalating territorial disputes and ongoing conflicts or international crisis, increases the target state's likelihood of militarily intervening or initiating conflict against encircling states. When encountering threats of conflict on two or more fronts on its strategic periphery, sustaining defensive forces along multiple fronts would be expensive, drawing off the target state's economic resources. In the worst-case scenario, the target state might encounter an invasion of its mainland as it loses its freedom of maneuver in foreign policy to guarantee its safety due to military

besiegement. As peace becomes more costly than war, the target state's likelihood of initiating conflict or militarily intervening in an ongoing conflict to counter an encirclement increases.

3. Domestic weakness and leadership's mobilization intent

Faced with *encirclement*, the national leadership might exaggerate external threats for domestic political purposes. Especially when the national leadership faces considerable domestic problems, they may wish to solidify their hold on power through calls to nationalism and unity- which China scholars often refer to as domestic mobilization. According to rational accounts of threat perception, it is possible that state leaders at times accurately perceive the threat from their opponents, but deliberately exaggerate and manipulate the threat to mobilize domestic forces and constrain opposition (Stein 2013). In this regard, the national leadership would be instrumentally rational, using a heightened level of threat perception to achieve domestic goals (Stein 2013).

Chinese strategic culture defines "crisis" (*weiji*) as a combination of danger (*wei*) and opportunity (*ji*), and Chinese leaders sought gain out of danger while attempting to solve their external threats. Weiss (2014) claims that nationalist mobilization can be used as a diplomatic resource to reinforce a foreign and security policy-signaling strategy. By allowing nationalist mobilization, authoritarian leaders can signal their resolve to stand firm against external adversaries. By repressing antiforeign protests, the leaders can signal their commitment to a more cooperative diplomatic stance (Weiss 2014).

Whiting (1975) emphasized that the worst-case scenario for China resulted from the combination of a serious internal crisis and a perceived enemy on the border. Facing the domestic economic or political crisis while being encircled by a network of military alignment by its adversaries, the national leadership might prefer to engage in conflict to strengthen their position. This study suggests that the national leadership's intention to use external threats for their domestic

political purposes increases the likelihood of choosing military force as a counter-encirclement strategy.

Dependent variable: China`s use of force

The dependent variable is use of force. The research defines the use of force to include an occupation of territory, a seizure, a clash, a raid, and a war (for definition of these terms, see Jones et.al 1996). The dependent variable of use of force also includes military intervention. The definition of military intervention follows Pickering and Kisangani`s (2009) collection of a foreign military intervention dataset. This defines military intervention as “the movement of regular troops or forces (airborne, seaborne, shelling, etc.) of one country inside another, in the context of some political issue or dispute.¹²” It excludes any accidental troop movements but includes only purposeful action that is a result of national leaders` decision-making. It also excludes paramilitaries, government-backed militias, private security forces, and other military units that are not part of the regular uniformed military of the state.

¹² Jeffrey Pickering and Emizet F. Kisangani, “The International Military Intervention Dataset: An Updated Resource for Conflict Scholars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 4 (2009): 589–99.

Hypotheses:

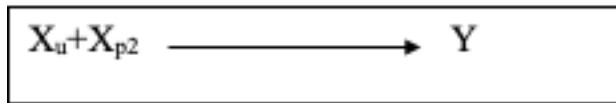
Based on above mentioned arguments, the research offers the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1:



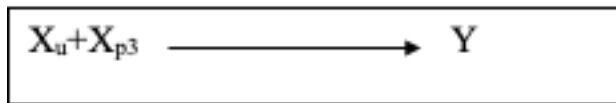
China is more likely to use military force when military encirclement undermines its influence in a strategically important area.

Hypothesis 2:



China is more likely to use military force when military encirclement poses threats of conflicts in two or more separated areas on its strategic periphery.

Hypothesis 3:



China is more likely to use military force when military encirclement is coupled with domestic political and economic problems.

2.3. Methodological approach

This research employs the qualitative method of structured, focused comparison. In each case, the study will examine the target state's perceptions on an encirclement. Then, it will examine what impact the threats from an encirclement have on foreign policy decision making. Linking strategic encirclement with use of military force, the research introduces a threat perception-based counter-encirclement strategy model to explain certain conditions that guide potential pathways to conflict escalation. As part of the case study methodology, this study employs the process tracing method that follows chronological development of each individual case, to build a theory connection between encirclement and interstate conflict.

Concept, case selection and variable measurement

In order to examine the causal relationship between the strategic encirclement and use of military force as the counter-encirclement strategy, this study has chosen four cases.

In order to control for possible confounding variables, unit homogeneity will be achieved through several case selection criteria. All cases to be examined are from the post-1949 era following the establishment of the communist regime in China. Using this time period controls for the influence of varying regimes in foreign policy decision making.

All of the cases constitute an existing *strategic encirclement* based upon a definition of *strategic encirclement*. *The strategic encirclement* is a condition in which a target state encounters a hostile great power's nonmilitary or military involvement in two or more states on its strategic periphery, aimed at undermining the target state's influence in a given strategic area or region.

In order to measure the level of the threats from the strategic encirclement, four independent variables have been identified: the strategically important geographic area, military encirclement, two-front conflict problem, and domestic political reasons.

Military encirclement is a great power military involvement in two or more peripheral states surrounding the target state. The strategically *important geographic* area refers to geographic areas or spaces having high strategic value to the target state's security. This is also a geographic area where an actual or likely conflict can directly threaten the security of a target state's homeland. *Two-front conflict* refers to a situation when the target state faces potential attacks on two or more separated areas of the strategic periphery. *Domestic weakness and leadership intent* refer to a situation in which the target state faces domestic political or economic difficulties, and its leadership intends to strengthen their hold on power, by using external threats to mobilize the populace.

The cases to be examined are: (1) China's intervention in the Korean War (1950); (2) The Sino-Soviet border conflict (1969); (3) China's support to North Vietnam (1964); (5) The Sino-Vietnamese War (1979). All the case studies will be compared by using a single set of questions that are to be applied to each case. For each case, the study will examine the level of threat perceptions and deliberate risk taking for domestic political reasons. In order to identify that China is responding to being encircled, this research will use both primary and secondary sources to assess China's reactions to the four conditions mentioned above.

<p>Domestic weakness and leadership intent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target state does not face domestic political or economic challenges. • The national leadership does not intend to use external threats for domestic political purposes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target state faces domestic political or economic difficulties. • The national leadership intends to use external threats for domestic political purposes.
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SFC Questions:

A general set of questions will incorporate the above-mentioned variables and explore their impact in each case, leading to an assessment of the overall influence of the strategic encirclement on interstate conflict:

1. Military encirclement: Does the target state encounter great power military involvement in multiple states on its strategic periphery? Has military encirclement surrounding the target state intensified or expanded?
2. Strategically important geographic area: Does this area or region have strategic importance to the target state's security? Can actual or likely conflict directly threaten the security of a target state's homeland?
3. Threats of two-front conflict: Does the target state encounter potential threats of conflict in two or more separated areas in the strategic periphery at the same time?

4. Domestic political reasons: Does the target state face domestic political or economic difficulties? Does the target state's leadership intend to use external threats for domestic political purposes?

In the following chapter, the research will examine four cases on China's external conflicts to test the theory and to see to what extent it is able to explain China's conflict behavior. The cases will not be presented in greater narrative detail; instead, they will be organized in the form of answers to each of the questions above.

Chapter 3 - Case studies

This chapter analyzes four external conflicts by the PRC: Korean War (1950), China's military support to Vietnam (1964), Sino-Soviet border conflict 1969, Sino-Vietnamese War (1979). The case study sections are divided into four subsections on analyses of four independent variables, to determine how much of an influence these factors have had in China's decision to use force.

Korean War (1950)

Perceptions of the US military encirclement:

On January 12, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in his speech to the National Press Club, defined the US defense perimeter in Asia without including Korea and Taiwan. In early 1950, American influence in East Asia appeared to be limited to Japan and the Philippines. Nevertheless, Washington's strategy in East Asia started to subtly change after the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union established their defense agreement.¹³ In April 1950, the US government adopted NSC-68, a proposal for an increase in the defense budget and more resolute actions towards containing communist expansion.

After the North Korean invasion of the South on June 25, 1950, the US geared toward supporting South Korea and containing communism in Asia. Two days after the North Korean attack, Truman announced air and naval support for South Korea. On the same day, the US also deployed the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait to "neutralize" the area or to protect Taiwan from being invaded by the PRC. But this appeared more offensive to the Chinese Communist leadership. Faced with the war on its northeastern border, China was put in an unfavorable strategic position

¹³ Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1994), 113-114.

by the presence of the Seventh Fleet, which made it vulnerable to attacks from the northeast and the southeast at the same time.

In Indochina, American strategic behavior shifted from relative neutrality to a more assertive stance. On April 24, 1950, Truman approved NSC-64, recommending that “all practicable measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.”¹⁴ On May 1, 1950, the US president approved \$10 million for military assistance for Indochina.¹⁵ Increased American presence in Korea, Taiwan, and Indochina exploited China’s sense of encirclement and insecurity. During the Politburo meeting on August 4, 1950, Mao said to the top CCP leaders that “the American imperialists would become even more aggressive and threatening to China if they won the war; thus, China must aid Korea.”¹⁶

From South Korea and Japan in the east through the Philippines and Taiwan to Vietnam in the south, China now encountered the US military besiegement all around its southeastern periphery. China perceived America’s increased involvement on China’s periphery as threatening to China’s security. This change in Washington’s strategic behavior led Chinese leaders to reexamine America’s intent toward China and their own security strategy.

Strategic importance of the Korean peninsula to China’s security:

From the era of Imperial dynasties, China has long considered the Korean peninsula as within China’s defense perimeter. The Ming dynasty intervened to support Korea when Japan

¹⁴ “Report to the National Security Council by the Department of State,” U.S. Department of State (Government Printing Office), accessed February 2, 2021, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d480>.

¹⁵ “Pentagon Papers,” National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers>, 17.

¹⁶ Li, *China's Battle*, 19.

invaded the country in the 1590s. More recently, the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) was triggered by competition between China and Japan for dominance in Korea.

Korea historically has been a pivotal point, from which foreign enemies had a strategic advantage to threaten China. Japan's annexation of Korea that occurred in 1910 subsequently led to its occupation of Manchuria in 1931. Given these historic experiences, the CCP leaders should have felt vulnerable to any potential threats from the Korean peninsula.

Korea, as an immediate neighbor, has always been of greatest concern because instability there can pose a direct and proximate threat to China's internal security. In a time of crisis, the Korean peninsula's strategic importance to the PRC's security has increased due to its geographic proximity to Beijing and the industrial complex in Manchuria. On September 15, 1950, the US forces landed at Inchon. On October 1, 1950, the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel into the North Korea. The Chinese leaders perceived this circumstance greatly deepened the vulnerability of China's strategic position. During the Politburo meeting on October 5, Peng Dehuai persuaded the CCP leaders to deploy troops to assist Korea arguing that "If the American military places itself along the Yalu River and in Taiwan, it could find an excuse anytime it wants to launch an invasion."¹⁷

Threats of conflict on three fronts

China was vulnerable from three fronts on its strategic periphery. The CCP leaders gave special attention to the connection between the developments in Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. They believed that the events in these areas were interrelated.¹⁸ Zhou Enlai defined this "concept of confronting the US on three fronts."¹⁹ Beijing viewed its relations with America in the broader

¹⁷ Quoted in Li, *China's Battle*, 24.

¹⁸ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 20.

¹⁹ Chen, *China's road*, 94.

perspective of long-range confrontation in the Asian region.²⁰ In his October 2 telegram to Stalin, Mao explained why China must fight against the United States from a domino-theory logic.²¹ The Chinese leader feared that if did not forestall the US aggression in Korea, it would be the reverse domino process that America would tighten its encirclement by taking further, even bolder actions in the Taiwan Strait and Indochina.

Chinese leaders were concerned with the potential dangers from the US strategic besiegement rather than the immediate threat of American invasion of the mainland. Among many other reasons that the US would not invade China, the Chinese alliance treaty with the Soviet Union provided a guarantee that this would not be the case. Thus, China`s concerns were more strategic than a matter of life and death. From a long-range strategic perspective, being besieged by the United States on three fronts and being isolated in the region, China would have, in the long run, no room to maneuver its foreign policy to guarantee its national security as well as to promote trade and business to restore its economy. Also, sustaining defensive forces along three frontiers would definitely be expensive, draining the country`s economic resources. Thus, the long-term costs of being encircled by the US and its allies on three fronts on China`s strategic periphery outweighed the short-term costs of military intervention in Korea. On October 19,1950, Chinese troops entered into North Korea to “resist America and assist Korea.”

China`s decision to intervene in the Korean War was linked to its fear of encirclement. China faced war threats on three fronts in its immediate neighborhood. This sense of encirclement heightened the sense of insecurity and influenced China to take a more aggressive stance towards

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Thomas J. Christensen, “Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams,” *International Security* 17, no.1 (1992):139.

the US. Although the Korean War was a great risk for China, from strategic considerations, it was necessary to avoid the US encirclement.

Mao`s domestic mobilization intent

China`s new People`s Republic faced both internal and external threats. The country had economic and political problems to solve at home while facing war on the northeastern border. China`s economy was devastated after years of civil war and Japanese invasion. The disasters of floods and drought in 1949 worsened the economic conditions, resulting in the loss of millions of tons of grain and leading to widespread famine.²² On the political front, Chinese leaders had to deal with the remnants of the Nationalists and strengthen the Communist Party`s authority throughout the Chinese territory. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, one of Mao`s strategic priorities was to establish the legitimacy of the CCP as the ruling party.²³ Mao viewed the Korean War as an opportunity to mobilize both party and people and consolidate control over Chinese society.²⁴

Mao decided to launch the “Great movement to Resist America and Assist Korea,” and a document entitled “The CCP`s Central Committee`s Directives on the current situation,” providing guidelines for the movement, was issued to all party organs on October 26, 1950. On November 6, Xinhua News Agency distributed a propaganda document entitled “How to regard the US” for educating and preparing the general public for mass mobilization.²⁵ At the same time, Beijing implemented the nationwide campaign to suppress “reactionaries and reactionary activities.”²⁶

²² Whiting, 15-16.

²³ Li, 2.

²⁴ Chen Jian, *China`s road*, 203.

²⁵ *Ibid.*,191.

²⁶ Chen, *Mao`s China*, 88.

Mao intended to turn the external threats caused by the Korean War into a driving force for advancing the Chinese revolution by conducting widespread propaganda movements and campaigns aimed at stimulating national sentiment against foreign enemies.²⁷

The Korean War presented serious challenges for China; at the same time, it offered a potential opportunity to suppress anti-communists and strengthen the CCP's authority in the newly established People's Republic. This expected gain pushed the country one step closer to the decision to intervene militarily in the Korean War.

China's military support to Vietnam (1964)

The perceptions of the US military encirclement

Through 1950s, the United States surrounded China with a ring of military alliances, forging bilateral security treaties with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia and Taiwan and multilateral treaties such the ANZUS Treaty and the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (or SEATO) with the South and Southeast Asian nations.

In the early 1960s, Mao warned the CCP leaders of a US military encirclement. This encirclement, starting with South Korea in the north and continuing to Okinawa, the Philippines, Taiwan and the island of Guam, would complete with Vietnam in the south.²⁸ A *Renmin Ribao* editorial of July 1, 1964, claimed that "the US built military bases around China and organized military blocs of aggression to lay a military cordon around China to threaten it with war."²⁹

²⁷ Chen, *China's road*, 193.

²⁸ Xiaobing Li, *The Dragon in the Jungle: The Chinese Army in the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 49.

²⁹ *Beijing review*, no 27, July 3, 1964, 8.

Beijing perceived that the United States was expanding its influence all around China's eastern and southern periphery in Asia in order to militarily besiege the PRC.

China's concerns about the US threats were further elevated after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964. On August 7, the US Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution that authorized President Johnson to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression" by communist Vietnam.³⁰ On the same day, the government of China issued an official statement that the US aggression had gone over the "brink of war" and "made a first step in extending a war in Indochina."³¹ With this statement, China declared that "the US aggression against Vietnam Democratic Republic means aggression against China."³² Beijing perceived that an American escalation of war in Vietnam constituted a link in Washington's chain of encirclement of China, and supporting North Vietnam was a way to break this chain.³³

Strategic significance of southern neighbor Vietnam

Vietnam has been a traditional strategic frontier where China had historically shown its willingness to use force to protect its security interests. In the era of the Qing dynasty, China deployed expeditionary troops three times (in 1788, 1790 and 1884) to intervene in conflicts in Vietnam. Soon after its establishment, the People's Republic of China followed this pathway and dispatched troops into Vietnam in support of its struggle against external powers – France (1950), and the United States (1965).

³⁰ "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution," *History*, October 29, 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/gulf-of-tonkin-resolution-1>.

³¹ *Beijing review*, no 32, 7 August 1964, ii.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 140.

Moreover, Vietnam has security importance due to its geographic position of contiguity to China and access to the sea. Vietnam is a pivotal area from where an enemy could carry out an amphibious attack against China's southern border. Thus, the control of Vietnam by outside powers meant that China's southern frontier was vulnerable to a possible external invasion.

Although the US had not expressed a direct threat to invade China, Beijing felt safer with a buffer zone – North Vietnam. In February 1965, America launched Operation Rolling Thunder, a large-scale bombing campaign targeting North Vietnam. The Chinese feared that heavy US bombing might force North Vietnam to give up its cities and the capital and retreat to the countryside and border areas, with the risk of extending the war into China's territory. China also worried that a possible US amphibious landing on the northern coast of Vietnam, similar to the Inchon landing in Korea, would turn Chinese coastal areas and offshore islands into a war zone. In August 1964, Mao told Le Duan that China needed to dispatch 300,000-500,000 troops to the southern borders to prepare for the worst-case scenario.³⁴

From a security perspective, China needed to deter the US invasion of North Vietnam. China calculated ways to provide support for North Vietnam without directly engaging in war with America. From strategic considerations, China sought to limit increasing Soviet involvement in Vietnam in order to prevent Moscow from increasing its influence in the strategically important Indochina and subsequently the Southeast Asian region as the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the PRC was growing in early 1960s. In February 1965, Soviet premier Aleksei Kosygin visited Hanoi and signed an agreement, increasing Russian aid to 148,000 tons of military goods and deploying a Soviet missile combat brigade of 4,000 troops.³⁵ As Moscow increased its military aid, Beijing was concerned about Vietnam's calls for closer relations with the Soviet Union.

³⁴ Li, *The Dragon in the Jungle*, 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

Conflict threat on two fronts

China was vulnerable from two fronts on its strategic periphery, on the north and the south. In the early 1960s, the tension between the PRC and the USSR was subtly increasing due to the emerging Sino-Soviet split. The tension was further exacerbated when the Yi-Ta incident occurred in the spring of 1962. From April to May, 60,000 Kazakhs and Uighurs fled from Xinjiang into the USSR. The violent riot occurred as China moved troops to seal the border to halt this exodus. Moscow and Beijing blamed each other for causing the incident. In the mid- 1960s, the Soviets began strengthening their defense ties with Mongolia, which later would increase the Soviet military presence on China`s northern border. On September 21, 1964, Moscow established a defense agreement with Ulaanbaatar to render military aid to Mongolia.³⁶ In his speech in 1965, Mao said: “We must keep eye on not only on the east but also on the north... We must prepare for fighting wars on two fronts.”³⁷

On the southern front, the US escalation of the war in Vietnam greatly increased China`s perceptions of the US threats. In March 1965, Washington deployed ground troops into battle in South Vietnam and by June of that year, 82,000 American troops were stationed in Vietnam.³⁸ China viewed the increased American involvement in the Vietnam War as threatening to China`s security and increased its support to North Vietnam. By the end of 1965, China had deployed more than 160,000 troops into North Vietnam.³⁹

³⁶ Ookhnoin Batsaikhan et al., *Mongoliin tuuh: 1911-2017* [History of Mongolia: 1911-2017] (Ulaanbaatar: Soyombo printing, 2018), 393.

³⁷ Quoted in John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2006), 47.

³⁸ “Vietnam War,” *History*, October 29, 2009, https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history#section_5.

³⁹ Li, *The Dragon in the Jungle*, 64.

In the mid-1960s, China was concerned with the encirclement by the Soviet Union in the north and the United States in the south. Resisting two great power rivals on two fronts at the same time, China would eventually exhaust its economic resources and lose its freedom of maneuver in foreign policy. In the worst-case scenario, the country might encounter an invasion of its mainland as being encircled made the country vulnerable to attacks from multiple directions. As it was clear that the Soviet threat from the north was less intense compared with the US threat from the south, China appeared to be dealing with the two great powers one after another, starting with the one posing the most immediate danger – the United States. Beijing would deal with Moscow later.

Mao`s mobilization intent

Faced with the war on its southern border, China experienced domestic economic and political crisis in the early 1960s. The PRC`s economy had collapsed due to the failure of the Great Leap Forward Movement of 1958-1960. China`s industrial system was so severely damaged that industrial output dropped by about 50 percent through 1962 and did not recover until 1964.⁴⁰ The damage to agriculture was so devastating that grain output dropped drastically and did not return to its 1959 level until 1966.⁴¹ China suffered a nationwide famine, which led to the deaths of approximately 30 million people.⁴² The domestic political situation was turbulent, with party disunity and leadership splits. Mao had disagreements with Liu Shaoqi, his designated successor and a vice-chairman of the Communist Party, who challenged his authority and criticized him for the failure of the Great Leap Forward. Mao intended to remove Liu and other party leaders from the revolutionary generation, who questioned his leadership and charged him with the disasters of

⁴⁰ Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 176.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*,170-171.

⁴² *Ibid.*,333.

the Great Leap Forward, and subsequently mobilize the entire party to sweep out all the officials who had demonstrated the “revisionist” tendency.⁴³

Mao sought to use the impending war in Vietnam for his domestic mobilization directed at the Chinese population and the Communist Party. Mao, from his previous experiences, was fully aware that “a creation of the perception of China facing serious external threats would help strengthen the dynamics of revolutionary mobilization at home as well as his authority and controlling position in China’s political life.”⁴⁴

In May 1964, Mao first suggested mobilizing China for the Third Front, a massive project to move resources out of the big cities and build military industrial complexes in the mountains of western China.⁴⁵ At that time, over 60% of China’s industry was in 14 large coastal cities exposed to enemy airstrikes.⁴⁶ In a time of rising tensions with both the US and Soviet Union, Chinese leaders launched their Third Front campaign which aimed at “socially engineering a population” to conform to Mao’s principles and ensuring the security of the communist regime.⁴⁷ To build the Third Front, the Chinese Communist Party mobilized around 15 million workers.⁴⁸

Moreover, Mao used international crisis as an opportunity to tighten his control over the Communist Party. Mao, concerned with revisionism within the party, had seen this opportunity to attack the other party leaders whom he branded as “revisionists.” Mao believed that he could turn the US threat into an advantage by using it to intensify domestic anti-imperialist feelings and mobilize the population against revisionists.⁴⁹ In August 1964, Beijing launched a “Resist

⁴³ Ibid.196.

⁴⁴ Chen Jian, “China’s involvement in Vietnam War 1965-1969,” *The China Quarterly*, no.142 (1995):361.

⁴⁵ Covell F. Meyskens, *Mao’s Third Front: The militarization of Cold War China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 82.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Meyskens, *Mao’s Third Front*, 3&22.

⁴⁸ Ibid.,1-2.

⁴⁹ Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*,152.

America and assist Vietnam” movement all across China. From 7 to 11 August, over 20 million Chinese people, according to Xinhua News Agency, participated in rallies and demonstrations all over China, protesting “the US imperialist aggression against Vietnam.”⁵⁰ Mao used the US escalation of the Vietnam War in 1964 to mobilize China’s population for his more radical foreign and domestic policies.⁵¹

Domestic factors played a decisive role in Mao’s decision making to support the Vietnamese Communists in their armed struggle against the United States. This was, indeed, the main thread of Mao’s complex calculus.

Sino-Soviet border conflict (1969)

Perceptions of Soviet military encirclement

Before the Sino-Soviet border clash in 1969, China was besieged by Soviet military forces all around its northern periphery: on its north, northwest and northeastern frontiers.

From 1965, the Soviets began increasing their troop deployments in the Far East, Siberia, and Soviet Central Asia, and arming them with more powerful weaponry. Russia also started equipping its Far Eastern troops with missiles.⁵² In 1967, the Soviet Union deployed the Scaleboard (SS-12), a tactical nuclear weapon that could hit targets such as transportation centers and big military concentrations, to a range of 725 kilometers within China.⁵³ Soviet divisions deployed along China’s northern borders increased from fourteen in 1965 to around thirty-four by

⁵⁰ Chen, “China’s involvement in Vietnam War,” 365.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Thomas W. Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict,” in Stephen S. Kaplan, ed., *Diplomacy of Power: Soviet Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1981), 271.

⁵³ *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], Directorate of Intelligence, 28 April 1970, 24

1969.⁵⁴ The relative balance of forces along the Sino-Soviet border was initially balanced as Chinese numerical superiority weighed against Soviet sophisticated weapons and equipment. However, the balance was upset when the Soviets started stationing troops in Mongolia.⁵⁵

From the mid-1960s, the USSR strengthened its defense ties with the Mongolian People's Republic, forging a military alliance, providing weapons, establishing military bases or installations and stationing troops in Mongolia. In 1964, a Military Assistance Agreement was signed between the USSR and the MPR. According to this agreement, the Soviets provided military goods and materials worth 700,000 rubles each year between 1966 and 1970.⁵⁶ On January 15, 1966, Mongolia and the Soviet Union signed a Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Agreement. In February 1967, the Soviet Politburo made the decision to deploy troops of the Soviet Thirty-Ninth Army in Mongolia.⁵⁷ On March 4, 1967, Moscow and Ulaanbaatar signed the Agreement on Stationing Soviet Troops in Mongolia.⁵⁸ According to Article 6 of this agreement, the MPR allowed 410,073.43 ha of land to be used for Soviet military bases and this included 4 districts in the capital city Ulaanbaatar, 15 aimags (provinces) and 54 sums⁵⁹ mostly in eastern and southern parts of Mongolia.⁶⁰ By November 1967, several divisions armed with tanks and missiles were occupying permanent bases in Mongolia.⁶¹ Increased Russian military presence in Mongolia heightened China's apprehension of Soviet threats. In January 1967, Mao warned that "Soviet

⁵⁴ M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 204.

⁵⁵ Robinson, 272.

⁵⁶ Gombosuren Dendevsuren, *Mongol Ulsyn Zevsegt Khüchnii baiguulaltyn tiiikh: XX зуун*[History of Mongolian Armed Forces Development: XX Century] (Ulaanbaatar: Arvai Print, 2009),193.

⁵⁷ Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heaven*, 189-190.

⁵⁸ Gombosuren, *Mongol Ulsyn Zevsegt Khüchnii baiguulaltyn tiiikh*, 193.

⁵⁹ Sum is the second level administrative division below aimag (provinces), roughly comparable to a County in the US.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Robinson, 272.

ground forces are on the move,” and “Chinese troops in north must be on guard and in a state of preparedness.”⁶²

The USSR accompanied its military moves with diplomatic efforts that were designed to isolate China and further exploit its fears of encirclement. Between late 1968 and early 1969, Moscow intensified its diplomatic activities around China’s periphery: the Soviet Defense Minister and a Supreme Soviet delegation visited India and Ceylon; Afghanistan’s Defense Minister, India’s Prime Minister, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister and a North Korean economic delegation visited Moscow; and trade protocols were signed with Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Japan.⁶³ Besides, China was virtually isolated in the socialist world, with its only friend Albania.

On its over 8000-kilometer border with China and additional over 4700-kilometer Mongolia-China border, the USSR effectively encircled the PRC by land with its military posture in the Far East, Mongolia, and Soviet Central Asia.

⁶² Quoted in Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980),213.

⁶³ Kenneth G Weiss, “Power Grows Out of the Barrel of a Gunboat. The U.S. in Sino-Soviet Crisis,” CNA Professional Paper 376, December 1982, 15.

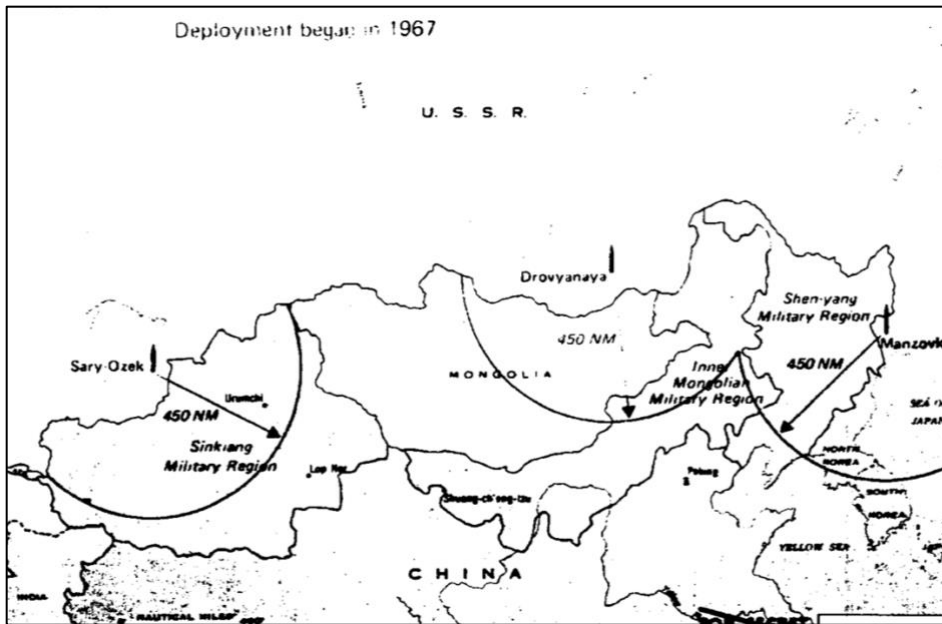


Figure 3.1. Mobile missile (Scaleboard) deployment along Sino-Soviet border (Source: [From CIA Intelligence Report, April 28, 1970](#))

Strategic significance of Mongolia

The strategic significance of China's northern neighbor Mongolia greatly increased in a time of rising tension between the USSR and the PRC.

Due to its geographical proximity to Beijing, Mongolia was a crucial neighbor from where an enemy could carry out an attack against the Chinese capital. The route from Erenhot on the Sino-Mongolian border to Beijing through Zhangjiakou is only around 560 kilometers, and much of the terrain is flat enough to be accessible to mechanized troops with tanks. The Soviet military doctrine calculated that Russian army groups could extend more than 700 km in depth within 10 to 14 days.⁶⁴

Another important factor that made the Mongolian People's Republic strategically important was its border with the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR), historically part

⁶⁴ Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959-1973: A New History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 248.

of Mongolia`s territory. During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese conducted mass genocide against the ethnic Mongols in IMAR, imprisoning and torturing over 300,000 and killing 22,000.⁶⁵ As the violent suppression of the ethnic minorities led to hatred and greater dissatisfaction with Chinese rule in the autonomous region, Beijing presumably feared instigation by the Soviet Union in Inner Mongolia. By spring 1968, Chairman Mao put the entire Inner Mongolia Military District under the command of the Beijing Military Region.⁶⁶

As the Soviet military presence increased in Mongolia, the Sino-Mongolian border stretching over 4700 kilometers made China vulnerable to attacks from north, northeast and northwest. China was deeply suspicious of the Soviet intent behind strengthening its military bases in Mongolia. In the summer of 1968, the Soviets completed a rail line between Chita, a major Soviet military base, and Choibalsan, Mongolia`s second largest city, where a new Soviet base was established.⁶⁷ Choibalsan is a city which is located in eastern Dornod province bordering with China`s industrial heartland Manchuria. In Dornod province, the Soviet-Mongolian troops fought against the Japanese during the Battles of Khalkhin Gol in 1939; thus, this was an area where they had experience of conducting joint operations.

Beijing worried about the possibility of a Soviet invasion but was not entirely sure about the Soviet intent behind the military buildup. In this situation where the intention of the Soviets was vague or difficult to read, China resorted to well-planned limited use of military force in a carefully chosen area – Zhenbao Island – to probe Moscow`s intent. The reason why China did not initiate conflict against Mongolia was not just because China did not find any excuse (the two sides

⁶⁵ Kerry Brown, “The Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia 1967–1969: The Purge of the “Heirs of Genghis Khan,” *Asian Affairs* 38, no.2 (2007):176.

⁶⁶ Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 226.

⁶⁷ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict,”272.

had settled their border issues, signing the Sino-Mongolian Border Treaty in 1962) but to avoid full scale war and prevent being locked in a land war with Soviet -Mongolian troops, as Japan was at Khalkhin Gol in 1939.

Conflict threats on two fronts

China had conflict threats from two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, on two fronts on its strategic periphery.

On the southern front, in the late 1960s, China was continuing its support for the North Vietnamese fight against the US forces. From June 1967 to March 1968, the war in Vietnam, as described by the Chinese, was in the hardest phase for them, a “bombing wave,” in which the US sharply intensified its bombing.⁶⁸ After the opening of Paris peace talks and America`s suspension of bombing in November 1968, China started to pull back its troops from North Vietnam. By March 1969, the PLA completed its withdrawal of antiaircraft artillery divisions.⁶⁹ Between late 1968 and early 1969, China`s focus of threat shifted from the south to the northern front.

On the northern front, from late 1968, the tensions between the USSR and the PRC reached a peak, and nine violent confrontations over Zhenbao Island occurred between December 27, 1968 and February 25, 1969.⁷⁰ On December 27, 1968, several Soviet vehicles, according to Chinese sources, landed on Zhenbao Island and Russian soldiers used sticks to beat Chinese soldiers. On January 23, 1969, a particularly serious incident occurred, and 28 Chinese soldiers were reported

⁶⁸ Li, *The Dragon in the Jungle*, 125.

⁶⁹ Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 17.

⁷⁰ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 208.

to be wounded.⁷¹ The massive Soviet military buildup combined with increased border incidents to pose threats to China.

China was sandwiched between the military forces of two superpowers, being threatened from north and south. Beijing wanted to send the message that “Invasion was not be feared: China was too big for the Soviets or the Americans to swallow.”⁷² As for Mao, belligerence was the best option for deterrence against the Soviet Union. There is a famous proverb that says, “Fight fire with a fire.” Even in real life, a controlled small fire is used to fight larger fire by creating a barrier to an incoming forest fire, albeit with a great amount of risk. China sought to deter the looming war with the Soviet Union with a small conflict in a carefully designated area. However, the conflict would put China, for two decades, at great risk that had not been foreseen by the paramount leader.

Domestic politics

In the late 1960s, China had domestic instability due to the Cultural Revolution while facing conflict threats on its northern border and southern border. Mao`s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution began in May 1966. After two years, China was in turmoil with the fighting among radical Red Guards, economic difficulties and factional conflict in the CCP leadership.

Mao was worried about the development of the Cultural Revolution, especially when violence and armed clashes increased in the summer of 1968. On July 28, 1968, at a meeting with five top-level Red Guard leaders, Mao said: “First of all, we want cultural struggle, not armed

⁷¹ Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement,” *Cold War History* 1, no.1 (2000): 25.

⁷² Quoted in Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos China’s Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 114.

struggle.”⁷³ He strongly condemned the Red Guards for their violent factional conflict, saying, “Now we have come to the point where you little generals are committing errors.” He urged them to stop fighting, warning “Well now we’re issuing a nationwide directive, and whoever violates it, striking at the army, sabotaging transportation, killing people, setting fires, is committing a crime.”⁷⁴ The Chinese leader decided to move the Cultural Revolution into a new phase of consolidation.

In August 1968, the Soviet-led Warsaw pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia, and Moscow proclaimed the Brezhnev Doctrine in September of that year, justifying its right to intervene in the affairs of socialist countries. After seeing a fellow communist country being occupied within six hours, Beijing feared that Moscow could apply the Brezhnev doctrine to China as well.⁷⁵ China had reason to believe so since the Soviet troops were positioned all around its northern border. Zhou Enlai, in his remarks to an Albanian delegation on China’s National Day, related the Soviet actions in Eastern Europe with further “provocations” against China, including “deploying large numbers of troops on the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian borders.”⁷⁶

Beijing’s worst nightmare is external conflict and domestic chaos flowing in the same direction. When surrounded and isolated by external enemies, playing with domestic chaos could be too risky for the Chinese leader. Thus, he first cracked down on the disorder of the Cultural Revolution.

The Sino-Soviet border clash broke out when Chinese troops ambushed and killed a group of Russian border troops on Zhenbao Island, on the Ussuri on March 2, 1969. After the conflict, Beijing launched massive demonstrations all over China. From March 4 to March 12, more than

⁷³Quoted in Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China Under Threat*, 194.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Walder, *China under Mao*, 261-62.

⁷⁵ Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split*, 248.

⁷⁶ Fravel, 203.

400 million people attended the anti-Soviet rallies.⁷⁷ In the face of danger, Mao had to strengthen unity, eliminate factionalism and stabilize the domestic political situation.⁷⁸ In other words, he wanted to first put his own house in order.

Creating an international conflict in order to unite the party and the Chinese people was not a primary purpose of the Chinese leader. Nevertheless, Mao used the conflict to mobilize China once again. He also took this opportunity to divert people`s attention from the troubles of the Cultural Revolution.⁷⁹

Sino-Vietnamese War (1979)

Perceptions of Soviet military encirclement

Increased Soviet naval presence in Asian waters and the intensified military cooperation with Vietnam in the late 1970s heightened China's awareness of the threat of Soviet encirclement. From March 1976, Moscow began the construction of refueling and repair facilities for Soviet submarines near Haiphong and agreed to supply Vietnam with submarines and train Vietnamese to operate the vessels. In the same year, Hanoi allowed Moscow to use Camh Ranh Bay as a base to supply oil to the Soviet navy and as one of the main ports to transport weapons and military goods and materials to Vietnam.⁸⁰ Naval bases and ports in Danang, which were modernized and previously used by the US, also started being used by the Soviet navy.⁸¹ The Soviet access to Vietnamese naval bases greatly enhanced Soviet power projection in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. By the end of 1976, more Soviet than US naval vessels were piled in the Western Pacific

⁷⁷ Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split*, 251.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 249

⁷⁹ Lyle J. Goldstein, "Return to Zhenbao Island: Who Started Shooting and Why it Matters," *China Quarterly*, no 168, (2001):997.

⁸⁰ Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 92-93.

⁸¹ Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), 269.

close to the East Asian mainland. In the South China sea adjacent to Vietnam, there were a dozen Soviet vessels and a third of them were combat-ready.⁸²

This growing military cooperation between Moscow and Hanoi, especially the Soviet use of naval bases in Vietnam, increased Beijing`s concerns about the Soviet threat. On June 2, 1978, the pro-Beijing Hong Kong newspaper *Wen Wei Po* claimed that “the Soviet Union`s strategic aim is to make arrangements in Vladivostok, Taiwan and Cam Ranh Bay for forming an anti-China oceanic arc.”⁸³ In a *Renmin Ribao* editorial of June 23, 1978, Beijing charged that Moscow is “increasing its military presence in the region of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and carrying on subversive activities in the littoral states; and it is also anxiously seeking a base it can count on in Southeast Asia.” The article remarked that Moscow`s motive of backing up Vietnam was part of its strategic plan to dominate Southeast Asia and improve its strategic position in the world.⁸⁴

Beijing`s concerns about Soviet intentions further intensified when Vietnam joined the Soviet-led economic organization Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in June 1978. In August, Moscow began airlift and sea transport of arms to Vietnam, delivering guns, missiles, radar, and ammunition by Danang port. The Soviets also provided MiG-21 fighters to support the Vietnamese border defense against China.⁸⁵

Late 1978 was a major turning point. Vietnam signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in November 1978. The most important part of the treaty is Article 6 which says:

⁸² Douglas Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an alliance* (Boulder: Westview Press,1987), 192.

⁸³ Quoted in Kenneth G Weiss, “Power Grows Out of the Barrel of a Gunboat. The U.S. in Sino-Soviet Crisis,” CNA Professional Paper 376, December 1982, 50.

⁸⁴ *Bejing Review*, no 25, June 23, 1978, 26.

⁸⁵ Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers,1986), 258.

In case either party is attacked or threatened with attack, the two parties signatory to the treaty shall immediately consult each other with a view to eliminating that threat, and shall take appropriate and effective measures to safeguard peace and security of the two countries.

Beijing reacted with great apprehension to Hanoi's security treaty with Moscow. On November 8, 1978, Deng Xiaoping in Bangkok said that the Sino-Vietnamese Treaty was being used to encircle China.⁸⁶

China viewed the Soviet-Vietnam military alliance, the Soviet use of Vietnamese naval bases, and Soviet provision of military equipment and weaponry as evidence of Moscow's intent to militarily besiege China. As counter measures against this perceived encirclement, Beijing normalized its relations with the US and Japan, signing the friendship treaty with Japan in August 1978 and establishing diplomatic relations with America in January 1979.

⁸⁶ King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), 81.

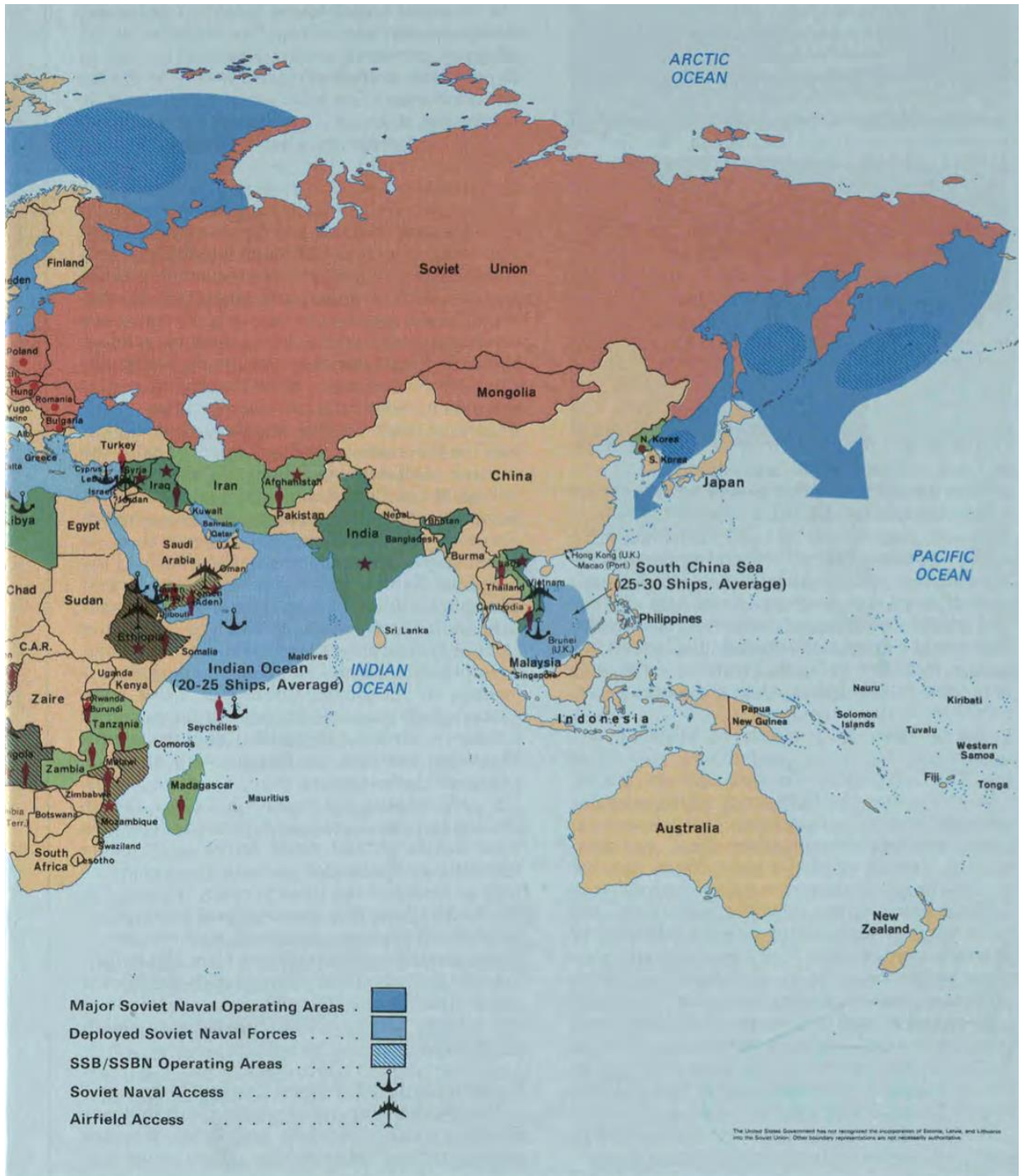


Figure 3.2 The Soviet power projection. (Source: [The Soviet Military Power, Defense Intelligence Agency, 1985](#))

Strategic importance of Indochina to China`s security

Indochina, located to the south of China, has a strategic position, being bordered by the Indian Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east. The presence of outside powers in Indochina could undermine China`s security by land and sea. In other words, any great power occupying or dominating Indochina could possibly besiege China by both land and sea from the south. In this sense, Indochina should be considered as a strategically significant area to China`s security. To keep external powers away from Indochina, the PRC had sent advisors and even military units into North Vietnam to assist Ho Chi Minh against France in the 1950s and America in the 1960s.

After American withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975, the “power vacuum” in Indochina started to be filled by the Soviet Union. Moscow had seen America`s defeat in Indochina as an opportunity to revive its proposal for an Asian collective security system, which Brezhnev announced at the meeting of the International Conference of Communist and Workers` Parties in 1969.⁸⁷ As Moscow tried to convince Asian states that its Asian collective security proposal was identical to ASEAN`s “zone of peace of peace, freedom and neutrality” (ZOPFAN), Beijing - frightened with the expanding influence of the USSR and Vietnam in Indochina, strongly denied this claim. Beijing portrayed Moscow`s reformulation of the proposal for an Asian collective security system as an attempt “to sell old wine in new bottle”, a typical way for the Soviets to seek expansion in Asia.⁸⁸ In early 1976, Laos became the first Asian country to support the collective security proposal. Moscow`s economic assistance and the presence of Soviet military advisors in Laos increased as that country joined the Soviet bloc in late 1976.⁸⁹ In July 1977, Vientiane and

⁸⁷ Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011),107.

⁸⁸ Ross, *The Indochina tangle*, 84.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*,85-86.

Hanoi signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, allowing the stationing of Vietnamese troops in Laos. In the same year, Vietnam deployed 30,000 troops into Laos “to help control general unrest.”⁹⁰ Beijing accused Vietnam of serving as “aide” to the USSR to extend its influence in Indochina. In a *Renmin Ribao* editorial of December 22, China referred to the Soviet Union and Vietnam as “partners in a dirty deal,” with both having shared ambitions to dominate in Southeast Asia.⁹¹ This article further stated that Moscow was using Vietnam’s ambition to implement its own- improving its strategic deployment in order to dominate Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Beijing even branded Vietnam a “willing pawn of the Soviets” and a “second Cuba.”⁹² In a statement by the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson in December 1978, Beijing charged Vietnam with attempting to “rig up an ‘Indochinese federation’ under its control.”⁹³ The expanding Soviet influence in Indochina weakened China’s strategic position in South and Southeast Asia and increased China’s perception of a Soviet encirclement threat.

Conflict threats on two or three fronts

China faced conflict threats from at least two and possibly three fronts on its strategic periphery.

On the northern frontier, Sino-Soviet relations continued to deteriorate, raising the prospect for potential conflicts along China’s north, northeast and northwestern frontiers, after the border clashes with the Soviet Union on Zhenbao (Damansky) Island in March 1969 and in the area of Zhalanashkol Lake on the Sino-Soviet border in Xinjiang in August of that year. By 1979, the number of Soviet divisions along China’s northern frontier had increased from thirty-one to fifty.⁹⁴ From 1978, the Soviet military posture in the Far East and Mongolia became even more threatening

⁹⁰ Ross, 124.

⁹¹ *Beijing review*, no 51, December 22, 1978, 18.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 141.

towards China when Moscow deployed strategic weapons such as the SS-20 intermediate ballistic missile and the Backfire bomber in the Far East.⁹⁵



Figure 3.3 Potential Soviet invasion routes into China (Source: [Director of Central Intelligence, Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multi-theater War, 1985](#))

⁹⁵ Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk Taking Against China* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1982), 77.

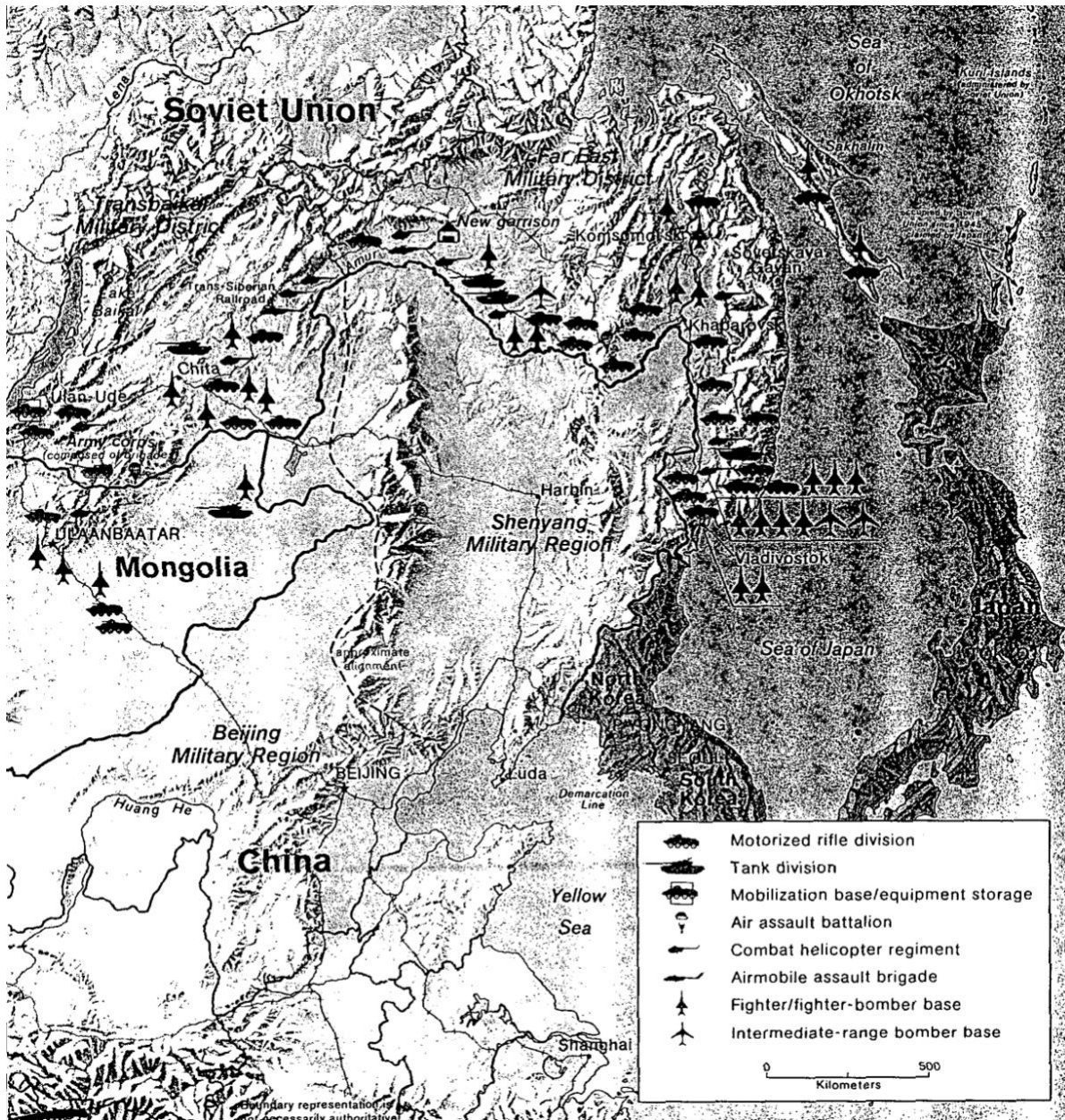


Figure 3.4 The Soviet forces opposite Northeastern China (Source: [Director of Central Intelligence, Soviet Strategy and Capabilities for Multi-theater War, 1985](#))

On the western front, the Soviet presence increased in Afghanistan. Although the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan occurred several months after the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979, China was aware of growing Soviet influence in Afghanistan. Beijing had distrusted the pro-Soviet

communists that took power after the Saur revolution in 1978.⁹⁶ Moscow and Kabul signed a 20-year friendship treaty in December 1978. China had reason to be concerned with a hostile Afghanistan, not just because it borders China's major ethnic minority region of Xinjiang but because China's nuclear arsenal was located in Xinjiang, close to the Afghan border. On the southwestern frontier, Moscow also greatly improved its defense cooperation with India after establishing a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with India in 1971.

On the southern front, Sino-Vietnamese relations began to deteriorate after the Vietnam War ended, and North and South Vietnam unified in 1975. At least one hundred border incidents occurred in 1976. The number of border incidents further increased, according to Chinese accounts, reaching 1,100 incidents in 1978, in which about 300 troops and civilians were wounded or killed.⁹⁷ The tensions in Sino-Vietnamese relations erupted into hostilities when Vietnam persecuted ethnic Chinese and invaded Cambodia.

By late 1978, the external threat, however, was not one of imminent invasion of China. Instead, China had seen the expanding Soviet influence on China's strategic periphery as threatening. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978, Beijing perceived this as a Soviet strategy to dominate South and Southeast Asia and complete the encirclement of China from the south. In a *Beijing Review* article from January 19, 1979, the PRC charged that "the aggression against Kampuchea by Vietnam, supported and instigated by the Soviet social imperialism, is an important part of the 'global strategy' employed by Moscow in its bid for world hegemony."⁹⁸ China perceived that the USSR's extending its influence in Indochina aimed to

⁹⁶ Elleman, Bruce, Stephen Kotkin, and Clive Schofield, *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbors in Asia* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2013),16.

⁹⁷ Xiaobing Li, *The Dragon in the Jungle: The Chinese Army in the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 2020),259.

⁹⁸ *Beijing Review*, no 3, January 19, 1979, 13.

control important sea routes and “complete an arc of strategic encirclement.”⁹⁹ Beijing referred to the Soviet Asian strategy as a “strategic encirclement” directed “to cordon the continent from the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean right up to Vladivostok and using Vietnam as its Hatchet-man, ‘the Cuba of Asia,’ in its central thrust to seize the whole of Indochina and then dominate Southeast Asia, South Asia and edge the United States out of Asia.”¹⁰⁰

China increased its support to Cambodia and began considering the possibility of limited war with Vietnam. Deng Xiaoping supported the war against Vietnam, claiming that China’s military attack on Vietnam was directed not at mere border disputes but at the wider situation in Southeast Asia and even the entire world.¹⁰¹ He believed that if China failed to take resolute action against Vietnamese aggression, this would encourage the Soviets to move from the north.¹⁰²

In addition, Deng Xiaoping advocated the use of military force against Vietnam because China needed a “safe reliable environment to undertake its modernizations.”¹⁰³ China, in order to implement its modernization and economic reform, first needed to deal with the Soviet intent to isolate China.

China’s decision to go to war against Vietnam was intended to break the perceived Soviet encirclement and deter Vietnam from further expanding its influence throughout Indochina.

Domestic mobilization

After Mao’s death in 1976, China was left with domestic political factionalism created by the Cultural Revolution. China had a domestic political crisis – a power struggle between Deng

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.,14.

¹⁰¹ Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015),55.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

Xiaoping and Mao`s chosen successor Hua Guofeng. At the same time, the country faced external threats on its southern border with Vietnam.

From August 1977 to December 1978, the power struggle between Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping intensified.¹⁰⁴ After the Fifth National People`s Congress from February 26 to March 5, 1978, Deng Xiaoping retained his position as the chief of the General Staff of the PLA.¹⁰⁵

In a time of crisis, Deng did stand out with his military expertise vis-a-vis his opponent Hua. Deng was a veteran of the Long March and one of the most important CCP military leaders during the 1946-49 civil war while Hua had no such military experience. Deng had seen the external threats as an opportunity to enhance his prestige against his political rivals.¹⁰⁶

After the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee held from December 18 to December 22, 1978, Deng Xiaoping`s political position within the CCP had been greatly advanced.¹⁰⁷ Deng`s priority was to carry out economic reform and open up China to the outside world. When facing the external conflict on China`s southern border, Deng hoped to use this crisis to encourage patriotism that would solidify support for his reforms.¹⁰⁸

Deng Xiaoping thus sought some domestic political gains from the coming conflict with Vietnam. However, these expected gains were side benefits rather than being major reasons for war.

¹⁰⁴ Chen, *China`s war*, 72.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 73

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Scobell, *China`s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Scobell, *China`s Use of Military Force* ,137.

¹⁰⁷ Chen ,76.

¹⁰⁸ Scobell,137.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

4.1 Conclusion

Major arguments about China's conflict behavior agree upon the notion that China's use of force often involved issues of Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity. In other words, China opted for military force when its border security was threatened, or its territorial integrity or sovereignty was challenged. This thesis has challenged this major argument, suggesting that China has employed military force externally mostly for greater strategic reasons – beyond the mere defense of its borders – avoiding strategic encirclements by the strong powers. This study, rather than arguing China is either pacifist or parabellum, has sought to demonstrate when and under what conditions China becomes more parabellum than pacifist. The four cases on China's external conflicts indicated that central to Chinese calculation to use force was securing its strategic position to avoid being encircled by its adversaries. As a weaker major power sandwiched between two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, China's major security concern was to escape being militarily besieged by any of the two. Whenever one of the two superpowers became dominant in those regions close to China's borders, with their powerful military presence, China's strategic position became greatly weakened.

One of the major reasons for China's decision to militarily intervene in the Korean War in 1950 was that the country faced threats of conflict on three fronts on its strategic periphery at the same time as the US militarily besieged China by deploying invasion troops to the Korean peninsula, placing the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait and increasing its military assistance to the French in Vietnam. This confirms the second hypothesis that China's likelihood of using military force increases when military encirclement poses threats of conflicts in two or more

separated areas on its strategic periphery. The Chinese leadership's intent to use external conflict to strengthen their hold on power, by using external threats to mobilize the populace, further increased the possibility of China militarily intervening in the Korean War. Mao saw the Korean War as an opportunity to suppress anti-communists and strengthen the CCP's authority in the newly established People's Republic as the country was experiencing severe economic crisis and challenges to the communist rule from Nationalists both in the mainland and from across the strait. This fits the third hypothesis that China resorts to the use of force when military encirclement is coupled with domestic political and economic problems.

The Chinese leadership's domestic mobilization intent was more prominent in the Chinese calculus to intervene in the Vietnam War, increasing its military assistance and deploying troops to North Vietnam in 1964. The Chinese domestic political and economic situation was dire as the country was devastated due to the Great Leap Forward failure; at the same time, Beijing faced dual adversaries: the Soviets in the north and the US in the south. Mao used the international crisis in Vietnam to get rid of fellow comrades questioning his leadership and mobilize the populace for his ambition to create a "Third Front." But the leadership's domestic mobilization intent, independently, could not provide the whole picture for China's external use of force. The domestic political reasons, rather than being the actual cause of war, served as a supporting factor in China's decision to use force for foreign policy purposes.

The research indicates that Chinese leaders perceive certain regions and countries to be more important than others. China was more concerned with the great power military presence in areas with strategic importance for China's security. Mongolia was one of those areas with strategic importance due to its proximity to China's capital Beijing and its bordering China's industrial heart Manchuria and a major ethnic minority in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous

Region. The Soviet military deployment in Mongolia greatly threatened China's security. The Sino-Soviet border 1969 is an odd case. This case confirms among all other three cases, that the military encirclement, itself, can directly lead to an interstate conflict. On the more than 10,000-kilometer Mongolia-China border and Sino-Soviet border, the USSR encircled the PRC by land with its military posture in the Far East, Mongolia, and Soviet Central Asia, deploying troops and missiles, and building military bases all around the Chinese northern periphery. The case on the Sino-Soviet border in 1969 refutes this research's initial assumption that the military encirclement can only serve as an underlying condition, rather being a major reason for the conflict itself.

China's attack against Vietnam in 1979 confirms the first hypothesis that China's likelihood of use of force increases when military encirclement undermines its influence in strategically important regions or areas. The Soviet Union used Vietnamese naval bases and ports, enhancing its power projection capability in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and provided weapons and equipment to Vietnam; at the same time, Soviet-backed Vietnam expanded its military presence in China's immediate neighbors, deploying troops in Laos and subsequently invading Cambodia. China's decision to go to war against Vietnam in 1979 was intended to deter the Soviets and Vietnam from further expanding their influence in the Indochina region.

Overall, China often employed military force to shape a more favorable strategic environment in the regions close to China's borders. China has tended to use force in areas that are in its immediate neighborhood rather than those further afield.

4.2 Policy implications

China`s breakout from encirclement: Belt and Road initiative

“China dream”, “peaceful rise”, and “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” phrases often repeated in China`s President Xi`s speeches and the country`s strategic documents, are the keys for understanding China`s contemporary policy. To explain briefly, China's dream is to become a rich and powerful nation on the global stage, but for this new era it will be done in a peaceful way and this era will be referred to as “the Great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” This new incarnation as an economically developed, politically influential, and militarily strong nation has been the dearest wish of Chinese leaders for hundreds of years. To fulfill it, the first and foremost goal is to create an external environment favorable for China`s rise.

A significant lesson China learned from its struggle with encirclement from the United States and the Soviet Union in the last century is that China, in order not to be besieged again, should avoid getting stuck in the region of its immediate periphery. China`s central geographic position between Russia and the United States makes it hard for Beijing to maneuver its foreign policy in the region. China, using its traditional strategy of “using ‘barbarians’ to check ‘barbarians’,” on some occasions successfully played the two superpowers against one another.

However, China was put in enormous danger when it had confrontations with both of the superpowers at the same time in the late 1960s. This lesson taught China the need to extend its reach beyond its periphery to escape Russian or American encirclement.

Therefore, China`s current leader came up with the idea of implementing a project, a modern version of the ancient Silk Road, whose specific function is to link countries of the world by the different types of infrastructure. Emerging as a feature of China`s so-called peaceful development, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a manifestation of its aspiration for connecting itself to the

countries of the great Afro-Eurasian landmass by railroads, highways, shipping routes and communication networks. Xi Jinping first proposed a plan for building land infrastructure connectivity, named “Silk Road Economic Belt,” and sea routes, named the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” in 2013. This project, later named the Belt and Road Initiative, today includes more than 100 countries.¹⁰⁹

The core of the BRI appears to be to gain control over strategically important lands and ports. In other words, China is employing the BRI to pursue its strategic interests of dominating strategically important areas. The critics of the BRI accuse China of purposely targeting the developing or underdeveloped countries with limited capability of paying their debt and convincing them to borrow money by offering infrastructure development in return. When they experience difficulty in paying back their debt, China uses this opportunity to seize the asset, extending its strategic or military reach.¹¹⁰ Examples such as China’s lease of Sri Lanka’s port for 99 years or its establishment of a new military base in Djibouti are portrayed as attributes of its strategic interests. China built, for Sri Lankans, a port at Hambantota, that is within the BRI, and then Sri Lanka had to hand it over to China under a favorable lease of 99 years when they couldn’t pay back the debt of over \$8 billion. Djibouti owed a huge amount of money to China, which is 82% of their external debt, and like Sri Lanka, it gave away a port for China to build a military base.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ As of January 2021, 140 countries have signed agreements with China to participate in the initiative, see Christoph Nedopil, “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” Green Belt and Road Initiative Center, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

¹¹⁰ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy',” Chatham House, August 19, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy>.

¹¹¹ George Tubei, “The sad similarity between Sri Lanka, Zambia and now Djibouti exemplifies China's 'debt trap' diplomacy,” Nov 09, 2018, Business insider, <https://www.pulselive.co.ke/bi/politics/politics-the-sad-similarity-between-sri-lanka-zambia-and-now-djibouti-that-best/8kx3drc>

Another important lesson China learned from strategic encirclement during the Cold War is that its neighbors` having close relationships with the great powers such as the United States and Russia greatly undermines China`s strategic position in the region. China appears to be using the BRI as means to establish influence in countries around its periphery. Increasing their economic dependence on China, Beijing presumably expects its neighbors will have less incentive to turn against China by aligning with outside powers such as the United States. China is heavily investing in its neighbors, increasing connectivity and interdependence through the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, China is building a railway, which stretches more than 1,000 kilometers from Kunming, China to Vientiane, capital of Laos,¹¹² and planning to build a Mongolia-Russia-China economic corridor, connecting three countries by new trails of railways and highways. As a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a collection of projects that are estimated to cost up to \$62 billion, China builds the railways and highways connecting China with the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea.¹¹³ The BRI is indeed a modern version of the Chinese strategy of a breakout from encirclement.

The US encirclement of China?

A famous book from 2010, entitled “C-shaped Encirclement: China’s Breakout of Encirclement under Internal and External Threats”(C-xing baowei; neiyou waihuan xia de zhongguo tuwei) by PLA Air Force colonel Dai Xu, says “The United States is constructing a ring of encirclement stretching from Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia in the north through the South China Sea to

¹¹² China builds green rail linking Laos,” Belt and Road Portal, April 12, 2021, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wtfz/ssl/170013.htm>.

¹¹³ Jacob Mardell, “The BRI in Pakistan: China’s flagship economic corridor,” MERICS, May 20, 2020, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/bri-pakistan-chinas-flagship-economic-corridor>.

India in the south as steps toward the final ‘carving up and destruction of China’.”¹¹⁴ Beijing has reasons to be concerned with the US strategic encirclement.

On China’s eastern and southeastern periphery, the United States has military alliances with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia. The US has around 54,000 troops stationed in 85 facilities on the islands of Honshu, Kyushu, and Okinawa in Japan.¹¹⁵ The US forces deployed in Korea are estimated to number approximately 28,500.¹¹⁶ Washington has intensified its military presence in the Asia Pacific through frequent joint military exercises, high-level visits, arms trade, and military assistance to allies and partners, and cooperation on defense technology. Last October the US Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, regardless of the pandemic situation, conducted an Asia tour, visiting several countries in China’s neighborhood: India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Vietnam. Beijing perceives this as Washington’s attempt to build an anti-China alliance in Asia. An October 22 article from the Xinhua News Agency accused the US of advocating an anti-China alliance, saying, “the U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper revealed a new initiative to strengthen and expand U.S. alliances with ‘like-minded democracies’ to encircle China. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been traveling around the world, selling his anti-China ideas and denigrating China’s normal cooperation with other countries.”¹¹⁷ In the Xinhua article, Beijing warned Washington saying,

¹¹⁴ John W. Garver and Fei-Ling Wang, “China’s Anti-Encirclement Struggle,” *Asian Security* 6, no.3 (2010): 238; see also: Dai Xu, *C-xing baowei; neiyou waihuan xia de zhongguo tuwei* [C-shaped Encirclement: China’s Breakout of Encirclement under Internal and External Threats] (Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 2010).

¹¹⁵ “About USFJ,” US Forces Japan, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://www.usfj.mil/About-USFJ/>.

¹¹⁶ Hyonhee Shin and Joyce Lee, “Factbox: U.S. and South Korea’s security arrangement, cost of troops,” *Reuters* online, March 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-usa-alliance/factbox-u-s-and-south-koreas-security-arrangement-cost-of-troops-idUSKBN2AZ0S0>.

¹¹⁷ Huaxia, ed., “Commentary: U.S. Politicians’ Attempt to Build Anti-China Alliance Faces Dead End,” Xinhua, accessed November 16, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/22/c_139459485.htm.

“They (US) have seemingly ignored how a similar strategic mistake was made 70 years ago: overestimating their ability to counter China and underestimating China's determination to safeguard its core interests.”¹¹⁸ China's encirclement concern further increased when the US conducted a series of joint military exercise with Japan, Australia, and India, known as the Quad. The Quad conducted a naval exercise in Malabar in the Northern Arabian Sea in November 2020.¹¹⁹ Moreover, the Quad members participated in a French naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal in April 2021, and this was the first time the Indian Navy participated in the La Pérouse military exercise.¹²⁰ This exploits China's worst fear that the US might drag NATO members into its confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific region.

From the western to northern fronts along China's border, the US military deployed troops in Afghanistan, enjoys a close partnership with India, and recently upgraded its bilateral relationship with Mongolia to a strategic partnership. Mongolia was part of the NATO-led Kosovo Force from 2005 to 2007, sent troops to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2014, and is currently contributing troops to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan as one of the largest contributors.¹²¹ The recently declassified United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific indicates that the US-India partnership is a significant component in the US efforts to contain China.¹²² During US Defense Secretary Mark

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ “US, India, Japan, Australia resume Malabar naval exercise,” <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/us-india-japan-australia-resume-malabar-naval-exercise-1.652511>.

¹²⁰ “La Pérouse – Exercice naval Quad et partenariat stratégique de l'Inde avec la France,” [La Pérouse - Quad naval exercise and India's strategic partnership with France], April 4, 2021, <https://www.fr24news.com/fr/a/2021/04/la-perouse-exercice-naval-quad-et-partenariat-strategique-de-linde-avec-la-france.html>.

¹²¹ “Relations with Mongolia,” NATO, March 22, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_85297.htm.

¹²² “US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific” accessed April 15, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to India, the two countries established "The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation," a military agreement on sharing sensitive satellite data vital for hitting missiles, drones, and other targets with high precision.¹²³ China perceives the US Indo-Pacific strategy is directed at containing China in the Indo-Pacific region. To counter this perceived encirclement, China is intensifying its military involvement in the Asia Pacific, through increasing the frequency of military exercises, intensifying defense cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, and building up forces in the East China and South China Seas. Last summer between July and September, the PLA conducted more than 30 sea drills amid the pandemic.¹²⁴ Last September, Chinese defense minister Wei Fenghe visited Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, exchanging views on the regional security situation and expressing Beijing's willingness to improve military to military ties.¹²⁵ Last November, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping awarded the Cambodian Queen Mother a "Friendship medal" for promoting the Sino-Cambodian friendship.¹²⁶ As the United States tightens its military encirclement, China first seeks to make sure its neighbors are not aligned with the US against China by reassuring them of its friendship through various diplomatic measures while rapidly increasing its military buildup, aiming to become strong enough to protect its interests.

123 "US-India 2+2: Crucial defence deal signed," *BBC* online, October 27, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54655947>.

124 Liu Xuanzun, "PLA launches more than 30 sea drills amid US, Taiwan exercises," *Global Times*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200845.shtml>.

125 Li Jiayao, "Malaysian PM meets Chinese defense minister on bilateral cooperation," *China Military Online*, September 09, 2020, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-09/08/content_9898498.htm; Li Jiayao, "Chinese defense minister meets with Indonesian counterpart in Jakarta," *China Military Online*, September 09, 2020 http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-09/09/content_9899659.htm; Huang Panyue, "Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte meets Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe", *China Military Online*, September 13, 2020 http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-09/13/content_9901703.htm.

126 "Xi awards Cambodian Queen Mother Friendship Medal," *Global Times*, November 06, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1205992.shtml>.

Keeping an enemy closer: China`s partnership with Russia:

Currently, China and Russia are significantly expanding their defense cooperation through joint military exercises, visits of high-level defense officials, and arms trade and cooperation on military technology. China has participated in annual Russian military exercises: Vostok-2018, Tsentr-2019, and Kavkaz-2020. More than 1,600 troops, over 300 sets of weapons and equipment, and nearly 30 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters from China took part in the Tsentr-2019 exercise in Orenburg, Russia.¹²⁷ Two countries have been continuously co-organizing “Joint-Sea” naval drills since 2012, and the serial “Cooperation” joint counter-terrorism exercises in 2007, 2013, 2016, 2017, and 2019. During 2019 the Valdai International Discussion Club gathering, Vladimir Putin announced Russia is helping China with developing a ballistic missile early warning system.¹²⁸ The Russian leader assured that this early warning system, capable of detecting missiles in their flight path at a distance of up to 6,000 km, will considerably increase Chinese defense capabilities as only the US and Russia have such a system so far.¹²⁹

Yet, there are several areas in the China-Russia relationship where they might be at odds with each other. Russia historically viewed Central Asia as its backyard. Within the BRI, China plans to build a China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridor. This corridor starts from China, directly connecting with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, then runs through Uzbekistan

¹²⁷ Xu Yi, “Chinese Defense minister inspects Tsentr-2019 exercise in Russia,” China Military Online, September 23, 2019, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-09/23/content_9632256.htm.

¹²⁸ “China’s new missile warning system to reduce probability of big war, say Russian experts” TASS Online, October 04, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1081529>.

¹²⁹ “Russia achieves certain success in helping China set up its missile attack warning system,” TASS Online, August 24, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1193135>.

and Turkmenistan to connect with the rest of West Asia, which includes the South Caucasus.¹³⁰ China's increased involvement in Central Asia, in the long term, might become a concern of Russia. A recent article from *Gazeta* claims that Russia's position in Central Asia and the Caucasus is weakening as Chinese presence in the region is significantly growing with the implementation of its Belt and Road Initiative. According to *Gazeta*, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have become vital partners in China's Belt and Road Initiative and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are striving to develop close ties outside the former Soviet bloc.¹³¹

Another area where the two countries' spheres of interest overlap is the Arctic. More than 70 years ago, American geopolitician Nicholas Spykman envisioned that melting of the Arctic ice would bring many possibilities including the opening of new trade lanes through which supersonic trains would be running from Vancouver and Washington DC to Tokyo and Seoul.¹³² In 2018, The Chinese government adopted a white paper titled "China's Arctic Policy," describing the Chinese vision for the Arctic. This White paper announces, "China hopes to work with all parties to build a 'Polar Silk Road' through developing the Arctic shipping routes. It encourages its enterprises to participate in the infrastructure construction for these routes and conduct commercial trial voyages in accordance with the law to pave the way for their commercial and regularized operation."¹³³ China might want to increase its presence in the Arctic as a tool to strengthen its

¹³⁰ "Amb. Yu Hongjun: Silk Road Pathways: The China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor," Center For International Security and Strategy Tsinghua University, September 13, 2020, <https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/OpinionsandInterviews/2138>.

¹³¹ Sofia Krakov, "Китай наступает: Россию выдавливают из Центральной Азии [China advancing: Russia pushed out of Central Asia], September 20, 2019, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2019/09/20/12654181.shtml>.

¹³² Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1944).

¹³³ See full text of white paper, "Full Text: China's Arctic Policy," The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, January 26, 2018, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/32832/Document/1618243/1618243.htm>.

global geostrategic posture. The potential shipping routes through Arctic waters would provide Chinese ships a much shorter path from China to Europe than the regular routes through the Suez Canal or around the Cape of Good Hope. China's ambition to build the "Polar Silk Road", in the long run, might stimulate spatial competition between Moscow and Beijing in the Arctic.

Associated with these strategic considerations, psychological factors also play an important role in shaping China's attitude toward Russia. Russia has a long tradition of hierarchical relationships with its neighboring countries. As an emerging great power, China would not want to be Russia's junior partner as it was during the early Cold War era.

If we view the China-Russia friendship through the lens of ancient Chinese strategic thinking, it might reveal more than what we see today. A famous Chinese stratagem teaches to "kill with a borrowed knife." The idea is to cause damage to your enemy by getting a third party to do the deed; in fact, it can be said that "your enemy's enemy is your friend."¹³⁴ It seems obvious that China partners with Russia now to use it against America, just as they used America against Russia during the Cold War. But what is not obvious?

According to ancient Chinese strategic thinking, the real intention should always be disguised. If it is following Sun Tzu's advice of subduing the enemy without fighting, China should be fooling the Russians by outwitting them before combat is ever even necessary. Through the spectrum of Chinese traditional stratagems, China's friendship with Russia might be a good strategy - manipulating an enemy who does not even realize that you are looking at him as one. In front of everyone, they point to America as an enemy while secretly pointing to Russia as well. These are very romanticized speculations based on the ancient Chinese stratagems. Yet, any nation that has ever encountered China knows not to underestimate them.

¹³⁴ Peter Taylor, *The Thirty-Six Stratagems: A Modern-Day Interpretation of A Strategy Classic* (Oxford: The Infinite Ideas Limited, 2013),14.

One might ask, why would China see Russia as a potential enemy? From Soviet encirclement during the Cold War, the People's Republic of China learned that Russia posed a very serious threat to China's interests (probably greater than the US). When the two communist neighbors diverged, Moscow mended relations with North Korea, deployed troops and established military bases in Mongolia, invaded Afghanistan, forged close defense cooperation with India, formed a military alliance with Vietnam and Laos, used Vietnamese naval bases for its forces, and backed Vietnam to invade Cambodia. Only Russia had the potential capability of territorial invasion of China and possibly of complete encirclement of China by both sea and land. Russia's contiguity to China and proximity to most of China's other neighbors made possible the relatively rapid deployment troops almost anywhere around China's borders, offering a credible commitment to Chinese weaker neighbors for aligning themselves with Russia against China.

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