

“The Specter of an Expansionist China”: Kennedy Administration Assessments of Chinese Intentions in Vietnam*

In his 1995 memoir, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reflected on his earlier assumptions about Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia: “[W]e—certainly I—badly misread China’s objectives and mistook its bellicose rhetoric to imply a drive for regional hegemony.” According to McNamara, his views reflected the prevailing orthodoxy. “Such ill-founded judgments,” he noted, “were accepted without debate by the Kennedy administration, as they had been by its Democratic and Republican predecessors. We failed to analyze our assumptions critically, then or later. The foundations of our decision making were gravely flawed.”¹ These flaws proved pivotal in the dramatic expansion of U.S. involvement in Vietnam under President John F. Kennedy.

Historians have long acknowledged McNamara’s arguments, but China should still factor more heavily into our understanding of American escalation in the Vietnam War.

Lacking diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic (PRC) and still reeling from Senator Joseph McCarthy’s (R-WI) assault on America’s leading China experts, the Kennedy administration assumed that the Chinese held expansionist designs on Southeast Asia.² While taking this dubious assumption as gospel, the president, his advisors, and the U.S. intelligence community nevertheless remained divided over the precise nature of the “ChiCom” (Chinese Communist) threat. While some insisted that the disastrous Great Leap

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1. Robert McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1995), 32–33.

2. For the influence of McCarthyism on U.S. China policy and China-U.S. relations, see Ely Kahn, *The China Hands: American Foreign Service Officers and What Befell Them* (New York, 1975); Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton, NJ, 1999); David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1972); Ross Y. Koen, *The China Lobby in American Politics* (New York, 1960).

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Forward and Beijing's fraying alliance with the Soviets would check Mao Zedong's drive for hegemony in Southeast Asia, others argued that these same factors would encourage Chinese meddling in Vietnam. Yet no matter how Kennedy advisors evaluated Chinese capabilities, they uniformly believed that China posed a threat to Vietnam and Southeast Asia. As a result, the proposals on American strategies in Vietnam shifted between only two similar options: supporting the existing U.S. military commitment in the region or pushing for even greater military pressure against the North Vietnamese. During his presidency, Kennedy expanded U.S. support for South Vietnam, thus pressuring Mao to arm and equip North Vietnam's (Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV) Vietnam People's Army and the Viet Cong (NLF) insurgents waging guerrilla warfare in the South. With its cautious, incremental, but ultimately dramatic escalation in South Vietnam, Kennedy's White House pushed the Chinese toward greater militancy.

Washington's fears of Chinese expansionism loomed large over official Pekingology from the early 1950s to well into the next decade.³ Anxiety about China underpinned Kennedy's central dilemma in Vietnam: How to avoid "losing" another Asian country to Communism without provoking another war like Korea. Throughout Kennedy's presidency, Washington China watchers interpreted growing tensions between Moscow and Beijing as likely to compel the Chinese to promote subversion and revolutionary violence in Vietnam. These men feared that a more aggressive Chinese foreign policy in Vietnam offered the PRC a means to undercut Communist bloc support for the Soviets and burnish its credentials as the world's leading revolutionary regime. By the time Kennedy was killed no side, whether American, Chinese, North or South Vietnamese, could have easily reversed course in Indochina. The Americans, for their part, could not have done so without first giving up their long-standing beliefs about Chinese foreign policy aims. And despite pleas from foreign statesman and a few dissenting mid-level officials, the Washington policy-making elite proved unwilling to reassess these assumptions until after the United States was embroiled in the Vietnam War.

Several historians of U.S.-China relations and Chinese foreign policy have explored the growing U.S. and Chinese involvement in Vietnam during the Kennedy years. Noam Kochavi argues that Kennedy found the Beijing government fanatical and feared the Chinese more than the Soviets, but his discussion on the growing U.S. entanglement in Southeast Asia centers on the Laos crisis. His later work shows that "who lost China" charges, fears of another conflict like Korea, and anxiety about Maoist revolutionary doctrine influenced Kennedy's decisions about Vietnam, but recently declassified sources now allow us to trace

3. For U.S.-China policy during the Eisenhower years, see Gordon Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948 to 1972* (Stanford, CA, 1990); Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York, 2000); Simei Qing, *From Allies to Enemies: Visions of Modernity, Identity, and U.S. China Diplomacy, 1945-1960* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

this story in much greater detail. Meanwhile, in searching for the origins of the Vietnam War during the Eisenhower presidency, Simei Qing concludes that Kennedy and Johnson followed John Foster Dulles's peripheral military containment strategy against China in South Vietnam, antagonizing the PRC and leading America into a tragic war. Three mainland Chinese scholars have demonstrated that Kennedy's escalation in South Vietnam both encouraged and facilitated increased Chinese support for Hanoi. Zhang Baijia concludes that from Beijing's perspective, Kennedy's war in Vietnam began on May 14, 1961, when the United States introduced "special warfare teams and advisors" to South Vietnam. Yang Kuisong, arguably the PRC's leading Cold War historian, argues that by May 1960, Mao began championing a more confrontational foreign policy. During the next two years, as Kennedy increased the number of U.S. advisors in Vietnam, Mao overruled those who opposed supporting the Communist insurgency in Vietnam, and, in 1963, Chinese and North Vietnamese military leaders began planning coordinated defensive activities in preparation for a potential U.S. invasion. Niu Jun, a mainland scholar who has long attracted a following in the West, concludes that American escalation greatly influenced the scope of Chinese assistance for the military struggle in South Vietnam.⁴

Other studies of Chinese Vietnam policy demonstrate that Kennedy's escalation in South Vietnam compelled the Chinese to increase their support for insurgency and also facilitated Mao's effort to accelerate revolutionary dynamism at home and radicalize Chinese foreign policy. Chen Jian shows that Chinese Vietnam policy began a radical turn in late 1962 and early 1963, following visits to Beijing by Hanoi officials who warned that U.S. escalation in the South and

4. Noam Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated: China Policy During the Kennedy Years* (Westport, CT, 2002), 163–81; Noam Kochavi, "Opportunities Lost? Kennedy, China, and Vietnam," in *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia*, ed. Priscilla Roberts (Washington, DC, 2006), 139–40. Qing argues that Dulles aimed to surround China with anti-communist American allies and subject the Beijing government to strict economic embargo as a way to ostracize the PRC and undermine it psychologically from within. Originally, Dulles saw Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand as forming America's defensive perimeter in the western Pacific. Following the 1954 Geneva Accords that divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel and Ngo Dinh Diem's return to South Vietnam in 1955, Dulles, according to Qing, initiated the process of adding South Vietnam to the U.S. defensive perimeter around China. See Qing, *From Allies to Enemies*, 179–83; Zhang Baijia, "KangMei, yuanChao yu yuanYue kangMei—Zhongguo ruhe yingdui Chaoxian zhanzheng yu Yuenan zhanzheng" [Resist America and Aid Korea and Aid Vietnam and Resist America—How China Dealt with the Korean War and the Vietnam War], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (2005): 36; Yang Kuisong, "Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949–1973," trans. Qiang Zai, *The Cold War International History Project* (hereafter cited in text as *CWIHP*) Working Paper no. 34 (2002): 19, 21–22, 28; Niu Jun defines leftist policies as pursuing goals that are ahead of their time or unrealistic. He sees China's 1962 "left turn" as characterized by the denial of the possibility of peace over the long term, an exaggerated notion of China's position and influence in world politics, a denial of the paramount status of national interest in the creation of foreign policy, and a struggle against so-called imperialists, revisionists, and anti-revolutionaries. See Niu Jun, "1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy," *CWIHP* Working Paper no. 48 (2005): 2–3, 24.

intensified fighting could lead to wider war with America. By March 1963, Hanoi had assurances from Beijing that the Chinese would defend North Vietnam if the Americans attacked. Mao and Zhou separately repeated this promise to DRV officials in the summer of 1964. Qiang Zhai also argues convincingly that Mao did not really press hard in Vietnam until after the summer of 1962, which followed Kennedy's establishment of the Military Assistance Command (MAC), drastically increasing the number of U.S. advisors in Vietnam and American equipment provided to Diem's regime. In August, 1962 Mao crushed Wang Jiaxiang's efforts to convince the Chinese leadership to show restraint in its support of revolutionary movements. Mao's condemnation, Zhai says, revealed his limited tolerance for independent opinions and set China on a policy of confrontation short of war with America in Vietnam.⁵ Chen's and Zhai's work, along with the previously mentioned scholarship by mainland historians, provides a basis for evaluating how accurate assessments of Chinese intentions were during the Kennedy administration and the degree to which Chinese involvement in Vietnam stemmed from U.S. actions.⁶

More recent scholarship on the origins of the Vietnam War has shown that Kennedy's anxieties about China informed his unwillingness to pursue a diplomatic solution in Vietnam. Though he blames Johnson for Americanizing the war, Fredrik Logevall admits that Kennedy feared negotiating on Vietnam would harm his credibility and expose him to a domestic political attack similar to what President Harry Truman had endured for "losing" China.⁷ Logevall may be correct in concluding that Johnson's concern with personal credibility, more than anything else, pushed him to Americanize the war, but he fails to show that the dynamics of the credibility problem originated in America's reaction to the Chinese Revolution and developed in response to the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations' anxieties regarding the PRC.

5. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001), 207–9; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), 114–15. Wang Jiaxiang was the director of the International Liaison Department of the CCP Central Committee. On February 26, 1962, he sent a letter to foreign policy officials, including Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and Chen Yi, criticizing CCP tendencies to overstate the danger of war and calling for restraint in support of national liberation movements.

6. The most recent mainland study of the U.S.-China clash in Vietnam neither brings new sources to light nor offers much in the way of reinterpretation on the Kennedy years. See Pan Yining, *Zhong-Mei zai Yinduzhina de duikang, 1949–1973: Yuenan zhangzheng de guoji guanxi shi* [Sino-US Confrontation in Indochina, 1943–1973: A History of the International Relations of the Vietnam War], (Guangzhou, 2011).

7. Fredrik Logevall, *Cboosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), 31. Logevall's monograph challenged leading interpretations of the Vietnam War, which saw the conflict as the logical result of U.S. containment policy. See, for example, George C. Herring's *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (Philadelphia, PA, 1979); Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York, 1997); David Anderson, ed., *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence, KS, 1993); William Duiker, *US Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA, 1994); Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991).

Understanding how the United States got entangled in Vietnam and why China was involved is one of the more important questions in American history. The conflict strained America's Cold War alliances and weakened the U.S. economy. It brought the world's most powerful military near to its breaking point and permanently eroded the American people's trust in government. More tragically, it caused millions of casualties and left an enduring legacy of environmental damage from chemical weapons and unexploded ordnance. In the years leading up to Americanization in Vietnam, Washington's China watchers made decisions from within a stifling domestic political climate and with very limited access to information. They had little to go on other than reports from the Chinese press, refugees fleeing China's famine, and public statements from the Sino-Soviet dispute, all of which painted the Chinese as radical and aggressive. The narrow framework through which U.S. officials viewed China created an ideological strait jacket that limited their ability to interpret events as they unfolded.

AMERICA'S "CHICOMPLEX": MAO, McCARTHY, KOREA, AND THE CHINA LOBBY

The Kennedy administration inherited its assumptions of Chinese aggressiveness and its hard-line policy toward Beijing from traumas of the late 1940s and early 1950s. China's Revolution and its entrance into the Korean War discredited the Democratic Party and helped bring the China lobby's views into the mainstream. A loose-knit pressure group of Nationalist Chinese officials and right-wing American political and cultural elites dedicated to overthrowing the CCP, the China lobby blasted Truman for "losing" China. By 1951, the press almost universally accepted its explanation of events in the Far East. As President Dwight Eisenhower entered office, Senators Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) and Pat McCarran (D-NV) were leading the campaigns that would gut State Department China expertise and discredit numerous academic China specialists, leaving the lobby's views unchallenged. Democrats and State Department officials now had to denounce China in strident terms in order to protect themselves against the charge of being soft on Communism. Eisenhower staffed his State Department with an eye toward appeasing the China lobby and its allies. Disgraced government China experts like John Stewart Service and John Paton Davies became nonpersons in Washington, a stigma they retained through the Kennedy years.⁸

As Kennedy campaigned for the White House, he showed no inclination to deviate from former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's uncompromising efforts to contain China. Dulles and his Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, Walter Robertson had regarded Southeast Asia as a future battleground for conflict between China and the United States. "The war in Indochina," said

8. Ross Y. Koen, *The China Lobby in American Politics* (New York, 1960), 89–90, 94, 103, 140–151, 180, 198–220; David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1972), 106; Robert E. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* (Cambridge, 2005), 142.

Robertson during a 1955 speech, “marked the beginning of the Communist bid for Southeast Asia.”⁹ Here the Chinese, and not the Russians, would knock over the dominos. As a Massachusetts senator, Kennedy had shared Dulles and Robertson’s view and recommended organizing the Southeast Asian countries into a defensive group, which the Eisenhower administration attempted through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Dulles’s harsh anti-China strategy appeared to pay dividends during the 1960 presidential campaign: That summer the Soviets withdrew their advisors from China. For Washington, this development affirmed Dulles’s strategy of isolating the PRC and forcing Beijing to overburden the Soviets with aid requirements. Fighting back against Richard Nixon’s charges that he was soft on Communism, Kennedy took a militant stance during his campaign.¹⁰ Privately, his father assured Time Inc. publisher Henry Luce, a close family friend who had written the forward to Kennedy’s first book, *Why England Slept*, that Jack Kennedy was a staunch anti-Communist. Though Luce traditionally supported Republicans, he told Joseph Kennedy during their July 15, 1960 meeting at Luce’s Manhattan apartment, that his publications would take it easy on his son unless he wavered in his anti-Communism, in which case Time Inc. would “clobber him.”¹¹ Luce, one of the China lobby’s most powerful figures, would have little to worry about when it came to Kennedy’s China policy.

After entering the White House, Kennedy appointed to senior foreign policy positions two men who assumed the Chinese sought to control Southeast Asia. His Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, never wavered in his belief that the Chinese stood behind strife in the region and that a U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam would stimulate China’s expansionist activities. Though Rusk and Kennedy never established a good rapport, the secretary would retain his unyielding fears of Chinese expansionism into the Johnson years, a time when his influence with the commander in chief was far more substantial. John McCone, Kennedy’s second CIA director, took for granted that sooner or later the United States would face China in an apocalyptic showdown in Southeast Asia. Two other key Kennedy advisors—McNamara and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy—had little foreign policy experience and zero China expertise. To set the tone in the new administration, George McGhee, Rusk’s hand-picked director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Council, informed his subordinates that he would tolerate no new

9. Walter Robertson, “The Problem of Peace in the Far East,” address made before the Virginia Bar Association at White Sulphur Springs, VA, August 3, 1955, *Department of State Bulletin*, August 13, 1956, 266.

10. Donald Zagoria, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict 1956-1961* (Princeton, NJ, 1962), 390; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, 1986), 126–27; Presidential Debate in Washington, DC, October 7, 1960, *The American Presidency Project* at the University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29401&st=&st1=> (accessed April 16, 2013).

11. Quoted in Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce*, 211.

ideas on U.S. China policy.¹² After his narrow electoral victory and with the “loss” of China still haunting the Democrats, Kennedy signaled through his appointments that he had no inclination to challenge the China lobby.

THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD, CHINESE EXPANSIONISM, AND
CAUTIOUS ESCALATION

Kennedy’s wariness about deviating from the conventional wisdom did not mean that his administration was unconcerned with matters inside China. Indeed, his foreign policy team and Washington’s intelligence analysts understood that the Chinese faced an ongoing economic crisis. Even before Kennedy’s 1960 electoral victory, his leading foreign policy advisor, Chester Bowles, reflected on how famine might influence Chinese intentions. In an April 1960 *Foreign Affairs* article Bowles, who represented the more liberal wing of the Democratic Party, argued that China’s growing food requirements would lead it to “develop fiercely expansionist tendencies directed toward the weaker neighboring states to the south.”¹³ Here Bowles matched the stridency of outgoing Assistant Secretary Robertson, a close Chiang Kai-shek supporter. Other Washington insiders recognized China’s difficulties but disagreed with Bowles’ thesis. Once famine refugees from China began entering Hong Kong in 1961, an intelligence estimate reported that “a major Chinese Communist military intervention in Southeast Asia in the near future is extremely unlikely.” In contrast to Bowles, intelligence analysts believed that “Communist China’s economic crisis and food shortages are more likely at this time to discourage rather than encourage a major military adventure in Southeast Asia.”¹⁴ Their reporting emphasized that despite Beijing’s warlike rhetoric, it feared direct military conflict with the United States. So long as Beijing was assured that military adventures in Southeast Asia would trigger U.S. retaliation, the intelligence community now believed, the Chinese would resort to other means to expand their influence. Although they disagreed as to why, Bowles and the CIA agreed that only a U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia could deter a Chinese attack. According to Washington’s rigid China orthodoxy, even a weakened China needed to be restrained.

Continued investigation into the Great Leap Forward during 1961 confirmed that China would weather the crisis and that only U.S. military power would keep Beijing from overrunning Southeast Asia. A RAND Corporation report, undertaken at Deputy Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Walt Rostow’s behest, concluded that Mao’s government would survive the

12. Warren Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (Towota, NJ, 1980), 246, 288; Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, NY, 1967), 318; Halberstam, *Best and the Brightest*, 103.

13. Chester Bowles, “The China Problem Reconsidered,” *Foreign Affairs* (1960), 2, 8.

14. Special National Intelligence Estimate (hereafter SNIE) 10-2-61, “Likelihood of Major Communist Military Intervention in Mainland Southeast Asia,” June 27, 1961, 2.

famine. In a July study, Edward Rice, a Policy Planning Council member, subsequently affirmed the RAND report's findings and stated that the Communists could endure yet another poor harvest without losing power. A CIA report the same month based primarily on Hong Kong refugee testimony, found that the famine's worst days had passed. During the fall, as the NSC pondered deploying SEATO ground forces to protect key Mekong River towns, it commissioned a Special National Intelligence Assessment (SNIE) to explore potential ramifications. The SNIE warned that despite China's economic problems, its military remained capable of easily overrunning all of Southeast Asia. Two further SNIEs conducted over the winter affirmed this conclusion while also noting that the Chinese intended to establish Communist regimes throughout the area.¹⁵ All these studies supported a firm U.S. military commitment to the region. Granted, Kennedy had other reasons for dispatching four hundred Green Beret counterinsurgency advisors to South Vietnam in May 1961, such as showing strength following the Bay of Pigs, but Beijing always loomed in the background of any thinking on the area.¹⁶ However, as had been the case since the Dulles era, Washington misread Chinese intentions.

The PRC was more cautious and crucially *reactive* to U.S. escalation. China's economic difficulties may very well have constrained Chinese leaders, but Hanoi and Beijing both saw ominous signs in Kennedy's May decision to send Green Beret advisors to South Vietnam. As Zhang and other Chinese scholars noted, Beijing interpreted the U.S. move as a major escalation.¹⁷ DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong reached the same conclusion and left for Beijing the next month to seek greater Chinese assistance. During his meetings with the Chinese leadership, Mao expressed general support for armed struggle but Zhou advised prudence. The DRV nevertheless decided on military escalation, passing a resolution in October to intensify the anti-American effort. During his visit to Hanoi the same month, People's Liberation Army Marshal Ye Jianying urged caution, fearing that the Vietnamese Communists would expose themselves to American airpower and heavy weaponry. With starvation still widespread in China, its

15. June Grasso, "John F. Kennedy and Famine in China," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14, no. 4 (2003): 159–61; SNIE 10-4-61, "Probably Communist Reactions to Certain US Actions in South Vietnam," November 7, 1961, 5a; CIA/ORR, "Food Shortages in the Communist Bloc," July 15, 1961, 2–4, *CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room*, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/80801/DOC_0000307839.pdf (accessed April 16, 2013); Chester Cooper, "The CIA and Decision Making," *Foreign Affairs* (1972): 225, 230. Cooper, a former CIA deputy director and NSC member, notes that the NSC or the White House commissioned SNIEs to explore the potential ramifications of policies under consideration. SNIE 13-3-61, "Chinese Communist Capabilities and Intentions in the Far East," November 20, 1961, 1, and SNIE 10-62, "Communist Objectives, Capabilities, and Intentions in Southeast Asia," February 21, 1962, 1.

16. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: American and Vietnam, 1945-1996*, rev. 5th ed. (Malden, MA, 2008), 79–80.

17. Zhang, "KangMei, yuanChao yu yuanYue kangMei," 36; Guangxi shehui kexueyuan. Yinduzhina yan jiu suo, *ZhongYue guanxi shi da shiji* [The True History of Chinese-Vietnamese Relations] (Nanning, 1980), 56.

leaders sought to avoid provoking a clash with the Americans.¹⁸ Despite its northern neighbor's pleas for restraint, the NLF nevertheless intensified its armed struggle, forcing Kennedy to take notice.

With Saigon reeling from the relentless NLF pressure, the President sent General Maxwell Taylor, his closest military advisor, and Rostow to survey the deteriorating military situation. Taylor urged Kennedy to increase the size of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and introduce a U.S. military task force to South Vietnam. McNamara called for Kennedy to adopt Taylor's recommendation and even told the president that the United States may have to send up to 220,000 troops to show the other side that Washington meant business. After consultations with his advisors, Kennedy adopted National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 111 on November 22, which granted many of the additional military forces recommended by Taylor, including helicopter teams to transport Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces to and from combat zones. Thousands of American advisors soon left for South Vietnam.¹⁹

The president deployed advisors rather than combat forces, but Chinese leaders found the move no less troubling. In early 1962, the PRC leadership publicly stated that American military actions in Vietnam were aimed indirectly at China and constituted a direct threat to Chinese security. Beijing's statement echoed the warnings it made before intervening in Korea. While the PRC had supported the North Korean invasion, it had not intervened until the UN pushed north of the 38th Parallel. In Kennedy and Truman's interpretation, the United States needed to show strength to face down Communist aggression. But in both cases, aggressive U.S. moves made greater PRC intervention much more likely because it was reacting to a threat, not relentlessly expanding.

On numerous occasions following the NSAM 111 decision, the PRC issued official protests, often using *People's Daily* editorials, against American escalation in Vietnam. An anonymous New Year's Day editorial, which American analysts attributed to Mao, criticized Kennedy as more aggressive and willing to take risks than Eisenhower.²⁰ Sensing a new stage in his struggle, Ho Chi Minh visited Beijing in the summer to request greater military aid, and Mao agreed to provide 90,000 rifles and machine guns to equip two-hundred and thirty infantry battalions. American escalation and establishment of the MAC in February 1962 led Wang Jiaxiang, director of the International Liaison Department of the CCP Central Committee to write a letter urging restraint in support for national liberation

18. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 112–13.

19. Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 107–12.

20. Niu, *CWIHP*, 25; Guangxi shehui kexueyuan. Yinduzhina yan jiu suo, *ZhongYue guanxi*, 56–57; “Xinnian xianci,” in *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* [Selection of Important Documents Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China] vol. 15 (Beijing, 1992), 1–8. The New Year's editorial stated that only revolutionary struggle could overcome imperialism. China's main foreign policy line, the article claimed, was “to protect and strengthen socialist unity and cooperation in every country and assist the revolutionary struggles of every people and race resisting imperialism and colonialism.”

movements. His move provided Mao with a pretext to move against him, tighten his own control over foreign policy decision-making, and signal that he would brook no further dissent.²¹ By upping the ante in Indochina, the Kennedy administration helped Mao repel an internal challenge to his authority. The U.S. escalation, conceived at least in part to deter China's aggressive tendencies, ended up having the opposite effect.

The numerous SNIEs issued in late 1961 and early 1962 indicate that Chinese intentions were clearly on Kennedy's mind as he considered Taylor's report and pondered escalation. The second of two November SNIEs sounded ominous warnings about China's aims. After admitting that overt military conquest was extremely unlikely, the report warned that "Communist China's long-range goal in the Far East is the complete communization of the area under the hegemony of Peiping." China, the authors concluded, had "little need to resort to overt military invasion in order to enlarge [its] influence or communize other countries." The estimate's authors stated that control over Taiwan, Japan, and India made up Beijing's long-term goals, but "on the basis of opportunity, however, South Vietnam and Laos are currently the primary targets."²² SNIE thinking reflected the groupthink of the 1950s: Little to no appreciation for traditional Sino-Vietnamese hostility, taking an implacable Chinese desire for expansionism as its starting premise, and pointing to Vietnam as the place to make a stand.

The SNIE conclusions reinforced the President's own anxieties about the PRC, which in turn underpinned his worries about Diem. If Diem's regime were to fall, Kennedy's Republican rivals would blame him for "losing" another Asian country to Communism—an absolutely unthinkable outcome. But if he followed McNamara's recommendation and deployed hundreds of thousands of ground troops, he could have another Korean War on his hands. The Taylor report's recommendations offered the president a middle path: an increased U.S. military presence capable of raising South Vietnamese morale and keeping the Saigon regime in power, but not enough of an escalation to risk overt Chinese intervention.²³

As Kennedy began his second year in office, a few clear patterns in China assessments and efforts to contain China had emerged. Rostow excepted; the administration believed that the PLA was insulated from the famine and still had the capacity to overrun any Southeast Asian military. Ever the hawk, Rostow pressed all year for aggressive intervention, arguing that China's economic crisis gave the United States the opportunity to ratchet up the pressure in Vietnam. But the

21. Ibid., Zhang, "kangMei, yuanChao yu yuanYue kangMei," 35; Niu, *CWIHP*, 25; Guangxi shehui kexueyuan. *Yinduzhina yan jiu suo, ZhongYue guanxi*, 56–57; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 214–15.

22. SNIE 13-3-61, "Chinese Communist Capabilities and Intentions in the Far East," November 30, 1961.

23. "Letter from the President's Military Representative (Taylor) to the President," November 3, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1961–1963, Vol. I, Vietnam, Document 210, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d210> (accessed April 16, 2013).

president rejected his proposal after the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concluded that it could lead to massive Chinese intervention.²⁴ That prospect was about as welcome as “losing” South Vietnam to the Reds, so Kennedy increased the U.S. military commitment to South Vietnam but avoided measures that might oblige Beijing to send the PLA across its southern frontier. In all, when it came to his son’s performance in the Far East, Joseph Kennedy had little reason to worry that the Time Inc. would “clobber” the president as Luce had threatened.

The administration’s 1962 reports on Great Leap Forward sounded like a broken record stuck on some old Foster Dulles tune. The PLA remained the strongest military in the Far East and Beijing’s interests still “too closely identified with North Vietnam and the Communist position in Laos for it to be able to tolerate serious reverses in these areas.” All that stood in the way of Chinese hegemony in East and Southeast Asia was “US strength and determination.”²⁵ Meanwhile, Kennedy sent troops to Thailand in order to discourage Communists from further military probing in Laos, which brought the Pathet Lao, a Chinese ally, back to the negotiating table in Geneva.²⁶ Kennedy’s cautious escalation seemed to confirm that “US strength and determination” could push the Communists into making concessions. Dulles’s peripheral containment policy against Beijing, envisioned during the years when “China hand” carried an invisible footnote reading “probably a Commie,” had served its purpose. Or so it appeared in Washington. But just in case anyone started feeling too complacent, a dispatch from the American Consulate General in Hong Kong warned Secretary Rusk that Beijing retained its ability to “meddle in Southeast Asia.”²⁷

In October, Chinese forces invaded disputed territories controlled by India and inflicted heavy losses on Indian forces before unilaterally withdrawing, which confirmed to the Kennedy administration both China’s aggressive intentions and its undiminished military strength. In light of the crises in Berlin and Cuba, the Chinese offensive underscored the need to stand firm against Beijing.²⁸ Questions about the Great Leap Forward’s consequences now ceased to preoccupy Washington’s China watchers. In Beijing, on the other hand, the attack on India ended a dangerous year fraught with skirmishes along the Sino-Indian frontier, Chiang’s threats to attack the mainland, American escalation in South Vietnam, and tension on the Sino-Soviet border due to a Kazakh uprising.

Over the prior two years, nearly all analyses of how China’s domestic woes would affect its policies in Southeast Asia had affirmed U.S. military commitments to the region, or, more commonly, provided the premises for cautious escalation,

24. David Milne, *America’s Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York, 2008), 96.

25. NIE 13-4-62 “Prospects for Communist China,” May 2, 1962, 7–8.

26. Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated*, 170–71.

27. Memo, American Consulate General Hong Kong to Rusk, July 18, 1962, China General 7/62-12/62 Folder, Box 15, James C. Thomson Papers (hereafter cited as JCT Papers), John F. Kennedy Library (hereafter JFKL).

28. Robert McNamara made this conclusion about the crises in Cuba and Berlin. See McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 32.

pushing the two sides closer to proxy war. To Washington, the Laos neutralization agreement demonstrated that cautious escalation could press the Communists into making concessions. The Chinese, on the other hand, interpreted Kennedy's dispatch of special warfare advisors in South Vietnam, NSAM 111 escalations, and the military deployments in Thailand as alarming signs of growing American aggression.²⁹ Finally, even Rostow, who thought that famine had weakened China, viewed Chinese weakness not as an opportunity to scale back American financial and military commitments to South Vietnam, but rather as an opening to strike a decisive blow against North Vietnam and NLF infiltration without provoking Chinese retaliation.

The administration's uniform belief in threatening Chinese intentions, along with its seeing both Chinese strength and weakness as a sign to escalate, reflected deep-seated policy assumptions. When men like Taylor, McNamara, or even the president looked to Vietnam, they saw Diem's parlous domestic position as their most immediate concern. Yet Diem was simply the weakest link in the single-minded Far Eastern policy line that the Kennedy administration had retained from the Eisenhower years: Containing and isolating China while maintaining the network of anti-Communist alliances along its periphery. James Thomson, who served in Kennedy's newly reshuffled Bureau of Far Eastern affairs starting in November 1961, affirmed that Dulles's Far Eastern policy, the so-called "loss of China," and the Korean War were central ingredients in the Vietnam War. Thomson also noted that the administration inherited and shared a perception of China on the march, another carry over from the Dulles years but reinforced in the early 1960s by Beijing's harsh public rhetoric.³⁰ To the White House, Diem's survival and a decisive end to the insurgency offered the chance to make political capital by halting Communist gains in an Asian country, thereby kicking the "who lost China" stigma. Nobody in the White House wanted to let Saigon fall, but if the Southern Vietnamese government could eventually be made stand on its own, it would vindicate the Democratic Party and the members of the Kennedy administration personally. A China without expansionist intentions would render the entire exercise superfluous.

THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT AND THE BATTLE FOR LEADERSHIP IN THE COMMUNIST WORLD

Since the Kennedy administration looked to China's domestic economic troubles and reflexively pondered how they would affect China's expansionist intentions in Southeast Asia, it comes as little surprise that the White House saw the growing Sino-Soviet dispute through the same lens. During Kennedy's first few months in

29. Deng Lifeng, "YuanYue kangMei shulue" [A Summary of the War to Aid Vietnam and Resist America] *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 9, no. 1 (2002): 85.

30. James C. Thomson, "How Could Vietnam Happen? An Autopsy," *The Atlantic Magazine*, April 1968, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1968/04/how-could-vietnam-happen-an-autopsy/6462/> (accessed April 16, 2013).

office, a CIA Sino-Soviet Task Force report entitled “The Sino-Soviet Dispute and its Significance” circulated to top policymakers and NSC staffers. The report interpreted the rift as reflecting China’s growing strength and an emerging duality of power within the Communist Bloc. It deemed China far more radical than the Soviet Union. Highlighting the 1960 ideological arguments between the two Communist powers over support for independence movements, the report contrasted China’s penchant for violence with the Soviet Union’s more conciliatory line: “[the] Chinese believed that the Soviet idea of peaceful coexistence was tantamount to abandoning the class struggle.”³¹ After reading the report, NSC staffers made rethinking China policy a higher priority, though not in the sense of considering recognition.

The CIA’s report inspired one NSC staffer, “Blowtorch” Bob Komer, to rethink the entire U.S. containment policy against China. Komer saw a power struggle for dominance of international Communism as the foremost issue driving the Sino-Soviet dispute. Southeast Asia, according to Komer, was basically lost to the Chinese. “We will never be able to jack up feeble countries,” Komer continued, “like South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, etc. to the point where they can stand on their own feet vis-à-vis Peiping.” He believed that Southeast Asia’s twelve million overseas Chinese offered Beijing ample subversive potential in the region. Rather than fight what he saw as a futile effort, Komer recommended pulling back to Japan and India while searching for “a better way of getting Asian nationalism to work for us instead of against us.” No naïf when it came to domestic politics, Komer recognized that his proposal would encounter strong China lobby opposition, but he pressed forward nonetheless.³² He challenged the status quo U.S. China policy but not in a way that demonstrated any rethinking of assumptions inherited from the Dulles years. Komer’s China was irredeemably on the march, subversive, more threatening than the Soviets. But whereas Dulles had faith in the American allies on China’s periphery, Komer found risible the idea that men like Diem or Chiang could stand up against the Red Chinese juggernaut, regardless of the U.S. support they enjoyed. Kennedy, of course, with much more to lose from a

31. Report, CIA Sino-Soviet Task Force, “The Sino-Soviet Dispute and its Significance,” April 1, 1961, China General Folder Box 21A, National Security Files (hereafter NSF), JFKL, 13. Ongoing declassification at the Kennedy library has demonstrated that Kennedy administration officials were more cognizant of Sino-Soviet differences than historians writing in the 1990s had realized: The only real question by 1962 was whether or not the rift was final. In 1994, for example, Nancy Tucker argued that Washington had been slow to accept the reality of the rift and that only by the mid-1960s had intelligence assessments and Moscow’s and Beijing’s public denunciations convinced policymakers that the split existed and would endure. See Nancy Tucker, “Threats, Opportunities, and Frustrations in East Asia,” in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963-1968*, eds. Warren Cohen and Nancy Tucker (New York, 1994), 103-104.

32. Komer Draft Paper, “Strategic Framework for Rethinking China Policy,” April 7, 1961, China General Folder, Box 22, NSF, JFKL.

clash with the China lobby so soon after taking office, never adopted Komer's recommendations.³³

Still, Komer's response paper and the CIA report that inspired it signaled a more nuanced approach to China than had existed in the 1950s, but only slightly so. Both dismissed notions of monolithic Communism and identified the rising power struggle within the Communist Bloc. Each noted that the Beijing-Moscow dispute paradoxically discouraged overt Chinese militancy and promoted Chinese support for armed revolutionary movements. Equally important, the CIA report confirmed and added intellectual depth to the Eisenhower-era belief that China was more likely to risk war than the Soviets. The Korean War and racist notions that "Oriental" culture felt indifferent about human losses had led the Eisenhower administration to conclude that the Chinese were more belligerent than the Russians.³⁴ In their own search for Chinese aggressiveness, Kennedy's advisors and intelligence analysts sought more sophisticated explanations. As opposed to the Soviets, the CIA report stated, the "Chinese see war as inevitable," and believed that the "Bloc should give more support to people fighting revolutionary wars, and should not fear these small wars." The CIA reached these conclusions by taking the PRC's inflammatory rhetoric at face value. With few other information sources and the ever-present China orthodoxy looming in the background, the agency had little chance of doing otherwise, especially with the alarmist John McCone at the helm. In all, both Komer and the CIA found new evidence to support old assumptions.³⁵

By summertime however, Washington's China watchers could not help but notice a shift in Beijing's aggressiveness. Beginning during the spring, the PRC ceased its verbal assaults on American imperialism. In Warsaw Wang Bingnan, China's negotiator with the United States in secret ambassadorial talks, told American representative to the Laos neutralization talks W. Averell Harriman that he hoped the United States would take steps to improve bilateral ties.³⁶ These signals intrigued State Department officials, including Bowles, Rostow, and Roger Hilsman, who thought the Chinese intended to improve relations with the United States. Not so, the CIA countered. The president followed the CIA's advice, refusing to respond to Chinese signals and thereby rendering less likely any chance to pursue a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. When offered two alternatives about Chinese intentions, the president chose the one which better reflected existing assumptions.

33. James Thomson supports this explanation in his study of Washington China policy in the 1960s. See James C. Thomson Jr., "On the Making of U.S. China Policy, 1961-69: A Study in Bureaucratic Politics," *The China Quarterly* 50 (1972): 220-43.

34. For the role of racism in Eisenhower's views on China, see Chang, *Friends and Enemies*, 154, 170-74.

35. Report, CIA Sino-Soviet Task Force, "The Sino-Soviet Dispute and its Significance," JFKL, 25-26; Komer Draft Paper, JFKL.

36. Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated*, 79-80.

Their dalliance with reconsidering Chinese intentions now behind them, policymakers and analysts returned to exploring the Sino-Soviet dispute's implications. By late 1961, they agreed that the conflict promoted a power struggle that would lead Beijing to take a harder line against the West. Unlike Eisenhower-era analyses, which stressed strong cohesive forces holding the Communist alliance together, Kennedy-era analyses recognized that Beijing's challenge to Moscow damaged the alliance enough to make Russia and China competitors rather than partners. As the weaker power, the Chinese could not match Soviet economic or military might and thus had to rely instead on their revolutionary credentials. Unsurprisingly, analysts identified Southeast Asia as the region where China would emerge victorious in its power struggle with the Soviets.³⁷

As winter approached, a new team assembled at the State Department's Far Eastern Affairs section and quickly set out to investigate what the growing Sino-Soviet rift meant for Southeast Asia. In November, Kennedy made the eminent W. Averell Harriman his new Deputy Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs and added Allen Whiting, a social science researcher and China expert from the RAND Corporation, to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research's (INR) Far Eastern section. Rostow replaced McGhee as head of the Policy Planning Council, and Michael Forrestal and Roger Hilsman also joined State's Far Eastern desk. According to David Halberstam, Harriman wanted men who would think freely and avoid automatically reproducing the "mythology of the past."³⁸ With the weight of domino theory, the "loss" of China, Dulles Far East policy, and McCarthyism still bearing down on the State Department, Harriman had no easy task ahead of him.

A fresh Far Eastern Desk and Policy Planning Council, tasked to challenge old shibboleths, did not necessarily mean the Kennedy administration would adopt less alarmist interpretations of Chinese intentions. In preparation for an important January 2 Policy Planning Council meeting, Mose L. Harvey, a mid-level foreign policy researcher and a former Russian history professor, prepared a draft paper which affirmed that Moscow and Beijing were jockeying for supremacy within the Communist Bloc. Though the rift appeared ideological, Harvey regarded a clash of national interest as its ultimate source.³⁹ His report represented the administration's boldest assessment yet on the differences between Soviet and Chinese interpretations of Communism and their respective positions within the Bloc.

37. S/P Study 1159: "US Policy Toward Communist China," October 26, 1961, Box 14, JCT Papers, JFKL, 65.

38. Halmerstam, *Best and the Brightest*, 191.

39. Draft Paper, "The Sino-Soviet Conflict and US Policy," December 19, 1961, Box 14, JCT Papers, JFKL, 1-3. Interestingly, two recent studies of the Sino-Soviet Split have pondered this same question. Sergey Radchenko argues for a multicausal explanation for the split, with clashing national interest at the center. Lorenz Luthi states that Mao's ideological beliefs and domestic needs drove the dispute. See Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ, 2008); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC, 2009).

James Thomson, a Far Eastern affairs analyst at State who had earned his PhD in Chinese history studying under John King Fairbank, later wrote that the administration began to accept the finality of the Sino-Soviet split during the first weeks of 1962—after Harvey’s draft paper circulated.⁴⁰

Harvey’s draft report concluded that the Chinese were likely to cause greater problems in Southeast Asia than the Russians. Its circulation led to a debate over whether or not the rift reached the point of no return.⁴¹ Harvey argued that “[r]ivalry between the two big powers” would lead to “a contest for support within the world Communist movement.” In this contest, each side would take actions to demonstrate to other Communist countries “that adherence to and applications of its own concepts and views can produce desired results and hence stand proven as correct.” Russia’s line, Harvey believed, was that the “Communist camp should avoid actions that involve the initiation of violence or that might provoke the initiation of violence by the enemy.” On the other hand, Harvey stated that “the Chinese Communists have argued for struggle in all forms, including revolutionary violence and wars of national liberation.” Regarding the current Communist campaign in South Vietnam, “the arguments put forward by Moscow in its quarrel with Peiping suggest that this is a type of operation which Moscow does not approve.” Following Harvey’s analysis, a full break meant that China would have the opportunity to demonstrate the correctness of its line on revolutionary violence by supporting North Vietnam in its struggle against the American-backed Saigon government. His report ended by recommending that the United States take measures in Vietnam “that would significantly increase the difficulties and costs of continued Communist advances.”⁴² Just months before, several State Department officials had believed the PRC intended to improve ties with the United States, implying that diplomatic solutions to Sino-U.S. differences in Southeast Asia were possible. Now, the State Department officials tasked with challenging past mythology saw only military solutions.

In April, a few months after the Policy Planning Council meeting, Rostow sent a memo to Secretary Rusk which demonstrated that Harvey’s ideas had resonated. A draft paper, written by Edward Rice at INR, accompanying Rostow’s memo warned that because of the dispute with Moscow “the Chinese are under compulsion to demonstrate that, as against Soviet claims, low cost successes can be achieved through local aggression . . . Laos and South Vietnam, and especially the latter, constitute a critically important test case for the entire Peiping line.” The consequences looked clear: “If the Communists ‘get away with it’ in these areas, Peiping will be vastly encouraged to undertake specific applications of its chosen strategic concepts. And it will have scored tellingly in its challenge to

40. Thomson, “How Could Vietnam Happen?”

41. Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated*, 196–97; Rosemary Foot, *The Practice of Power: US Relations with China Since 1949* (Oxford, 1995), 130.

42. Draft Paper, “The Sino-Soviet Conflict and US Policy,” JFKL, 39–58.

the Soviet leadership.”⁴³ Although Harvey and Rice had yet to persuade the White House, their complementary assessments identified a troubling new element in the Vietnamese insurgency. Vietnam offered the Chinese the chance to score points against the Soviets and prove that their aggressive policy worked. North Vietnamese (read: Chinese) success would press the Soviets to support a more aggressive foreign policy. Harvey and Rice’s conclusions fit perfectly with existing notions of Chinese aggressiveness and expansionism as well as the need for American military solutions. Incorporating their recommendations into U.S. China policy carried zero domestic political risk, while ignoring them could be dangerous.

In the next few months, the American Consulate General in Hong Kong and the intelligence community continued to monitor the Sino-Soviet dispute and changes in China’s attitude toward Vietnam and Southeast Asia. A May SNIE indicated that the intelligence community had not detected any shifts in China’s attitude toward Southeast Asia, concluding that the PRC currently supported “anti-US action in South Vietnam and Laos,” and would continue constantly probing for weaknesses. The same report also stated that “we believe that over the next few years Communist China will follow relatively conservative and rational policies.”⁴⁴ While at first glance these conclusions seem contradictory, a closer look reveals their consistency with previous evaluations. A “conservative and rational policy” meant favoring subversion and economic support to overt military action. These conclusions supported the same firm stance in Southeast Asia that both Harvey’s draft paper and assessments of the Great Leap Forward had advocated. The May SNIE would be the last intelligence estimate related to China conducted until May 1963. The administration spent much of the remainder of 1962 defusing tensions between Chiang Kai-shek and the mainland, evaluating the Sino-Indian War, and dealing with more pressing problems in the Caribbean. The absence of further discussions about Chinese intentions in Vietnam for the next several months indicates that the Kennedy Administration did not see any major changes in China’s posture toward Southeast Asia or Vietnamese attitudes toward the Sino-Soviet rift.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Sino-Indian War, the administration returned its attention to China and Vietnam. A November Policy Planning Council paper on China policy concluded that “relations between Communist China and the Soviets have long since reached the point of an effective but unacknowledged break.” The Council’s last report on China had warned that a full break would push China toward greater support of North Vietnam’s efforts against the Saigon government, and this report stated, “A Communist triumph in South Vietnam would do much to revive the dimmed hopes of the Chinese elite, while a defeat would increase Chinese feelings of frustration.” In response, the

43. Memo, Rostow to Rusk, “US policy re The Sino-Soviet Conflict,” April 2, 1962, Box 14, JCT Papers, JFKL, 16–17.

44. SNIE 13-4-62, “Prospects for Communist China,” May 2, 1962, 2, 9.

United States needed to do whatever it could to “ensure the failure of Communist insurgency in Southeast Asia.”⁴⁵ The Policy Planning Council’s November paper was the first acknowledgement of a full split between China and the Soviets. More importantly, it provided support to Rice’s and Harvey’s arguments and reaffirmed existing assumptions about Chinese intentions.

INR’s Hilsman saw China as increasingly confident but still wary of overt aggression following its victory over India and the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. Writing to Secretary Rusk, Hilsman argued that “China will project an image of militancy but because of doubts about Soviet backing, will be less likely to expand unless risks are low.” He interpreted China’s unilateral withdrawal from India’s disputed North East Frontier Agency as evidence that the PRC had won a painless victory and never intended further advance. He also believed that China’s criticism of the Soviets following the Cuban Missile Crisis was disingenuous because “the Chinese have shown the utmost circumspection in dealing with the possibility of US retaliation.” Regarding Vietnam, Hilsman stated that China would pursue a foreign policy over the next five years that emphasized “avoiding adventures or risks which might bring the regime into a military conflict with the US.” China would commit ground troops to North Vietnam, he argued, only if the Hanoi government requested assistance in repelling an attack.⁴⁶ Hilsman and Whiting, who became Hilsman’s deputy in March, offered the administration’s soberest assessments on China, yet even Hilsman implied that without the threat of American retaliation, the Chinese would likely pursue some sort of expansionist policy in Southeast Asia.

The myth busters at the Far Eastern desk still proved unable to kick the core U.S. assumptions about Chinese expansionism. The State Department had competent China experts now for the first time since the McCarthy witch hunts, but these men—Whiting and Thomson—had junior positions, meaning they were excluded from high-level decision making. As Thomson later wrote, the “loss” of China still haunted the State Department, with men in the field recalling what happened to the World War II China experts who reported honestly. In Washington, groupthink created a narrow framework within which policymakers evaluated the already skewed field reporting coming in from Asia. Thomson remembered when an assistant secretary shot him down for merely suggesting that Vietnam was a civil war.⁴⁷ Had China experts like Davies or Service run the Far Eastern Bureau or perhaps served in senior roles on the NSC, some of the old shibboleths may have fallen.

But instead the Kennedy administration had to continue assessing implications of the Sino-Soviet dispute without real China or Vietnam expertise at the senior

45. S/P Study, “US Policy Toward Communist China,” November 15, 1962, Box 15, JCT Papers, JFKL, 27, 50–51.

46. Memo, Hilsman to Rusk, “Problems and Prospects in Communist China,” February 26, 1963, China General 1/63-3/63, Box 24, NSF, JFKL, 1, 13–14, 27.

47. Thomson, “How Could Vietnam Happen?”

level. The dispute intensified in late February and early March when the Chinese leadership published a scathing 10,000 character article in Beijing's party journal, *Red Flag*, and the North Vietnamese indicated a tilt toward the Chinese side. Rostow told McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's National Security Advisor, that the article stood out for "the sweep and finality of the Chinese attack and challenge."⁴⁸ Marshall Green, reporting from the consulate in Hong Kong affirmed that "Peiping has thrown down the gauntlet to Moscow in an outright bid for leadership of the international Communist movement." Green stated that Beijing "evidently believes it has Asian Communist parties in its pocket."⁴⁹ This apparent escalation in the Sino-Soviet dispute prompted Thomas Hughes, who had replaced Hilsman as INR director after the latter became Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs in March, to report to his former boss that he noticed changes coming from Hanoi. Le Duan, first secretary of the central committee and North Vietnam's nominal number two leader behind Ho, captured Hughes's attention with a pro-Chinese speech on March 13. Previously, the DRV had striven to maintain neutrality in the Sino-Soviet dispute, but Hughes now reported that "there are indications that the Sino-Soviet dispute is mixed up with disagreements within the North Vietnamese leadership."⁵⁰ In his speech, Le Duan sharply denounced "Yugoslav revisionism"—this had long been Beijing's preferred method of criticizing Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev—and repeated China's line that only revolutionary violence could overthrow capitalism.⁵¹ Never before had the Hanoi leadership made such a strong statement favoring one side. Ever since Harvey circulated his draft paper, Kennedy administration China-watchers had waited for indications that Hanoi was leaning in one direction or another. Although Hughes felt Le Duan's pro-Chinese comments indicated independence, his memo was the first indication noted by a government analyst that signaled a possible shift in Hanoi's stance.

Summertime investigation into the Moscow-Beijing-Hanoi triangle culminated in a July 31 NSC meeting in which participants discussed the latest SNIE on China. Minutes from the meeting reveal that CIA Director John McCone doubted that a final break between China and Russia had actually occurred. McCone's doubts, however, did nothing to stem his wariness of Chinese aggression, and Rusk recommended maintaining a state of high alert over the next few

48. Memo, Rostow to Bundy, March 8, 1963, China General 1/63-3/63 Folder, Box 24, NSF, JFKL.

49. Memo, American Consulate General Hong Kong to Rusk, March 1, 1963, China Cables 3/63-5/63 Folder, Box 26, NSF, JFKL.

50. Memo, Hughes to Hilsman, April 18, 1963, Folder 3 of 13, Box 3, Roger Hilsman Papers (hereafter RH Papers), JFKL.

51. *The Evening Star* "North Vietnam Backs Peiking," April 16, 1963. A May CIA report on China concluded that "the North Vietnamese may be preparing to jump off their tightrope onto the Chinese side," but cautioned that the Vietnamese might balance their recent pro-Chinese statements with more pro-Soviet ones in the future. See CIA Office of Current Intelligence, "Growth of Chinese Influence among World Communists," May 17, 1963, 3.

weeks to gauge possible changes in China's foreign policy posture. Referring to the secret ambassadorial talks taking place between PRC and U.S. representatives in Warsaw, Hilsman indicated that Ambassador Cabot would inform his Chinese counterpart that the PRC should not take actions in Vietnam that would indicate an escalation of Beijing's support.⁵² The United States could increase its commitments to Diem, but the Kennedy administration expected the Chinese not to respond.

Hilsman, sounding conflicted, admitted to Rusk after the meeting that "South Vietnam provided a group through which the Chinese Communists could work and thus be doctrinally impeccable by 'assisting struggles of national liberation.'" Still, Hilsman questioned whether the Chinese had actually increased their support to the Vietnamese insurgency. He also cautioned that in the event they did so, U.S. military engagement "would run the very grave risk of confirming in the minds of the Vietnamese people the Communist propaganda theme that the US is taking over where the French left off."⁵³ Worried that increased involvement would lead to disaster for the United States but also fearful that China would eventually increase its support to the Vietnamese Communists, Hilsman's thinking reflected the administration's central dilemma in dealing with China and Vietnam: Avoiding another "lost China" situation in Southeast Asia without provoking another Korea.

Careful analysis of Chinese intentions continued immediately following the meeting, but intelligence analysts had not yet detected the PRC's increased support for Hanoi. Throughout 1963, the Chinese delivered the rifles and artillery that they promised during Ho's summer 1962 visit to Beijing.⁵⁴ Although in March 1963 Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong told a Polish diplomat that the DRV sought a neutralization conference that would allow an honorable American withdrawal, a PLA delegation to Hanoi the same month had repeated promises to defend the North and begun coordinating war plans with its Vietnamese counterparts.⁵⁵ A CIA special article circulated on August 2 showed that the Chinese had improved existing roads to Vietnam, which could now support military operations, but a memo sent the next week found no direct evidence of CCP involvement in the Viet Cong insurgency.⁵⁶ While speculating on numerous possibilities for increased Chinese assistance and cooperation with the DRV,

52. National Security Council Meetings, 1963 #516, Meeting on Chinese Communist Intentions, July 31, 1963, Box 314, NSF, JFKL.

53. Memo, Hilsman to Rusk, "Suggested US Responses to Likely Chinese Initiatives," July 31, 1963, China 1961-1963 Folder 1 of 3, Box 410, NSF, JFKL, 3.

54. Wang Xiangen, *Zhongguo mimi da fa bing: yuanYue kangMei shi lu* [China's Secret Dispatch of Troops: A History of the War to Assist Vietnam and Resist America] (Jinan, 1992), 25; Li Ke, *Wenhua da geming zhong de jiefangjun* [The People's Liberation Army During the Cultural Revolution] (Beijing, 1989), 408-9.

55. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 8; for discussion of the PLA visit to Hanoi, see Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 207.

56. CIA Special Article, "Roads Along Communist China's Southern Frontier," August 2, 1963, China General 7/63-8/63 Folder, Box 24, NSF, JFKL; INR Hughes to Rusk, "Possibilities

analysts found no evidence that such activities were taking place and mentioned nothing about the PRC's material aid to the DRV and its coordination with Hanoi military officials.

Before Kennedy was killed, one senior official argued that the United States could leave Vietnam without allowing Chinese gains, but his career trajectory after speaking out demonstrated that such views remained beyond the pale. Paul M. Kattenburg, who served as Vietnam Working Group chairman in late 1963, emphasized in a memo to Hilsman that the DRV maintained independence from both China and Russia and pursued the struggle for reunion since 1959 "largely by their own means."⁵⁷ During an August 31 NSC meeting, he pushed for total withdrawal. By winter his supervisors had banished Kattenburg to a Policy Planning Council position dealing with other regions.⁵⁸ Though the McCarthy and McCarran days were long gone, Asian affairs staff who deviated too far from the consensus still suffered for their views. Kattenburg's removal showed that the Kennedy administration had not yet emerged from the shadow of the early 1950s.

Total withdrawal was anathema for Kennedy. During a September 9, 1963 interview on NBC, David Brinkley asked the president about American difficulties in South Vietnam and the potential problem of getting locked into a policy there that made change and improvisation difficult. Kennedy responded that it was important for Americans to be patient with the struggle in Vietnam because "[W]e don't want to have the reputation of China [referring to the 1949 Communist victory], because that was the most damaging event that has occurred to us, perhaps in this century, when that [China] passed into the control of the Communists." Brinkley followed up by asking Kennedy if he had reason to doubt the "so-called" domino theory, and Kennedy's response is worth quoting in full:

No, I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough, China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them [China and the Vietnamese Communists] an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya, but it would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists.⁵⁹

Kennedy's belief in Chinese expansionism had supported his moves to strengthen what had begun under Eisenhower as a far more tentative commitment to South

of Greater Chinese Communist Militancy," August 12, 1963, China 1961-1963 Folder 1 of 3, Box 410, NSF, JFKL, 10.

57. Memo, Kattenburg to Hilsman, September 6, 1963, Vietnam Folder 1 9/1/63-9/10/63, Box 4, RH Papers, JFKL.

58. George Sherman, "Kattenburg Advised Quitting Vietnam," *The St. Petersburg Times*, June 26, 1971.

59. John F. Kennedy, interview by David Brinkley, *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*, NBC, September 9, 1963, <http://en.kendincos.net/video-vjtmfff-interview-with-president-john-f-kennedy-nbc-tv-9-9-63-part-1-.html> (accessed May 25, 2012).

Vietnam. Not willing to acquiesce to “losing” another Asian country to Communism, Kennedy’s White House never wavered in its efforts to prop up Saigon and assist the South Vietnamese in defeating the insurgency.⁶⁰ Kennedy’s comments to Brinkley revealed that his anxieties about the PRC underlined his stance in Vietnam. Harvey’s memo, and the line of thinking it inspired, supported Kennedy’s fears that Saigon’s fall would convince the rest of Southeast Asia that China represented the future.

KENNEDY’S FINAL DAYS AND BEYOND

In the final months of Kennedy’s life, diverse voices, including U.S. allies and American journalists, urged the White House to examine its assumptions about Chinese intentions and abandon its hopes for defeating the Communist insurgency. On August 29, French President Charles De Gaulle gave a speech which laid the groundwork for a proposal to reunify Vietnam through a neutralization conference. In De Gaulle’s view, a unified Vietnam would serve as a bulwark against Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia. Following Diem’s assassination, De Gaulle reiterated his call for U.S. withdrawal. Meanwhile, although mainstream American press mostly supported Kennedy’s stance on Vietnam, a September *New Republic* editorial echoed De Gaulle in concluding that as leader of a unified Vietnam, Ho would likely become another Tito. Influential columnist Walter Lippmann began moving toward more neutralist views by the winter, and James Reston at the *New York Times* criticized the Kennedy administration for not considering negotiations with the DRV.⁶¹

At the same time, other voices outside the administration warned Washington against wavering in its anti-Communism. Luce publications continued to blame the Chinese for insurgency in Vietnam. American allies, too, encouraged the United States to remain in South Vietnam. For example, the Thai leadership feared that it would be the next domino to fall. The Malayan Federation began training South Vietnamese police and military forces in 1961, and Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman warned that without U.S. military support, all Southeast Asia would fall to Communism.⁶² These voices affirmed Washington’s assessments of Chinese aims. To hear other Asian leaders confirm U.S. fears about Chinese intentions probably helped deflect criticism from reluctant allies like De Gaulle.

Kattenburg’s removal, the Brinkley NBC interview, and ongoing analysis of Chinese intentions illustrated that the Kennedy administration saw withdrawal from Vietnam as an action that would prove the efficacy of China’s hard line, enhance PRC prestige, and press the Soviets to act more dangerously. As Hilsman wrote in his memoir, “[S]o long as the Chinese felt that aggression and

60. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 2, 55–73.

61. *Ibid.*, 13, 57–67.

62. Kahin, *Intervention*, 287; Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (London, 2010), 18–19, 30–31.

their policy of hard line intransigence were successful they would hardly turn to peaceful coexistence.”⁶³ True, Kennedy opted for a diplomatic solution in Laos, but by 1963 the United States had invested far more money and manpower in Vietnam. The Chinese and North Vietnamese were also more willing to negotiate over Laos in 1961 and 1962 than by the end of 1963, when the DRV completed its ideological separation from Moscow and began pushing for all-out revolution. The Chinese, too, made specific guarantees to Hanoi in December 1963 by presenting the Vietnam People’s Army with a war preparation plan, outlining how the Chinese would assist them.⁶⁴

After Kennedy’s assassination, Lyndon Johnson came to office and retained most of Kennedy’s advisers and their accompanying assumptions about Chinese intentions. Johnson also held onto his predecessor’s aversion to diplomatic alternatives and relied increasingly on McNamara, Rusk, and Bundy to formulate Vietnam policy. Both Rusk and McNamara viewed Chinese intentions in Vietnam with alarm, and McNamara insisted that Johnson believed that the Chinese sought hegemony in Southeast Asia and saw the takeover of Vietnam as a step in that direction. Bundy, Logevall notes, warned Johnson in January 1964 that any move toward withdrawal would lead to increased Chinese influence in a neutral Thailand. His memo also reminded the president how the Chinese Revolution damaged Truman’s standing, implying that leaving Saigon would cause Johnson similar trouble.⁶⁵ Leading up to the 1964 elections, anxieties about China remained central to Johnson’s and his advisor’s conceptions of credibility.

More than any other ally, the French pressed American policymakers to change their views on Chinese intentions, but because French and U.S. officials operated with different assumptions, the Americans could never see eye-to-eye with them. When Undersecretary of State George Ball met with De Gaulle in June 1964, he told the French president that the United States had to prove its mettle against the aggressive Chinese. The Chinese, De Gaulle insisted, had limited ambitions in Southeast Asia; they remained weak, backward, and likely to accept neutralization. NSC China expert James Thomson exempted, Johnson administration officials disagreed with De Gaulle’s assumptions. Ball saw De Gaulle’s position as defeatist and stated that the administration’s key figures unanimously opposed negotiations because they feared Chinese expansionism and falling dominos.⁶⁶ The most recent CIA analysis confirmed the same line Washington had followed since the Mose Harvey study: China would be the chief beneficiary of a U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam because it would boost Beijing’s “prestige as a leader of world

63. Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 346.

64. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 120–25.

65. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 79, 92; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 102.

66. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 175–77, 229.

Communism . . . [and] conspicuously support the aggressive tactical considerations of Peiping as contrasted with the more cautious position of the USSR.”⁶⁷

UN Secretary General U Thant supported De Gaulle’s stance but had no better luck than the French president in persuading the Johnson administration. In July talks with U.S. Ambassador to the UN Adlai Stevenson, Thant pressed his case, and he tried once more during a State Department luncheon following the Tonkin Gulf Incident. Rusk, nevertheless, rejected his pleas for negotiating with the DRV. The secretary of state remained convinced that only U.S. force would demonstrate to the Chinese that their aggressive foreign policy line would fail, an argument he made when addressing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in early 1965. As late as 1968, one study has shown, Rusk still believed that U.S. withdrawal would stimulate China’s expansionist tendencies. As he argued in his memoirs, Rusk always saw the Chinese as clearly backing the DRV and opposing negotiation.⁶⁸

As Johnson Americanized the war, the assumptions Harvey first raised in 1962 retained their influence, and the China lobby and its allies reinforced the president’s determination. On March 24, 1964, McNamara gave a speech at an awards dinner in Washington where he stated “Communist China’s intentions are clear. It has publicly castigated Moscow for betraying the revolutionary cause . . . Peiping thus appears to feel that it has a large stake in demonstrating their new strategy, using Vietnam as a test case.” McNamara repeated this assertion over the next few weeks and, writing later of this judgment of China’s geopolitical objectives, stated: “I expressed the common view of my senior associates—both military and civilian.”⁶⁹ Testimonies before Congress in 1965 and 1966 from Hilsman, Taylor, and RAND Corporation analyst Donald Zagoria affirmed McNamara’s assertion: All three stated that Beijing believed Vietnam to be a test case for its ideological line against the Soviets.⁷⁰ This idea dated back to Mose Harvey’s draft paper. A few weeks after the Tonkin Gulf incident, Ball told James Reston that a neutralization conference was unworkable because it supposed the Chinese sought stability in Southeast Asia. Around the same time, the China lobby continued nursing the widespread belief among the American public and Congress that the Chinese controlled Hanoi and the NLF.⁷¹ Ball confirmed as much during an early 1965 Congressional briefing, warning that behind North Vietnam “is the very large specter of an expansionist China.” That same winter, Rusk argued the case for

67. Memo, Sherman Kent to John McCone, “Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a ‘Domino Effect’ in the Far East?” June 9, 1964. *CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room*, http://www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC_0001166427/DOC_0001166427.pdf (accessed April 16, 2013).

68. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 187, 211; Cohen, *Dean Rusk*, 288; Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It: A Secretary of State’s Memoirs* (New York, 1990), 258.

69. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 116.

70. Mao Lin, “China and the Escalation of the Vietnam War: The First Years of the Johnson Administration,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 2 (2009): 64–66.

71. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 229; Kahin, *Intervention*, 287.

escalation before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, saying that the United States must demonstrate that the Chinese approach would fail. By the summer of 1965, with American combat soldiers already on the ground, all but one of fifteen experts in a group Johnson convened to discuss foreign policy issues accepted the idea that Vietnam was a test case war for national liberation and that Communist takeover in South Vietnam could lead to outright Chinese or North Vietnamese control of other mainland Southeast Asian countries.⁷² The assumptions of Chinese intentions developed during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years still haunted Washington in the mid-1960s.

CONCLUSIONS

America's domestic political environment ensured that U.S. assessments of Chinese intentions would accept Beijing's radical pronouncements at face value. Without diplomatic relations, the United States had only limited sources to gauge Chinese foreign policy aims. McCarthyism and the China lobby made matters worse by pushing most leading China experts out of government, branding leading academic specialists as traitors, and enforcing an official orthodoxy on interpretations of the Chinese Revolution and the PRC. Those China watchers in the field in Hong Kong and Taiwan knew what befell their predecessors who reported honestly on events in China during World War II. Few analysts in Washington knew much about Chinese language or history, but all worked for men like Rusk or McCone who assumed that the Chinese sought to control Southeast Asia. Most importantly, policymakers in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations understood that any action regarding China which Republicans could construe as showing weakness risked political suicide.

Kennedy administration assessments on Chinese intentions in Vietnam ran the gamut from strident warnings of an imminent Chinese assault to dismissive conclusions that the Beijing regime was far too weak to do much of anything. In one way or another, however, nearly all these conclusions either affirmed the U.S. military commitment in the region or pushed for greater military pressure against the DRV. Kennedy's cautious escalation reflected his fears of another Korean War. This same cautious escalation, nevertheless, led to increased Chinese support to the DRV, who were determined to reunify Vietnam through armed struggle.

Only after Chinese foreign affairs archives open to the degree of their American counterparts will historians be able to determine how much China's support for the DRV was a reaction to U.S. escalation, but based on available evidence, Mao's ideological support of the DRV appears consistent with CCP foreign policy, and his materiel support appears largely reactive to U.S. moves. American China watchers had only limited capabilities to monitor Chinese materiel support, but anyone could read *Red Flag*. The aggressive rhetoric coming from Beijing conformed to U.S. policymakers' assumptions of China's expansionist tendencies.

72. Quoted in Cohen, *Dean Rusk*, 284–85; Kahin, *Intervention*, 360.

Granted, some officials like Thomson and Kattenburg challenged prevailing ideas about China, but these men remained in the minority and lacked the clout of senior figures like McNamara and Rusk.

Both China and the United States erred in their assumptions about the other side. The Chinese saw the United States as determined to wage an imperial foreign policy and reduce South Vietnam to the status of a colony, and Americans saw China as determined to seek hegemony over Southeast Asia. Like Kennedy and Johnson, Mao, too, staked his own personal standing on holding the line in Vietnam. Because of his harsher rhetorical stance compared to the Soviets on supporting armed revolutionary struggle, he risked being deemed a hypocrite if he chose not to stand behind the DRV.

Credibility, writes Logevall, was the central factor in Johnson's decision to Americanize the war. In *Choosing War*, Logevall argues that personal credibility for men like Johnson, McNamara, and Bundy mattered more than Democratic Party credibility or America's international credibility.⁷³ Yet Logevall mentions little about how the China factor informed credibility during the Kennedy and Johnson years. An important part of that credibility goes back to 1949, when Mao's Communists won the Chinese Civil War. The China lobby and the Republican Party thus found a common cause, blaming the Truman administration and "traitors" in the State Department for Chiang Kai-shek's defeat. China's 1950 entrance into the Korean War fueled McCarthy's and the China Lobby's assault on America's China experts, creating a rigid domestic political orthodoxy and inflicting deep wounds on the State Department and the Democrats.

In the 1960s, China remained central to Kennedy and Johnson administration notions of credibility. On an international geopolitical level, both administrations sought to bolster American credibility by using U.S. military power in South Vietnam to demonstrate the error of Beijing's aggressive rhetorical support for national revolutionary movements versus Moscow's support for peaceful coexistence. A firm stance against perceived Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia enhanced Party credibility vis-à-vis the hard-line Republicans and China lobbyists who had painted the Democrats as soft on Communism and even un-American since the fall of Nationalist China. A less resolute stance toward perceived Communist expansionism, especially with the 1960 and 1964 elections in mind, would have been unthinkable for the Democrats. On a personal level, holding back or even reversing Communist gains in an Asian country provided Kennedy, Johnson, and the New Frontiersmen a chance to kick the "who lost China" stigma once and for all. But drawing the line against the "the specter of an expansionist China" in Vietnam proved to be a tragic miscalculation.

73. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 386–89.