



THE SOVIET UNION IN THE SINO-VIETNAMESE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE (1975–1979): A STRUCTURAL POWER AND STRATEGIC PERCEPTION PERSPECTIVE

Luu Van Quyet*

Faculty of History and International Relations, University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Sai Gon Ward, Ho Chi Minh City 700000, Vietnam
E-mail: luuvanquyet@hcmussh.edu.vn

Vu Hung Phi**

Office of Inspection and Legal Affairs, Saigon University, Cho Quan Ward,
Ho Chi Minh City 700000, Vietnam

Faculty of History and International Relations, University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Sai Gon Ward,
Ho Chi Minh City 700000, Vietnam
E-mail: vphi@sgu.edu.vn

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ABSTRACT

Between 1975 and 1979, the strategic triangle involving Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union (USSR) underwent a profound transformation that culminated in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war. This study revisits that transformation by positioning the USSR not merely as a contextual backdrop but as a decisive source of structural power shaping both Vietnam's strategic alignment and China's threat perceptions. While existing scholarship has largely emphasised Chinese and Vietnamese motivations, this study places the Soviet dimension at the analytical centre as an independent variable. Integrating structural realism with strategic cognition, this study conceptualises structural power not simply as material capability but as the capacity to generate strategic effects through alliances, institutional linkages, and access arrangements that shape perceptions and expectations. Methodologically, this study draws on qualitative analysis of declassified archives, diplomatic correspondence, and contemporaneous Vietnamese, Soviet, Chinese, and Western sources. The findings suggest that although the USSR did not directly instigate the 1979 conflict, its strategic posture—symbolised by the 1978 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and access arrangements at Cam Ranh Bay—significantly intensified Beijing's perception of strategic encirclement. Vietnamese official discourse generally interpreted Soviet commitments as political and strategic reassurance. Moscow, however, continued to employ deliberately ambiguous signalling. Here, ambiguity is understood as a strategic choice rather than a communication failure, contributing to widening gaps in strategic expectations within the triangle. This asymmetry of interpretation weakened deterrent stability and contributed to regional instability in late Cold War Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Sino-Vietnamese relations, Soviet foreign policy, structural power, strategic perception, asymmetric alliances

INTRODUCTION

Between 1975 and 1979, Sino-Vietnamese relations underwent a dramatic transformation – from the brotherly friendship forged during the wars against France and the United States (US) to deepening political disputes, escalating tensions, and ultimately open warfare in early 1979. This rupture signalled not only the breakdown of ideological solidarity between two major socialist states in Asia but also a broader realignment of Southeast Asia's post-Vietnam War security order. Beyond immediate triggers such as the Cambodian conflict and tensions surrounding the ethnic Chinese community, the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations must be understood within the wider Cold War context, particularly the intensifying strategic rivalry between Beijing and Moscow.

Within the Vietnam-China-Soviet Union (USSR) strategic triangle, the USSR emerged as a pivotal actor whose policies reshaped the regional balance of power in Southeast Asia. For Hanoi, partnership with Moscow offered tangible benefits at a moment of acute postwar vulnerability, including reconstruction credits, technical assistance, military supplies, diplomatic backing, and a degree of strategic reassurance amid rising tensions with both China and Democratic Kampuchea.¹ For Moscow, however, Vietnam was not simply a fraternal ally but a strategically valuable partner through which the USSR sought to expand its geopolitical presence in Southeast Asia, strengthen its influence in Indochina, and counterbalance China's growing regional role without committing itself to direct confrontation. The Soviet-Vietnamese relationship was thus characterised by a mutually beneficial but uneven strategic alignment, in which Hanoi prioritised reconstruction and security while Moscow pursued influence, access, and strategic leverage. This asymmetry also shaped how Soviet commitments were formulated, conveyed, and interpreted within the triangular system.

Vietnam itself was not a passive actor within this triangular dynamic. As early as 1975, Hanoi began to perceive warning signs in China's regional posture. During Lê Duẩn's visit to Beijing in September 1975, Chinese state media prominently displayed images of Chinese forces stationed on the Paracel Islands,² while official commentary emphasised China's claims over islands in the South China Sea (Samuels 1982; Luu and Nguyen 2021). Vietnamese leaders increasingly interpreted these developments as indications of a broader shift in China's strategic behaviour (Communist Party of Vietnam 2002). At the same time, Hanoi continued to emphasise an independent foreign policy, avoiding explicit alignment with either Moscow or Beijing in the Sino-Soviet dispute. This position preserved strategic autonomy but increasingly frustrated Beijing, which expected Vietnam to support Beijing's opposition to Soviet hegemonism.

By the late 1970s, these tensions were reinforced by emerging structural alignments. Vietnam institutionalised its cooperation with the USSR through the 1978 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, a 25-year agreement that formalised consultation and strategic coordination, while China simultaneously deepened its rapprochement with the US. These developments did more than reflect shifting alliances; they also altered the strategic environment by reshaping strategic expectations, intensifying threat perceptions, and increasing the likelihood of confrontation within the triangular system.

To explain this crisis, this study draws on insights from both structural realism and strategic perception³ theory. Waltz's (1967) structural arguments highlight how shifts in the distribution of power and alliance structures constrain state behaviour. Complementing this perspective, Herrmann's (1986) work on strategic perception emphasises how leaders interpret threats, opportunities, and signals of commitment. In the context of the Vietnam-China-USSR triangle, this combined framework makes it possible to capture not only how Soviet involvement reshaped the regional environment, but also how the same developments were read differently in Hanoi

and Beijing. Building on Barnett and Duvall's (2005) broader conception of power and Guzzini's (1993) critique of purely materialist approaches, this study conceptualises structural power⁴ not only in terms of capabilities but also through institutional and relational arrangements that shape strategic behaviour.

Overall, the Hanoi-Moscow partnership was reciprocal but not strategically equivalent. For Vietnam, cooperation with the USSR was closely tied to immediate postwar imperatives of reconstruction, regime security, and deterrence under mounting external pressure. For Moscow, by contrast, Vietnam constituted a strategically valuable but instrumental partner embedded within a broader global strategy aimed at expanding influence in Southeast Asia, securing access, and counterbalancing China without direct military confrontation. For Beijing, however, these developments were interpreted through a different cognitive frame. Expanding Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation appeared less as a defensive arrangement than as part of a broader encirclement strategy constraining China's regional autonomy. This divergence in interpretation turned strategic alignment into a source of tension.

Accordingly, this study advances a central argument: the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War cannot be understood solely through Chinese decision-making or bilateral tensions, but must be analysed through the interaction between Soviet structural power and divergent strategic perceptions in Hanoi and Beijing. Specifically, this study demonstrates that Soviet commitments were interpreted asymmetrically, producing divergent expectations regarding credibility and intervention thresholds that made a limited war more feasible within the triangular system. By placing the USSR at the analytical centre, this study shows how asymmetrical alliance logic, ambiguous commitments, and misaligned expectations together weakened deterrent stability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the strategic dynamics of the Indochina triangle after 1975. However, this literature remains theoretically fragmented and analytically uneven because structural, bilateral, and perception-based explanations are rarely integrated within a single framework. Existing research on relations among Vietnam, China, and the USSR generally falls into three broad strands: analyses of structural power and alliance politics, studies of perception and strategic interpretation, and works examining bilateral tensions and Soviet policy in Southeast Asia. While each strand has generated important insights into the regional security environment, they remain analytically disconnected, limiting the understanding of how systemic constraints, alliance dynamics, and cognitive processes interacted during the crisis (Guzzini 1993; Barnett and Duvall 2005).

Scholars adopting structural or neorealist approaches emphasise the expansion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia through its alliance with Vietnam (Wilson 1979; Chang 1985; Gilks 1992; Morris 1999; Path 2008, 2020; Buszynski [1986] 2013; Nguyễn 2016; Đặng 2018). These studies highlight military assistance, institutional cooperation, and strategic facilities such as Cam Ranh Bay as key instruments through which Moscow consolidated its regional presence. This literature also recognises the limits of Soviet structural power, noting that Moscow pursued a cautious strategy designed to avoid direct confrontation with China. This tension between structural expansion and strategic restraint created asymmetries between Vietnam's security expectations and the USSR's broader global priorities. However, by privileging material capabilities and alliance structures, these approaches tend to understate how regional actors interpreted these developments in different ways.

A second strand of scholarship focuses on perception and cognitive interpretation. Drawing on Herrmann's (1986) argument that foreign-policy decisions are shaped through interpretive lenses rather than purely objective indicators, scholars such as Jencks (1979), Chen (1987), Evans and Rowley (1990), Zhou (1992), Zhai (2000), Zhang (2005, 2015), and Kissinger (2012, 2015) examine how Chinese leaders increasingly interpreted Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation as evidence of strategic encirclement. More recent studies, including Schulman (2018) and Path (2020), further emphasise how ideological narratives and strategic discourse shaped the ways in which Beijing and Hanoi interpreted alliance developments and threat perceptions. This body of work demonstrates that perceived trajectories of alignment—rather than discrete shifts in material capabilities alone—played a decisive role in shaping Chinese threat assessments in the late 1970s. While this literature provides important insights into cognitive processes, it often lacks a systematic account of how these perceptions were conditioned by underlying structural changes.

A third strand of research examines the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations and the asymmetries embedded within the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance (Ross 1988; Amer 1991; Morris 1999; Khoo 2011; Nguyễn 2014, 2016; Luu and Nguyen 2021). Vietnamese archival materials and official publications indicate that Hanoi regarded the alliance with the USSR as a critical pillar of national security amid rising tensions with China. These sources show that Vietnamese leaders interpreted Soviet commitments as a strategic counterweight to external pressure rather than as evidence of proxy dependence. At the same time, Soviet and Russian-language scholarship (Gaiduk 1996; Kobelyov 2014, 2015, 2019; Wang 2023) emphasises that Moscow interpreted the relationship primarily through the lens of global strategic competition and consistently avoided steps that might provoke direct confrontation with China. Several Russian studies also argue that Soviet assistance to Vietnam, particularly in the military and strategic domains, played a significant role in reshaping the regional balance of power in Indochina, even as Moscow attempted to manage escalation risks (Kobelyov 2014, 2019). Yet these studies rarely connect alliance asymmetry to the broader dynamics of perception and escalation within the triangular system.

Existing scholarship generally suggests that Vietnam viewed the Soviet alliance as a key element of national security, whereas Moscow treated it as one component of a broader global strategy. This divergence shaped both Vietnam's security concerns and China's interpretation of Hanoi's alignment choices. Despite extensive scholarship on the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, however, the Soviet dimension of the crisis has received comparatively limited analytical attention. Much of the literature has paid considerable attention to China's motivations, the Cambodian conflict, and bilateral disputes between Beijing and Hanoi (Ross 1988; Evans and Rowley 1990; Womack 2006; Zhang 2005, 2015; Path 2008, 2020; Khoo 2011; Nguyễn 2016), while Russian scholarship has examined important aspects of Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation and triangular dynamics (Kobelyov 2014, 2015, 2019; Lokshin 2019; Wang 2023). However, relatively few studies place the USSR at the analytical centre of the 1979 conflict. Against this background, three major limitations remain. First, existing scholarship has not sufficiently explained how Soviet alliance-building reshaped the regional strategic setting in ways interpreted differently by Hanoi and Beijing, thereby altering the dynamics of escalation within the strategic triangle. Second, structural and perception-based explanations are rarely integrated, resulting in an incomplete understanding of how material constraints and cognitive interpretations interacted during the crisis. Third, although Vietnam's agency is increasingly acknowledged, existing studies do not adequately explain how Hanoi interpreted Soviet commitments within an asymmetric alliance or how these interpretations influenced Beijing's threat perceptions. Accordingly, this study addresses these limitations by placing the USSR at the analytical centre of the Vietnam-China-USSR strategic triangle. It develops an integrated framework that links Soviet structural power with divergent strategic perceptions in Hanoi and Beijing, thereby providing a more comprehensive explanation of the escalation dynamics that culminated in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Theorising Structural Realism and Strategic Perception

This study integrates structural realism with strategic perception to explain how the USSR shaped the Vietnam–China–Soviet triangle between 1975 and 1979 through both material reconfiguration and strategic interpretation. The central argument is that alliance politics in asymmetric settings cannot be adequately understood by focusing exclusively on either the distribution of capabilities or leaders' beliefs. Rather, changes in alignment and strategic access generate political effects whose meaning is filtered through existing interpretive frames, producing mismatched expectations that can accelerate escalation even in the absence of deliberate war-making intentions. Accordingly, the framework functions not merely as a background theoretical discussion but as an analytic guide that informs case selection, evidence interpretation, and causal reasoning throughout the empirical analysis.

Building on Waltz's (1967) structural arguments, the framework recognises that changes in capability distribution and alignment patterns constrain state behaviour. At the same time, this study adopts a broader understanding of "structure" than one focused narrowly on material balance. Drawing on Guzzini (1993) and Barnett and Duvall (2005), structural power is conceptualised as the capacity to shape the configuration of options, dependencies, and institutional linkages through which strategic action becomes more or less feasible. In late 1970s Indochina, Soviet structural power operated less through direct coercion than through alliance institutionalisation, economic integration, and strategic access – most visibly through Vietnam's integration into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon),⁵ the 1978 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, and Soviet access arrangements at Cam Ranh Bay.⁶ These developments altered not only material capabilities but also the relational architecture of the regional order, compelling other actors to interpret their implications.

Such developments do not automatically translate into uniform behavioural responses; what matters is how they are interpreted by political elites operating under conditions of uncertainty. Herrmann's (1986) theory of strategic perception helps explain why identical structural developments can generate reassurance for one actor while intensifying threat perceptions for another. Strategic perception in this study refers to how political elites categorise other actors, infer intentions, and form expectations about commitment credibility. Within the Vietnam–China–Soviet triangle, Beijing increasingly labelled Vietnam as a Soviet outpost, interpreting Soviet–Vietnamese cooperation as evidence of encirclement, whereas Hanoi interpreted the same cooperation as reassurance against converging external pressures. These perceptions were not incidental. They functioned as mediating mechanisms through which structural change was translated into political action, shaping threat assessments, credibility judgements, and escalation thresholds.

This integrated structural–cognitive framework yields two theoretical implications that the empirical analysis explicitly examines. First, it refines structural realist expectations by demonstrating that alignment outcomes depend not only on the objective distribution of capabilities, but also on how alliance-related developments are interpreted within pre-existing belief systems. Structural realism would anticipate balancing behaviour under conditions of threat; yet this case suggests that balancing can become more likely to generate escalation when perceived trajectories of alignment—rather than capabilities alone—are interpreted as indicators of hostile intent. Second, the framework refines cognition-centred accounts by anchoring perception dynamics in observable structural developments. Perception gaps are not treated as isolated psychological errors, but as interpretations rooted in identifiable alliance arrangements and access agreements.

A key concept linking structure and perception in this study is strategic signalling under ambiguity. Alliance treaties and military access arrangements often contain indeterminate clauses and flexible commitments. Such ambiguity can be intentional: it allows a major power to sustain influence and alliance credibility while avoiding automatic entrapment in unwanted conflicts. At the same time, ambiguity widens gaps in expectation within asymmetric alliances. Weaker partners may interpret political assurances as approaching a security guarantee, while stronger patrons calibrate their commitments in light of broader strategic priorities. In the Vietnam-China-Soviet case, this asymmetry was reflected in Vietnam's expectation of deterrent backing exceeding Moscow's willingness to risk direct confrontation, while Beijing inferred that a punitive but limited war could remain below the Soviet intervention threshold.

Building on this logic, the analysis traces a three-stage causal sequence. Soviet alliance-building and access arrangements altered Indochina's strategic environment. These changes were then interpreted through divergent cognitive frames in Hanoi and Beijing—reassurance on the one hand, encirclement on the other—producing incompatible expectations about commitment and resolve. Finally, these differing expectations shaped escalation thresholds, conditioning China's willingness to initiate war on a limited scale and Vietnam's reliance on strategic reassurance without seeking direct proxy confrontation. The empirical sections that follow trace this sequence through documentary evidence and elite discourse.

Research Design and Sources

This study adopts a qualitative, historically grounded methodology that combines historical analysis with insights from international relations theory. Rather than merely reconstructing events, it explains how structural conditions and actor perceptions interacted to shape strategic behaviour.

This study traces how shifts in alignment and institutional linkages generated identifiable strategic effects and how those developments were interpreted by Vietnam and China. Changes in alliance structures, power distributions, and institutional arrangements are thus linked to perception-driven policy choices. The analytical design integrates structural realism, which highlights systemic constraints, with strategic cognition theory, which explains how leaders interpret and respond to those constraints.

Empirical evidence is drawn from multiple categories of sources to ensure triangulation. Primary materials include Vietnamese party and government publications, selected declassified Soviet materials, Chinese official statements, and Western intelligence and diplomatic reports from 1975 to 1979. Secondary sources include scholarship on Cold War politics, alliance politics, structural power, and strategic perception. Vietnamese-language scholarship is incorporated to balance Western interpretations and highlight local perspectives often underrepresented in international debates.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, it reconstructs the chronology of the Vietnam-China-USSR triangle between 1975 and 1979. Second, it examines the USSR's structural role through economic assistance, military cooperation, and alliance institutionalisation. Third, it analyses how divergent Vietnamese and Chinese interpretations of these developments transformed strategic alignment into confrontation. Process tracing is employed not merely to reconstruct chronology but to identify how alliance-related developments were translated into divergent strategic expectations, while discourse analysis examines how political leaders framed threats, justified strategic decisions, and interpreted alliance commitments.

This study focuses on 1975 until 1979, when the triangle was most fluid and escalation-prone. Archival access remains uneven across the three actors. Vietnamese sources are relatively accessible through party documents and official publications, whereas systematic access to Chinese internal archives remains limited and Soviet materials have been only partially declassified. To address these constraints, this study relies on triangulation across Vietnamese documents, Russian-language scholarship, available Soviet materials, Chinese official statements, and contemporaneous Western reporting.

By combining historical reconstruction with theory-driven interpretation, this methodological approach highlights how structural power and perception interacted within the Vietnam-China-USSR strategic triangle. It demonstrates that perceptions of alliance commitments and strategic intent were as important as material capabilities in shaping the escalation that culminated in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict.

HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL CONTEXT (1975–1979)

The end of the Indochina wars in 1975 marked a major geopolitical transformation in mainland Southeast Asia. With the victories of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, a contiguous zone of socialist regimes emerged stretching from China's southern border to the Gulf of Thailand. Rather than producing regional cohesion, however, this transformation generated a new arena of strategic competition shaped by the intensifying Sino-Soviet rivalry. The post-1975 regional order therefore remained structurally fluid, as alliance expectations and security perceptions were recalibrated across the region. These conditions provided the broader setting within which later developments and their interpretation acquired greater strategic significance.

From a structural perspective, the withdrawal of US military forces created conditions that enabled the USSR to expand its political and strategic presence in Southeast Asia. Vietnam's reunification significantly increased its geopolitical importance, and Moscow increasingly viewed Hanoi as a key partner within the socialist camp. Soviet economic assistance, expanding military cooperation, and Vietnam's integration into Comecon reflected a growing network of institutional and strategic linkages across Indochina (Nguyễn 2008; Buszynski [1986] 2013). These developments deepened Soviet involvement in regional political and economic structures and signalled a growing Soviet commitment that would shape both allied expectations and adversarial threat perceptions.

For China, however, the evolving regional environment generated increasing strategic concern. Historically, Vietnam had functioned as a buffer along China's southern frontier (Kissinger 2012). The emergence of a Vietnam increasingly connected to Soviet political and military networks was therefore interpreted in Beijing as a potential shift in the regional balance. Influenced by the legacy of the Sino-Soviet split, Chinese leaders viewed expanding Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation and Soviet access to regional facilities as developments with broader strategic implications (Ross 1988; Kissinger 2012; Vũ 2019). Structural changes were thus filtered through an existing framework of strategic rivalry, amplifying perceived threat levels and reinforcing expectations of encirclement.

These dynamics were further shaped by changes in the wider Cold War environment. China's gradual normalisation with the US during the 1970s, combined with concerns among several Southeast Asian states regarding Soviet influence, contributed to the emergence of new patterns of regional alignment. Beijing increasingly viewed diplomatic engagement with the US and cooperation with Southeast Asian states as a strategic hedge against perceived Soviet expansion (Vũ 2019). These evolving alignments reinforced a competitive environment in which one actor's cooperation could readily be interpreted by another as evidence of hostile alignment.

Vietnam's foreign policy after reunification sought to balance two objectives: preserving strategic autonomy while securing favourable conditions for reconstruction and national defence. In the immediate postwar years, Hanoi attempted to maintain workable relations with both China and the USSR while promoting cooperation with Laos and Cambodia (Communist Party of Vietnam 2002). However, deteriorating relations with Democratic Kampuchea and increasing regional security pressures gradually pushed Vietnam towards closer cooperation with Moscow. Chinese leaders interpreted these developments differently. Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia and expanding Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation were increasingly viewed in Beijing as evidence of coordinated strategic expansion in Indochina. As tensions intensified, bilateral relations deteriorated through diplomatic disputes, economic pressures, and competing regional alignments. These diverging interpretations illustrate how evolving alignments generated not only material changes but also competing expectations regarding strategic intent and alignment.

Domestic developments in Vietnam also contributed to rising tensions. Vietnam's late-1970s campaign against the so-called "bourgeoisie", which affected segments of the ethnic Chinese (Hoa)⁷ commercial community, generated additional diplomatic friction between Hanoi and Beijing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam [MOFA Vietnam] 1979: 86; Chang 1982: 16; Morris 1999: 29; Luu and Nguyen 2021: 158). Chinese authorities portrayed these measures as discriminatory policies targeting overseas Chinese, further reinforcing Beijing's perception that Vietnam had adopted a hostile stance (*Renmin Ribao* 1979; Guo 1992). Although the campaign did not by itself cause the breakdown in Sino-Vietnamese relations, it intensified an already deteriorating relationship by providing Beijing with a politically sensitive issue through which broader strategic mistrust could be amplified and internationalised. In this sense, the Hoa issue functioned less as an autonomous cause of war than as an accelerant within a wider pattern of bilateral and triangular confrontation.

In sum, the post-1975 Indochina order emerged through the interaction of geopolitical restructuring and shifting alliance relationships. The redistribution of power following US withdrawal, expanding Soviet involvement in Vietnam, and China's evolving threat assessments created a volatile regional environment in which strategic alignments became increasingly polarised. This structural context did not mechanically produce conflict, but it established the conditions under which Soviet commitments would be interpreted differently by Hanoi and Beijing, thereby shaping the escalation dynamics that ultimately made war possible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Soviet Strategic Objectives and Alliance Management after 1975

Following Vietnam's reunification in 1975, Soviet policy towards Hanoi shifted from wartime assistance to a strategy of regional influence and controlled alliance management within the intensifying Sino-Soviet rivalry. Through economic assistance, military cooperation, and institutional engagement, the USSR sought not only to support Vietnam materially but also to reshape the regional balance of power (Buszynski [1986] 2013).

Soviet engagement with Vietnam after 1975 cannot be understood solely as postwar assistance or socialist solidarity. Rather, it formed part of a broader strategic effort to expand Soviet geopolitical presence in Southeast Asia, reinforce its credibility within the socialist camp, and counterbalance China's regional influence while avoiding direct military confrontation with Beijing (Buszynski [1986] 2013). Soviet strategy towards Vietnam was therefore embedded in a broader effort to shape the postwar strategic order in Southeast Asia. By embedding Vietnam within Soviet-centred economic, political, and military networks, Moscow secured a strategic

foothold in Indochina at a moment when American power had receded from the region (Nguyễn 2016). This positioning not only expanded Moscow's regional reach but also affected both allied expectations and adversarial threat perceptions.

Within this configuration, Vietnam functioned simultaneously as a partner requiring support for reconstruction and as a geopolitical platform through which the USSR could expand its regional influence. Yet Soviet policy remained carefully managed: Moscow sought to enhance its credibility within the socialist camp and constrain China's regional role while avoiding strategic entrapment in a direct Sino-Soviet confrontation. The Soviet-Vietnamese partnership thus reflected a controlled form of alliance politics in which influence, deterrence, and restraint were deliberately balanced. This calibrated approach meant that Soviet commitments were designed to be credible but not unlimited, thereby embedding ambiguity into the structure of the alliance itself.

From Hanoi's perspective, however, cooperation with Moscow was framed primarily as a pragmatic response to reconstruction needs and growing security pressures rather than as subordination to Soviet strategy. Vietnamese official documents consistently emphasised independence and self-reliance as guiding principles of foreign policy (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam [CCCPV] 1976; MOFA Vietnam and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR [MOFA USSR] 1983). The Political Report of the Fourth National Congress of the Communist Party in 1976 defined foreign policy priorities as mobilising international conditions favourable to economic recovery and national defence while maintaining solidarity with socialist countries (CCCPV 1976). Within this framework, cooperation with the USSR was presented as supporting autonomy rather than substituting for it.

Soviet assistance expanded substantially after reunification. Even before 1975, the USSR had increased military and economic aid to support Vietnam's final campaigns against the US (Gaiduk 1996). During Lê Duẩn's visit to Moscow in October 1975, the USSR pledged approximately 1.73 billion rubles in long-term credits (Democratic Republic of Vietnam Prime Minister's Office 1975), nearly half of the aid provided by the socialist bloc (*Bước Phát Triển Mới Về Chất Của Quan Hệ Hữu Nghị Hợp Tác Việt Nam-Liên Xô* 1987; Path 2020). Between 1975 and 1978, total Soviet assistance reached roughly 3.6 billion rubles, including major investments in infrastructure, energy, and industry (MOFA Vietnam and MOFA USSR 1983; Đặng 2018). Projects such as the Vietsovpetro joint venture became central to the development of Vietnam's petroleum sector and broader industrial recovery. Vietnamese sources portrayed these commitments as critical to postwar economic recovery, stressing that without socialist support, particularly from the USSR, Vietnam would have struggled to stabilise its economy and meet urgent social needs (CCCPV 1976, 1978).

From the perspective of structural power (Barnett and Duvall 2005), these commitments did more than provide economic resources: they reconfigured Vietnam's position within a Soviet-centred network of economic and institutional relations, thereby enabling Moscow to shape the regional strategic environment without direct coercion. This restructuring of economic dependence and strategic access also indicated to external actors the depth of Soviet engagement in Vietnam. Hanoi nevertheless continued to describe the relationship as mutually beneficial cooperation consistent with socialist internationalism and national self-reliance (CCCPV 1976).

Soviet engagement also extended into education, administration, and military training. Thousands of Soviet experts worked in Vietnam, while Vietnamese students and officials received extensive training in Soviet institutions (Vietnam News Agency 1978). These exchanges strengthened technical capacity while reinforcing institutional links between the two countries, further embedding Vietnam within Soviet-led networks of influence.

Military cooperation constituted the second pillar of Soviet policy. Moscow supplied naval vessels, armoured vehicles, air-defence systems, and military advisers (Evans and Rowley 1990). A particularly significant development was Soviet access to naval facilities at Cam Ranh Bay, a deep-water port that provided the USSR with a major maritime foothold in Southeast Asia (Kissinger 2015; Đặng 2018). Vietnamese authorities justified these arrangements as necessary to strengthen deterrence and national defence, while for Moscow, access to Cam Ranh Bay significantly expanded Soviet naval reach in Southeast Asia (CCCPV 1979). From a structural realist perspective (Waltz 1967), this access enhanced Soviet force-projection capabilities near China's southern flank. It also reinforced Beijing's perception of expanding Soviet strategic reach.

Diplomatically, Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation culminated in Vietnam's accession to Comecon in 1978 and the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation later that year. The 25-year treaty reaffirmed political solidarity and established mechanisms for consultation in the event of external threats (MOFA Vietnam and MOFA USSR 1983). Vietnamese leaders presented the treaty domestically as a defensive arrangement intended to support reconstruction and national security rather than to formalise bloc alignment (CCCPV 1978). From the perspective of alliance theory, however, such agreements functioned as commitment markers within an asymmetric relationship. Vietnam interpreted the treaty as providing implicit reassurance amid rising tensions with China and Democratic Kampuchea, while China viewed it as confirmation that Hanoi had entered the Soviet strategic orbit (Vũ 2019). What Moscow intended as a reinforcement of deterrence for Vietnam simultaneously intensified Chinese perceptions of encirclement, illustrating how alliance-building could generate both reassurance and insecurity within the triangular system.

Soviet Signalling during the 1978–1979 Crisis: Support, Restraint, and Strategic Ambiguity

The dynamics of Soviet policy became particularly visible during the 1978–1979 crisis, when Moscow translated its broader strategic objectives into concrete forms of political, military, and diplomatic signalling. Rather than direct intervention, Soviet strategy relied on a carefully balanced combination of support and restraint designed to influence escalation while avoiding a wider Sino–Soviet confrontation. Soviet signalling thus operated less through direct control of events than through shaping the strategic environment in which decisions were made.

During this period, the USSR provided sustained diplomatic backing to Vietnam, expanded military assistance, and mobilised forces along the Sino-Soviet border. These actions signalled resolve and demonstrated that Moscow would not abandon a key partner under external pressure. At the same time, however, Soviet leaders deliberately avoided direct military confrontation with China. Soviet policy thus combined substantial support with strategic restraint, signalling commitment without offering an automatic combat guarantee. This combination created an environment in which commitment appeared credible yet limited, leaving room for divergent regional interpretations.

This dual-track approach reflected a broader logic of controlled alliance management under conditions of escalating crisis. At the regional level, Soviet involvement had dual effects: it facilitated Vietnam's economic recovery and strengthened its security position, while simultaneously intensifying Chinese perceptions of encirclement. Soviet policy therefore functioned both as a deterrent instrument and as a source of strategic ambiguity, shaping allied expectations and adversarial threat perceptions at the same time.

From a strategic perspective, Soviet signalling during the 1978–1979 crisis served four interrelated objectives. First, it helped preserve Moscow's credibility with Vietnam and the wider socialist camp by demonstrating that the USSR would not abandon a key partner under external pressure. Second, it increased the expected costs of Chinese escalation through military resupply, diplomatic backing, and force mobilisation along the Sino-Soviet border. Third, it enabled Moscow to protect and deepen its structural influence in Indochina during a period of intensifying regional realignment. Fourth, and equally importantly, it allowed the Soviet leadership to avoid direct entrapment in a Sino-Soviet war. Together, these objectives suggest that Soviet policy was designed not to prevent conflict altogether but to regulate its scope and strategic consequences.

Soviet policy during the crisis was thus neither a failure of commitment nor a case of unconditional alliance solidarity. Rather, it represented a strategy of limited support – sufficient to sustain credibility and constrain escalation, yet deliberately bounded so as to prevent a wider great-power confrontation. This calibrated approach created additional uncertainty about the threshold of Soviet intervention, which became a key variable in Chinese strategic calculations.

Judged against these objectives, Soviet signalling during the crisis was only partially successful. In terms of credibility, Moscow largely achieved its goal: continued military assistance, diplomatic backing, and force mobilisation signalled commitment to Vietnam and reassured the wider socialist camp. With regard to deterrence, however, the outcome was more limited. While Soviet actions increased the expected costs of escalation and likely constrained the scale and duration of Chinese operations, they did not prevent Beijing from initiating a punitive war. This outcome highlights the limits of indirect deterrence under conditions of deliberately ambiguous commitment.

At the regional level, Moscow succeeded in preserving and, in some respects, deepening its structural influence in Indochina. Vietnam remained firmly embedded within Soviet-centred economic, military, and institutional networks. The Soviet leadership effectively avoided direct entrapment in a Sino-Soviet conflict, maintaining strategic flexibility within the broader Cold War context.

These outcomes reveal a pattern of partial success: Soviet policy sustained credibility, preserved influence, and constrained escalation, yet fell short of fully deterring conflict or eliminating divergent assumptions within the alliance. This partial effectiveness underscores both the utility and the limits of Soviet structural power in managing crisis dynamics within an asymmetric alliance.

Interpretation of Soviet Signals in Hanoi and Beijing: Perception, Misalignment, and the Road to War

While Soviet policy generated a set of political and strategic cues through economic assistance, military cooperation, and alliance commitments, their effects depended critically on how they were interpreted by regional actors. In this sense, Soviet structural power operated not only through material capabilities but also through the meanings attached to its actions by other actors. The escalation of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict therefore cannot be understood without examining how the same developments produced divergent threat perceptions and expectations in Hanoi and Beijing.

In the aftermath of the Indochina victories of 1975, China's posture towards Vietnam shifted from revolutionary camaraderie to growing strategic suspicion. Although Beijing publicly celebrated Vietnam's defeat of the US, it increasingly interpreted postwar developments through the lens

of the Sino-Soviet split and the perceived expansion of Soviet influence in Asia (CCCPV 1976; *Renmin Ribao* 1979). As Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation deepened, China reinterpreted Vietnam not merely as a difficult neighbour but as a potential extension of Soviet strategic power along its southern flank (Ross 1988; Elleman 2001). This reinterpretation transformed otherwise ambiguous developments into indicators of hostile alignment, thereby elevating perceived threat levels even in the absence of explicit hostile intent.

Vietnamese official documents, however, consistently emphasised that post-1975 foreign policy remained grounded in independence and self-reliance (CCCPV 1976, 1978, 1979). From Hanoi's perspective, Soviet cooperation was interpreted as supportive rather than constraining. Vietnamese political discourse framed the relationship as mutually reinforcing, emphasising that external assistance strengthened rather than replaced national autonomy (CCCPV 1976, 1994; MOFA Vietnam and MOFA USSR 1983). In practical terms, Soviet aid enhanced Vietnam's capacity to manage simultaneous security challenges, particularly amid deteriorating relations with China and escalating conflict with Democratic Kampuchea (MOFA Vietnam and MOFA USSR 1983). Crucially, this interpretation made Soviet support a source of reassurance, reinforcing expectations that external backing would contribute to deterrence rather than provoke escalation.

This divergence became a central feature of the triangular relationship: the same Soviet-related developments were interpreted differently in Beijing and Hanoi, producing contrasting expectations about alignment, threat, and commitment credibility. More broadly, the case illustrates the interaction between structural conditions and strategic cognition, in which material alignments shaped the strategic environment while political leaders interpreted those conditions under uncertainty.

In the immediate postwar years, Vietnam pursued a strategy of multilateral engagement aimed at reconstruction while preserving strategic autonomy. Between 1975 and 1977, Hanoi maintained relations with both Moscow and Beijing, emphasising that balanced ties within the socialist camp were essential for recovery (CCCPV 1976, 1978, 1979; Nguyễn 2002). Beijing, however, increasingly demanded clearer political alignment. During Lê Duẩn's 1975 visit to Beijing, the absence of a joint communiqué and the early termination of the trip signalled growing mistrust (Ross 1988; Khoo 2011). Chinese leaders pressed Vietnam to condemn Soviet hegemonism, while Vietnam framed its position as principled independence. Beijing interpreted this stance as concealed alignment, illustrating how ambiguity can be read as hostility when filtered through adversarial expectations.

A series of diplomatic frictions in 1976–1977 further eroded trust. Vietnam pursued diversified external relations, while China increasingly portrayed these policies as evidence of strategic drift towards Moscow (Chang 1982; Chanda 1986; Khoo 2011). These developments reinforced a feedback loop in which prior suspicions shaped the interpretation of new developments, progressively narrowing the space for cooperative expectations.

The Cambodian crisis further intensified tensions. As Democratic Kampuchea—supported by China—conducted repeated cross-border attacks, Vietnam sought Chinese mediation, but Beijing refused and expanded support for the Khmer Rouge (Luu and Nguyen 2021). From Hanoi's perspective, this produced a two-front security dilemma requiring defensive intervention. From Beijing's perspective, however, Vietnam's actions confirmed suspicions of Soviet-backed regional expansion (Wang 2005). Chinese criticism escalated accordingly, including the mobilisation of the ethnic Chinese (Hoa) issue within international discourse (MOFA Vietnam 1979; Nguyễn 2002; Path 2020). Here again, the same developments were embedded within competing interpretive narratives: defence in Hanoi, expansion in Beijing.

As Vietnam strengthened ties with the USSR to address mounting security pressures, China increasingly viewed these actions as confirmation of hostile alignment (Path 2020). Soviet aid, military cooperation, and treaty negotiations were thus interpreted through contrasting cognitive frames: reassurance in Hanoi and encirclement in Beijing. The turning point came with the signing of the Vietnam-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in November 1978. For Vietnam, the treaty represented a defensive response to intensifying insecurity (CCCPV 1978); for China, it confirmed that Hanoi had entered the Soviet strategic orbit (Central Intelligence Agency 1979; Chen 1987; Wang 2005). The convergence of several developments—including Soviet access to Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia, and the treaty—reinforced Chinese perceptions of strategic encirclement (Chen 1987).

Domestic political developments in China also shaped Beijing's escalation calculus. Deng Xiaoping's consolidation of power and the repositioning of Chinese foreign policy after Mao contributed to a growing determination to resist perceived Soviet encirclement (Zhang 2010; Eisenman 2019). However, these domestic factors alone cannot fully explain the timing of escalation. The opportunity structure for conflict emerged from the interaction between Soviet commitments and Beijing's assessment of their credibility and limits.

These divergent expectations directly influenced China's strategic calculations. Chinese leaders concluded that the USSR would be unwilling to risk direct military confrontation with China in defence of Vietnam (Zhou 1992; Li 1993; Lee 2000). Importantly, this was not simply an assessment of Soviet capability, but of political willingness – an inference derived from patterns of Soviet behaviour rather than from explicit guarantees. The perceived limits of Soviet commitment thus became a key condition for China's decision to launch a punitive war on a limited scale.

In late 1978, Deng Xiaoping sought support for such an operation, arguing that the USSR would not intervene militarily despite the 1978 treaty (Chen 1987; Lee 2000). This assessment suggested that China could act without provoking a wider war. Preparations combined diplomatic signalling with military readiness while hedging against potential Soviet responses (Jencks 1979; Li 1993; Ta 2002; Tyler 2008). On 17 February 1979, China launched a large-scale invasion of northern Vietnam involving more than 200,000 troops (Path 2008; Vũ 2019). The conflict lasted roughly one month, after which Beijing announced a unilateral withdrawal. Despite heavy losses and limited territorial gains, the operation demonstrated China's resolve and tested the credibility and limits of Soviet alliance commitments (Evans and Rowley 1990; Kissinger 2015).

From Hanoi's perspective, the Chinese attack represented the culmination of escalating coercive pressure since 1977. Contemporary Vietnamese official sources emphasised that the combination of large-scale troop mobilisation, armed incursions, and explicit war threats had already created "an extremely dangerous situation along the Sino-Vietnamese border" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1979: 5). Vietnam responded with nationwide mobilisation and defensive operations aimed at imposing high costs on the invading forces (CCCPV 1979; Vũ 2019). Crucially, Vietnam did not request direct Soviet combat intervention, instead relying on Soviet political signalling and material support to influence China's cost calculations. This response suggests that Hanoi's expectations were calibrated towards indirect deterrence rather than automatic alliance intervention.

Soviet behaviour during the conflict reinforced this strategic ambiguity. Moscow condemned Beijing, mobilised substantial forces along the Sino-Soviet border, and expanded military aid to Vietnam, but deliberately avoided direct intervention (Central Intelligence Agency 1979; Kobelyov 2019). These actions simultaneously strengthened deterrence while signalling the limits of Soviet commitment, shaping the environment within which escalation unfolded.

The crisis, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a story of Chinese decision-making. Rather, it emerged from the interaction between Soviet commitments and their divergent interpretation by Vietnam and China. Beijing's calculations were conditioned by its assessment that Moscow would support Vietnam substantially but not unconditionally. Soviet policy thus defined the strategic boundaries of escalation: it constrained the scale of conflict while leaving space for a limited war to occur.

The breakdown of deterrence in 1979 largely resulted from a persistent gap in expectations within the triangular system. Vietnam interpreted Soviet commitments as deterrent reassurance, whereas China assessed those same commitments as bounded and therefore insufficient to prevent a military operation of limited scope. This misalignment turned deterrent measures into permissive conditions for war, illustrating how ambiguity in alliance commitments can unintentionally lower escalation thresholds.

CONCLUSION

The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War cannot be fully explained through bilateral tensions or Chinese decision-making alone, but must be understood through the interaction between Soviet structural power and divergent strategic perceptions. While border disputes, the Cambodian conflict, the Hoa issue, and the broader deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations all contributed to the outbreak of hostilities, this study argues that the conflict can only be fully understood by examining how Soviet power was embedded in the Vietnam-China-USSR triangle. Within this configuration, the USSR functioned not as a passive background actor but as a central strategic force that reshaped the regional balance of power and conditioned the choices of both Hanoi and Beijing.

Soviet influence operated primarily through structural mechanisms—economic assistance, military cooperation, institutionalised alliances, and strategic access arrangements such as Cam Ranh Bay—which strengthened Vietnam's security environment while expanding Moscow's regional presence. These mechanisms also produced political effects that were interpreted differently by Hanoi and Beijing. For Hanoi, Soviet commitments provided reassurance under conditions of growing insecurity. For Beijing, the same developments appeared as evidence of strategic encirclement. The escalation of tensions therefore reflected not only material changes in the regional balance of power but also divergent interpretive frameworks through which those changes were understood.

The crisis of 1978–1979 also revealed the limits and contradictions of Soviet structural power. Moscow succeeded in reinforcing alliance credibility, expanding its influence in Indochina, and constraining the scale of Chinese military operations. At the same time, it deliberately avoided direct intervention to prevent escalation into a wider Sino-Soviet conflict. This combination of support and restraint was not a failure of commitment but a strategic choice embedded in Soviet grand strategy. Soviet policy thus functioned as a calibrated strategy of limited support that balanced credibility and entrapment avoidance – sufficient to sustain credibility and shape the strategic environment, yet deliberately kept below the threshold of direct intervention.

These dynamics produced a persistent credibility gap within the triangular system. Vietnam interpreted Soviet commitments as deterrent reassurance, whereas Moscow treated the alliance as one component of a broader global strategy, and China assessed that Soviet support would remain substantial but limited. This misalignment of expectations altered perceptions of escalation thresholds within the triangular system and increased the likelihood of conflict.

The breakdown of deterrence in 1979, therefore, emerged not from the absence of power, but from the interaction between structural incentives and competing interpretations of credibility and commitment.

By placing the USSR at the analytical centre of the triangular relationship, this study contributes to a more integrated understanding of Cold War conflict dynamics in Southeast Asia. It demonstrates that Soviet policy was shaped not only by ideological solidarity but also by strategic calculations concerning influence, access, and rivalry management. More broadly, the case suggests that structural realism and strategic cognition are analytically complementary: structural conditions define the constraints of action, while perceptions determine how those conditions are interpreted and acted upon.

The broader implication is that deterrence stability within asymmetric alliances depends not only on the distribution of power but also on the alignment of expectations regarding alliance commitments. Where commitments are deliberately ambiguous and interpretations diverge, deterrent measures may be transformed into conditions that make war more likely. The Vietnam-China-USSR triangle therefore offers a broader insight into international politics: escalation is often produced not by the absence of power, but by the misalignment of expectations about how that power will be used.

Some limitations nevertheless remain, particularly because archival access across the three sides remains uneven. While this study draws on Vietnamese materials, Russian-language scholarship, and available diplomatic sources, some aspects of how Moscow and Beijing assessed escalation risks and alliance commitments cannot yet be fully reconstructed. Future research based on additional Russian archival materials, as well as Vietnamese and Chinese materials that may become more accessible in the future, may further clarify how strategic signalling, alliance expectations, and intervention thresholds were understood within the Vietnam-China-USSR triangle.

The analytical framework developed in this study also extends beyond the Cold War context. Contemporary strategic configurations, including those involving the US, China, and Southeast Asia, exhibit similar features, including asymmetric partnerships, ambiguous commitments, and ongoing signalling interactions under conditions of structural volatility. In such environments, smaller states often seek to leverage major-power signals to reinforce deterrence while preserving room for strategic autonomy. Yet these same actions may be interpreted by rival actors as evidence of adversarial alignment rather than defensive hedging. The lesson drawn from the 1975–1979 case, therefore, is not that smaller states function as passive “triggers” of great-power conflict, but that misaligned expectation management under conditions of ambiguity can unintentionally lower escalation thresholds, particularly when major powers prioritise strategic flexibility over clarity in their alliance commitments.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the study was carried out without any financial or commercial ties that might be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

NOTES

- * Luu Van Quyet is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-VNU-HCM). He received his PhD from Beijing Normal University, China. His research focuses on diplomatic history, Vietnam's relations with Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, and maritime and island history, particularly in the context of the Cold War. He teaches and conducts research in these fields and has published extensively in national and international academic journals.
- ** Vu Hung Phi holds a Master of Arts in History and is currently a doctoral candidate at USSH-VNU-HCM. He currently works at Saigon University. His research interests include Vietnam-China-USSR relations during the Cold War, as well as political and legal institutions in Southeast Asia.
- ¹ Democratic Kampuchea refers to the Khmer Rouge regime that ruled Cambodia between 1975 and 1979 under Pol Pot. Repeated border clashes between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam became a major source of regional instability in the late 1970s.
 - ² China's seizure of the islands from the Republic of Vietnam in 1974 carried lasting implications for Vietnamese threat perceptions and regional strategic calculations.
 - ³ Strategic perception is used in this study to denote how political leaders interpret signals, infer intentions, and assess the credibility of commitments under conditions of uncertainty.
 - ⁴ Structural power refers not only to material capabilities but also to the capacity to shape the strategic environment through institutional arrangements, dependency relations, and access structures that condition the options available to other actors.
 - ⁵ Comecon was the principal economic organisation of the Soviet-led socialist bloc. Vietnam's accession in 1978 symbolised not only economic integration but also deeper institutional alignment with that order.
 - ⁶ Cam Ranh Bay is a natural deep-water harbour located on Vietnam's south-central coast. During the Cold War, it became one of the USSR's most significant overseas naval facilities, enabling logistical support and sustained naval operations in the South China Sea and the western Pacific (see Wilson 1979).
 - ⁷ Hoa refers to the ethnic Chinese community in Vietnam. Tensions surrounding the Hoa population became an important issue in Sino-Vietnamese relations during the late 1970s.

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