Xiaoming Zhang


Xiaoming Zhang’s latest book, _Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991_, examines the conflict between China and Vietnam in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Zhang presents his explanation in three parts. After introducing his subject, he explains the international and domestic context in which the Chinese made the decision to go to war. Next, Zhang outlines the course of the conflict at the tactical and operational levels. He closes with chapters on Chinese reactions to the war and a chapter drawing out the implications of the war for China’s present and future uses of military power.

Zhang seeks answers to a host of questions: Why did China attack Vietnam in 1979? What were Beijing’s objectives during the attack and during the subsequent years of conflict? What led to the conclusion of the conflict between the two countries? To find the answers to these questions Zhang studies the international context of the war, including the USSR-PRC-SRV triangle, the USSR-US-PRC triangle, and the US-PRC-SRV triangle. Zhang also examines the nature of Deng Xiaoping’s leadership and the Chinese strategic culture to tease out answers to these questions.

The thesis of _Deng Xiaoping’s Long War_ is that China and Vietnam went to war because although they were “ideological communists . . . the leaders of the two countries placed individual national interests above other concerns” (213). And, “As a result, war was virtually inevitable” (212). Zhang demonstrates this thesis through an extensive discussion of the international actors and their interests, perceptions, and motivations. He goes on to provide over a hundred pages about the military operations of the 1979 campaign and the subsequent fighting between China and Vietnam.

The Sino-Soviet rivalry, according to Zhang, occupied the leaders of China, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam from 1949 to 1991. With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the emergence of an independent, communist-led state in the northern part of Vietnam, it appeared on the surface that a strong communist axis had developed in East Asia. This was not the case. Under the smiles and toasts, Zhang finds the roots of the conflict that broke out in 1979. There were early signs of ideological competition and there were indications of personality rifts among the leaders of the three states. China became wary of the Soviet Union’s role in Asia and, since
Vietnam, which was still engaged in its war of reunification, was increasingly tied to the Soviet Union, sought to distance itself from Vietnam. As a result of the increasing Viet-Soviet friendliness, Deng Xiaoping faced a difficult situation after his return to power in 1978. Deng, unlike some Chinese leaders, had little affinity for the leaders of the Vietnamese Communists and feared the growth of a Soviet-Vietnamese alliance threatening his northern and southern borders. His solution, Zhang argues, was to drive a wedge between the Soviets and Vietnamese by teaching the Vietnamese to be wary of too close an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Since Zhang believes that the Sino-Soviet rivalry was the cause of China’s march to war in 1979, the Chinese move closer to the US contributed to these developments by providing the Chinese with a counterweight for Soviet influence in Asia, a source of funds and technology for economic growth, and a chance to curry favor with the Americans by attacking their recent enemy, Vietnam. Additionally, the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia presented the Chinese with a chance to polish their credentials as a defender of weaker Asian states and allies who might be pressed by the Vietnamese.

Executing the decision to attack Vietnam was a massive project. It required aligning the various factions in the PLA and the highest ranks of the CCP. Although there were no outright dissenters, the author provides an examination of the contending points of view from a variety of new sources. But moving an army as big and dated as the PLA required mobilizing more than soldiers. It necessitated personnel shifts, political training, and, since the PLA had not fought a foreign enemy in almost two decades, the training or retraining of troops in basic soldier skills was required.

The author sees the Chinese invasion of Vietnam as a three-phased operation. In the first phase (17-25 February), the PLA captured the provincial capitals of Lao Cai and Cao Bang. They also captured the Lang Son province district town of Dong Dang, the first step on the road to the provincial capital in Lang Son. During the second phase (26 February-5 March), the Chinese forces attacked Lang Son and conducted operations against Vietnamese forces west of the Red River. In the third phase (5-15 March), the Chinese conducted a retreat under pressure from the Vietnamese forces.

In recounting the events of his three phases, Zhang deals in great detail with the events at the tactical level of war. He explains the movements of the various units and the problems they encountered on the battlefield. He deals with the events of the campaign and in a following chapter attempts to explain the way the PLA assessed the difficulties it had encountered. These assessments supposedly influenced the PLA modernization programs of the following