

4 The 1979 campaign

Today China claims that its 1979 incursion into Vietnam was a small defensive operation conducted by a few thousand border guards who quickly seized their objectives and withdrew.¹

This is untrue. The 1979 campaign was a massive military operation involving eleven Chinese armies (*jun*, the equivalent of a U.S. corps) of regular ground forces, militia, and naval and air force units, totaling at least 450,000 troops. Far from being a minor cross-border incursion, it was similar in scale to the assault with which China made such an impact on its entry into the Korean War in November 1950.² Furthermore, the unconventional warfare operations that occurred in conjunction with the 1979 campaign extended into areas far beyond the Sino-Vietnamese border.

The Chinese incursion of 1979 was in reality a major campaign of a war that ran for more than a decade, from the late 1970s until the level of violence in the Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese–Cambodian theaters at last subsided in the late 1980s and the protagonists took the first steps toward normalizing relations. This chapter deals with the Chinese incursion at the operational level, within the context of the Third Indochina War.³

At the outset, a brief word about casualties is important. The casualty figures for the 1979 campaign vary so widely as to be virtually useless. In April 1979, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, the official journal of the PAVN, estimated that China lost 62,500 soldiers in the fighting.⁴ A month later, Chinese Deputy Chief of the General Staff Department, Wu Xiuquan, acknowledged a loss of 20,000 men.⁵ Harlan W. Jencks, the most astute Western student of the conflict, accepted this latter estimate in an August 1979 article,⁶ qualifying the loss as one-half killed and one-half wounded, but in 1985 he revised his estimate upward to the much greater figure of 28,000 Chinese soldiers killed in action.⁷ Estimates for Vietnamese losses are equally diverse. Wu Xiuquan claimed 50,000 casualties among the Vietnamese defenders, but Li Man Kin, for example, while noting this claim makes his own estimate of 35,000–45,000 Vietnamese casualties.⁸

It is impossible to draw reliable conclusions from such diverse and contradictory evidence, but casualty figures are in any event not the best measure of military effectiveness, even in a campaign of attrition such as this.⁹ History is

replete with examples of effective military units that had high casualty rates and of ineffective units that had comparable casualties: measuring military performance by citing casualty figures, even where the statistics are reliable, as a result is not as helpful as assessing how a unit performed on the battlefield. Military effectiveness is best measured by assessing the speed and efficiency demonstrated by a military unit in accomplishing its tasks: did it use its mass of troops effectively to overcome resistance? Did it take its objectives in a reasonable amount of time? Were unit tactics a positive contributor to effectiveness or a hindrance?

As we shall see, viewed in these terms, the PLA's performance in the 1979 campaign was poor. China planned for "battles of quick decision" (*sujue zhan*) but conducted a series of slow, indecisive operations. In the Lang Son area, one Vietnamese regiment held up two Chinese armies for a week, and another Chinese army needed up to ten days to secure Lao Cai and Cam Duong, a pair of towns that lie less than fifteen kilometers from the border. The PLA had so much difficulty securing Cao Bang that it had to commit at least two armies to a renewed assault on a city that it claimed to have already taken, and in Quang Ninh a platoon of Vietnamese delayed for five hours a Chinese regiment's capture of Cao Ba Lanh Mountain, inflicting on the Chinese regiment the loss of 360 of its 2,800 men. Such losses, repeated all over the battlefield, were grievous and bought little. The PLA proved incapable of using its masses of troops effectively through the use of suitable tactics, and incapable therefore of attaining a tempo of operations that would translate into its desired "battles of quick decision."

The battlefield: geography and topography

The geography of northern Vietnam played a crucial role in the 1979 campaign. Vietnamese geographer Le Ba Thao divides the northern, or Bac Bo, region into two distinct geographical entities, the northwest and the northeast, based on their geological age, the nature of their topography, and the density and type of flora.¹⁰ Thao postulates a dividing line between these areas that runs along the course of the Red River. The area to the south and west of the river, comprising the border provinces of Lai Chau and Hoang Lien Son, is mountainous and densely forested. Vietnam's highest mountain, Phan Xi Pang (3,143 meters), is in this area, and travel here generally is difficult due to the elevation of the land and the steepness of the slopes. To the north and east of the Red River, in 1979 the border region comprised of a few administrative districts of Hoang Lien Son province and the provinces of Ha Tuyen, Cao Bang, Lang Son, and Quang Ninh, on the Gulf of Tonkin (VN: *Vinh Bac Bo*; CH: *Beibu Wan*). The northeastern region is a land of low hills and mountains. While less heavily forested than the northwest, it again is difficult for travel because of the numerous limestone formations (karst) that characterize the topography and shape the use of the land (Maps 1–4).¹¹

The PAVN organized its military commands in the two northern provinces to fit these geographical realities. Its regional demarcation put the border provinces



Map 1 The China–Vietnam border.

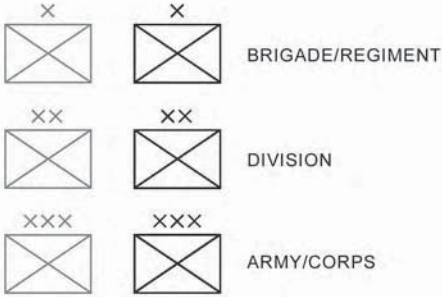


Map 2 The main attacks (1979).

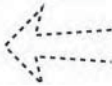
of Lang Son and Cao Bang in Military Region One and Ha Tuyen, Hoang Lien Son, and Lai Chau in Military Region Two. Quang Ninh province was designated a separate, special region for reasons of defense.¹² Vietnam has never explained the reasoning behind this demarcation, but the most likely rationale for the structuring of the two military regions rests in the differing challenges

Symbols

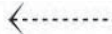
GRAY: VIETNAM
BLACK: CHINA



MAIN CHINESE AXIS OF ADVANCE



SECONDARY CHINESE AXIS OF ADVANCE



CHINESE ARTILLERY OR SMALL CHINESE GROUND ATTACK



CHINESE DOWN VIETNAMESE AIRCRAFT



VIETNAMESE DEFENSIVE POSITION

Map 3 Symbols.

Ground Order of Battle Comparison: 1979

Chinese Army/Corps: 11, 12, 13, 14, 20, 41, 42, 43, 50, 54, 55

Chinese Militia: Several Hundred Thousand

Vietnamese Divisions: 3, 311, 316, 345, 346

Vietnamese Brigades/Regiments: 567, 852, 677, 246, 481

Vietnamese Militia: Unknown

Estimated Chinese Troop Strength (minus militia): 472,000

Estimated Vietnamese Troop Strength (minus militia): 50,000

Map 4 Ground order of battle comparison: 1979.

they would present should their commanders be called upon to defend Hanoi against attack from the north. The sparse vegetation and low hills of Military Region One would enable forces to be moved and massed with relative ease – certainly when compared with the harsh topography and dense forestation of Military Region Two. Critical also, in defensive terms, is the short distance from the border to Hanoi: Lang Son, the key city of Military Region One, is 154 kilometers from the capital and Cao Bang 276 kilometers. The main city of Military Region Two, Lao Cai, is 295 kilometers from Hanoi. While charged to defend a more shallow front, however, the commander of Military Region One would be aided in this defense by the geography of the region and its man-made infrastructure. Highway 1A from Lang Son and Highway 3 from Cao Bang cross the Cau River, a natural defensive line for Hanoi, and connect at Yen Vien before crossing the Red River and entering Hanoi, effectively channeling any invader toward a single point of attack against the city. In contrast, the roads from the two principal northwestern cities are confined by the mountains into separate and distant river valleys, obliging Military Region Two to defend against the potential of a two-pronged assault against Hanoi.¹³

Geography also informed China's invasion planning. The Chinese border provinces, Yunnan in the west and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the east, are geographically dissimilar. Yunnan lies on the high, mountainous Yun-Guei Plateau, remote and hard to access from China's heartland, while Guangxi is an area of low mountains and river plains affording greater ease of troop movement. In the same way that Vietnam recognized the military implications of the geography of its border regions, China assigned its forces in its corresponding border areas to two different commands, the Yunnan Military District going to the Kunming Military Region and Guangxi Military District to the Guangzhou Military Region. The provincial and military district boundary line ran from approximately where the Ha Tuyen and Cao Bang provinces met on the Vietnamese side of the border.¹⁴ The differing terrain of the two regions significantly also shaped the railroad and road networks. The railroad, which was vital for keeping the Chinese invasion forces supplied, had a short, straight run from the eastern part of China, where most of the invasion force was based. By comparison, the railroad from China's heartland to Kunming and from Kunming to Lao Cai took a long, circuitous route through steep hills and narrow valleys. The highways to Kunming were similarly confined.

China chose to make its strongest attacks in 1979 against the cities of Vietnamese Military Region One: Cao Bang and Lang Son. A major assault further to the west was deemed too perilous, because the long, narrow river valleys of the region presented an obstacle to the resupply of attacking forces and to the difficulties that attack units would face in supporting one another. Attacking through Military Region One, in contrast, China could threaten Hanoi by a relatively short route, and the low hills and less dense vegetation would permit the easier movement of troops and supplies back and forth. Of course, this was not a new plan of attack. In 1077, 1288, and 1427, Chinese forces had attacked through the same area. On each occasion, they had come to grief (Map 5).¹⁵



Map 5 Military regions and the Cau River defensive line.

Troop deployments

While Chinese and Vietnamese diplomats and party leaders were posturing, negotiating, and pondering in the middle months of 1978, the soldiers of both sides were preparing for war (Map 2).

In mid-July, the Vietnamese 3rd Division moved to Lang Son and began to organize its defenses, digging in.¹⁶ The 3rd Division had been formed in the early 1960s during the Second Indochina War against the United States, when it had been a consistent obstacle to the “pacification” of Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai provinces in South Vietnam. Its officers and men were seasoned soldiers, and many of them, through their involvement in the major North Vietnamese offensives of 1972 and 1975, had experience in large-scale conventional operations. The division was quickly joined in Lang Son by the 166th Artillery Regiment and the 272nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment. In August, the 571st Transportation Division began to dispatch large convoys of trucks with supplies for Military Region One and Military Region Two,¹⁷ and throughout the second half of 1978, fuel, troops, and ammunition continued to be moved north on Highway 1 to Lang Son. Anti-aircraft guns were deployed at key locations along the border, and troops were billeted in villages along Highway 4 between Dinh Lap and Lang Son. Young Vietnamese men living in the border area also were given training in basic military skills. In November, Vietnamese tanks were observed near Friendship Pass (VN: *Hu nghi guan*, CH: *Youyi guan*), where Highway 1A crossed the border at Dong Dang.¹⁸

In early February 1979, the 346th Division and the 311th Division assembled in Cao Bang, where they were joined by the 567th and 852nd regiments.¹⁹ At the

end of 1978 or in the first weeks of 1979, the 316A Division and the 254th Regiment deployed to the Lao Cai area,²⁰ where according to U.S. intelligence analysts, they were joined also by the 345th Division.²¹

There were no indications of Vietnamese air or naval deployments in the weeks leading up to the invasion.²²

Chinese deployments to the border began later than had the deployment of PAVN troops, but they were much more extensive, involving about thirty divisions by February 1979. The armies of the Kunming Military Region and the Guangzhou Military Region were the first to take up positions near the border, with the 55th Army and the 42nd Army of the Guangzhou Military Region deploying in October and the 41st Army in November.²³ Units from outside Guangzhou and Kunming moved in by road and rail throughout November 1978 through February 1979. Some came from great distance: the 20th Army, for example, moved 1,200 kilometers from its bases in the Wuhan Military Region. Tourists as far as central China saw trains with military equipment heading south²⁴ and reported that portions of the road and rail network had been placed off limits to foreign travelers. One of the last units to take up position was the 13th Army, from Chengdu Military Region. The 13th deployed along the border opposite Lao Cai in January or February 1979.²⁵

The Chinese made every effort to conceal these troop movements. Rail and road traffic moved at night, when civilian trains were moved off the main track to allow troop trains to pass. Curfews were imposed on towns and villages along the route of the march, and during the day, troops rested in areas that were screened from public view. Much of China was closed to foreigners in 1978 and 1979, but some cities had been opened: where these were in sensitive areas they were again temporarily closed. Many travelers returned to Hong Kong with tales of disrupted travel plans and strange happenings on the routes leading to the Sino-Vietnamese border.²⁶

Chinese air force (PLAAF) deployments proceeded at the same time. Around January 1, 1979, the PLAAF began its war preparations in Guangxi and Yunnan, reorganizing its command structure in the Guangzhou Military Region and the Kunming Military Region, preparing airfields, and deploying anti-aircraft weapons. Political work among air force personnel also intensified. At least 700 aircraft were brought into the area, raising the deployment in the two military regions to between 800 and 1,000 aircraft, and more than 20,000 air force troops were brought in.²⁷ To accommodate this enormous influx of equipment and personnel, the logisticians of the PLAAF built more than 43,000 square meters of bamboo sheds and repaired 23,000 square meters of old housing. They issued 10,000 mobile beds and laid 200 kilometers of electric cable, more than thirty-two kilometers of water pipe, and fifty kilometers of semi-permanent fuel pipeline to three separate airfields.²⁸

In the South China Sea, the Chinese Navy (PLAN) South Sea Fleet, which had its headquarters at Zhanjiang in Guangdong province, prepared for battle by organizing a new task force that included some of its strongest combatants. The Chengdu-class frigates *Guiyang* (pennant number 505) and *Chengdu* (507) were

deployed with a third warship, bearing pennant number 48,²⁹ as part of the 217 Formation (*217 biandui*).³⁰ The 217 Formation appears to have operated with ships of the 1st, 21st, and 91st Groups (*dadui*). The 207th Squadron (*dadui*), an element of the 21st Group, also was active in the 217 Formation's operations. The PLA seaman and naval cadre prepared for war with political study, by performing maintenance work, and with training exercises, and when the 217 Formation was first organized, the standard of seamanship was low. Less than 20 percent of the shells fired by the gun crews on ship forty-eight hit their targets, and the ships of the formation worked poorly together: in at least one recorded instance, a signalman sent the wrong signal, throwing the formation into confusion. These problems did not augur well for the coming hostilities.³¹

Leadership problems and command organization

By mid-December 1978, the forward command post of the Guangzhou Military Region had been established, and the headquarters political department (*Guangzhou junqu qianzhi zhengzhibu*) was providing guidance to its subordinate units on the problems that were emerging as preparations continued for war. But the political officers of the deploying PLA units faced enormous problems in readying their troops for combat.

On December 12, the General Political Department (GPD) of the PLA dispatched a secret circular to all units. These "Directives from the General Political Department on political work conducted by troop units during military operations" (*Zong zhengzhibu guanyu zuohao budui zai junshi xingdongzhong zhengzhi gongzuode zhishi*) stated that units should make immediate efforts to strengthen the unit cadre system and should fill all cadre vacancies in companies and platoons.³² In a cable to its subordinate units on the same day, the Cadre Bureau of the Political Department advised that individuals scheduled for demobilization could be retained if they were needed to fill specific assignments, but further advised that any units that lacked basic cadre because they had been recently established or had been reorganized could, where the situation required them to do so, begin operations.³³ Two days later, the GPD reiterated that cadre vacancies should be filled as quickly as possible³⁴ and instructed all deployed units that continued to have problems to notify the GPD. The GPD advised that it would obtain replacements by conducting an army-wide search (*quan jun*). The PLA, before the first shot was fired, was having difficulty filling the crucial leadership posts at the company and platoon level.

A similar problem existed in the area of technical positions. On December 12, the Guangzhou Military Region's Forward Command Political Department and the Logistics Department issued guidance on the policy to be followed in filling technical jobs in the artillery, engineering, communications, armor, anti-chemical warfare, and "confidential" (*jiyao*) units. As in the case of cadre vacancies, units were told that they could retain specialists scheduled for demobilization if those specialists agreed to serve. Medical personnel at all levels of the hospital system also could be retained.³⁵

China officially launched its border campaign on the last day of 1978. Although King C. Chen, in the most thorough study of Chinese decision-making on the eve of the war, states that the final decision to go to war with Vietnam was made by the Central Military Commission between February 9 and 12, 1979,³⁶ the decision to launch the campaign had in fact been made much earlier. In February, the commission reviewed the plans for the invasion and examined the implications of Deng Xiaoping's recent trip to the United States, but the Guangzhou Military Region Forward Command Political Department had informed subordinate units on December 28 that they were to record combat service from December 31, 1978.³⁷

On the Chinese side of the border, PLA units continued to deploy to their assembly areas, and in Vietnam, the PAVN dug an endless series of fighting positions. On both sides, the senior staffs went to work turning peacetime armies into wartime armies. Staff officers and party officials reorganized their command and control arrangements and planned the operations that lay ahead.

In late December or early January, the Chinese established the Southern Front to link operations in the Kunming Military Region and the Guangzhou Military Region. The Guangzhou Military Region Commander, Xu Shiyou, assumed command of the front, with Zhang Tingfa, the Commander of the Air Force, as his Chief of Staff. Yang Dezhi moved from command of the Wuhan Military Region to take control of the Kunming Military Region and to serve as Deputy Commander of the Southern Front. According to press reports, Yang also was to be the commander of all Chinese troops in Vietnam.³⁸ Xiang Zhonghua and Liu Zhijian retained their roles as political commissar of the Guangzhou Military Region and the Kunming Military Region.³⁹ Wang Hai, the Guangzhou Military Region Air Force Commander, was made commander of air operations in the Guangxi theater of operations and Hou Shunjun, the director of the Kunming Military Region Air Force Command Post, became his counterpart air commander in the Yunnan theater.⁴⁰

At the other end of the country, the Northern Front was at the same time set up to face the Soviet Union. Comprising the Xinjiang, Lanzhou, Beijing, and Shenyang military regions, the Northern Front was led by Li Desheng, the commander of the Shenyang Military Region. The northern military regions, despite having the heaviest concentration of PLA troops, were to hold on to their forces and made no contribution to the campaign in the south.⁴¹

The intended effect of the creation of the Southern Front was to produce a single organization, reporting direct to PLA headquarters in Beijing, which controlled all PLA ground and air assets in the Kunming Military Region and the Guangzhou Military Region. The front comprised two theaters: Guangxi in the east, coterminous with Guangxi Military District in the Guangzhou Military Region, and Yunnan in the west, coterminous with Yunnan Military District in the Kunming Military Region. In both cases, the military theater of operations followed the boundary of the respective province.

Command relationships on the Vietnamese side were just as simple. Military Region One, which included Cao Bang and Lang Son provinces, was designated

the Cao–Lang area,⁴² and two fronts established within it. In February 1979, the Cao Bang Front (*Mat Tran Cao Bang*) was set up to control operations in the northwest part of Military Region One, with the Lang Son Front fulfilling a similar role in the eastern part of the region.⁴³ The procedure was the same in Military Region Two, where the Phong Tho–Lao Cai area of operations was established with a single front, the Lao Cai Front. The only border area that in the beginning did not include one or more fronts under a military region was the Quang Ninh coastal province, but this situation was addressed in March when the Ministry of Defense established the Quang Ninh Front in the Quang Ninh Special Region.

The overall military command of the PAVN lay with Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap, Minister of Defense since 1944. Senior General Van Tien Dung served as Chief of the General Staff Department and Senior General Chu Huy Man as Chief of the GPD.⁴⁴ Major General Dam Quang Trung served as the First Military Region Commander and Political Commissar and Lieutenant General Vu Lap (a *nom de guerre* for Nong Van Phach) as his counterpart in Military Region Two.⁴⁵

Final preparations

In October 1978, the PLA began a series of probes of Vietnamese positions that continued until February 15, 1979. The Chinese intended for these operations to gain intelligence, to intimidate the PAVN troops, and to divert attention from China's main operational objective of the forthcoming campaign. The first probes were conducted in the areas through which the PLA would subsequently move during the February 17 invasion. The main ground objectives of the invasion were to be in the provinces of Hoang Lien Son, Cao Bang, and Lang Son, and nine of the first ten probes were conducted against PAVN forces in these provinces. Of the nine attacks, eight were made in districts that lay across the approach routes for the invasion. (There were no recorded probes in Lai Chau and Ha Tuyen, the two Vietnamese border provinces that only suffered minor or harassing attacks in February.) The attacks built in size and frequency as more PLA units deployed along the border, reflecting the growing need of local commanders for information for their own battlefield operations. The probes in particular sought to identify enemy positions, through analysis of the PAVN's reaction to ground and artillery attacks.

There is no record of Vietnamese probes of Chinese positions, but it is almost certain that the Vietnamese at least conducted reconnaissance of the terrain and the Chinese build-up: the border was extremely porous and patrols, agents, and others could cross it with relative ease. Whether or not the Vietnamese conducted patrols, the fact that the Chinese probes were large, well organized, and violent signaled clearly to the Vietnamese the magnitude of the force arrayed against them.

By the morning of February 17, 1979, Vietnam had about fifteen combat regiments controlled by five regular divisions on the Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang

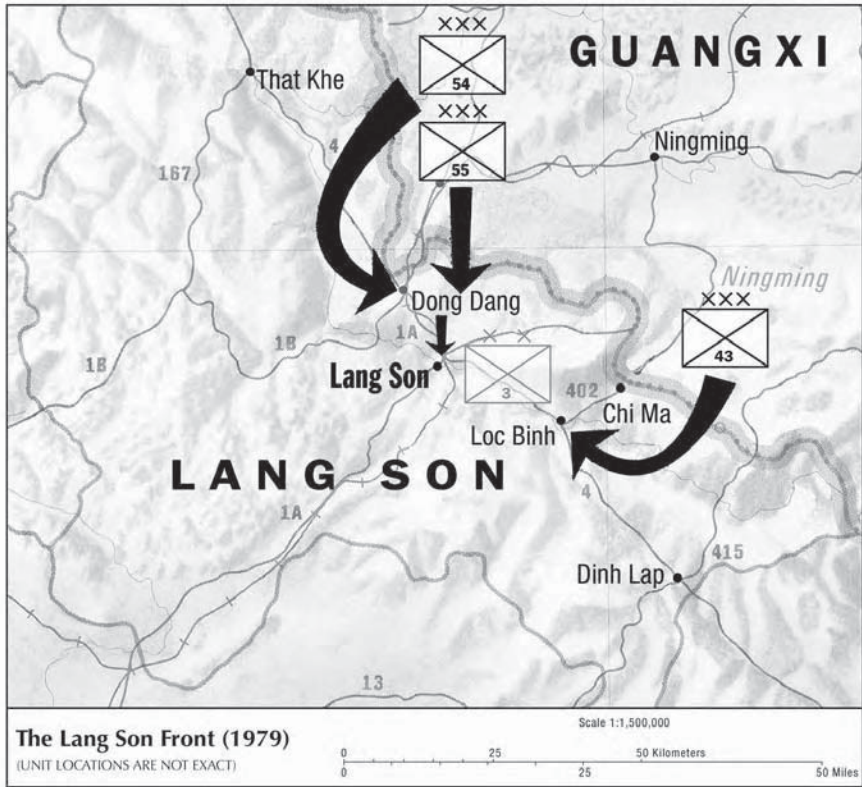
Son Fronts. Militia and a small number of border defense units supported the defense, to create in total a force of about 50,000 men. Arrayed against the defenders, under the direction of its Southern Front, China had more than a hundred combat regiments, totaling about 450,000 troops. The correlation of forces was at least six to one, and in some areas it was much higher. In the area around Lang Son, the balance of forces was at least ten to one in favor of the Chinese.

Neither Vietnam nor China has ever published a clear explanation of its operational plans for the 1979 campaign, but something of those plans can be discerned through analysis of the locations and deployments of the opposing forces. The picture that such analysis creates is sometimes at odds with the picture that most scholars hold of the campaign; in particular, it raises serious questions about the number of attacks that China made on the Vietnamese provincial capitals. For example, King C. Chen claims that the Chinese attacked five provincial capitals in the 1979 campaign: Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Ha Giang, Cao Bang, and Lang Son.⁴⁶ China and Vietnam, however, agree that there were no attacks on Ha Giang and Lai Chau.⁴⁷ A careful analysis of the fighting resolves the campaign into a struggle over the three fronts identified earlier in this chapter: Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai.⁴⁸ In the early hours of February 17, the campaign began on these three fronts (Maps 6, 7, and 8).⁴⁹

The Lang Son Front

The Chinese attack on Lang Son came slightly later than the assaults on Cao Bang and Lao Cai, the guns of the 55th Army opening up at around 05:00 against the Vietnamese defenders in the area of Friendship Pass, between border markers 15 and 20 (Map 6). Behind the barrage, the 55th Army was poised to move against its initial objective, the town of Dong Dang. To the southeast, between border markers 32 and 45, the 43rd Army trained its guns on the Vietnamese border guards in the hills around the town of Chi Ma. The route of the 43rd led through Chi Ma via local route 402⁵⁰ to Loc Binh, about ten kilometers to the southwest. From Loc Binh, the 43rd would hook northwest along Highway 4B to the ultimate objective, Lang Son.⁵¹

The 55th Army and the 43rd Army, together with the 54th, which began the battle in reserve, thus were to attack Lang Son from two directions. Beyond Dong Dang, the 55th had a seventeen-kilometer approach to Lang Son along Highway 1A; from Loc Binh, the 43rd had nineteen kilometers of Highway 4B to traverse.⁵² The Chinese strategy was for its two armies to link up southwest of Lang Son, isolating the Vietnamese 3rd Division and forcing its surrender or destruction. The early capture of Lang Son, about 150 kilometers from Hanoi, would give China the use of the railroad from the border and one of the best highways in Vietnam, National Highway 1A. The Vietnamese capital would be laid open to attack. If Beijing were to move against Hanoi, Lang Son clearly was the place to start the attack. If its goal was to stop at Lang Son, the speedy seizure of the town would add to the significance of the lesson that Beijing



Map 6 The Lang Son Front (1979).

planned to teach the Vietnamese by exposing the vulnerability of Hanoi. For China, speedy success on this front was critical. On the battlefield, it sought insurance of victory by amassing at least nine infantry divisions against the single Vietnamese division, the 3rd that was dug in around Lang Son.

The 55th Army launched its attack by pushing the 163rd Division south through Friendship Pass, with orders to seize three initial objectives: Dong Dang; the four-kilometer line of hills to the south of the town that comprises Hill 339, Tham Mo, Hill 505, and Hill 423 and the intersection of Highway 1A and Highway 1B. These objectives all lay within five kilometers of Friendship Pass. On the western flank of the 55th Army's attack, the 164th Division crossed into Vietnam in the vicinity of border markers 15 and 16 with orders to establish itself on Highway 4A and prevent reinforcement of Lang Son from Cao Bang. It also was to attack south toward Lang Son, seizing Hill 386, Hill 438, Con Khoang, and Khon Lang and thus closing the Chinese line south of Dong Dang. The 164th Division's deepest initial objective was Khon Lang, about five kilometers south of its border crossing, and at its widest point the sector it was to

control was two kilometers across. Successful execution of these plans would give the two Chinese divisions control of the high points on either flank of their advance: Hill 438 in the west and Hill 505 in the east. Facing them, on a front 5–7 kilometers wide, was the 12th Infantry Regiment of the Vietnamese 3rd Division.⁵³

On the eastern edge of the Lang Son Front, the Chinese 43rd Army likewise deployed two divisions, the 127th and the 129th, in its initial attack. On the right of the 43rd's attack, the 127th Division crossed the border between markers 32 and 33 on an axis of advance that ran from the border town of Ba Son toward the town of Cao Loc. This was the most difficult approach of any that the Chinese used in their assault. The route followed a narrow, dry-weather road of loose gravel that snaked through the mountains along the bank of an unnamed seasonal stream for a distance of about thirty kilometers before intersecting with Highway 1A at Cao Loc, on the northeastern edge of Lang Son city.⁵⁴ On the left flank of the assault, the 129th Division attacked through Chi Ma from its assembly areas near border markers 43 and 45, with the objective of seizing Hill 392 and Hill 623 and joining Highway 4B at the town of Loc Binh. The division would then turn north to attack its primary objective – Lang Son.⁵⁵

Defending against these attacks was primarily the 141st Regiment of the Vietnamese 3rd Division. This unit faced a two-division assault force operating on two axes of advance, about fifteen kilometers apart. Separating the two prongs of the Chinese assault was the highest series of mountains in Lang Son province, including Nui Ma Son, at a height of 1,541 meters.⁵⁶ The hills were steep, bereft of vegetation, and difficult to defend. Although there were some caves in the rocky hills and karst formations that the Vietnamese soldiers could use, for the most part any defensive positions would be easily visible from a distance and a comparatively straightforward target for a competent artillery–infantry team.

As the invasion unfolded, the PLA attack rapidly fell behind schedule. North of Lang Son, the Chinese 55th Army had failed after more than a week of fighting to move more than three kilometers into Vietnam. From February 17 to February 23, the 55th Army struggled to take the line of defensive positions that ran from Hill 505 on the east of its front to Hill 438 on the west. It was only on February 23 that the Dong Dang railroad station and Tham Mo were taken, and even then Vietnamese resistance in the area continued. Fighting went on in the Dong Dang area and along the Hill 505–Hill 438 defensive line until at least February 27,⁵⁷ and required at some point in this ten-day period the introduction into the attack of a second Chinese army.⁵⁸

On the east of the Lang Son Front, the efforts of the 43rd Army were a comparative bright spot in the fog of disasters that shrouded the Chinese attacks. The 43rd had further to go to its initial objectives than did the 55th and 54th Armies, but it moved more quickly. Within eleven days, the 43rd had moved on and taken Loc Binh, seventeen kilometers from its assembly positions, and in early March, it reached Lang Son, a further nineteen kilometers distant.⁵⁹ But overall the PLA, which earlier in its history had demonstrated a remarkable ability to

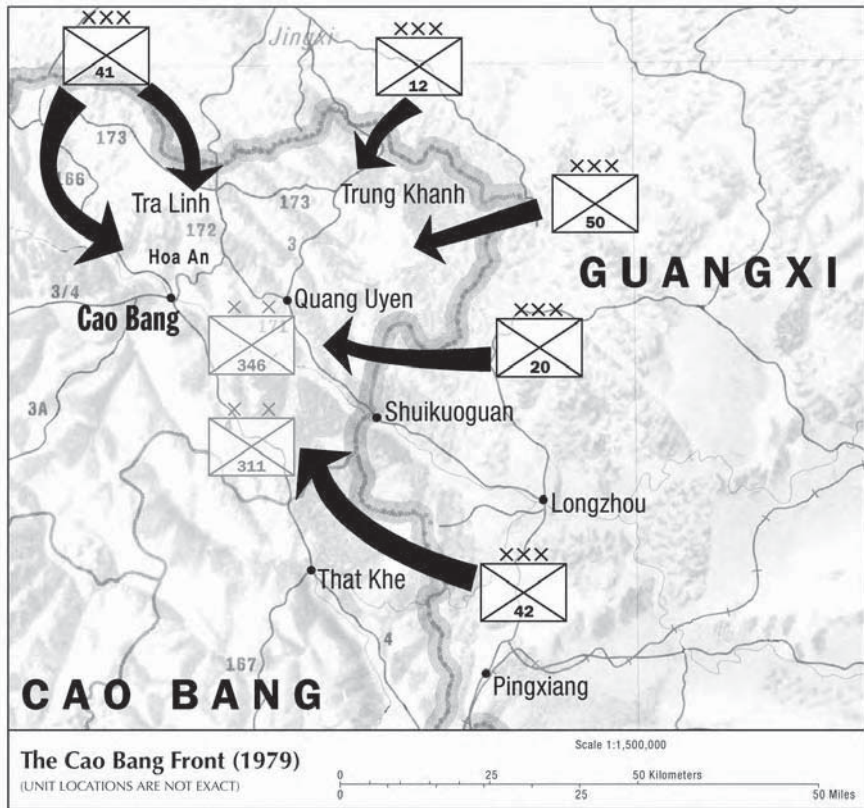
conduct operations at a very high tempo, had been fought to a standstill by a vastly outnumbered force.⁶⁰

The Battle for Lang Son began on February 27 and did not end until the Chinese captured Hill 413, southwest of the city, on March 5.⁶¹ On the same day, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced China's intention to withdraw from Vietnam.⁶²

The Cao Bang Front

The attack on the Cao Bang Front began in the dark on the morning of February 17, at four widely separated points on the border (Map 7). Chinese forces quickly moved through the tiny border crossings that lead to Trung Khanh, Quang Uyen (also known by the district name, Quang Hoa), Tra Linh, and Hoa An. All were headed for the city of Cao Bang.

China had assembled a strong force to conduct this part of the campaign. The primary attacking forces were the 41st and 42nd Armies from Guangzhou Mili-



Map 7 The Cao Bang Front (1979).

tary Region. Backing up these main armies were elements of the 12th Army⁶³ (Nanjing Military Region), the 50th Army⁶⁴ (Chengdu Military Region), and the 20th Army⁶⁵ (Nanjing Military Region), contributing to a force that probably totaled over 200,000 troops. Elements of all of the five Chinese armies represented in this sector ultimately saw combat in Vietnam.

During the build-up for the invasion, the PLA had deployed to assembly areas in Longzhou and Jingxi counties, Guangxi province. These areas were barely adequate to the task. Unlike the assembly areas opposite Lang Son and Lao Cai, neither those at Jingxi nor Longzhou were served by a railroad: the Longzhou assembly area was more than eighty kilometers from the nearest railhead and the Jingxi assembly area more than 200 kilometers away. The troops as a consequence had to march or be trucked to the assembly areas over narrow dirt roads. Tanks drove to the assembly areas because there was no other means of transportation, and artillery pieces were towed. The PLA's equipment was basic and durable, but it was not designed for this sort of treatment. Every round, every liter of gasoline, and every blanket for every man also had to be transported to the assembly area and then carried by porters or trucked to the advancing units. Rice, vegetables, and the little bit of meat that enlivened the PLA soldier's diet could be purchased locally, but these remote areas of Guangxi province have never produced much of a surplus. Hosting an army of this size must have been a nightmare for the local commune and county officials.

The deployment of PAVN forces facing the PLA at this point of the border is little known. The 677th Regiment was positioned to defend Tra Linh, and the 246th and the 852nd Regiments defended the northwestern approaches to Cao Bang through Hoa An and Thong Nong. The 481st Regiment probably served as the 346th Division's reserve and as the primary defender of Cao Bang. It is not clear where other units were deployed.⁶⁶

The Chinese 41st Army was to cross the border along a wide front before focusing its advance on Cao Bang down to two avenues of approach that led through the towns of Tra Linh and Trung Khanh. After seizing Tra Linh, about 5–6 kilometers from border markers 96 and 92, the attackers would move south on Cao Bang, twenty kilometers distant. On the other extreme of the Chinese front, the 42nd Army was to attack Cao Bang from the southeast, out of Longzhou County. On the southern flank of the 42nd's route lay the city of That Khe; on its northern flank was an avenue of approach that started at the Shuikouguan border crossing before leading to Phuc Hoa and north to Quang Uyen. After seizing Quang Uyen, the 42nd Army would link up with the 41st Army and continue to strike west to Cao Bang.⁶⁷

The 42nd Army apparently was charged with sending a force south down Highway 4 to connect with Chinese forces on the extreme north of the Lang Son Front. By joining the two fronts, the Chinese both would gain the ability to transfer their own troops from one area of operations to the other and would deny their enemy the opportunity to reinforce his defense along the Thai Nguyen–That Khe road. Thai Nguyen lay just eighty kilometers to the south and had good railroad connections out of Hanoi.

The Chinese advances were slow. The attacks by the 41st Army ran immediately into the Vietnamese 677th Regiment, which stopped it in its tracks. It was not until February 22 that the PLA secured Tra Linh. The 41st Army's advance in other areas was similarly slow, and by the end of February 22, its deepest penetration, at Trung Khanh, was no more than 10–15 kilometers from the border. Other elements of the 41st were slowed down in a series of fights near Thong Nong, northwest of Cao Bang city.⁶⁸

The efforts of the 42nd Army were more productive, and by the night of February 22, the 42nd had taken Phuc Hoa, That Khe, Quang Uyen, and Dong Khe, penetrating into Quang Uyen about twenty-five kilometers from Shuikouguan. Some hard lessons were learned along the way. On February 20, a PLA tank unit, moving ahead of the main force, had penetrated into Bac Son, about ten kilometers southeast of Cao Bang on Highway 4. The Vietnamese stopped this penetration with a barrage of anti-tank missiles that destroyed several tanks and forced the 42nd into a hasty reinforcement to prevent its spearhead being surrounded and eliminated. Although the Chinese broke through this resistance, they learned that, in engagements of roughly equal forces, they were no match for the Vietnamese.⁶⁹

Twenty kilometers of narrow road and hilly terrain now lay between the 42nd and Cao Bang, and the 41st and 42nd Armies were converging from Tra Linh, Trung Khanh, and Quang Uyen on a dangerous choke point. The Ma Phuc Pass (latitude: 2244N, longitude: 10619E) is an opening in the mountains at around 700 meters of elevation. A steep road of an estimated grade of 15 percent winds its way via several long switchbacks through the pass, creating an area that, as the Chinese were to discover, is readily defensible by even a very small force.⁷⁰

These difficulties notwithstanding, on February 25 Cao Bang fell. China claimed to have destroyed the 677th and 681st (probably the 481st) Regiments of the Vietnamese 346th Division and claimed by the following day to have destroyed also the remnants of the 246th Regiment. This claim does not flatter the PLA: if it is true, a single Vietnamese division had held up two full Chinese armies and elements of several other armies for almost ten days.

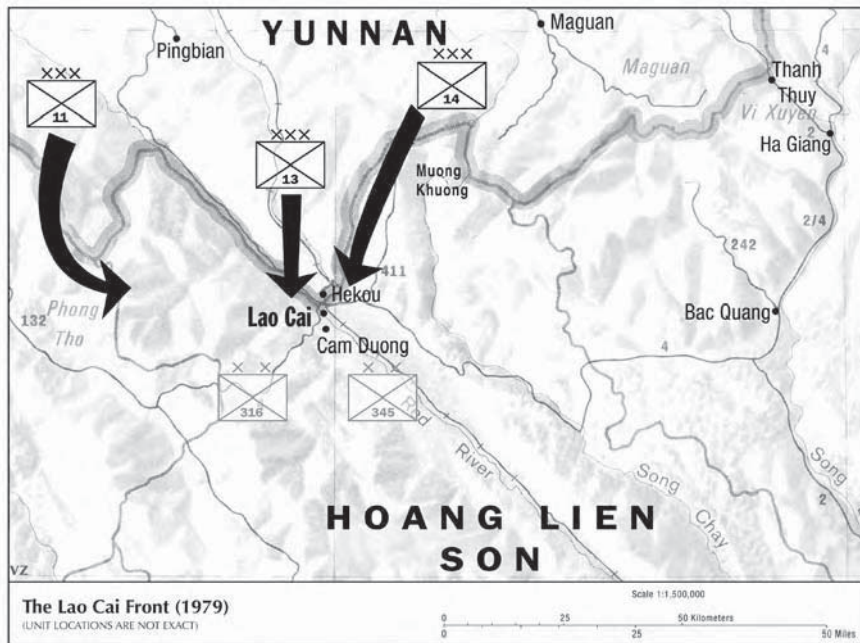
For the next five days, brutal fighting continued throughout the Cao Bang area of operations. On February 27, the Chinese seized Guan Tiat airfield, southwest of That Khe. The Vietnamese counterattacked, and the two sides continued to contest the field. The Vietnamese also counterattacked at Quang Uyen and Tra Linh on February 27, with Chinese control of the towns not being restored until March 2 and 3, respectively. If the 346th Vietnamese Division and its sister units truly had been destroyed, it is difficult to understand who was making these counterattacks behind the Chinese lines.⁷¹

At 19:30 on March 3, a Chinese force from That Khe and a Chinese force from Dong Dang captured the town of Duet Long, on Highway 4. The Lang Son area of operations was thus linked to the Cao Bang area of operations, and the major gap between the troops of the Guangzhou Military Region closed.

The Lao Cai Front

China's attack in the Lao Cai area of operations began before dawn with an artillery barrage against the Vietnamese positions (Map 8). Behind the barrage, elements of the PLA 11th, 13th, and 14th Armies led ground attacks along three avenues of advance.⁷² On the Chinese right, the advance was aimed at taking Phong Tho, about sixty-five kilometers from Lao Cai, to seal off the battlefield from the west. Seizing Phong Tho also would give China access to the Da River Valley, a distant but nonetheless direct geographical entry point to the Red River Valley. The central attack was against the city of Lao Cai itself, which lies less than one kilometer within the border. Lao Cai is 295 kilometers from Hanoi and is a regional nexus of rail, road, and river traffic. Control of the city would give invaders seeking to threaten Hanoi and the Red River Valley a variety of transportation arteries south and east into Vietnam. In contrast to the obvious strategic importance of Lao Cai, Muong Khuong and Pha Long, the objectives of the third prong of the Chinese assault forty kilometers to the east, have little clear military or political importance. It is likely that the attacks here were intended as distractions to prevent their Vietnamese defenders from moving to reinforce the defense of Lao Cai.

Coordinated by the Kunming Military Region Front Headquarters, probably located in Kunming city, the Chinese attack force consisted of the 11th and 13th Armies⁷³ from Kunming Military Region, the 14th Army⁷⁴ from Chengdu



Map 8 The Lao Cai Front (1979).

Military Region. These three armies brought more than 125,000 troops to the battle. The 11th conducted the attacks in the western sector of operations, assaulting Phong Tho and hooking east toward Sapa and Lao Cai.⁷⁵ A detached unit from the 14th was responsible also for the attack on Muong Khuong and probably approached Lao Cai from the east. The 13th conducted the operations against Lao Cai and went on to Cam Duong, immediately to the south of Lao Cai.

The order of battle of the Vietnamese defenders is more difficult to assess. Li Man Kin, who has done the most to estimate the strength of the PAVN during the 1979 campaign, believes that the Vietnamese 316th Division and the 345th Division were deployed in the area and identifies among the defenders the 192nd, 148th, 147th, 254th, 121st, and 95th Regiments. Six regiments are consistent with a two-division force, but of the regiments that Li identifies only the 148th appears to be connected to the 316th Division. It is entirely possible that Li has his order of battle correct at the divisional level but that it is less accurate at the regimental level.⁷⁶ A two-division force of PAVN would imply that there were about 20,000 Vietnamese defenders near Lao Cai when the Chinese attacked.

The first objectives on February 17 were Lao Cai and the small towns of Bat Xat, Muong Khuong, and Pha Long. The main assault was aimed at Lao Cai, with those against Bat Xat, about fifteen kilometers northwest of the city, and against Muong Khuong and Pha Long probably intended to divert Vietnamese attention from the attack on Lao Cai. There do not seem to have been any attacks against Phong Tho on the first day of the campaign.

The 345th Vietnamese Division took the brunt of the Chinese attacks and fought back hard. It took the 13th PLA Army until 14:00 on February 19 to capture Lao Cai. The Chinese movement against Muong Khuong and Pha Long continued on February 19, but on February 20, the PLA found itself still fighting in the area south of Lao Cai and engaged still in mopping up operations in Lao Cai City. By February 22, when the 316th Vietnamese Division was first engaged, the two PLA armies had been fighting for more than five days against a single division of defenders, yet had moved only about two kilometers into Vietnam.

The shape of the attack nonetheless at last began to come into focus. One group of PLA, probably the 13th Army, moved south along the Red River to attack Cam Duong, a town about ten kilometers from Lao Cai that was defended by the remnants of the 345th Division. Another group, probably the 14th Army, moved southwest along the Lao Cai–Sapa road (Highway 4D) to attack the 316th Division. The 316th moved out from Sapa, thirty-eight kilometers from Lao Cai, to meet the advancing Chinese, making contact on February 22 somewhere along the secondary road that links Lao Cai to Sapa.

After three days of fighting, on February 25, the Chinese took Cam Duong. Problems were by now manifesting themselves in the rear of the invading forces, however, and the PLA had to spend the next two days clearing out pockets of resistance in Lao Cai and other towns that it thought it had secured.

To the southwest, Chinese troops were slowly closing in on Sapa, and at 14:45 on March 1, the town fell. A Chinese force slipped around Sapa to cut off the retreat of the defending PAVN 316th Division by attacking toward Binh Lu. This enveloping force apparently skirted around Vietnam's highest mountain, Phan Xi Pang, and crossed part of the Hoang Lien Son mountain range to accomplish its mission. Binh Lu, which is forty-four kilometers west of Sapa, was a significant objective because it prevented reinforcements from reaching the 316th Division by blocking the best road from Lai Chau. Although there is no indication that the Chinese got all the way to Binh Lu, this blocking position was at least forty kilometers from the Chinese border and was to prove the deepest Chinese penetration of the war.

While the western elements of the Chinese attack on the Lao Cai Front were thus attempting to end resistance by the 316th Division, the eastern elements of the invasion force attempted a night attack against Khoc Tiam. Launched at 20:00 on March 2, the attack secured its objective at 17:15 the following day.

The situation meanwhile was becoming critical for the Vietnamese 316th Division. At 19:00 on March 3, the Chinese approached the town of Phong Tho, cutting the roads into the town from Binh Lu and Pa Tan and severing its access to reinforcements and resupply from Lai Chau. This maneuver simultaneously put another blocking force between the 316th Division and the Lai Chau supply route. On March 4, the Chinese attacked and captured Phong Tho.

Although Sapa had fallen on March 1, the 316th Division had continued to hold out against the 14th Army in the surrounding areas. It resisted for one more day, its fight ending finally on March 5. The Chinese claimed to have killed 1,398 Vietnamese soldiers, wounded 620, and captured thirty-five.⁷⁷ At what price is unknown. The PLA used "human wave" assaults to attain even the most minor of tactical objectives. One Vietnamese infantryman told French newsman, Jean-Pierre Gallois, during the fighting: "The Chinese infantry advance shoulder to shoulder to make sure the minefields are cleared. . . . When they moved out of Lao Cai they were as numerous and close together as rice in the paddy fields."⁷⁸

The attack on Quang Ninh

China concentrated its offensive on the three provincial capitals of Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son, but it also undertook numerous attacks on other small towns in the northern Vietnamese provinces (see Map 2). Reports indicate that the PLA attacked in at least company strength against thirty-nine points along the 1,281-kilometer border.⁷⁹ But if the largest of these, the PLA attacks on the province capitals, went poorly, how did the smaller attacks fare?

The PLA attacks in Quang Ninh are illustrative of these smaller attacks. Quang Ninh is at the eastern edge of Vietnam's border with China and, sparsely populated, is the smallest of the provinces that China attacked. A long, narrow province that runs roughly from northeast to southwest, Quang Ninh consists primarily of a mass of hills and low mountains and a narrow coastal plain. It has only two significant towns: the provincial capital, Hong Gai, on Ha Long Bay,

and Mong Cai, the border point for entry into China's Guangxi province at Dongxing. Three Quang Ninh counties border China; from east to west, these are Hai Ninh, Quang Ha, and Binh Lieu. The road network in the province is poor. National Highway 4B runs from Mong Cai to Lang Son, but as late as 1998 it was narrow, muddy, and difficult to traverse in even a four-wheel drive vehicle. Highway 18, Quang Ninh's other major road, runs north along the narrow coastal plain from Haiphong to connect with Highway 4B. The province's main industries are fishing, agriculture, and mining.

Except as an alternative route to Lang Son or a starting point for a long thrust at Hanoi, there is virtually nothing in Quang Ninh that would be of strategic importance to China.⁸⁰ The effort that the PLA put into attacking the Quang Ninh border counties might therefore appear to have been wrong and wasteful. It likely was simply an attempt to distract the Vietnamese. China attacked the border town of Mong Cai, but the attack failed to draw Vietnamese reinforcements to the area. The PAVN held what it could and recaptured what it lost. The attack was a complete failure.

The attack on Quang Ninh preceded the major Chinese invasions further to the west, beginning sometime after 23:00 on February 16 with shelling and an infantry assault on the border point at Hoanh Mo in Binh Lieu County.⁸¹ The attack suggests the possible intention of the Chinese to attack down the Hoanh Mo–Binh Lieu road to cut Highway 4B at Tien Yen. The only way to resupply or reinforce Mong Cai would as a result have been by sea. On February 17, the Chinese shelled Mong Cai and the Xuan Hoa state farm to the west of the town. Later in the day, Chinese infantrymen attacked along a six-kilometer front in the vicinity of Mong Cai, and a second Chinese force attacked Quang Ha County near Po Hen.⁸² The Chinese attacked Mong Cai again on February 20 and 21 from assembly areas in Dongxing.

At this point, the assaults stopped.⁸³ Although fighting continued along the border, the next large-scale Chinese attack occurred on March 2, when a Chinese force attacked Hill 781 in Binh Lieu County; one day later, the Chinese attacked Hill 1050. Both attacks failed, with the loss, according to the Vietnamese, of 750 men.⁸⁴

China continued to shell Vietnamese positions at least until March 10, conducting also limited ground attacks. On March 10, the PLA fired around 3,000 shells at Mong Cai and other Vietnamese border points.⁸⁵

One anecdote illustrates the problems that the Chinese encountered in Quang Ninh. At some point in the fighting, a Vietnamese platoon was assigned to defend a mountain known as Cao Ba Lanh. The mountain was significant from a military point of view because it looks down from a distance of about nine kilometers on the border crossing at Hoanh Mo. The side that controlled Cao Ba Lanh could limit the enemy's use of the crossing. The Vietnamese platoon dug defensive positions and placed mines and booby traps along the most likely avenues of approach.⁸⁶ The first Chinese attack involved two platoons and was beaten back. Later in the day, an entire company attacked, and this again was beaten back, with fifteen Chinese casualties. The following day, two Chinese

battalions attacked en masse. After losing forty-seven men to the mines and rifle fire, they retreated. The next Chinese attack, which was conducted after an extensive artillery barrage, consisted of three battalions – an entire Chinese regiment. This assault came at the Vietnamese platoon from three directions but again failed, Vietnamese mines and booby traps taking a terrible toll of the attacking infantrymen. The three battalions regrouped and, following another artillery barrage, tried again to seize Cao Ba Lanh. At the end of five hours of attacks and for the loss of 360 men, the Chinese regiment captured the mountain.⁸⁷

This vignette illustrates the problems that the PLA encountered the length of the Quang Ninh border. Attempts to divide the Vietnamese effort failed because small Vietnamese units routinely handled much larger Chinese forces. In the case of Cao Ba Lanh, the assault parties of the PLA lacked the military skills to take their objective, and as a consequence failed as planned to draw down upon themselves Vietnamese reinforcements. Beaten back repeatedly, the Chinese commanders knew no better than to resort to ever-larger attacks, and the political exhortations of the commissars and party members resulted only in more catastrophic “human wave” assaults. The Chinese recognized that their attacks on Quang Ninh were a failure. When Beijing announced its “great victory” over the Vietnamese, it mentioned every town where its forces had fought with success. But it never mentioned any of the towns in Quang Ninh province.⁸⁸

The Vietnamese response

The Vietnamese divisions that had met the Chinese assault, although badly mauled, continued to fight as China began its withdrawal on March 5. Only in the Lang Son theater were new units deployed to relieve the battered units of the front line: the 337th, 327th, and 338th Divisions, which had been held near Chi Lang, south of Lang Son, to contain a Chinese breakthrough, were finally committed to the battle. The 337th had made contact on March 2, when it had attempted to stop part of the Chinese advance on Lang Son in the area of the Khanh Khe ford. Its arrival had come too late to influence the battle for Lang Son, but now the Vietnamese counterattack had begun. The 337th, renamed the 390th Division, and the 338th Division attacked the Chinese as they retraced their steps to the border crossing point at Chi Ma.⁸⁹

Navy and naval air operations

The Chinese South Sea Fleet’s mission in the war was to support the ground forces in Yunnan and Guangxi, to defend against possible Soviet naval incursions and to defend the Paracel archipelago against a Vietnamese island grab.⁹⁰ To perform these missions, it had created the 217 Formation and charged it to patrol the waters of the Tonkin Gulf and the South China Sea. The 217 Formation reported that it sailed 38,971 nautical miles and remained on alert for 2,151 hours (ninety days) while performing these missions.⁹¹

The 217 Formation was ill-prepared for this mission, however. Organized to attack Vietnamese naval ships, it found on arrival on station that its enemy had changed: the 217 Formation was up against the Soviet navy.⁹² Predictably, the Chinese crews, who appreciated the advantages the Soviets held in ship size, firepower, and communications, were concerned.⁹³ The PLA naval commanders and political officers conducted a new series of political meetings to motivate the skeptics among their crews, but a perceived lack of fighting spirit below decks may have been the least of their problems. The ships and crews of the 217 Formation were experiencing engineering plant failures, a lack of drinking water, seasickness, and difficulties in communicating with each other. Their gunnery skills also were found out to be inadequate. The task of stopping an incursion by the Soviet Pacific Fleet must have seemed formidable indeed.⁹⁴

The battle with the Soviets never came. The *Guiyang* and *Chengdu* investigated reports of Soviet Alligator class (*e yu ji*) amphibious ships (*deng lu jian*) entering the area, but there is no record of an exchange of fire or even an interception.⁹⁵ And when the commander of 217 Formation changed the operational plan from one of “deploy and fight hard” (*bai kai ying da*) to “rely on the islands and shores, from a defensive stance launch surprise attacks from hidden positions” (*yituo dao an, yinbi tuji . . . zai fangyu zhong*),⁹⁶ the likelihood of a clash receded. He had, in other words, assessed the strength of his Soviet opponents and decided to avoid a battle. The crews naturally felt the new plan better suited the practical demands of the war.⁹⁷

The naval air force followed a similar course of action. The Chinese naval aviation units anticipated a response by the Soviet naval air force⁹⁸ and looking at their equipment from this new perspective found it to be glaringly inadequate. As in the case of the crews of the ships, the political officers and naval air force commanders found themselves facing the difficulty of motivating their airmen to participate in a one-sided fight. In 1979, the Chinese naval air force was still flying large numbers of Mig-19 aircraft, which were so old as to have fallen out of production. Even the most sophisticated fighter in the Chinese inventory, the Mig-21 (F-6), was being phased out of the Soviet air force. The Soviet replacement aircraft, the Mig-23, Mig-25, and Mig-27, were up to three generations in advance of the best Chinese plane.⁹⁹

If the first problem of the naval aviators was the relative obsolescence of their aircraft, the second problem was the magnitude of the task they were assigned. To monitor Soviet naval activity in the South China Sea and to defend the Paracel archipelago would require longer-range aircraft, aircraft carriers, or an aerial refueling capability. The Chinese had none of these capabilities. Although they had moved the aircraft of Unit 37262 to bases close to Vietnam and the South China Sea,¹⁰⁰ their longest-range bomber or reconnaissance aircraft, the H-5 (the Il-28, or Beagle), could only fly 550 nautical miles (about 1,000 kilometers) to its target and return. The longest-range fighter in the Chinese naval air order of battle was the Mig-19, which had a range of 530 nautical miles. The Paracels are about 150 nautical miles from the nearest Chinese airbase, on Hainan Island. While China could comfortably reach and overfly the islands, it

did not have the ability to provide the constant cover that would be needed to intercept and deter Soviet interlopers.

Limited by the quality of their aircraft, the Chinese naval aviators conducted the only operations that were practicable to them: they photographed Soviet naval electronic intelligence ships¹⁰¹ that were monitoring the conflict. Presumably, if the war had come to them, they would have acquitted themselves as well as their equipment would allow.

Air force operations

Neither the Chinese nor the Vietnamese air force flew any air-to-ground support operations during the 1979 campaign, nor did the two sides engage in any air combat. The practical contribution of the two air forces was effectively limited to a resupply role. On the first day of the campaign, the PLA air force flew 567 sorties, using 170 groups of aircraft.¹⁰² Over the course of the entire campaign, from February 17 to March 16, it flew 8,500 sorties using 3,131 groups of aircraft. It also flew 228 transportation sorties, carrying 1,465 troops and 151 tons (153.5 metric tons) of materiel.¹⁰³

The real reason that the Chinese air force did not clash with the Vietnamese was probably found in a sober calculation of the possibilities of winning. The PLA air force had a significant numerical advantage over its Vietnamese counterpart but little edge on the area of front-line fighters. Where China possessed 4,000 Mig-17/Mig-19s to Vietnam's 210, it could field only eighty of the newer Mig-21s to Vietnam's 70.¹⁰⁴ The Chinese undoubtedly were aware that the Vietnamese Mig-21 force had proven formidable in its war against the United States (during Operation Rolling Thunder, from October 1, 1967, to March 31, 1968, the Vietnamese Mig-21s shot down three times as many U.S. aircraft as they lost) and knew that a battle against the Vietnamese Mig-21 fighters was one to be avoided.¹⁰⁵

China's Mig-19 pilots in particular were skeptical about their chances. One low-level political discussion in Unit 39530 was probably typical of those among PLA aviators. The unit's political report recorded: "Shortly after the orders [for the campaign] were received, some comrades were unconvinced that the [Vietnamese] Mig-21 could be defeated" ("*Zuo zhan renwu gang xia da shi, youxie tongzhi duineng fou da sheng Mig-21 xinli mei di*").¹⁰⁶ The discussion between political officers and pilots apparently went on for some time. The aircrews argued that the Mig-21 was faster, better armed, and more capable at higher altitudes than their Mig-19s. The political officers argued that the crews did not understand that "weapons are an important but not decisive factor in war, man is the decisive factor" ("*wuqi shi zhanzheng de zhongyao yinsu, dan bushi jueding de yinsu, jueding de yinsu shi ren*"). The political officers additionally appealed to the patriotism of the crews and their sense of the PLAAF's "glorious history" in the Korean War.¹⁰⁷

The pilots were only satisfied when the political officers changed their line of argument and argued that it was possible to defeat the Mig-21 by emphasizing

the capabilities of the PLAAF's Mig-19s at medium altitudes and in defensive maneuvers. Citing examples of successful Pakistani Mig-19 operations against Indian Mig-21s, the political officers lectured the pilots on the need to carefully select their tactics when they engaged the Mig-21. The Political Department of Unit 39530 claimed that these practical arguments carried the day – but no fighter sweeps were reported, and there were no contacts with the Vietnamese air force.

Of course, there were many other excellent reasons for the Chinese not to conduct aggressive air operations. The use of air power might have escalated the conflict to an unmanageable level and could potentially have drawn the Soviet Union into the war. The Vietnamese air defenses, particularly around the Red River Delta, were, in the 1970s, among the best in the world. Finally, the PLAAF was not trained to conduct attacks on ground forces, and it may have been that the PLA leadership felt it had enough problems on its hands without adding the nightmare of air-to-ground coordination to the mix. For all these reasons, and in spite of the fact that China had flown an additional 700 fighters to its air bases along the border, the PLA elected not to conduct an aggressive air operation during the 1979 campaign.

Twenty years after the 1979 campaign ended, General Wang Hai of the PLAAF published his memoirs of what had been a long and distinguished career. Wang, who ended his career as the Commander of the PLAAF and a member of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee, had commanded the air force units deployed against Vietnam during the 1979 campaign. He did not devote a single page to or make a single mention of the campaign in his memoirs. Perhaps he simply had no good memories of those days.¹⁰⁸

The unconventional warfare campaign

Away from the noise and confusion of the fight between the conventional forces of the PLA and PAVN, both sides conducted violent and intense campaigns of unconventional warfare. These operations ranged from the dispatch of cross-border intelligence agents and raiders to the development and direction of large-scale guerrilla movements. They spread the war far from the Sino-Vietnamese border and laid the basis for the conflict to continue for at least ten more years.

In 1979, the Sino-Vietnamese border was highly porous. Groups of Tai, Nung, Yao, and Hmong tribesmen routinely moved back and forth among the homes of their extended families, and Vietnamese (*Kinh*), Lao, and Chinese traders moved to and fro across the border in pursuit of money. Nor was the border a barrier to the intelligence officers and special operations officers¹⁰⁹ of either side.

The Vietnamese had conducted cross-border intelligence and raiding operations since before the 1979 campaign and persisted with them through the fighting. The goal of these operations was to delay and disrupt the attackers. Chinese Unit 35218 noted that the Vietnamese had a consistent set of missions that they conducted in the Chinese unit's area of operations. According to the Political

Department of Unit 35218, the Vietnamese conducted raids using small groups of soldiers who blended in with the local population and sought to collect information on or disrupt PLA activities. The infiltrators entered Chinese territory at night to observe military deployments, sometimes also sabotaging command posts and supply bases.¹¹⁰ These Vietnamese infiltrations happened frequently enough for the political sections of large Chinese units – the staff offices responsible for the security of the units’ most sensitive areas – to record the lessons learned from their efforts to counter them. The Chinese press also reported on the infiltrations and was sufficiently aware of the nature and the frequency of the crossings to sometimes report several incidents in a single article; Xinhua, for example, reported on March 2, 1979, that Vietnamese infiltrators had been caught crossing into Guangxi province on February 17, 24, and 27 and on March 2.¹¹¹ Chinese Unit 53701 that was responsible for defending the seven bridges that China had built across the Zuo River at Shuikouguan (in Vietnamese, the Bang River) reported seeing infiltrators in the vicinity of the bridges on twenty occasions in a single month.¹¹² Near Cao Bang (CH: *Gaoping*) Unit 33970 additionally faced a threat from Vietnamese special forces units, reporting that on thirty-one separate occasions, it fought off Vietnamese saboteurs that were seeking to attack the city’s river bridges. The unit claimed that it killed fifty-six of these raiders without the loss of a single Chinese soldier.¹¹³

The Vietnamese also attacked important “high-value” targets. When the PLAAF emplaced a radar unit on Punian Ridge near Friendship Pass, for example, the Vietnamese made every effort to knock the station out of the war, launching ground and artillery attacks on it during the day and sabotage raids at night. The station was put out of action by artillery on February 22. When the unit was repaired, the Vietnamese attacks resumed.¹¹⁴

Although the available information is sketchy, the best demonstration of the Vietnamese willingness to bring the war to the Chinese rear areas was a raid that it conducted on Ningming airfield in Guangxi province, a full forty kilometers from the border. On March 1, 1979, “informed Vietnamese sources” told Agence France Presse (AFP) reporters in Hanoi that, shortly after the invasion was launched on February 17, the Vietnamese had conducted a “commando” raid in Chinese territory. According to AFP, the Chinese Xinhua news agency confirmed that there had been a raid in Ningming County, and possibly on the airfield.¹¹⁵

The Chinese conducted similar intelligence and raiding operations, with the dual goals of creating agent networks to report on Vietnamese political cohesion and military activities and of disrupting the logistical support of the Vietnamese units blocking the Chinese advance.¹¹⁶ The success of these operations is questionable. The 571st Truck Division, one of the principal logistics units supporting the Vietnamese forces in the conflict, does not mention in its official history a single attack by Chinese raiders.¹¹⁷ Where Chinese infiltrators were uncovered, however, the Vietnamese response was uncompromising. The Yunnan Military District, during its brief occupation of Vietnamese villages across the border, conducted extensive political work among the minorities in those villages, with

the hope of developing agents to report on the situation after the Chinese had left, to conduct acts of sabotage and to organize guerrilla raids.¹¹⁸ After the Chinese political cadres withdrew, the Vietnamese arrested and killed their agents.¹¹⁹

While Vietnamese unconventional warfare operations were largely tactical, the operations by their Chinese opponents bordered on the strategic. Beijing's political objective in launching the 1979 campaign was to induce the Vietnamese to leave Cambodia, and to this end it supported the main military campaign with a number of political, diplomatic, and lesser military initiatives.

Seeking to increase the military pressure on Vietnam, for example, China launched or resurrected a series of guerrilla movements throughout Indochina. The goal of these movements was to tie down the Vietnamese army and to erode the political power of the Hanoi government and its allies in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In the 1970s and 1980s, Beijing gave military and political assistance to the Khmer Rouge in its resistance against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. (Thailand and the United States similarly supported the noncommunist resistance in Cambodia in the 1980s.)¹²⁰ On occasion working through its Thai allies, Beijing also supported, guided, or manipulated several other guerrilla operations that it hoped would tie down and weaken the Vietnamese. Some of these wars predated the 1979 campaign and had their origins in groups, such as FULRO (Le Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées), that had opposed the Saigon government before its collapse in 1975.¹²¹ Others, such as the Hmong insurgency in Laos, had their origins in American attempts to create an anti-Hanoi resistance during the Second Indochina War.¹²² And in a few cases, such as that of the United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, the combatants were remnants of the old South Vietnamese army, resurrected by refugees to take advantage of the stress the Chinese invasion was putting on the Vietnamese military.¹²³ These guerrilla bands temporarily tied down some Vietnamese troops, but in the end they were never able to transition into widespread popular insurgencies.

Logistics

Throughout the 1979 campaign, the Chinese effort suffered from chronic logistical problems. Units frequently noted that they were required to operate without food and water. Even the GPD, which could always be depended on to put a gloss on any problem, admitted that the army had difficulties meeting its need for provisions.¹²⁴ For example, three days after the invasion began, the 150 men of the 3rd Company of PLA Unit 53203 were down to a total, across the company, of eight individual meals. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency calculations indicate that the unit should have had more than 1,000 rations on hand at that point in the operation.¹²⁵ Many Chinese soldiers also lacked water. The same 3rd Company of Unit 53203 reported that it ran out of water on the second night of the campaign: after marching eighteen kilometers in a single night, its soldiers were so thirsty that they licked the dew off the grass.¹²⁶

The trials of Unit 53203 were not unusual. There are so many examples in

unit histories of shortages such as these that the reader begins to believe that the hunger and thirst of individual soldiers was a metaphor for the greater sacrifice of the army. In truth, it is likely that the PLA suffered a massive failure of its logistics system. First, it was fighting in hostile territory, where there was no friendly population to provide food and water, as had happened during the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. Second, the supply cadres clearly failed to issue basic rations before the attack, because they were unable to move the rations forward fast enough, because they thought the war would end rapidly, or because they thought the rations would catch up with the advancing troops when the action slowed. And third, it may have been that the troops discarded their rations when stress of combat, lack of experience, and poor discipline convinced them that they had bigger problems to worry about. The net result, whatever the reason, was that the logisticians failed to ensure that Unit 53203 and many other units had the basic food rations that the soldiers needed. The provision of water was at least as bad. The hills of northern Vietnam in the dry season simply did not provide the water the PLA expected to find there.¹²⁷

In contrast, there is scarce mention in Vietnamese unit histories of a lack of any supplies other than ammunition. Directed by the General Staff Department, the 571st Truck Division had as early as August 21, 1978, begun to make supply runs to the PAVN units of the First Military Region and the Second Military Region. By the end of 1980, the division was supporting Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, Laos, and on the Chinese border. The unit exceeded the northern border supply requirement by fulfilling 104 percent of the planned requirement.¹²⁸

Hanoi at war

As the 1979 campaign unfolded, Vietnam had behind its thin screen of soldiers in Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son rapidly begun to construct a defense that was similar to the one that had stopped the Chinese in the past: a “Nhu Nguyet” defense.¹²⁹ In 1077, the Vietnamese had defeated an invading Chinese army by fighting a delaying and harassing action that finally fell back on defenses along the Cau River (see Map 5). The Cau River flows from northwest to southeast across the Red River Delta, about 30–40 kilometers north of Hanoi. In the northwest, the river flows from the area around Thai Nguyen, gaining strength from the runoff of the Tam Dao Mountain range, a series of low, steep mountains near Hanoi. The river continues just north of Bac Ninh, before emptying into the lowest part of the Red River Delta. If it could hold the southern bank of the Cau River, Vietnam reasoned that it could stop the PLA from threatening Hanoi from the Cao Bang and Lang Son theaters because the main highways (Highways 3, 1A, and 1B) cross the river at just two points: the Soc Son Bridge and Bac Ninh. The strategy had worked in 1077, and Vietnam thought it would work again in 1979.

To execute the Nhu Nguyet strategy, the Vietnamese had first to reconfigure their forces.¹³⁰ On March 2, the General Staff in Hanoi established the 5th Corps

in Military Region One. The corps, which consisted of the 3rd, 337th, 338th, 327th, and 347th Divisions and their supporting arms, was created out of units that were at or near Lang Son.¹³¹ Between March 3 and 5, the 1st Corps, including the 320B Division, the 338th Division (returned from assignment to the 5th Corps), and the 209th Regiment of the 312th Division, joined with the divisions of the 5th Corps in moving against the Chinese retreating through Chi Ma and Dong Mo.¹³² From March 1979 to July 1979, Hanoi continued to reconfigure its military, establishing or moving seven corps to the northern theater of operations.¹³³

Few of these troops were moved from Cambodia, as Beijing had hoped. Instead, Hanoi expanded its conscription campaign. On March 5, the Vietnamese Communist Party announced a new set of conscription criteria, and local party committees began screening volunteers and potential conscripts. Men from the age of eighteen to forty-five and women from the age of eighteen to thirty-five were eligible for service.¹³⁴ In another form, conscription had already begun. In February, young men who had performed military service were called up to do labor service. The PAVN now sent these men north. The draftees, mostly from Hanoi and the Red River Delta, moved to camps along the Cau River to perform the backbreaking work of building Hanoi's defenses.¹³⁵

Vietnam also needed weapons and equipment to make up for the enormous Chinese advantage in manpower and turned to the Soviet Union for help. Between April and July 1979, the Soviets refitted the 308th Division of the 1st Corps and other units with new equipment, including 111 BMP-1 armored personnel carriers.¹³⁶ The BMP-1 was a significant advance over the armored personnel carriers that had so far been available to either side. If the Chinese were to resume their attack on Vietnam, these vehicles would enable the Vietnamese to move the 308th Division and other elements of the 1st Corps at high speed around the battlefield. The Soviets additionally provided advisers¹³⁷ to the units that received the new vehicles, and these advisers presumably taught their students more than just the best way to change the oil or fix a short in an electric lamp. Presumably, the Soviets also taught the Vietnamese the lessons of the battlefield debut of the BMP-1 in the 1973 Arab–Israeli wars.

Conclusion

The 1979 campaign, at least for the PLA, was a failure. China launched its attack in an effort to force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. The Chinese withdrew from Vietnam on March 16, 1979, but the Vietnamese did not leave Cambodia until 1989.

The Chinese leadership in Beijing had believed the PLA to be strong enough to force Hanoi to divert its forces from the Cambodian occupation, but it clearly was not. Vietnam diverted some troops but conscripted many more, and the PLA had no further effect on life in Vietnam. Its campaign, which was intended to teach Hanoi that it could not keep its military forces in Cambodia, had taught the Vietnamese instead that, at least in the short term, they could comfortably

support military operations not only in Cambodia, but also in Laos and along the border with China. The PLA had amassed an enormous force and planned a war of “quick decision,” but it had failed utterly to make progress against the better-trained and more experienced PAVN. In the Korean War, a similar-sized PLA force had moved farther in twenty-four hours against a larger defending force than it moved in two weeks against fewer Vietnamese.¹³⁸ Furthermore, in November 1950, the PLA had made its advances against forces that were far better equipped; in 1979, its enemy was the rough equivalent in the area of technology. The PLA air and naval forces were stalemated, with neither arm contributing to the campaign, and the logistical support of the ground operation was weak and intermittent. When the last PLA soldier returned to China on March 16, 1979, two things were clear: the PLA had failed as a pedagogical instrument; and, if the Chinese were to continue to try to force the Vietnamese out of Cambodia, changes had to be made. The last Maoist war was not over, but the Chinese had been taught a major lesson.

Before moving on to the events that followed the Chinese 1979 campaign in Northern Vietnam, it is illuminating to look closely at the war at the tactical level of operations. This chapter has given the reader a broad view of the strategy and operations the Chinese employed during the campaign. The next chapter gives the reader a closer look at the tactical problems the cadres and conscripts faced during the most important battle of the campaign: the Battle of Lang Son.