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## Chapter 3: Planning and Preparation for the Invasion

On 9 December 1978, both the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions received orders to deploy troops on the Vietnamese border by 10 January and prepare to fight a war “in limited time and space” with “overwhelming force.” Many Chinese soldiers doubted whether China should attack Vietnam and whether they would be victorious. The PLA forces had not fought a major war in almost thirty years. Thus, no officers at or below the battalion level had any combat experience. Moreover, the Cultural Revolution had left the PLA’s morale and reputation at all-time lows. Chinese leaders, including Deng Xiaoping himself, were unsure about the PLA’s combat capability. In the midst of these doubts and uncertainties, the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions embarked on detailed planning and preparations for the invasion of Vietnam.

This chapter explores the PLA’s implementation of the invasion operations at the campaign and tactical levels in the context of Cold War history. The PRC never planned to engage in a fight with the SRV, and the PLA had never before prepared for such a military action. Chinese forces were undermanned, underequipped, and poorly trained. The most serious difficulty was the lack of enthusiasm among the rank and file. Many soldiers did not understand why they would attack a country that seemed like— and had often been compared to— China’s “little brother.”

The PLA had developed its own approach to war and its own unique institutional culture. Much of the continuity found in the PLA’s military doctrine, strategy, and operational concepts was based on adherence to Maoist principles, even when fighting a weaker enemy like Vietnam. Mao’s military thought, the PLA’s “political work system,” and the mobilization of society to support military actions all played vital roles in guiding the planning and preparations for invasion. The characteristics of the PLA’s operational art in military campaigns during the invasion foreshadowed both continuities and changes for years to come. Preparations for war against Vietnam were a national undertaking in support of the Chinese leadership’s strategic objectives.

### The PLA’s Doctrinal and Institutional Traditions

In 1979, the PLA’s senior military officers were still Mao’s generals, with combat experience from the war against Japan, the civil wars against the Nationalists, and the Korean War. They were intimately familiar with Mao’s approach to conflict. In planning and preparing to invade Vietnam, they hewed to the principles developed by the late Chinese leader in the 1930s and 1940s. The CMC’s order included some of these principles, requiring both the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions to “concentrate a superior force,” to employ “encirclement and

outflanking” tactics, and to engage in a decisive “battle of annihilation.” Understanding how the PLA applied Maoist doctrinal and institutional traditions in the planning and preparation phase of the 1979 invasion of Vietnam requires us to examine the traditions themselves.

Mao’s military thinking focused on how a force inferior in arms, equipment, and training could defeat a superior adversary. The essence of his approach was creating a political environment for mobilizing the whole country and rallying popular support for a protracted war. One key doctrinal principle Mao invoked in his approach to warfare was “active defense” (jiji fangyu – *cận ngăn phòng ngự*) through “decisive engagements,” using the three operational principles of *initiative*, *flexibility*, and *planning*. First, he believed that gaining and retaining the initiative were essential for a weaker force in asymmetric warfare. Second, he asserted that flexibility was essential for achieving the operational initiative. Third, he contended that making clear plans and later necessary changes during the fight helped overcome the confusions, obscurities, and uncertainties peculiar to war.

Mao believed that applying these principles necessitated having commanders who “use all possible methods of conducting reconnaissance” and “ponder information” by “discarding the dross and selecting the essential, eliminating the false and retaining the true” and then “proceeding from one to the other and from the outside to the inside.” By carefully considering the interrelationships between conditions of his own army and those of the enemy’s army, a wise commander could “reach to his judgment, make up his mind, and work out his plan.”

In the late 1940s, as the communist forces were growing in size and strength after more than ten years of fighting against internal and external enemies, Mao redefined Chinese military strategy and operational doctrine, extracting four additional principles: (1) annihilate the enemy’s effective strength (yousheng liliang – *hữu sinh lực lượng*) rather than seizing or holding a city or a place; (2) concentrate the superior force (jizhong youshi bingli) with concurrent frontal and flank attacks and avoid becoming bogged down in a battle of attrition; (3) make preparations that will ensure victory in any given situation; (4) fight courageously in continuous battles without fear of sacrifice or fatigue. The PLA employed these military principles in its 1949 victory against the Nationalist regime, and they became enduring features of the PLA’s tactical and operational style.

Since the founding of the Red Army in the later 1920s, Mao had attached great importance to the CCP’s absolute control over the military. He advocated embedding the party organization inside the army at all levels to guarantee that troops would comply with the CCP’s directions. He particularly stressed the importance of the party’s role at the company level. Because his army was very weak and experienced extreme hardship, Mao was convinced that only a politicized army could keep up morale and maintain solidarity among the rank and file. The CCP had to play an active and decisive role in making rules, regulations, and decisions for the military. Troops must act on orders from the party instead of orders from an individual commander. This advocacy gave rise to the creation of a distinctive institutional characteristic of the communist-led armed forces—the political work system—to ensure one of Mao’s other key principles for the military: the gun must be under the control of the party, not the military.

The most critical components of the political work system were the *party committee system* and the *political commissar system*. The party committees were designated to provide leadership, guidance, and unity for troops, conveying directives and orders to lower-level party organizations and making sure that troops carried out orders. Under the leadership of the party

committees, a *collective* decision-making authority was established in which military commanders and political commissars jointly shared responsibility for the work of their units. Except in tactical and emergency situations, the party committees discussed and made all important decisions.

Under the collective leadership of the party committee, a dual commandership system gave the military commander and the political commissar equal ranks. The former was responsible for all military affairs, while the latter, who usually served as the secretary of the party committee, was in charge of promotion, security, propaganda, public service, and ideological indoctrination. The basic principles of political work—unity between officers and soldiers, unity between the army and the people, and (consequently) the disintegration of enemy forces—constituted the political basis for unifying the troops and defeating the enemy. The CCP leadership and the PLA were convinced by their shared experience from the 1920s that the political work system played a significant role in ensuring that the troops were loyal to the CCP and in providing the troops with motivation sufficient to enhance their combat effectiveness.

The CCP-led forces consisted of three basic components: main forces, regional forces, and militia. The main forces operated unconstrained by geographical concerns, whereas the regional and militia forces were restricted to their own localities. Consequently, over the years, regional and militia forces developed strong social networks in their areas that translated into detailed knowledge of local conditions and thus of how to conduct operations there.

In late 1948, following the significant expansion of communist forces in the final years of the civil war, the CMC reorganized its troops into four field armies. By the time that the People's Republic was founded, the first field army, under Marshal Peng Dehuai and Marshal He Long, had established a strong presence in northern and northwestern China. The second field army, under Marshal Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping, dominated central and southwestern China. The third field army, under Marshal Chen Yi and General Su Yu, occupied eastern China. Finally, the fourth field army, under Marshal Lin Biao, swept from northeastern to southern China. The field army became an institution with which the rank and file personally identified. This individual affiliation as well as the longtime service of soldiers in a particular unit also laid the foundation for valuable mentor-protégé relationships between senior officers and trusted subordinates and for fostering less desirable factionalism in leadership politics. These traditions and institutional characteristics, deeply embedded in the PLA by 1979, strongly influenced China's decision to go to war against Vietnam.

## Planning the Invasion

Gerald Segal has claimed that China's prime motives for attacking Vietnam were checking Vietnamese ambition and aggression in Southeast Asia, halting a Vietnamese threat to Chinese national security, and exposing Soviet weakness. However, poor political calculation meant that by attempting to create a strategy to punish Vietnam, the PRC's leaders had actually put themselves in an unwinnable position—that is, one in which China never stood a chance of success. China's clearly stated desire to "teach Vietnam a lesson" created a misleading impression that its main war objective was simply an "act of revenge." This impression was unfortunate, because the attack was hardly impulsive or merely vengeful. At the outset, Beijing had strictly limited the objectives and the duration, scope, and conduct of the war to avoid going beyond a bilateral border conflict. However, following Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, the CMC broadened its objectives to include invading northwestern Vietnam.

Practical or not, this scheme revealed both that considerable thought had gone into crafting the plan and that China's leaders were willing to gamble, seemingly no matter what the cost. In addition, the plan reflected the moderating influence of the CCP leadership on the PLA's seething anger. PLA officers wanted to use force to strike hard at Vietnam, which they perceived as nothing less than a traitorous former ally that must be punished. Instead of offering the military an unconstrained framework in which to inflict the desired punishment, CCP leaders limited their operations in both time and space by directing the military leadership at Guangzhou and Kunming to derive an operational strategy that could meet the CCP leadership's strategic objectives. Local military planners were concerned about the extent to which their objective of teaching Vietnam a lesson could actually be achieved or even measured.

The CMC initially asked the Guangzhou Military Region for two armies (the 41st and 42nd) and one division (the 129th of the 43rd Army) to attack Vietnamese forces in the Cao Bang area, while two other armies (the 43rd and 55th) would engage in diversionary attacks against Dong Dang and Loc Binh prior to the final assault on Lang Son. The Kunming Military Region was ordered to employ two armies (the 13th and 14th) to destroy one Vietnamese division at Lao Cai as well as other local units near the Yunnan border. The CMC apparently granted operational autonomy to regional commanders but kept the duration and space of the fight under the command of the central leadership in Beijing. Deng Xiaoping was determined to avoid having the invasion turn into a quagmire for China.

According to General Zhou Deli, General Xu Shiyou, the commander of the Guangzhou Military Region and a veteran PLA warrior, received the planning task on 9 December 1978 and then began to consider his military strategy against Vietnam. He immediately thought of an overwhelming surprise attack on the Vietnamese army, seizing the initiative and preventing the Vietnamese from recovering their strength. Drawing on his own combat experience, Xu's suggested plan was known as *niudao shaji* (using a butcher's knife to kill a chick), a description suggestive of its massive violence. As a student of Mao's approach to war, Xu believed that this approach fittingly applied Mao's doctrine to fight wars of annihilation. There were three components: (1) concentrating strikes on the vital parts of the enemy's defense but not on the enemy's strong point, (2) employing overwhelming force and firepower to crush the enemy defense at the point of engagement, and (3) quickly and deeply striking at the enemy's heart. In this way, Xu expected the PLA to cut the enemy defenses to pieces and then destroy the targeted forces one by one.

On 11 December 1979, Xu convened his first war meeting. Participants included the vice commanders, the deputy political commissars, the chief of staff, the political director, the logistical director, and the commanders and political commissars of the 41st, 42nd, and 55th Armies from the Guangzhou Military Region. At the meeting, the 41st and 42nd Armies were designated to conduct a two-pronged offensive against Cao Bang, while the 55th would launch attacks on Lang Son. Because the Guangzhou Military Region did not have enough troops, the CMC transferred the 43rd Army from the Wuhan Military Region as Xu's reserve.

After General Zhou announced his assignments, the participants raised many questions because their troops had not engaged in such large operations for many years. The main problem was how to transport their troops— especially the two armies and two artillery divisions from the Guangdong area— from their home barracks to the border region in Guangxi by the end of December. Few people had the knowledge and experience to arrange in such a large-scale movement of troops, particularly in light of the limited means of transportation. Another pressing

issue was that all units involved in the invasion were undermanned and underequipped. Those in attendance at the meeting agreed that no more than 5 percent of personnel would be left in the rear and required all troops to prepare to fight with the equipment they had on hand. At the end of the meeting, Xu urged senior officers to serve as exemplars by changing their work habits from the routine of a peacetime regimen to the total focus of wartime— to act swiftly and on time and to work hard. He made clear that he would punish those who failed to perform their jobs. Then Xu requested that his deputies go to the troops and help them prepare for the invasion.

Xu had been the commander of the Nanjing Military Region (the third field army) for eighteen years before taking up command in the Guangzhou Military Region in 1973, when Mao became increasingly apprehensive about the loyalty of his military regional commanders. Because Xu inherited most of his deputies and troops from the fourth field army, many of them were not comfortable with his leadership style. After the meeting, chief of staff Zhou Deli felt it necessary to bring his department heads together to discuss details about how to deploy troops to the border region. For security reasons, Xu asked his chief of staff to discuss assignments and mission objectives with each department separately.

Deng did not seem confident in the Guangzhou Military Region's leadership, as the purge of the Gang of Four's supporters was then under way. Most of the senior officers had been the subordinates of Marshal Lin Biao, who was killed in a September 1971 plane crash in the Mongolian desert, allegedly after a failed coup against Mao. Lin was subsequently condemned as a traitor and labeled the chief designer of a series of political purges against many CCP and PLA leaders— including Deng— during the Cultural Revolution. In early December, one of Deng's longtime subordinates from the second field army, Liu Changyi, was appointed Xu's deputy to command the war, even though he already had five deputies. However, this appointment did not make Xu feel uneasy, since his personal connections with Liu extended back to their days in the Red Army. Nevertheless, the lack of personal connections between the rank and file and their commander would lead to complaints about Xu's leadership style when operations did not go as expected.

On 21 December, the Guangzhou Military Region set up a forward command post in an air force cave depot near Nanning, capital city of Guangxi Autonomous Region, since the attack would be launched from three directions from the Guangxi side. The post comprised seven functional groups: the headquarters (Group 1), the political department (Group 2), the logistics department (Group 3), the artillery corps (Group 4), the engineering corps (Group 5), the air force (Group 6), and the navy (Group 7). Staff officers were divided into three teams, with each team supporting the operations of one direction of attack. In his memoirs, General Zhou claimed that this command structure was effective for directing one army group, thus avoiding chaos during the campaign.

On 5 January 1979, the members of the Guangzhou forward command held their second war meeting in Nanning. In addition to those who attended the first meeting, attendees now included senior officers from the air force and the navy as well as local CCP leaders. After reviewing the preliminary operational plan, the participants recommended several revisions. The final plan divided the campaign into two stages: first, two armies would be employed to mount attacks on Cao Bang, and then one army would take on Lang Son. The plan also called for two divisions to thrust into the enemy's rear, to encircle Cao Bang from the west and south. The PLA General Staff endorsed the plan, recommended additional training, and instructed that units assigned to deep-penetration tasks carry as much ammunition as possible, even by reducing their other

provisions to no more than three days' worth. On 5 February, attendees at the third meeting proposed that a simultaneous attack should be launched on Dong Dang, the gateway to Lang Son, once the battle against Cao Bang began. Xu approved this final revision. Because the PLA possessed only limited knowledge about the SRV's military and local social and natural conditions, Zhou Deli later acknowledged that the plan was flawed from the outset. Otherwise, the subsequent military campaign would have secured more victories.

No personal recollections similar to Zhou Deli's are available to provide information about how the Kunming Military Region prepared for its actions. We now know that a change of leadership occurred on the Yunnan front, and the **plan for attacking Dien Bien Phu was scrapped**. On 7 January 1979, Yang Dezhi replaced Wang Bicheng, who was also from the third field army but had a bad relationship with the commander in Guangxi. However, four days after the Chinese forces invaded Vietnam from Yunnan, Yang was rushed to the hospital in Beijing with serious stomach bleeding. The campaign was thus originally planned by Wang Bicheng but executed by Yang's two deputies, supported by a team of staff officers from the PLA General Staff. Nevertheless, it is misleading to assert that Yang would have been a better choice for military leader than Xu.

From 8 to 10 January, the Kunming Military Region held planning meetings for the invasion. The 13th and 14th Armies would attack one regular Vietnamese division in the Lao Cai and Cam Duong area and then seek to engage another Vietnamese division in the Sa Pa area. The 11th Army would undertake an independent operation in the Phong Tho area. A forward command post was to be set up at Kaiyuan, a county town between Kunming and a border town, Hekou. The operations would involve a total of three armies, along with artillery units, tank units, engineering units, and independent units (150,000 troops). A western command was created to direct the 50th and 54th Armies as they conducted an outflanking operation in northwestern Vietnam. **After the Vietnamese military forces had seized most of Cambodia by mid-January, however, the CCP leadership aborted this campaign and redeployed these two armies (except for one division from the 50th) to the Guangxi front as reserves. No sources ever mention any coordination between the two military regions: they carried out their attacks independently.**

## Deployments and Preparations

In mid-December 1978, the armies of the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions began deploying to their positions along the border with Vietnam. Troops moved in by road, while their heavy equipment and supplies came by rail. Engineering units built three pontoon bridges on two main rivers in Guangdong. A total of more than 168,100 troops along with 7,087 tons of materials were transported from Guangdong to the front. Four armies from other military regions traveled to their destinations in Guangxi and Yunnan by rail. The 13th Army— a total of 35,000 troops, along with 873 pieces of artillery, 1,950 vehicles, and other equipment— traveled 1,700 kilometers from Chongqing, Sichuan Province, by ninety trains.

Although the PLA moved by night, such heavy rail and road traffic disrupted normal train schedules and piqued the curiosity of many passersby and travelers. **All vehicles used Guangxi license plates to conceal their identification, and troops maintained radio silence during their deployment. The rear bases operated their transmitters on their routine schedule to deceive Vietnamese** and other foreign intelligence collectors. By the end of the month, all armies of the Guangzhou Military Region, including the 43rd Army from Louyang, Henan Province, in the Wuhan Military Region, had taken up their positions near the border. Zhou Deli later recalled

that the troop movements were completed on schedule. Only one accident had occurred, leaving an artillery piece damaged and two soldiers injured.

According to Zhou, the air force and navy deployed their troops at the same time. Thirteen air force aviation regiments plus another six flying groups, along with their support units, antiaircraft artillery (AAA) and surface-to-air missile (SAM) units, were brought to the airfields in Guangxi, near the border. The air force command and control systems were inadequate in these two provinces. Though unified command is essential for effective military performance in military strategy, two air force forward command posts were created under the existing military region system: regional air force commander Wang Hai was placed in charge in Guangxi, and Hou Shujun, the Kunming Military Region Air Force command post director, took command in Yunnan.

To avoid escalating the conflict, the CCP leadership confined the use of air power to Chinese territory, ordering the air force units to prepare to provide support for PLA ground operations “if necessary.” However, the leadership gave no clear definition of what a “necessary” situation might be or when it might occur; instead, leaders mandated that any operations outside China’s airspace must be authorized by the CMC. Based on this principle, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) came out with a strategy that required its units to be prepared to provide both air defense and ground support at any time and to fly as many sorties as possible over the border airspace to deter the Vietnamese air force from taking action against China. Air force operational teams were sent to both military regions’ forward command posts, and target guiding groups were attached to ground force army and division headquarters.

The PLA Navy (PLAN) deployed a task group, designated the 217 formation, consisting of two missile frigates, one missile boat group, one torpedo boat group, and one subchaser group, to the Paracel Islands and ports in Guangxi to prepare to attack the Vietnamese navy in Tonkin Gulf. The naval aviation units on Hainan Island were assigned to keep watch on Soviet naval activities in the South China Sea. In case it had to fight against the Soviet cruisers, the PLAN adopted a defensive strategy of using the islands and shores to mask its missile boats, enabling them to launch surprise attacks from hidden positions.

Because no sea engagements actually occurred during the invasion, it is difficult to determine whether this strategy would have worked against the Soviet flotilla. However, the after-action report by the Political Department of the South Sea Fleet admitted that the seamanship was not professional at the time and that only 20 percent of the shells fired by the gun crews hit their targets in training. Another incident demonstrated that the ships worked badly in flotillas. In one exercise, a signalman reportedly sent the wrong signal, throwing the whole formation into confusion.

The regional military leadership was increasingly concerned about operational security, particularly leakage of information about troops’ movement toward the Guangxi border areas. General Xu was irritated to learn that his presence in the capital city of Guangxi, which was supposed to be secret, was broadcast by foreign journalists. He was further alarmed to learn that the rail line between China and Vietnam remained operational on a normal schedule, and cross-border trade continued between the two sides. In both situations, Vietnamese intelligence agents could obtain information about Chinese military movements in the border area. Xu asked the Guangxi government immediately to halt all border trade activities and close the border. He also requested that Beijing close rail operations between the two countries and expel Vietnamese

railroad staffs from the border town of Pingxiang. Beijing approved this request. On 26 December, the Guangxi-Vietnamese border was closed as the troops started arriving in their assembly areas nearby. While this series of initiatives undoubtedly solved his immediate problem, these actions themselves may well have alerted Vietnamese authorities to the imminence of military action from Guangxi.

PLA forces had not engaged in such large-scale military action for more than two decades. The Guangzhou Military Region forward command promulgated a detailed directive requesting the troops to pay close attention to five issues when they were preparing for the invasion. **First**, all troops needed to construct defensive works and camouflage vehicles and equipment against the possibility of a surprise Vietnamese attack from the air and ground. **Second**, commanders at all levels needed to familiarize themselves with the enemy and with geographic conditions in northern Vietnam along the China border and start gathering target information for their artillery. **Third**, all forces needed to increase their units to full strength and maintain weapons and equipment in good condition. **Fourth**, all units needed to practice good communications security, especially assignment orders given in person instead of by wire and wireless communications. **Finally**, all units needed to train new recruits in grenade throwing and rifle marksmanship and draw up plans to accomplish their combat missions.

This directive reflected several critical problems the PLA confronted on the eve of the invasion. Most seriously, its forces were far from ready for operation; indeed, they were not yet fully manned and equipped. For years, the PLA's ground forces had maintained a peacetime organizational structure: within each army, only one division—the Category A division (*jiazhongshi* or *quanzhuangshi*)— was kept at full strength, while the other two divisions— Category B division (*yizhongshi* or *jianbianshi*)— were below strength. Local authorities conducted two wartime drafts. Given the shortage of veteran soldiers, the second draft specially conscripted well-trained militiamen and ex-servicemen. In Guangdong Province alone, nearly 400,000 young men responded to the call. A total of 15,000 new recruits were drafted, and 1,512 demobilized soldiers were reactivated. The PLA also quickly promoted officers to fill leadership vacancies at all levels. Specialized personnel from other military regions were transferred to staff technical jobs in artillery, engineering, communications, armor, and anti-chemical-warfare anti-chemical-warfare units.

The 42nd Army promoted eleven officers to be commanding officers at division level and eighty-two officers at regiment level, while the 55th Army advanced fifteen individuals to be division leaders and seventy-six people to be regiment leaders. To fill leadership positions at the platoon level, the 42nd Army commissioned 1,045 enlisted men to be officers on the eve of the invasion. The 13th Army received 15,381 recruits, of which 11,874 were new conscripts. These statistics demonstrate the training problems faced by the PLA as it prepared for war.

### Training Troops before Fight

In his book, General Zhou Deli's use of an expression, "Sharpen one's sword only before going into battle— start to prepare for war only at the last moment" (*linzhen modao*), suggested that the PLA was in an embarrassing condition at the time. Indeed, in 1978, only 42 percent of military units undertook military training. The air force had some 800 pilots who conducted firing and bombing practice, but only percent hit their targets.

But the actual situation of the PLA was even more shocking. General Zhang Zhen, director of the General Logistics Department, inspecting war preparations on the Guangxi front in mid-



January 1979, found that the PLA forces had numerous problems that indicated a serious lack of combat preparation. According to his memoirs, the Company 2 of the 367th Regiment of the 41st Army had 117 men, of whom 57 were new recruits. In a little over two weeks of training, 44 soldiers had three firing practice sessions, 41 had two, and the rest had only one. **Thirty-three soldiers received training in offensive tactics as a squad, but no defensive tactical training was offered because no military officers knew how to do it.** General Zhang recommended that each division set up a field that could be used to train units to operate at the squad level as well at the company and battalion levels. Trainees would focus on infantry attacks along with artillery and tank units. The infantry units should especially be taught how to call fire support. The general promised that the GLD would allocate 10,000 yuan so that each division could construct such a training field.

Based on these recommendations, the troops began training themselves in accordance with their assigned missions. The 121st Division, which was designated to undertake a deep-penetration mission in Vietnam, focused on how to move through jungles and mountain trails against the enemy's ambushes and then how to attack the enemy positions on hilltops. **At least three soldiers from each company were trained to read maps.** The division organized three exercises under environmental conditions similar to those in northern Vietnam to teach the troops to maneuver with little rest and food. The 163rd Division, which was assigned to conduct front attacks on the enemy's strongholds, concentrated on training individual soldiers and squads in combat tactics as well as conducting live-ammunition exercises at the platoon, company, and battalion levels. The division carried out joint exercises with an infantry battalion plus artillery and tank units.

**Such desperate last-minute training efforts, though somewhat helpful, were woefully insufficient because there were too many new recruits and too many of them were peasant farmers.** Despite the goal of teaching military skills, most of the soldiers completed only one to two live practices on the shooting range and only one live grenade-throwing practice. Few units conducted serious tactical training exercises at the regiment or division level. Many officers reported that they were still uncertain about their troops' fighting ability when battle began. In short, the PLA invasion troops were poorly trained and inadequately prepared for a modern war against the SRV's forces. **The PLA's subsequent poor battlefield performance was ascribed to lack of training rather than the enemy's strength and twenty-five years of combat experience.**

**Repairs and maintenance of weapons and equipment** were other nagging problems for the PLA forces. Since 1975, Deng Xiaoping had called for improving the quality of the PLA's equipment and supplies, but no significant changes seem to have been made. Military professionals believe that sustainable logistical support guarantees military success. General Zhang Zhen recalled that his worst problem was the insufficient amount and poor quality of ammunition. Initial inspections showed that some artillery shells misfired, and a third of all grenades failed to explode. Cadets from the armament school were sent to assist the army depots in thoroughly checking their stock. The GLD also urgently ordered defense industries to increase production—in particular, of large-caliber artillery shells, rockets, and armor-piercing rounds.

**The supply of oil was another of the GLD's concerns.** Not only were both Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces far from China's petroleum industries in the northeast and northwest, but demand for oil would rise sharply if the Soviet Union retaliated against the attack on Vietnam. In addition, southern China had a shortage of oil storage facilities. Because outdoor oil facilities could be easily attacked, the GLD suggested using Guangxi's numerous karst caves to store fuel.

More than 428 kilometers of temporary pipelines were laid to supply fuel to four airfields in Yunnan. 61 Each army received assistance from a motor transport regiment to ensure that the troops received supplies, but as of mid-January, tons of supplies remained piled up at division headquarters, leading the GLD to rush in three additional motor transport regiments from the Nanjing and Fuzhou Military Regions. In its first attempt at conducting military operations with a significant amount of technical equipment, the PLA had to seek civilian technicians to assist in maintaining autos, tanks, and other machinery. . Nevertheless, the logistical problems continued to crop up, thwarting the PLA's operations once the invasion began.

## **Political Mobilization**

Despite the urgent need for training, the PLA continued the tradition that Mao had advocated forty years earlier— that is, the idea that the war could not be won without political mobilization. On 12 February 1979, the CMC issued an order emphasizing the importance of political mobilization in the PLA's military operations in Vietnam. Western analysts have criticized the PLA's decision to devote "so much time, energy, and attention" to this effort when Chinese soldiers badly needed training in military techniques. This criticism overlooked the long-standing significance of political mobilization, which had become institutionalized and thus culturally accepted in the reflexive framework of the PLA's war preparations. One notable characteristic throughout the PLA's history was that many of its soldiers were poor, illiterate peasants. The political indoctrination system had been instituted to mobilize them to fight against a strong enemy, proving its value repeatedly over the years.

By 1979, the PLA had changed only slightly; the members of the rank and file still came overwhelmingly from rural areas and were uneducated, inadequately equipped, and poorly trained. At the same time, the PLA's invasion of Vietnam did not correspond with a Chinese cultural tradition that supported the use of force only if it could be morally justified. Shortly after receiving Beijing's order, the local military leadership noticed that the **Chinese forces were ideologically ill prepared**. The immediate question was whether China should attack a small neighboring country such as Vietnam. According to Mo Wenhua, political commissar of the PLA's armored forces, **Chinese soldiers lacked an understanding of the significance of the war against Vietnam**. They were not only apprehensive about Soviet military intervention and their own possible inability to defeat Vietnam but also worried that the war would be detrimental to China's Four Modernizations and that other countries would use it to condemn China as an aggressor.

Despite China's quantitative dominance over Vietnam, Chinese soldiers were concerned that they did not have a technological advantage over Vietnam's Russian-made weapons and American equipment captured from the Saigon regime in 1975. China's air force pilots were particularly concerned that their J-6s could not match the Vietnamese MiG-21s, many flown by pilots who had already flown— and scored against— the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy. 68 In addition, Vietnam possessed a robust SAM threat, with skilled crews who were highly practiced in air defense operations. When the Chinese government ordered the invasion of Vietnam, Chinese troops appeared more knowledgeable about construction and agricultural production than about operating their weapons.

Soldiers' trust in the central leadership's decisions and obedience to orders was deemed fundamental to victory. On 12 December, the General Political Department (GPD) issued guidelines for political mobilization. Unlike the Western military, which depends on professional

ethics and training to ensure soldiers' compliance with their duties in war, the PLA opted for political indoctrination of troops, attempting to make them understand why the war must be fought and how it would matter to them. Under the influence of Confucian philosophy, the Chinese were accustomed to viewing themselves as a peace-loving people, not violent or expansionist, and only using force in self-defense. The concept of the just or righteous war was prevalent throughout Chinese society. For Chinese soldiers, this cultural tradition seemed to pose a barrier to conceiving a socialist neighboring country as a dangerous enemy that threatened national security. The GPD therefore urged all troops to study the CCP leadership's directives and speeches as well as the CMC's war and political orders, making them believe that the decision to attack Vietnam was correct.

According to the GPD's propaganda outlines, the war against Vietnam was just and necessary because the SRV's expansionist ambitions had led it to degenerate into the "Cuba of the East," the "hooligans of Asia," and the "running dogs of the Soviet Union." The two countries' shared political ideology did not prevent the PLA from launching self-defense actions against a neighboring small state that had violated China's national interests. Equally important, the directive pointed out that the SRV had already viewed the PRC as its primary enemy and called for "doing everything to defeat China."

From 10 December 1978 to 15 January 1979, the political apparatuses at all levels ran full steam ahead to politicize the soldiers' minds, using lectures, denunciation meetings, and visual exhibits to serve the purpose. These strategies included appeals to "just war" theory, punishing "ingratitude," defending the Four Modernizations, and confronting an emerging Vietnamese-Soviet quest for regional hegemony. The 43rd Army's political department attempted to convince troops that they were fighting a just war because Vietnam had invaded China and had fired the first shot; as a result, counterattacks were justified.

Another tactic involved reminding soldiers that China had made tremendous sacrifices to support Vietnam for many years, while Vietnam had returned kindness with ingratitude. Vietnam, the argument continued, thought that China was easy to bully and therefore, would further challenge China's territorial sovereignty. Therefore, Vietnam was a main threat to China's Four Modernizations and deserved to be punished.

Political officers also linked Vietnam's policy against China and hegemonic desires in Indochina to the Soviet social-imperialist global strategy. According to this line of argument, China's counterattack against Vietnam would frustrate Soviet hopes to encircle China. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and policy against China had been unpopular in the world, so China's punishment of Vietnam would receive global support.

The mobilization program emphasized arousing the troops' animosity toward the enemy. The PLA's peasant soldiers had always been encouraged to pour out their grievances against despotic landlords at denunciation meetings designed to stir up class consciousness so that they could be mobilized to believe that they were fighting for their own interests. In 1979, the political departments convened denunciation meetings, inviting the soldiers from the border guard units, the villagers from the border area, and the ethnic Chinese who had returned from Vietnam to use the facts of their personal experience to denounce the "hate-China, anti-China" crime committed by the Vietnamese revisionists.<sup>74</sup> In this way, the political propaganda not only sowed the seeds of hatred in soldiers' minds but also strengthened their convictions about carrying out their obligations as PLA soldiers to protect the people and their interests. To encourage troops to (if

necessary) willingly sacrifice their lives in combat, the 13th Army political department organized rallies at which officers and soldiers took an oath together by holding their guns in the air and shouting slogans. In powerful, emotional scenes that ignited patriotic fervor, all the soldiers pledged to take on dangerous and difficult tasks.

Given the fact that the PLA troops were not professional soldiers, political work served as a psychological means to prepare them to confront unpredictability and uncertainty and to fear neither hardship nor death on the battlefield. Ceremonies highlighting the heroes of the units' history encouraged troops to continue that glorious tradition. The 43rd Army demanded that all companies take an oath to carry on the tradition: "Learn from heroes, become a hero, and add new glories to the heroic war banners." Cadres and CCP members were urged to set themselves up as role models. Recognizing that its troops had not fought for a long time, the Guangzhou Military Region forward command conducted a survey identifying the officers who had participated in the wars against Japan and the Chinese Nationalists, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War as well as in the border conflicts with India. These veterans were asked to give lectures about their personal experience in combat. Having commanding officers show up on the front lines had been a PLA tradition, assuring troops that their superiors were sharing the risks and hardships. While sending his deputies to each army under his command, General Xu requested that the commanding officers at the army, division, and regiment levels send their deputies to lower-level units to assist with the command.

Political work also reportedly played a role in dispelling the skepticism of sailors and pilots about their chances against better-equipped opponents. The navy crews initially thought that they could easily defeat the Vietnamese navy. However, once they learned that they might have to confront Soviet missile cruisers, many of them became less confident in their own capabilities. Soviet ships were far bigger and had vastly more firepower and better communication technology. Chinese sailors grumbled that their small guns would only scratch the rust off the Soviet ships. In response, navy political officers used ideological indoctrination to stimulate sailors' patriotism. They also talked about the Soviet navy's weakness, noting that the ships had traveled far from their homeland and were dependent on a greatly stretched supply line. The Chinese crews became somewhat satisfied only after their commanders decided to use a surprise antishipping missile blitz against the Soviet cruisers.

The air force also convened meetings to deal with skepticism among its pilots by emphasizing Mao's teaching that "weapons are an important but not decisive factor in war, and man is the decisive factor." According to a report by the party committee of the 44th Air Division, the Korean War veterans were invited to tell their stories of flying against American F-86 Sabres to prove Mao's teaching right. Political officers also used the stories of the Pakistani air force, which had defeated India's Soviet-made MiG-21s with Chinese-made J-6s, to build up pilots' confidence against the Vietnamese air force. They particularly noted that the Chinese aircraft could outmaneuver the enemy's MiG-21s at medium altitudes if the pilots used correct tactics. Nonetheless, the air force leadership could not overlook the superior capability of the Vietnamese MiG-21s and did deploy all 73 of its J-7s (Chinese made MiG-21s) to Guangxi and Yunnan. Some J-6s were upgraded with air-to-air missiles, giving the Chinese air force firing capability than its Vietnamese counterpart.

While political work played the pivotal role in mobilizing soldiers' minds, the political system also helped the PLA deal with the problems its troops might face in fighting. One immediate concern was the leadership vacancies, especially at the platoon and company levels.

In mid-December 1978, the GPD instructed participating units to fill all leadership vacancies and develop a plan to avoid leadership interruptions during military operations. 83 The CMC transferred authority to promote divisional officers to the CCP committees of military regions and armed services levels. The political departments in military regions requested units at all levels to generate lists of candidates who could take leadership positions in the midst of the fighting. Each battalion and company received an extra deputy billet to ensure uninterrupted command operations. The PLA tradition trusted the CCP organizations to play a vital role in maintaining combat effectiveness. The party branch in the company urged party and youth league members to play a vanguard role in combat and to assume leadership roles when vacancies occurred. Political work also included preparing Chinese soldiers to distinguish Vietnamese civilians from military personnel and to use political and psychological strategies (winning the hearts and minds of civilians) to dismantle the enemy's forces. The GPD issued a number of combat disciplinary regulations regarding operations in Vietnam, emphasizing that Chinese troops must attempt to win support from the Vietnamese masses. During the preparation phase, Chinese troops studied local customs and lifestyle as well as the significance of working with the Vietnamese masses in the war zone. Just as PLA troops traditionally did while fighting inside China, those in Vietnam were expected to show concern for civilians and be kind to them. The GPD required every unit to organize a work team to use propaganda to improve local Vietnamese civilians' attitude toward China and the PLA and to damage the enemy's fighting will and morale. In addition, the GPD instructed troop leaders to teach soldiers the Vietnamese language so that they could shout propaganda slogans at enemy troops. They also trained soldiers to wage psychological warfare by distributing leaflets and broadcasting. Avoiding abuse of Vietnamese captives was another important battlefield rule. The GPD reiterated the PLA's POW policy, specifying that after being captured, Vietnamese militia fighters should be released immediately after receiving indoctrination. However, this rule would soon prove difficult to implement in a hostile country. The circumstances of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam differed vastly from the PLA's experience in the Chinese Civil War and, for that matter, from its experience in Korea from 1950 to 1953.86

## **Mobilizing Support from the Society**

The CCP traditionally mobilized Chinese society in support of war, although few studies have examined this practice. 87 Western scholars recognize that Chinese citizens held "varying opinions" about the 1979 conflict and that little "public enthusiasm" for the war existed in the provincial capital cities of Guangxi and Yunnan. 88 It was almost impossible for the PLA forces to operate outside the country without mobilizing public support for the war at home. Newly available Chinese records demonstrate the government's enormous effort to mobilize local populations to support the PLA's invasion. Since the PRC's founding, the PLA traditionally had been considered a positive role model for Chinese society, but its reputation had been severely damaged when the military abused its power during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the public's attitude toward the PLA had to be improved. Persuading the public to support the invasion required making people feel proud of the PLA's soldiers and patriotic toward China.

Despite the lack of widespread support for the invasion of Vietnam throughout China, CCP leaders in both Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces paid particular attention to the mobilization of support in their local communities. Public opinion in these two provinces was pessimistic about Beijing's war decision. The local communities had undergone much hardship in the Cultural Revolution and had made considerable sacrifices for the Vietnamese war effort. These two

provinces had not been on the priority list for investments from the central government. 90 Thus, these areas remained socially and economically backward. Nevertheless, citizens there hoped that economic reform—now the highest national priority—would bring peace, development, and better standards of living. The people and local governments in these two provinces seemed unenthusiastic about the Chinese attack on Vietnam and feared that the military action would conflict with the economic development agenda.

Given this mind-set, the two provincial governments resorted to their propaganda machines to persuade people to support Beijing's decision to go to war with Vietnam. The CCP propaganda departments of both provinces sent city, district, county, and subdistrict party organizations long lists of Vietnam's alleged crimes against China, requiring that the information be used to educate the local populace and arouse their patriotism in support of the war. Guangxi Autonomous Region held more than 530 mass meetings with a total attendance of 263,400. The CCP committee of Yunnan Province issued a mobilization order that stirred up the whole province to "do all for the front and do all for victory." Preparing for war and providing support for the front were the top priorities of party work and government work in both Yunnan and Guangxi. Both provinces created Aid-the-Front Committees to supervise and coordinate war preparations. 93 Similar offices were also set up in lower-level government organizations. 94 Twenty-one of Guangxi's cities and counties and fourteen in Yunnan were mobilized to support the front lines.

This approach not only demonstrated the PLA's commitment to continue Mao's "people's war" doctrine but also reflected the PLA's unequivocal weaknesses. PLA leaders realized that they lacked a modern logistics system to sustain the war effort, and their standard solution was the mobilization of popular backing. In November 1978, Zhang Zhen wrote that local support for food, lodging, and other supplies was critical in both total war and small-scale operations. He specifically noted that civilian support had accounted for almost 80 percent of the support for military operations during the 1969 border conflicts with Soviet forces, and civilian vessels had helped with the shipment of 65 percent of oil supplies during the 1974 sea battles against the South Vietnamese navy. Even in today's modern warfare, Zhang concluded, the armed forces would continue to depend on local governments to provide personnel and food, and military logistics would be determined by the strength of the national economy.

Since mid-December 1978, prefectural cities and counties in Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces had rushed to set up military reception centers (*junren jiedai zhan*) along rail lines and highways leading to the border so that troops could rest and receive meals and hot water. Each county government was responsible for housing troops at designated assembly areas near the border. Because border counties were small and economically backward, the tasks of frontline support often stretched beyond their capacities. Within a few weeks, more than 100,000 military and militia soldiers swarmed into Hekou County, opposite the Vietnamese city of Lao Cai, which had a population of 50,000 in 1978. Local authorities had to vacate offices, warehouses, and their own living quarters to accommodate the troops. Villagers and township dwellers were encouraged to "volunteer" their houses for military usage. Some local authorities mobilized office workers, students, and teachers to construct sheds with bamboo poles and cogon grass as military lodging facilities.

At the time, the PLA still had a hodgepodge supply system that required every unit to be self-sufficient in "retail logistics." The sudden surge in demand for food and other supplies presented a considerable challenge to local economic and commercial service authorities, which had to

manage supplies for local residents as well as troops. Local vendors were required to provide more livestock to the troops, while purchasing agents were sent to other provinces to guarantee every soldier a half pound of pork per day. Following an emergency request from the military, food producers in both Guangxi and Yunnan rushed to furnish troops with 1.25 million kilos of crackers prior to the invasion.

Since 1976, Yunnan had suffered from decreasing grain production. Food supply was a particularly acute problem. The troop assembly areas were situated in the poorest remote regions where local residents could not even produce enough food for themselves. The provincial government urgently appealed to Beijing for permission to use food reserves to meet the abrupt increase in demand and cut 40 percent of food supplies to urban dwellers to guarantee adequate supplies for the front. To overcome the problem of cooking rice during military operations, the local government imported a food production line for instant rice. Records from Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces show that the mobilization was carried out throughout the whole province and involved almost every government bureaucracy and every sector of society. A total of about half a million civilians served in either combat operations or aid-the-front work. The most notable undertaking was the organization of hundreds and thousands of militias to provide direct support for the PLA's operations beyond the border.

Mobilization of the militia forces to engage in combat and provide support for the front was a tradition of the communist-led armed forces stemming from Mao's "people's war" doctrine. The Chinese military's dependence on the aid-the-front militia units also revealed an awkward situation for the PLA, which was incapable of sustaining any expeditionary operations on its own. General Zhou Deli recalled that the PLA invasion forces did not feel safe conducting operations in Vietnam without a secure rear, and the militias and the local populace played a critical role in rear-echelon security. Both provinces had been the first line of national defense during the Cold War. Transportation infrastructure was inadequate for the large-scale troop movements needed for the invasion. In October 1978, Yunnan Province mobilized more than 100,000 militiamen from the capital city and seven prefectures to build two highways leading to the border. They completed the project in three months and thereby ensured the deployment of troops to the border areas on schedule.

In early January 1979, the militia forces received full mobilization. The well-organized and better-trained militia units from other parts of the two provinces were deployed to the border areas to provide direct support for military operations. Qujing Prefecture, located in northeastern Yunnan, deployed between 500 and 600 young militiamen from each county to serve in the war. Men aged between eighteen and fifty-five in all border counties were conscripted into the militia. According to the Yunnan provincial government's final report dated 6 September 1979, more than 87,000 militiamen (630 companies) plus 5,000 civilian horses and mules were called to serve, primarily as stretcher bearers, security guards, and porters. More than 21,000 militiamen operated side by side with the regular units in combat action. The employment of nonuniformed militia soldiers in a hostile country along with the PLA units later created confusion during encounters with Vietnamese defenders, who were also dressed in civilian clothes on the battlefield. On a few occasions, PLA soldiers found themselves with no choice but to kill anyone not in a uniform, even some of those men might be Chinese comrades.

General Zhou also asserts that more than 215,000 residents of Guangxi Province served in the war, with 60,000 were involved in military actions as stretcher bearers, security guards, and porters and more than 26,000 engaged in combat activities. The PLA forces transferred several

thousand automatic assault rifles and various types of heavy weaponry to the local militia units. By the time the invasion commenced, the militia forces in border counties were well equipped with machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, mortars, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and recoilless guns. The local militias bore responsibility primarily for constructing defense works, transporting ammunition and supplies to the front, and looking after the wounded. The militias' air defense units also protected border county towns and key industrial facilities such as hydroelectric stations and reservoirs.

Mao's "people's war" strategy was called into question since such a strategy of total war had not applied to the limited local conflicts in which China had engaged since Korea. King C. Chen in particular points out that China failed to engage in a people's war against Vietnam in 1979 because the necessary environment, which included "a strong sense of nationalism and massive people's participation," never existed. Mobilization of society to support the war was the pivotal Chinese strategic tradition, and the 1979 war proved that the PLA still operated within the people's war ideological framework.

## **Conclusion**

There is no way to overstate the level of intensity involved in PLA planning and preparation for military operations against Vietnam. This process reflected the PLA's strategic and institutional cultures, which were heavily influenced by Mao's military theory. The central military principles worked out by Mao and the operational style the PLA had developed still essentially guided its approach to the 1979 military campaign. The war plan created by the regional commands demonstrated an operational preference for seizing and maintaining the initiative by deploying superior force coupled with surprise attacks. Despite the urgent need for training, the PLA continued its established traditions, using political indoctrination as a primary means of boosting morale and improving combat effectiveness. Political indoctrination activities probably made no sense to Western military professionals. However, from a Chinese perspective, such political work played a crucial role in persuading ordinary, undereducated Chinese soldiers that China should launch military attacks against Vietnam, long considered a brotherly, even comradely, country. The mobilization of society to provide support for the war reflected the essence of China's "people's war." The PLA seemed unable to perform any large-scale military operations without mobilizing local governments and civilians for support. (Indeed, even now, more than three decades later, this critical characteristic continues to characterize China's approach to warfare and will likely do so in the future.) Despite detailed planning by Chinese military staffs, many events on the battlefield would remain unanticipated, a failure that would rapidly prove how deadly and costly an invasion of Vietnam could be.