
ASIA

The Chinese attempt to bleed Vietnam

by Daniel Sneider

Fighting escalated between Vietnamese and Chinese armed forces along their common border during the third week in April, with reports of heavy shelling and clashes between units of ground troops. The battles are the most serious since border skirmishes two years ago, and the Peking regime has issued threats hinting at a repetition of their 1979 invasion of Vietnam.

The Chinese are attempting to put military pressure on Vietnamese and Kampuchean forces who have been carrying out a dry season offensive against the Chinese-armed and backed rebels of the genocidal Khmer Rouge operating on the Thai-Kampuchea border. The attacks have targeted both the Khmer Rouge and their allies in the "coalition," the forces of ex-Prince Sihanouk and former Premier Son Sann.

While Vietnamese diplomatic sources told this news service that they do not expect a repetition of the large-scale 1979 Chinese invasion at this time, they are remaining vigilant. The Peking regime, through various mouthpieces, has made every effort to keep the threat of invasion alive.

In its public statements, Peking has tried to paint Vietnam as the instigator of the border battles—a tactic the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry described as "the thief crying 'stop thief.'" Yet the Chinese have all but admitted that they are in fact responding to events on the Thai-Kampuchea border; the Chinese Communist Party newspaper Peoples' Daily complained: "The Vietnamese authorities have increased provocations on the Sino-Vietnamese border in an attempt to tie up China and prevent it from supporting the just struggle of the people of Kampuchea and Thailand."

The Chinese attacks on Vietnam are a response to the increasing collapse, both militarily and diplomatically, of their Kampuchean rebel clients. The dry season offensive of the Heng Samrin government and the Vietnamese against the bases of the Pol Pot forces and their allies have undercut the pretensions that these rebels pose a threat to the Phnom Penh government. A propaganda campaign waged through the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* has indicted the Kampuchians and Vietnamese for "atrocities" against civilians, but independent observers have not confirmed their charges.

According to recent reports, these rebels have recently received new shipments of Chinese arms, and the Thai government has assisted them with sanctuary and artillery cover for their retreating forces.

Indochinese foreign ministers meet

Both Peking and the Thais, as well as the U.S. State Department, fear the increasing international disenchantment with continuing diplomatic support for the charade of the "coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea," the alliance of Pol Pot, Sihanouk, and Son Sann, which still holds the Kampuchean seat at the United Nations. At the recent New Delhi Non-Aligned summit, a meeting of 101 developing nations, it was decided to deny this group the legitimacy of representing Kampuchea despite a heavy Chinese-backed lobbying effort by Singapore and other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to bring Sihanouk to the conference.

The importance of the Non-Aligned decision was underlined in mid-April at a meeting of the foreign ministers of the three Indochinese countries—Laos, Vietnam, and Kampuchea—held in Phnom Penh. The communique issued following the meeting praised the resolution on Kampuchea adopted by the Non-Aligned summit and called for talks to take place between ASEAN and the Indochinese countries based on the Non-Aligned formulations.

The foreign ministers' statement referred to a proposal made by Malaysian Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie following a meeting he held in New Delhi with Vietnamese foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach. Shafie suggested that talks be held between ASEAN and the Indochinese countries. Shafie had positively received a Vietnamese concession that such talks could be take place without the direct presence of the Heng Samrin government. However, the Shafie initiative was tabled at a recent ASEAN foreign ministers meeting due to the opposition of some ASEAN states, particularly Thailand.

An editorial on March 26 in the *Indonesia Times*, decried the ASEAN decision to freeze the diplomatic opening. "ASEAN has let a golden opportunity pass, and many will regret it," the Indonesian daily said. "To let the Kampuchea question drag on will harm both ASEAN states and the Indochinese states . . . will prevent useful cooperation between the two sides and the emergence of peace and security in the Southeast Asia region." The daily concluded with a warning that "it will also augment the influence of the big powers in this region," a reference to not only the United States and the Soviets but also to fears of the Chinese role.

The foreign ministers also announced that there will be a partial withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea, the second such withdrawal which the Indochinese countries, at a summit meeting in February, had announced would occur annually. The withdrawal reflects the improved security situation inside Kampuchea, including the increased capacity of the armed forces of the Heng Samrin government.