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Why did the Vietnam War not decrease the tension of the Sino-Soviet Dispute? *

Umut Bekcan **

Introduction

The Vietnam War (Second Indochina War) was a national liberation struggle including two revolutionary wars. One of them lasted from December 1946 to July 1954 and resulted in the defeat of the French by the Viet Minh (League for the Independence of Vietnam). In the same year, it was agreed on the division of Vietnam from the 17th parallel line in Geneva conference held by the call of the Soviet Union (USSR), the United States of America (USA), England, and France. In the north, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and in the south pro-Western government under the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem were established. The second revolutionary war began with South Vietnam's asking for support from the USA because of the increasing revolutionary activities in the south. In 1962, the number of the U.S. forces under the name of the consultant reached 14.000. 250.000 South Vietnamese armed forces were supported by 300.000 regional and village militias. The USA in conjunction with the allies dispatched 1.200.000 soldiers to the region to defeat the Viet Cong (National Liberation Front) in the long-running war. In addition to more than half a million U.S. troops, soldiers came from South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand to block the unification of Vietnam under a socialist republic (Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi, 1988). In this context, The Vietnam War was an anti-imperialist independence war of socialist North Vietnam against the southern pro-Western regime and the USA from the mid-1960s. The USSR and the People's Republic of China (PRC/China) however, fought over Vietnam during the war so to say.

The main problem of the study is that the Vietnam War was not a factor of easing the tension between the two countries. Conversely, it increased the tension and created a new dispute. In this context, in this study, the reasons of this problem related to bilateral relations and the Vietnam issue will be examined. The study will be discussed in the traditional approach of International Relations by the notion that the subject of history is unique.

In this point, first of all, it is necessary to state the Sino-Soviet dispute. With the 1949 Chinese Revolution, the close relationship based on socialism fraternity began to develop between the two countries. The USSR gave political, economic, and military support to the PRC and became a model in all matters. But close relations gradually began to deteriorate from the second half of the 1950s and in the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1961), the Sino-Soviet split was officially cemented. The main reasons that caused the deterioration of the relations were as follows: The PRC was uncomfortable with the de-Stalinization process and the principles of peaceful coexistence and peaceful transition to socialism formalised in the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The PRC thought that these peaceful principles were injuring the revolution and historical class struggle of the workers of all countries. As a society of peasants, it wanted to carry out different development program from the USSR's program (dictatorship of the proletariat) based on industrialisation. It was the Great Leap Forward program (1958-60) based on the people's commune and failed. Apart from this, China thought that the USSR did not give sufficient support during the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis and in the same period, perceived the USSR's joint navy proposal as a hegemonic movement. In the following year, the USSR took

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a neutral position in the Sino-Indian border conflict and also did not want to provide nuclear weapons technology. The recall of the Soviet experts who served in China in 1960 was added to these developments. This overall was a great disappointment for China (Li, 2007; Gittings, 1968). The PRC was an unrecognised state in international politics, it was not included in the United Nations (UN) system, and was in favour of taking a more aggressive stance against the West. As one of the two superpowers of the system, the USSR; however, worried the world might be dragged into a nuclear war and based its policy on the principle of peaceful coexistence. Both countries regarded themselves as the real representative of Marxist-Leninist theory. The main problem was that China, following the Soviet path after 1949, wanted to walk its own path citing its own country-specific conditions and took an independent stand from the USSR from then on. Accordingly, the Chinese perspective to domestic, foreign and international politics naturally differed from the Soviets.

In normal circumstances, any two socialist countries' interests are supposed to be compatible in supporting a socialist country which struggles against an imperialist country. In this case, even if the split between the two socialist countries was certain, in view of the growing U.S. presence in Vietnam from the beginning of the 1960s and their involvement in the war in 1965, the USSR and the PRC could be expected to put aside their disagreements and move together against the capitalist bloc's leader. But they did not do so. It is possible to examine the reasons for this in two titles: the reasons related to bilateral relations and the reasons related to Vietnam. Naturally, the reasons related to the Vietnam issue are not independent from the influence of the bilateral relations.

The Reasons Related to the Bilateral Relations: The Newly Added Issues to the Dispute

In order to block the unification of Vietnam, the USA, and the South Vietnam caused a war against the Viet Cong and North Vietnam between 1965 and 1973. Three main issues that occupied the main agenda of the Sino-Soviet relations were the greatest obstacles to provide joint support to the North Vietnam. The first was the border dispute between the two countries, the second was the Cultural Revolution in China, and the third was the normalisation of Sino-U.S. relations. First of all, after the split was cemented in 1961, new emerging problems had kept the tension at a high level. For example, for China, ballistic missile deployment of the USSR in Cuba was adventurism but removing them by the agreement with the USA was submissiveness. According to the USSR, China wanted an outbreak of war so that the peaceful coexistence policy would fall to the ground (Lunev, 2009; Ivanov, 1979). In October and November 1962, in view of the Sino-Indian border conflict, the USSR took a neutral position like in 1959 and then signed the military aid agreement with India. This event was criticised obviously with this expression in *Jenmin Jibao* (the newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party) on February 27, 1963:

“At the time when Nehru government carried out a provocative attack on the socialist fraternal country, it was very interesting that the people who called themselves as Marxist-Leninist violated the principles of proletarian internationalism and took a neutral position” (Çem Vızvanı Raznoglasiya?, 1963).

The USSR; however, did not want to get the enmity of one of the leaders of the Non-Alignment Movement, India. In addition, China did not sign the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty which was signed by the USSR and USA on August 5, 1963. In accordance with the treaty, nuclear weapons tests were banned in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water. China claimed that this treaty was an obstacle to develop its nuclear and military capacity but worked to the advantage of the superpowers (Gittings, 1968). China considered having nuclear weapons necessary for its national security.

These new disagreements formed the basis of the above mentioned three fundamental issues. In other words, new disagreements triggered the new issues. For example, the borderline previously had not been seen as a problem. The first sign that the border would pose a problem was given in an article in *Jenmin Jibao* on March 8, 1963. In the article, the treaty of Aigun (1858) and the Convention of Peking (1860) were mentioned among the treaties which were signed between China and imperialist states causing the loss of territory of China (O Zayavlenii Kommunisticheskoy Partii SŞA, 1963). Moreover, in July 1964, in a meeting with the Japanese socialist delegation Mao said that one hundred years ago the Russian Empire gained the east of Baikal Lake, Khabarovsk, Vladivostok and Kamchatka with unequal treaties. Similarly after World War II, the USSR gained some regions both in Eastern Europe and Eastern Asia. He also added that the returning of Kuril Islands to Japan, would not be a problem for China (Goncharov & Danhuey, 2004). The Chinese side claimed that unequal treaties were imposed by Russia's diplomatic blackmail, military pressure, and aggression and wanted the USSR to recognise the inequality of the treaties. The Soviet side however, thought that the treaties were not unequal. For example, the negotiations of the Convention of Peking were carried out by Manchu dynasty in Beijing and there was no military threat. Conversely, Russian ambassador Nikolai Ignatiev mediated between China and British-French military forces and the international political environment had made Russia and China closer to each other (Kireev, 2006).

On January 26, 1967 the Embassy of the Soviet Union were blockaded by Chinese youth who wanted back their territory under the rule of the USSR. During the 18 days of the blockade, the families of the Soviet embassy officials had to leave China (Bogaturov, 2009). The border dispute reached its peak when armed conflict happened between two sides on the Damansky/Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri River on March 1-2, 1969. The second conflict took place again on the same island and around. Then on July 20, on Kirkinsky Island located three km north of the Damansky and on August 13, around the Lake Zhalanashkol located in the border between Kazakhstan Soviet Socialist Republic and Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (Ryabushkin, 2007; Shirokorad, 2004).

Another newly added issue to the dispute was the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China on May 1966. The revolution with the slogan 'bomb the headquarters' meant Mao was carrying the fight with bureaucracy to the streets and taking the masses back. He wanted to secure the worker-peasant alliance and challenged bureaucracy and the party dominating over people. The Chinese Defence Minister Lin Biao said that they had to achieve this revolution in order to prevent capitalist restoration, domination of the imperialists, and reactionary bourgeoisie on the people (Biao, 1966). During this period, unfavourable weather had grown too much for the Soviets in China. Like Biao, Mao also said that the revolution had a purpose of preventing revisionism. In case of a possible Soviet attack, he asked from the peasants to stock their products and from the cityfolks to dig underground bunkers as a precaution (Mei, 1985). According to him, those who opposed the Cultural Revolution were the American imperialists, Soviet and Japanese revisionists and reactionaries (Zedung, 2000). The Cultural Revolution not only aimed at splitting off China from the world capitalist system and moving it to different socialism from the Soviet model but also emphasised the principle of self-sufficiency. It also focused on the matter of creating a new culture and required the elimination of institutional factors which were obstacles to form a more equitable and just society (Dirlik, 2006).

The Soviet Union however, was describing the cultural revolution as the most essential part of the socialist revolution but thought that happenings in China could not be considered as a cultural revolution. The Cultural Revolution was a long process of grasping and embracing the socialist ideology and culture by masses of people. New and higher level culture and socialist consciousness would be formed in this complicated process. Socialist

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culture could only be formed on the basis of embracing of the spritual heritage of the past and a critical examination of all the values of world culture and the defeat of the reactionary ideology of the exploiting classes and the blind faith of the past. The Cultural Revolution in China (destruction of people's national feelings, denial of the experience of the world culture, the destruction of cultural monuments, hostile reception to the intelligentsia, terror in the revolutionary process) was in contradiction with the essence of a socialist culture in terms of its goals and tools (Ashukin et. al., 1979). The Soviet government had the idea that China was hiding the mistakes and failures realised in economy, domestic and foreign policy, and directing people's attention to the foreign relations rather than domestic issues. Mao adopted an anti-Soviet policy in order to justify his military and bureaucratic dictatorship. The efforts of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European states in construction of socialism and raising the living standards of the workers were disparaged with the terms of 'bourgeois,' 'revisionist,' and this was deemed as a 'return to capitalism.' To remove the increasing opposition against Mao's government and silence Chinese communists who supported the Soviet Leninist line, party organisations were devastated and militants were punished and thrown out of the party. According to the Soviet Union, all of them were made under the name of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution with the help of the army and the law-enforcement officers (Madra, 1971).

At the time of the Vietnam War, the third issue in the Sino-Soviet dispute, the normalisation of Sino-U.S. relations was realised. The purpose and content of the normalisation was against the Soviet Union (for China) and the Sino-Soviet relations (for the USA). The USA wanted to take advantage of the Sino-Soviet dispute. On March 21, 1966 an article signed by 198 researchers and scientists was published in the New York Times. Normalisation of the USA's China policy, China's unconditional acceptance of the UN membership, removal of trade embargo and obstacles to communication and information exchange were the main subjects mentioned in the article. China did not join the 23rd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at that time (29 March-8 April 1966). It was on the Cultural Revolution eve. The Chinese government weakened by the Cultural Revolution radicalism was looking to the world more pragmatic and perceived the Soviet threat more realistic than the U.S. threat. Although it took a stand away from Moscow, China did not rush to negotiate with the USA. China's UN membership was on the agenda in the period of Lyndon Johnson's presidency. The next president Richard Nixon's period the 'relations with China' issue gained great momentum, because Nixon was a politician with the idea that China should be included in the international system. He wrote the article titled 'Asia after Vietnam' in a Foreign Affairs journal and argued pulling China back into the world community (Shirokov, 2009).

The main reason for China's demand to be the part of the international community was not the desire of good relations with the USA. It was the perception of threat from the Soviet Union (Kissinger, 1994). In August 1968 the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in an effort to stop liberalisation reforms. A few months later Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev declared the theory of 'limited sovereignty' which was called the Brezhnev doctrine in the West. China reacted seriously to this intervention. The Chinese News Agency described it as brutal. Brezhnev and Kosygin's real thoughts on internationalism, friendship, and cooperation had emerged (Jones, 1990). Beijing claimed that the theory of limited sovereignty was the fascist, imperialist ideological residue of the Russian Empire. On April 1, 1969, in the Ninth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Defence Minister Lin Biao said that:

"What does all this stuff mean? It means that your sovereignty is limited, while his is unlimited. You won't obey him? He will exercise international dictatorship over you, over the people of the countries, in order to form the socialist community ruled by the new tsars, that is colonies of social-imperialism, just like the New Order of Europe of Hitler, the Greater East

Asia Co-prosperity Sphere of Japanese militarism and the Free World Community of the United States” (Biao, 1969).

According to Mao, because of the Cultural Revolution and the border issue, the Soviet Union could intervene with China. This concern was peaked by the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia and border clashes which occurred in 1969 were added to this. These two developments played an important and indisputable role in Mao’s approach to Washington. It was a pragmatic attitude (Zagoria, 1974). In his speech, in the congress, Biao described the USA and the USSR as posing equal danger to China; this made the situation in favour of the USA. They started to implement the strategy of transforming the bipolar world into a strategic triangle, by announcing a series of unilateral initiatives to indicate the change in attitude. The ban for Americans travelling to China was abolished. Chinese let Americans bring \$100 worth of Chinese-made goods into the USA (Kissinger, 1994). The representatives of the parties met on January 20 and February 20, 1970. The latter marked a major turning point, as the PRC issued an invitation for the USA to dispatch an envoy to Beijing for talks (Foreign Relations 1969-1976, 2015). The clearest indicator of the softening of the Sino-US relations was the PRC’s becoming a member of the UN and Security Council and removal of the membership of Taiwan. The US President Richard Nixon paid a visit to China. The two countries issued a joint communique in Shanghai on February 28, 1972. Both sides stated that the normalisation of the bilateral relations between China and the USA was consistent with the interest of all nations. They wished to reduce the danger of international military conflict. They agreed not to seek hegemony in the Pacific region and to oppose efforts by any other country to establish such hegemony. In other words, in the case of a possible threat from the USSR, the USA would support China and China would be frosty and cautious towards the USSR (30 Years of Sino-US Relations (2), 2015; Bogaturov, 2009; Kissinger, 1994). Thus, anti-American imperialism was no longer a factor that held the USSR and China together, because the normalisation of Sino-US relations had an anti-Soviet basis for China. The Sino-Soviet relations in the early 1970s were in a worse situation than the situation in the early 1960s.

The Reasons Related to Vietnam: “The Vietnam War between the USSR and the PRC”

In the second half of the 1950s, the USSR was having excessive tension with the West. The Syrian Crisis of 1957, the Berlin Crisis which began in 1958 with the USSR’s demand from the USA and its allies to leave Berlin and resulted in the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the U2 Incident (1960) were the events that carried risk of a nuclear war between the two blocs. In 1962, in Cuba, two superpowers came very close to the brink of war. The USSR did not want to harden the relations with the USA again and avoided a new crisis. In September 1960, the 3rd Congress of the Workers’ Party of Vietnam, the way of military struggle was decided to unite the country. Moscow was in favour of creating a neutral zone consisting of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and gathered an international conference for this. In April 1962, the Soviet, North Vietnamese, and Western diplomats discussed this matter. The USA opposed this idea. North Vietnam and the PRC considered this initiative as a propaganda method by claiming that it did not provide the goal of a real deal (Tikhonov, 2008).

The Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh wanted to get the support of both the USSR and the PRC. Although the USSR gave economic support in agriculture and industry fields, it was seeking a peaceful resolution for Vietnam. On the other hand, in May 1963, in Hanoi, the president of the PRC Liu Shaoqi argued that the struggle of Marxist-Leninists against the revisionist (the USSR) did not disturb the people all over the world who fought for the

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revolution. He gave Vietnam the message of if the war broke out, we would support you. This also naturally pushed Vietnam towards the PRC (Tikhonov, 2008).

The Chinese Communist Party was already in collaboration with the Vietnamese communists in the 1946-1954 colonial war and was the chief political and economic partner of them in the early 1960s. Beijing actively supported North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front which had taken great support from the villagers to overthrow the pro-Western regime. In December 1963, in the 9th General Plenum of the Workers' Party of Vietnam, party leaders claimed that Soviet foreign policy was defensive and revisionist. In the same year, North Vietnam punished ten Soviet sympathiser soldiers accused of revisionism. The Soviet Union; however, reduced economic aid by 30% and wanted the debts to be paid arising from the aid. This gave a reason to the PRC to accuse the USSR of not preferring to support the national liberation movement (Ivanov, 2010). The Former Soviet Ambassador in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1964-1974), Ilya Sherbakov, summed up the Soviet Union's view of Vietnam in recent years of Khrushchev:

“During the Vietnam node, the interests of the USSR, the USA and China were entangled. The atmosphere was very tense. We did not want to get involved. The conflict had a risk of reaching a worldwide size. Khrushchev wanted to be cautious but his ruling days were also counted” (Ivanov, 2010:69).

After Khrushchev, the Soviet Union's Vietnam policy was amended. In December 1964, the Permanent Mission of National Liberation Front was opened in Moscow. The USA's invasion of South Vietnam strengthened policy change and made it noticeable. In the same month, Prime Minister Kosygin and party-government representatives visited Hanoi. A great amount of economic assistance began to be provided in March. With the involvement of the USA, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong needed effective weapons. The Soviet Union provided military-economic aid worth \$1 billion annually. In August 1965, Chinese leaders rejected the proposal to establish a centre for Soviet specialists for Vietnam in the Yunnan province. In the most patient period of the Cultural Revolution, the Soviet aid to Vietnam were frequently cut off in China. Even the Soviet ship, *Svirsk*, dispatched to Vietnam was confiscated in China's port of Dalian on August 8, 1967. The captain of the ship was arrested. The crisis was overcome a few days later by the attempt of Kosygin. The Soviet Union's military economic aid to Hanoi outpaced the aid of the PRC which was in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and this strengthened the Soviet's position in Indochina. The PRC continued to be an ally and military and economic supporter of Vietnam but it was annoyed by the improvement of the USSR-Vietnam relations. According to Valeriy Ivanov even quoted from Vietnamese sources, yet in August 1964, Deng Xiaoping had gone to Hanoi with the secret assignment of the Chinese Communist Party and had offered financial aid to North Vietnam with the amount of 1 billion yuan to reject Soviet aid (Ivanov, 2010).

Moscow called all socialists for the defense of the Vietnam against American imperialism. Even so, the PRC was sure that the Soviet Union appeared to be supporting Vietnam but made it surrender. It described the Soviet's assistance as constrained and argued that Vietnam was duped by the Kremlin. This was because the Soviet Union did not aim for a proletarian revolution. It was defending the principle of peaceful coexistence. Generally, the Soviet Union did not presume the USA would completely be defeated. Therefore, to avoid the danger of a thermonuclear world war, the war should be ended with an appropriate compromise. Conversely the PRC had the idea that the war in Vietnam should be continued until the final defeat of the USA. There was no other resolution. After the USA's involvement, North Vietnam preferred to remain neutral in the Sino-Soviet split and take the advantage of this split and get the support from both sides (Madra, 1971; Rosser, 1969; Ivanov, 2010; Tikhonov, 2008). When the USSR's involvement in Vietnam increased, the Chinese inflamed their campaign against them. The Chinese had the fear of a 'Soviet plot' to

consolidate Soviet effect and claim dominance in South East Asia. As China was emerging as a rival regional power, interests were bound to clash. The defamation campaigns between the USSR and the PRC promoted a further deterioration of the relation. The strengthened ties between Vietnam and the Soviets paved the way of substantial aid by causing tensions on the relation between the PRC and North Vietnam (Kokshoorn, 2013).

As it was declared in the 23rd Congress, the Soviet Union, along with the other socialist countries would support national liberation movements and new established countries in convenient international conditions. Without leaving the principle of peaceful coexistence, it would show a determined resistance against the aggressive powers of the imperialism and would protect humanity from a new world war. Thus, the support towards North Vietnam became official (XXIII Syezd Kommunisticheskoy Partii Sovetskogo Soyuz, 1966).

In January 1966, the Politburo member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Alexander Shelepin, visited Hanoi and made an aid agreement between the two countries. Also in the same month, the USSR and Mongolia signed a friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance treaty during Brezhnev's visit to Ulaanbaatar. These developments made the PRC worried. In the end of 1967, the number of the Soviet troops on the border with Mongolia and the PRC increased from 250.000 to 350.000 (Lunev, 2009). In addition, after the conflict between India and Pakistan in 1965, by the initiative of the Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin, negotiations were held between the two countries in Tashkent. Thereby the USSR increased its prestige in the region. In July 1966, the Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko visited Tokyo and signed a trade agreement with Japan. The PRC saw these visits and Soviet's interest to Vietnam against itself. It was considered to be a holy alliance between the USSR, the USA, and Japan. According to the Chinese government, the Soviet Union in cooperation with the USA were containing the PRC together with the surrounding countries of the PRC (Sander, 1966). Besides, in May, the Cultural Revolution including the elimination of the Soviet sympathisers and increasing the Soviet hostility to its peak level began. From this moment on, it could not be expected that the Vietnam War would decrease the tension of the Sino-Soviet dispute. Then the border issue grew to have an armed conflict between the two countries. The PRC accused the USSR of being an ally with the USA and to maintain its national security, started the process of normalisation of the relations with the USA.

North Vietnam won the war by the support of the two hostile socialist countries. The Vietnams united in 1975 but the Vietnam experience contributed to the deepening of the Sino-Soviet dispute.

Conclusion

The Vietnam War did not decrease the tension of the Sino-Soviet dispute. These two socialist countries did not put aside their disagreements and moved together against the USA. The main reason for not moving in this way was the addition of new issues to the existing disputes between the two countries after 1961. That is to say while the presence of the USA in Vietnam was increasing, the tension in Sino-Soviet relations had continued to escalate. When the USA became involved in the war, as well as the border issue, the PRC began to fight against the USSR or the influence of the USSR in its country so to speak. Moreover, the reason for the normalisation process of the Sino-US relations for the PRC was its threat perception from the USSR. The bilateral relations were in totally an opposite situation from the friendly and fraternal relations established in the first half of the 1950s. As if they were two neighbouring countries having opposite political regimes and being the members of the

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hostile military blocs. Also such an atmosphere, naturally, had brought not cooperation for Vietnam but competition through Vietnam. The Vietnam War had become a new disputed matter.

As a matter of fact, when the two socialist countries split up on the principles and method of Marxism-Leninism, they did not come back together in the same point anymore and began to think and move differently in almost every respect. The Vietnam issue was only one of them.

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