

China's Wedge Strategies: Detaching Vietnam from the Soviet Union, 1975-1979

In a system of anarchy, alliance is a critical instrument of external balancing. To shift the balance of power in its favor, a state could try to weaken its adversaries' alliances.¹ This is what scholars have termed as wedge strategies, a state's attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken an adversarial alignment.² Wedge strategy is an important tool in great powers' repertoires of statecraft. Among many great powers, China often uses this tool to create more secure external environment.

During the Cold War, one of Chinese leaders' key foreign policy objectives was to keep the two superpowers out of China's neighborhood. To achieve this objective, China had tried to separate its neighboring states from these two superpowers. In the contemporary era, Chinese leaders pursue the same objective. For instance, China tried to limit South Korea's cooperation with the United States in the 2010s. The Philippines in the same period was another target of China's wedge strategies.

When using wedge strategies, China has many options: in some cases, China relies on coercion while in some other cases China relies on accommodation. Or, China can choose doing nothing when contemplating its strategic options. Under what circumstances does China prefer one strategy over another? I answer this question by proposing a theoretical framework that explains how a state chooses particular types of wedge strategies. I argue that two variables, leverage and threat perception, will determine a state's choice of wedge strategies. I then test this

¹ James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 909–33; Joseph Parent and Sebastian Rosato, "Balancing in Neorealism," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (2015): 51–86; Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 43–78.

² Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (2011): 155–89; Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "Binding Strategies in Alliance Politics: The Soviet-Japanese-U.S. Diplomatic Tug of War in the Mid-1950s," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2018): 108–20; Daniel H. Nexon, "The Balance of Power in the Balance," *World Politics* 61, no. 2 (2009): 345–46.

theory using the case of China driving a wedge between Vietnam and the Soviet Union between 1975 and 1979.

Combining the theory and the empirical case sheds light on the balance of power literature. Both establishing one's own alliances and breaking up others' alliances are tools of external balancing. However, compared to the former, the latter form of external balancing has drawn less scholarly attention.³ Existing literature on wedge strategies largely focuses on specific alliance dynamics.⁴ Those case studies are not dedicated to developing a parsimonious model that explains why a state chooses one particular wedge strategy over another.

Timothy Crawford and Yasuhiro Izumikawa provide two different models focusing on states' choices of wedge strategies. Crawford argues that a divider's perceived risks of balancing blowback determines its strategic choice.⁵ Differently, Izumikawa argues that the more reward

³ On the question of why alliances form, for instance, see Benjamin Fordham and Paul Poast, "All Alliances Are Multilateral: Rethinking Alliance Formation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no. 5 (2016): 840–65; Tongfi Kim, *The Supply Side of Security: A Market Theory of Military Alliances* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016); Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 86–120. Alex Weisiger discusses wedge strategies. He argues that states fighting independently from their allies are vulnerable to their adversary's wedge strategies, but he simply treats wedge strategies as an intervening variable and does not elaborate on these strategies. See Alex Weisiger, "Exiting the Coalition: When Do States Abandon Coalition Partners during War?," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 753–65.

⁴ For instance, John Lewis Gaddis, "The American 'Wedge' Strategy, 1949–1955," in *Sino American Relations, 1945–1955: A Joint Re-Assessment of a Critical Decade*, ed. Harry Harding and Ming Yuan (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1989), 167–72; Stacie E. Goddard, "When Right Makes Might: How Prussia Overturned the European Balance of Power," *International Security* 33, no. 3 (2009): 110–42; Stacie E. Goddard, "The Rhetoric of Appeasement: Hitler's Legitimation and British Foreign Policy, 1938–39," *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 95–130; Robert P. Hager, "'The Laughing Third Man in a Fight': Stalin's Use of the Wedge Strategy," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 50, no. 1 (2017): 15–27; Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); David Allan Mayers, *Cracking the Monolith: U.S. Policy against the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949–1955* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986). Wang Xiaohu and Xin Qiang, "Cong 'Duikang' dao 'Tiaoshi': Jiyu Taiwanwenti de Meiguo Xiezizhanlue Yanjiu" [From "Confrontation" to "Accommodation": A Study of American Wedge Strategy Based on the Taiwan Issue], *Taiwan Yanjiu Jikan [Taiwan Research Journal]*, no. 1 (2019): 16–27.

⁵ Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," 163; Timothy W. Crawford, "The Alliance Politics of Concerted Accommodation: Entente Bargaining and Italian and Ottoman Interventions in the First World War," *Security Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 113–47.

power a divider has, the more likely it chooses reward wedging.⁶ The major drawback these two theories share is the exclusion of mixed strategies.⁷ As I will show, China often selects both coercion and accommodation toward a target state. Additionally, Izumikawa fails to provide specific standards to measure a divider's reward power, his key explanatory variable.⁸ Without such a measurement, it is difficult to determine, a priori, whether the divider has strong reward power.

The rest of this paper will proceed as follows. First, I articulate my theory explaining a state's choices of wedge strategies. The next section discusses China's wedge strategies toward Vietnam between 1975 and June 1977. This section discusses the Soviet policy in Indochina, China's leverage over Vietnam, and China's choice of wedge strategies. The subsequent section analyzes China's decreasing leverage, threat perception, and the corresponding change of China's wedge strategies between June 1977 and February 1979. I conclude with a summary of my findings and implications of this paper.

Logic of Choosing Wedge Strategies

ACTORS AND STRATEGIC CHOICES

A wedge strategy dynamic involves three actors: the state choosing wedge strategies (the divider), the target state, and the adversary. From the divider's perspective, the adversary state is the one that threatens the divider's security. The target is the state who has been aligned with or

⁶ Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "United We Stand, Divided They Fall: Use of Coercion and Rewards as Alliance Balancing Strategy" (Ph.D Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2002), 27; Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics," *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 498–531.

⁷ Izumikawa, "United We Stand, Divided They Fall: Use of Coercion and Rewards as Alliance Balancing Strategy," 38–39.

⁸ Izumikawa, 58–59; Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics," 507.

considers alignment with the adversary. Thus, the adversary can aggregate allied power and poses a greater threat to the divider.

In the above definitions, I use “alignment” instead of “alliance.” As Glenn Snyder argues, alliances arise from formal agreements that include elements of specificity, legal and moral obligation, and reciprocity.⁹ In contrast, alignments are “expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions;” alliances are a subset of alignments that are formalized by explicit agreements.¹⁰ Moreover, political relations between states can change, even when their alliance treaties do not change. Using alignment allows investigation of both formal alliances and security collaboration short of an alliance treaty.

I only focus on the divider's wedge strategies toward the target state, not toward the adversary. While the adversary is the primary source of threat, changing the target's alignment can decrease the aggregated capabilities of the adversary-target alignment and thus make the adversary less threatening. Therefore, the divider's wedge strategies toward the target are important part of its external balancing behavior. Additionally, as the divider tries to balance against the adversary by influencing the target, in the chain of influence the target comes before the adversary.¹¹ Consequently, it is necessary to analyze wedge strategies toward the target first.

For wedge strategies, the divider has three options: (a) “coercion,” (b) “accommodation,” and (c) “wait and see.” Coercion uses actual or threatened punishment to pose a threat to the target state's security and/or economic stability and thus influence its alignment decision. Accommodation uses actual or promised security and/or economic rewards to affect the target's

⁹ Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 8.

¹⁰ Snyder, 6–16.

¹¹ Timothy W. Crawford, “The Strategy of Coercive Isolation,” in *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*, ed. Kelly M. Greenhill and Peter Krause (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 231.

alignment decision.¹² The third option, “wait and see,” maintains the divider’s current policy toward the target state.¹³

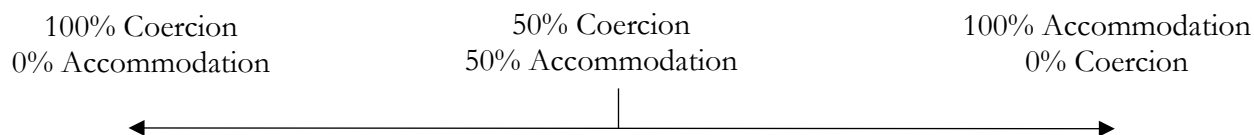


Figure 1. Strategic Options in Wedge Strategies

Figure 1 presents a continuum of options. It is important to note that any point on the continuum is a different combination of coercion and accommodation. Frequently the divider adopts a mixed strategy. On the left side of the continuum, coercion is the primary strategy while accommodation is the complementary strategy. The more emphasis the divider puts on coercion, the further left it is on the continuum. Conversely, on the right side of the continuum, accommodation is the primary strategy while coercion is the complementary strategy. The more emphasis on accommodation, the further right it is on this continuum. At the middle point of this continuum, the divider emphasizes equally on coercion and accommodation. Only at the both ends the divider chooses pure strategies, either coercive or accommodative. In addition, Figure 1 does not include the strategy of “wait and see” because logically it is infeasible to mix either accommodation or coercion with “wait and see.” By definition, “wait and see” is to maintain the status quo while both coercion and accommodation require change. Instead, a “wait and see” strategy can be an alternative at any point on the continuum.

¹² Baldwin, “The Power of Positive Sanctions,” 23; Izumikawa, “United We Stand, Divided They Fall: Use of Coercion and Rewards as Alliance Balancing Strategy,” 49–50; Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises*, 195–98.

¹³ Liu Feng, “Fenhua duishou lianmeng: zhanlue, jizhi yu anli” [“Dividing Adversarial Alliance: Strategy, Mechanism, and Cases”], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], no. 1 (2014): 54.

I introduce mixed strategies because states often mix coercion and accommodation that are closely related to each other. Indeed, as Thomas Schelling points out, coercion and accommodation are “names for different aspects of the same tactic of selective and conditional self-commitment.”¹⁴ Mixing coercion and accommodation has drawn extensive attention from the scholarship on deterrence.¹⁵ Robert Jervis argues that successful deterrence requires a combination of assurance and pressure.¹⁶ Scholars have also highlighted the role of assurance in coercive diplomacy. As Alexander George notes, policymakers need to decide the combination and sequence of employment of threat and accommodation to help coercive threat achieve its objective.¹⁷ To add, Robert Art suggests that positive inducements would likely to increase the likelihood of coercion success if they provide the target state with resources that help it abandon its goal.¹⁸

This logic of deterrence and coercive diplomacy applies to wedge strategies. When the divider opts for coercion, it can use accommodation as a complementary strategy for two purposes. First, with accommodation the divider can signal its restraint to the target. This consideration will be particularly salient when the divider worries that its coercion may be counterproductive, pushing the target closer to the adversary. Second, the divider's coercion

¹⁴ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 123–34.

¹⁵ For instance, see Thomas J. Christensen, “The Contemporary Security Dilemma: Deterring a Taiwan Conflict,” *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2002): 5–21; Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 74.

¹⁶ Robert Jervis, “Deterrence Theory Revisited,” *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (1979): 304–5.

¹⁷ Alexander L. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991), 68, 73; Alexander L. George and William E. Simons, “Findings and Conclusions,” in *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, ed. Alexander L. George and William E. Simons (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 277–79.

¹⁸ Robert J. Art, “Coercive Diplomacy: What Do We Know?,” in *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy*, ed. Robert J. Art and Patrick M. Cronin (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2003), 388–410; Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1–27; Matthew D. Cebul, Allan Dafoe, and Nuno P. Monteiro, “Coercion and the Credibility of Assurances,” *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 3 (2021): 975–91; Todd S. Sechser, “Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power,” *International Organization* 64, no. 4 (2010): 627–60.

against the target contains an implicit assurance that if the target alters its policy that the divider does not like, the divider will stop its coercive pressure. The divider's accommodation supports this assurance. It is important because, as Schelling notes, "one cannot force spies...to reveal themselves solely by the threat of a relentless pursuit that spares no cost; one must also promise immunity to those that come forward."¹⁹

Similarly, when choosing accommodation as its primary strategy, the divider can use coercion to complement its accommodation. Coercion, in this scenario, can signal that the divider has committed itself to a red line that the target should not cross and leave the next step up to the target.²⁰ Thus, the divider can use coercion as a warning to the target state. That is, if the target refuses to comply with the divider's demands, the divider may change its primary strategy to coercion and inflict more pains on the target.

When the divider mixes accommodative and coercive strategies, the strategy the divider prioritizes becomes its primary strategy; the other becomes its complementary strategy. The underlying logic of wedge strategies is to influence the target's cost-benefit analysis of its alignment with the adversary. If the divider devotes more material resources to increasing the target's costs of its alignment decision, coercion is the primary strategy and accommodation is the complementary strategy. In contrast, if the divider devotes more resources to increasing the target's benefits of its alignment decision, accommodation is the primary strategy and coercion is the complementary strategy. For operationalization, if the divider threatens the target's core interests and mobilizes more means to threaten the target than to reward it, the divider's primary

¹⁹ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 134. Daniel Klein and Brendan O'Flaherty provide formal characterizations of the "pure promise," the "pure threat," and the "hybrid." See Daniel B. Klein and Brendan O'Flaherty, "A Game-Theoretic Rendering of Promises and Threats," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 21, no. 3 (1993): 295–314.

²⁰ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 72.

strategy is coercion; if neither condition is true, the divider's primary strategy is accommodation. If one is true while the other is not, the two strategies are evenly mixed.

Thus, a central task for the divider is to find the appropriate mix of coercion and accommodation. While the literature discusses the use of mixed strategies in crisis bargaining, the dynamics they explore are quite different from those in wedge strategies.²¹ When using wedge strategies, the divider aims to change the alignment between the target and the adversary. The existence of the adversary as the third player complicates the divider's calculation of choices. It is because the adversary can counter offers the divider makes to the target. The divider's accommodation may start a bidding war because the adversary can try to outbid the divider by providing more security and economic support to the target. This bidding war can make the divider's accommodation more costly and likely to fail. Similarly, the divider's coercion against the target can be undermined if the adversary's assistance to the target can offset costs the target suffers from the coercion. Moreover, the adversary can threaten the target with high cost so that the divider's accommodation or coercion is insufficient to alter the target's cost-benefit analysis. In sum, when weighing its options, the divider needs to consider both the target's and the adversary's potential responses. Thus, we need a different framework to explain how the divider chooses its wedge strategies.

LEVERAGE AND SOURCES OF THREAT PERCEPTION

I introduce two independent variables to explain the divider's choice of wedge strategies. The first independent variable is the divider's leverage over the target. I define the divider's leverage

²¹ The international security literature on the use of mixed strategies is vast. For example, see, George and Simons, "Findings and Conclusions," 277–79; Louis Kriesberg, "Carrots, Sticks, De-Escalation: U.S.-Soviet and Arab-Israeli Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 13, no. 3 (1987): 403–23; Russell J. Leng, "Reciprocating Influence Strategies in Interstate Crisis Bargaining," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 37, no. 1 (1993): 30–36; Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises*, 279.

as the target's vulnerability to the divider's influence for foreign policy-making.²² A few aspects of this definition are worth noting. First, the divider can use leverage for either coercion or accommodation. Leverage comes from the divider's possession of resources valuable to the target state. "Resources" here refer to power resources that are the "means by which one actor can influence the behavior of another."²³ These include both material and nonmaterial resources, such as military assets, wealth, political influence, and cultural connections.²⁴ The divider can either reward the target by providing these resources or punish the target by denying the latter's access to them.

Second, leverage is a relative concept. The divider competes with the adversary for the target state's allegiance. The divider can possess one kind of resources that gives it leverage over the target. Nonetheless, if the adversary has more of this resource than the divider, the leverage of the adversary will offset that of the divider. Consequently, the divider's leverage over the target has little meaning without comparing it with the adversary's leverage over the target state. Finally, leverage is a bilateral relational concept, in the sense that it is impossible to describe the divider's leverage without implying its influence on the target state.²⁵ The divider has leverage because the target desires some resources that the divider possesses. The value of a particular type of resources depends on the target's evaluation. The less valuable a type of resources is to the target state, the weaker the leverage.

²² The form of my definition is based on Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's definition of leverage for democratization. See Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40.

²³ David A. Baldwin, "Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends versus Old Tendencies," *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (1979): 164–65.

²⁴ A thorough examination of the concept of power resources can be found in David A. Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 49–90.

²⁵ Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach*, 50.

I code leverage into a binary variable that has two values: “strong” and “weak.” Strong leverage means the target is highly vulnerable to the divider’s influence. In order to measure this variable, I utilize archives and published government documents to assess how the divider and the target perceive the former’s leverage over the latter. It is important to note that leverage is context-sensitive. As David Baldwin points out, we need to set the influence attempt in a context to specify “who is trying (or might try) to get whom to do what.”²⁶

I use two criteria to measure the strength of leverage. First, the more difficult it is for the target to find a substitute for valuable resources that the divider possesses, the stronger the divider’s leverage. Second, whether the leverage is strong or weak depends on the types of the target’s interests that the divider can influence. The more vital certain national interests are to the target, the stronger the divider’s leverage. I code the variable of leverage as “strong” only when by both criteria leverage is strong. Although the divider can possess some resources that are difficult for the target to find an alternative provider, if the possession of these resources affects the target’s less crucial interests, the target is not vulnerable to the divider’s influence attempt. Consequently, the divider only has weak leverage.

The second independent variable is the divider’s perception of threat from the target-adversary alignment. As the target contributes to the aggregated capabilities of the adversary’s camp, the divider perceives threat from security cooperation between the target and the adversary. I define degree of security cooperation as the ability of states to agree on their objectives and their strategies toward achieving common objectives.²⁷ This definition slightly expands Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan’s concept of alliance cohesion, so that it can cover both

²⁶ Baldwin, “Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends versus Old Tendencies,” 181.

²⁷ Ole R. Holsti, P. Terrence Hopmann, and John D. Sullivan, *Unity and Disintegration in International Alliances: Comparative Studies* (New York: Wiley, 1973), 16.

the phase in which the target and the adversary are not aligned and the phase in which they are. Moreover, this variable measures the distance between the target and the adversary's goals and corresponding foreign policies. Consequently, it reflects the level of threat that cooperation between the target and the adversary poses to the divider.

I code the divider's threat perception into a binary variable: the divider either perceives a severe threat from a target-adversary alignment or a mild threat. The value of this variable, in turn, relies on the degree of security cooperation between the target and the adversary. Based on Patricia Weitsman's measurement of wartime alliance cohesion, I measure the degree of security cooperation based on two criteria.²⁸ First, I examine the ability of the target and the adversary to agree on their diplomatic and defense objectives. Divergence in their objectives indicates weak cooperation. Second, I assess the capacity of the target and the adversary to coordinate their foreign policies and defense policies. Indicators for this capacity include willingness to provide or reassert security commitment, access to military facilities, and agreement on military presence on each other's soil. Since the first criterion is attitudinal while the second is behavioral, only when the abilities of the target and the adversary to agree on and coordinate their policies are both strong do I code this variable as "high."

LOGIC OF CHOOSING WEDGE STRATEGIES

In a wedging scenario, there is an alignment between the adversary and the target or they are trying to form one. The divider views this alignment as threatening and thus attempts to drive a wedge between the adversary and the target. The divider's decision-making has two steps. First, the divider considers its leverage over the target. If the leverage is strong, the divider will choose accommodation as its primary strategy. In contrast, if the leverage is weak, the divider will in

²⁸ Patricia A. Weitsman, "Alliance Cohesion and Coalition Warfare: The Central Powers and Triple Entente," *Security Studies* 12, no. 3 (2003): 85.

turn evaluates the threat it perceives from the security cooperation between the target and the adversary. When facing a high degree of security cooperation between the target and the adversary, the divider perceives a severe threat and therefore chooses coercion as its primary strategy. The higher such degree, the more pressure the divider will exert on the target. On the contrary, low-level security cooperation between the target and the adversary poses a less severe threat; the divider will opt for the “wait and see” strategy. Figure 2 summarizes the logic of the divider’s strategic choices in a wedging scenario.

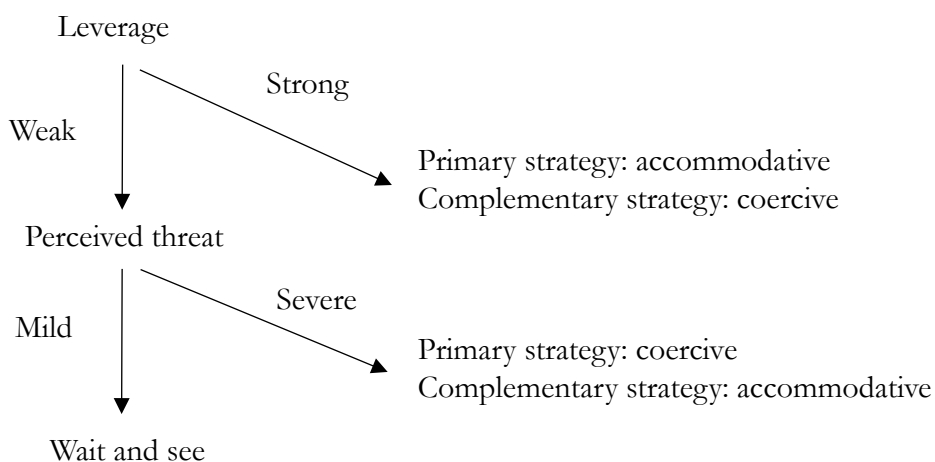


Figure 2. Choices of Wedge Strategies

When the divider has strong leverage, it accommodates the target, regardless of the threat it perceives from the security cooperation between the target and the adversary. This is due to the divider’s concern about the risk of balancing blowback, the risk that wedge strategies will “unite rather than divide its adversaries.”²⁹ Using coercive strategies against the target, by definition, heightens the target’s perception of threat from the divider. This threat perception, in turn, adds to the target’s incentives to align with the adversary. The divider’s coercion shows or enhances its aggressive intentions. Furthermore, the divider’s leverage, as defined above, can be either

²⁹ Crawford, “Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics,” 162.

accommodative or coercive. If the divider uses its leverage to exert pressure on the target, this suggests to the target that the divider could have used its leverage to accommodate the target, but chooses not to do so. As such, the divider's coercion would increase the target's threat perception and incentivize the target to stand closer with the adversary.

Concerns about this self-fulfilling prophecy will prompt the divider to choose accommodation as its primary strategy. Accommodation helps change the target's alignment in three ways. First, by making promises and providing actual rewards to target, the divider increases the target's benefits of changing its alignment with the adversary. Second, accommodation decreases the target's perceived threat from the divider. As Charles Glaser points out, when state A chooses cooperative policies (I term accommodation), it can reduce other states' sense of insecurity by showing that what drives state A's policies is insecurity, not greed.³⁰ Third, the divider's accommodation serves as a costly signal to convey the divider's nonaggressive intentions. As Schelling notes, to make a promise credible requires it to be costly to the promisor.³¹ Accommodating the target can be costly as it incurs sunk costs. In many cases, accommodative wedge strategies not only involve promises but also provide actual reward, such as military and economic assistance. Therefore, accommodation can be financially costly and thus communicate credible signals to the target.³²

The risk of blowback is not the divider's only concern at this stage. It also worries about the risk of being exploited. First, the divider worries that the target tries to draw the divider and the adversary into a bidding war, in which they attempt to outbid each other by offering more

³⁰ Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 59–60.

³¹ Thomas C. Schelling, "Promises," *Negotiation Journal* 5, no. 2 (1989): 115–16.

³² James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (1997): 82–84; Fuhrmann and Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," 919–35.

reward to the target. Involvement in a bidding war will increase the cost of the divider's accommodation. As a result, the divider may be reluctant to enter such a bidding war. The divider will be even more reluctant to do so if it considers its rewarding capability inferior to the adversary's. Second, the divider's reward may help the target improve capabilities. If the divider fails to sow discord in the target-adversary alignment, the target's enhanced capabilities will increase the relative power of this hostile alignment and thus heighten the threat to the divider.³³

Consequently, the risk of being exploited will prompt the divider to use coercion to complement its accommodative strategies. Coercion signals that the divider's accommodation has limits and that it does not intend to enter a bidding war for the target's allegiance. Additionally, a coercive complementary strategy is an illustrative use of threat, an illustration of what yet to come if the target does not comply. This use of coercion also promises minimum damage if the target complies quick enough.³⁴ Moreover, a coercive complementary strategy suggests to the target that it should not ordinarily expect to receive the divider's accommodation. This is a necessary component of a promise.³⁵ Coercion serves as a reminder to the target that received reward is contingent on its compliance.

Using accommodation as the primary strategy and coercion as the complementary strategy, how the divider mixes coercion and accommodation relies on the target's commitment to being aligned with the adversary. The more committed the target is in this regard, the more the divider emphasizes on its coercion. The divider would choose such a mix for two reasons. First, if the target is strongly committed to being aligned with the adversary, the divider's risk of balancing blowback is low so that the utility of accommodation decreases. Second, the more

³³ Daniel W. Drezner, *The Sanctions Paradox: Economic Statecraft and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4–6.

³⁴ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 81.

³⁵ Schelling, "Promises," 115.

committed the target, the less likely the divider's wedging succeeds. As a result, the divider accommodating the target could increase the aggregated capabilities of the adversary-target alignment and creates a greater threat. As a result, the divider would want to increase the coercive recipe in its strategic menu. In contrast, when the target is ambivalent about its alignment with the adversary, the risk of blowback is high and therefore the divider would put a maximum emphasis on accommodation and only minimally coerce the target. In this case, this mix is essentially a pure strategy.

When the divider only has weak leverage over the target, however, the divider's accommodation may be insufficient to alter the target's cost-benefit analysis of its alignment decision. If so, the divider needs to choose between coercive strategies and "wait and see," based on its perception of threat stemming from the security cooperation between the target and the adversary. If the target and the adversary cooperate closely, the divider faces such a serious threat from their alignment that it cannot afford waiting. As a result, the divider would choose coercive strategies as its primary strategies.

The higher the degree of security cooperation, the more threatened the divider feels and the less likely it uses accommodation to complement its coercive strategy. When the divider believes that whatever it does, the target has been strongly committed to an alignment with the adversary, the divider will choose coercion as a pure strategy.³⁶ In this case, the value of accommodation as the complementary strategy diminishes for two reasons. First, the risk of blowback is very low because there is no much room left for the target and the adversary to enhance their security cooperation. Second, the target strongly committed to the adversary suggests a low likelihood of wedging success. If so, accommodating the target means increasing

³⁶ Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," 163–64; Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics," 508–9.

the aggregated capabilities of its alignment with the adversary and thus makes this alignment a more serious threat. Meanwhile, when the target has been tightly committed to the adversary, the divider may still try coercive strategies that have the possibility of success, however low it is. The divider may also employ other strategies against the alignment of the target and the adversary, such as internal balancing or confronting the adversary on other fronts.

When the security cooperation between the target and the adversary has not reached that extremely high level, the divider will use accommodation as a complement to reduce the risk of balancing blowback. Meanwhile, accommodation serves as a signal to assure the target that if the target complies with the divider's demands, the divider will stop putting pressure on the target. As Schelling notes, an ideal coercive action would automatically stop upon the target's compliance.³⁷ While it is difficult to find a perfect type of this action in international politics, an accommodative complementary strategy can add credibility to the automaticity of coercion. It is because an accommodative complementary strategy implies that the divider's policy is flexible and it is possible for the divider to recall its coercive action. The weaker the target's determination to cooperate with the adversary, the more emphasis the divider puts on its accommodation. Consequently, with coercion as the primary strategy, the divider increasing its emphasis on coercion leads to a relatively balanced mix of accommodation and coercion.

CASE SELECTION

To test my theory, I conduct one case study in which China chose wedge strategies to detach Vietnam from the Soviet Union between April 1975 and February 1979. The Vietnam case offers variation in the independent variables and it allows me to examine the causal mechanisms of my theory. In the first phase between April 1975 and June 1977, China had strong leverage over

³⁷ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 89–90.

Vietnam and it chose accommodation as its primary strategy to detach Vietnam from the Soviet Union. In addition, China used coercion to complement its accommodation. In the second phase between June 1977 and February 1979, China's leverage gradually weakened and it perceived greater threat from the security cooperation between Vietnam and the Soviet Union. As a result, China changed its wedge strategies from accommodation to coercion.

This within-case variation also allows me to control for several important factors. First, the balance of power between China, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam remained the same. In both periods of the case, China was militarily and economically weaker than the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Vietnam was both militarily and economically weaker than China. Second, though China's domestic politics changed between the two periods, the key change in China's choice of wedge strategies did not correspond to the change in China's domestic politics. This suggests that the explanatory power of China's domestic politics in this case is limited.

China Accommodating Vietnam, April 1975-June 1977

With the fall of Saigon, China faced a transformed security order in Indochina. A unified Vietnam had a powerful military and a population of about 47 million. Vietnam also spared no effort to enhance its "special relationship" with Laos and Cambodia. This policy worked toward Laos. When delivering a speech on the 30th anniversary of Lao independent day in 1975, the Lao leader Kaysone Phomvihane expressed his gratitude to Hanoi's help: "We will be grateful to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)...for sacrificing blood...and for providing our revolution

with your great and valuable support.” He also embraced “the special combat solidarity spirit of the Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodian people.”³⁸

Meanwhile, Hanoi had been tilting toward the Soviet Union since the Tet Offensive in 1968 and received generous Soviet assistance in the 1970s. The Vietnamese leader Le Duan visited the Soviet Union in October 1975. The joint communiqué issued during this visit, from Beijing’s perspective, showed that Hanoi and Moscow “completely agreed on all issues.”³⁹ Moscow agreed to provide 3.2 billion U.S. dollars in aid between 1976 and 1980, contributing 60 percent of the funds for Hanoi’s five-year plan.⁴⁰ The Soviet Union agreed not only to provide technical assistance in the development of the Vietnamese industries, but also to coordinate with Vietnam on their national economic plans in the next five years.⁴¹ In December, the two governments signed an additional agreement on economic assistance.⁴²

Chinese leaders were alert to these developments in Indochina. In June 1975, Liu Zhenghua, Chinese Ambassador to Albania, told his Italian counterpart that Hanoi’s policies represented a Soviet point of view.⁴³ Similarly, according to a CIA report, Mao was concerned that the Soviets would use their assistance to “make demands” on Hanoi, such as the establishment of bases in Vietnam and transit rights for Soviet personnel and equipment.⁴⁴ As

³⁸ “Speech by Comrade Kaysone Phomvihane, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party at the Meeting in Vieng Xay on the 30th Anniversary of Lao’s Declaration of Independence (October 12th, 1975),” in *History of Vietnam-Laos: Laos-Vietnam Special Relationship, 1930-2007*, vol. III (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2012), 363-64.

³⁹ CCP International Liaison Department, *Guoji gongyun dashijie 1975 [Major Events of International Communist Movement 1975]* (hereafter cited as *GJGYDSJ*) (Beijing: The Chinese Communist Party Central Liaison Department, 1976), 45; Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China’s Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 60.

⁴⁰ Douglas Pike, “The USSR and Vietnam: Into the Swamp,” *Asian Survey* 19, no. 12 (1979): 1164.

⁴¹ “Joint Communiqué,” *Moscow Pravda*, October 31, 1975, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-SOV-75-213, L1-L2.

⁴² *GJGYDSJ* 1975, 50.

⁴³ National Security Council (NSC), Intelligence Summary, “People’s Republic of China [Includes Cable from Richard Soloman to Henry Kissinger Dated June 29, 1975],” July 4, 1975, in DNSA collection: The History of the National Security Agency: 1945 to the Present.

⁴⁴ CIA, “The President’s Daily Brief,” July 15, 1975, 1, in Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room (FOIA): President’s Daily Brief 1969-1977, document no. 0006014849.

the Soviet Union was the major threat to China in this period, the primary goal of China's Vietnam policy was to drive a wedge between Hanoi and Moscow, to prevent further Vietnamese-Soviet cooperation.

Prior to June 1977, China relied mainly on accommodation. As China enjoyed strong leverage over Vietnam, accommodation allowed China to induce Vietnam to keep distance with the Soviet Union while minimizing the risk of driving Vietnam further into the Soviet arms. Meanwhile, China used coercion to complement its accommodation.

CHINA'S LEVERAGE OVER VIETNAM

China could derive its leverage over Vietnam from four sources: its ability to adjust its policies toward overseas Chinese in Vietnam, Chinese-Vietnamese territorial disputes, the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict, and China's economic assistance to Vietnam. The first three sources lent Beijing strong leverage over Hanoi. The issue of overseas Chinese significantly affected Vietnamese national economy, while the territorial disputes impacted the stability on the border. To add, Hanoi and Phnom Penh were having armed clashes along their border. Beijing's influence in Phnom Penh could help deescalate the Vietnamese-Cambodian conflict. The last source, Chinese economic assistance, offered China weak leverage because Vietnam could easily find alternative economic assistance from the Soviet Union. In total, China enjoyed strong leverage over Vietnam.

Overseas Chinese played an important role in Vietnamese economy, especially in southern Vietnam.⁴⁵ As the Soviet embassy in Vietnam reported in 1976, Hanoi was anxious about Beijing's potential influence over the overseas Chinese community in southern Vietnam. Vietnamese leaders claimed that they detected a connection between the "subversive

⁴⁵ E. S. Ungar, "The Struggle Over the Chinese Community in Vietnam, 1946-1986," *Pacific Affairs* 60, no. 4 (1987): 605-7.

appearances of the Maoist in Indochina,” and they accused the overseas Chinese community of acting “in conflict with the line of the revolutionary authorities.”⁴⁶ As this implied, Vietnamese leaders were concerned about the possibility of overseas Chinese being a fifth column. This concern, in turn, gave China leverage because if Beijing was able to assure Hanoi that it had no intention to influence these overseas Chinese, this would be valuable to Hanoi.

The territorial disputes were another source of Chinese leverage. According to Vietnamese sources, there were 90 border incidents in 1974 and 234 in 1975.⁴⁷ This also offered Beijing leverage as Beijing was able to utilize these disputes to manipulate tension along the border. Beijing could have raised tensions with Hanoi on this issue, but they chose not to do so. This was one way to assure Vietnamese leaders.

China also derived leverage by influencing Cambodian behavior, and conflictual relations between Cambodia and Vietnam made this possible. Seeking solidarity among the three Indochinese states had been Hanoi's policy since April 1975. Nonetheless, different from their counterparts in Laos, Cambodian leaders resisted such a “special relationship” with Hanoi. This rift between Phnom Penh and Hanoi offered China room to maneuver. By restraining the CPK behavior in the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict, Beijing was able to influence Hanoi.

When approaching its victory, the CPK indicated that it might not cooperate with Vietnam. After taking over Phnom Penh, it declared that “Cambodia will firmly adhere to a policy of...absolutely not permitting any foreign country to install military bases in Cambodia, resolutely opposing all foreign intervention in the internal affairs of Cambodia and vigorously

⁴⁶ Stephen J Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 175.

⁴⁷ Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRV MFA), *The Truth About Vietnam-China Relations Over the Last 30 Years* (hereafter cited as *The Truth About Vietnam-China Relations*), October 1979, in King C. Chen ed., *The Sino-Vietnamese War: Issues in Dispute*, *Chinese Law and Government* 26, no.1 (1983): 61.

opposing all foreign subversion and aggression against Cambodia.”⁴⁸ In this context, China's Cambodia policy was twofold. First, China provided aid to the CPK to balance against Vietnam. Second, China attempted to moderate the CPK's foreign policy to accommodate Vietnam. Indeed, to achieve these two objectives, Beijing needed to help the CPK consolidate its power. On April 24, 1975, Marshall Ye Jianying chaired a Central Military Commission meeting, discussing the emergency shipment of assistance to Cambodia.⁴⁹ Subsequently, China and Cambodia agreed on economic and military cooperation; shipments of Chinese emergency food aid and military equipment began to arrive in Cambodia.⁵⁰

CHINA ACCOMMODATING VIETNAM

Because of its strong leverage, China primarily accommodated Vietnam in this period. With multiple sources of strong leverage over Vietnamese interests, China tried to induce Vietnam to keep distance with the Soviet Union. In order to achieve this objective, China provided incentives to Vietnam on multiple issues.

First, territorial disputes along the border as well as in the South China Sea had been a source of frictions between China and Vietnam.⁵¹ However, China decided not to raise tensions with Hanoi on these disputes. Instead, Beijing accommodated Vietnam by shelving these territorial disputes. Moreover, Beijing remained silent when Hanoi challenged Beijing's territorial claims. In April 1975, Vietnam occupied some of the Spratly Islands that China claimed. However, no Chinese official media commented on this incident.⁵² When Le Duan visited China in 1975, Deng Xiaoping again downplayed the importance of border and offshore

⁴⁸ “Press Communiqué of Cambodian Special National Congress,” *Peking Review*, no. 18 (May 2, 1975), 19-20.

⁴⁹ PLA National Defense University, *Xu Xiangqian Nianpu* [*Chronicles of Xu Xiangqian*] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2012), 314-15.

⁵⁰ *GJGYDSJ* 1975, 71, 73.

⁵¹ *The Truth About Vietnam-China Relations*, 61.

⁵² Searching in *Renmin Ribao* and *Xinhua* yields no report of this incident.

islands problems. Deng remarked that the land border dispute was “simply...over a few *mu* of land here and there. I believe that the dispute is not great and that the issue is not hard to resolve.”⁵³ As for the offshore islands, Deng acknowledged there was a dispute, but China and Vietnam could “discuss this question in the future.”⁵⁴

In addition to accommodating Hanoi on the territorial disputes by taking no action, Beijing also kept a detached attitude toward overseas Chinese in Vietnam. In a report in 1975, Chinese Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua stated that China opposed dual nationality because “for the interest of our country... [This] is not a good practice.”⁵⁵ Later, when Hanoi took more systemic measures against overseas Chinese,⁵⁶ Beijing remained silent. Hanoi stepped up its hardline policy towards overseas Chinese in 1977. In February, Hanoi ordered all Chinese residents in southern Vietnam to register their citizenship, an attempt to turn all of them into Vietnamese citizens.⁵⁷ Subsequently, Vietnam began to “clear up the border areas,” and “start in a planned way to expel” ethnic Chinese.⁵⁸ Yet again, Beijing chose not to comment on these issues.

Beijing also accommodated Hanoi by trying to moderate the CPK's Vietnam policy. To prevent Vietnam from further tilting toward the Soviet Union, China attempted to keep a rather neutral policy in the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict and restrain the CPK. To accommodate

⁵³ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979*, 67.

⁵⁴ “Hanoi Goes Back on Its Word,” *Peking Review* no.34 (August 24, 1979), 26.

⁵⁵ “Ch’iao Kuan-hua’s Address on the “Current Situation of the World” and Peiping’s “Foreign Policy,” May 20, 1975, in *Classified Chinese Communist Documents: A Selection*, ed. Institute of International Relations (Taipei: National Chengchi University, 1978), 568.

⁵⁶ “Chinese in Saigon Face Heavy Taxes,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1976, 13; Pao-min Chang, “The Sino-Vietnamese Dispute over the Ethnic Chinese,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 90 (1982): 200.

⁵⁷ “History Stood on Its Head: On the Vietnamese authorities’ Position Concerning the Question of Chinese Residents in South Vietnam,” *Peking Review*, no. 27 (July 7, 1978), 28.

⁵⁸ Pao-min Chang, *Beijing, Hanoi, and the Overseas Chinese* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 22–23. “Overseas Chinese Affairs Spokesman’s Statement on SRV,” *Peking NCNA*, May 24, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-78-101, A6-A8.

Hanoi, Beijing took a “middle-road” policy in the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict. In June 1975, Deng Xiaoping, Li Xiannian, and Geng Biao held a series of meetings with Pol Pot and Ieng Sary. In the meetings, the Chinese leaders elaborated on Chinese perspectives of the international situation and the united front policy after 1949.⁵⁹ By stressing on their united front policy, the Chinese leaders suggested their Cambodian guests to modify their stance on territorial disputes with Vietnam.

China's “middle-road” policy was consistent with its subsequent action. In 1975, Beijing informed journalists in Hong Kong that China sided with Cambodia in the Cambodian-Vietnamese territorial disputes, but wanted to avoid a public dispute with Vietnam on this issue.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, China called for solidarity among the three Indochinese states. An editorial in *Renmin Bao* commented that Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were “close neighbors; their destinies were entwined in the struggle. The unity of three nations was extremely important.”⁶¹

In the first half of 1977, China continued to signal its support for the CPK as well as encouraging negotiation and avoiding to side too close with the CPK. On July 30, 1977, new Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua explained to his comrades in the Foreign Ministry about China's Indochina policy. He remarked, “Cambodia has had some trouble with its adjacent countries...Why do I not call it conflict or war but trouble? Because it is a trouble for them, and *a trouble for us*. (emphasis added)” He further explained the delicate situation for China. On the one hand, Chinese leaders were displeased to see the fighting between Cambodia and Vietnam as it would be “better not to fight this war.” On the other hand, Huang stressed that for China, “the

⁵⁹ Huang, *Liushinina Zhongyue Guanxi Zhi Jianzheng*, 124.

⁶⁰ CIA, “The President's Daily Brief,” July 9, 1975, 1, in FOIA: President's Daily Brief 1969-1977, document no. 0006014844.

⁶¹ *GJGYDSJ* 1975, 36.

handling must be discreet,” otherwise China would be “in a dilemma.”⁶² As he suggested, China was willing to act as a mediator: China would “never side with any party to increase tension among them” and “provide as much assistance as she can in the post-war building of democratic, socialist countries.”⁶³

The last component of Chinese accommodation was providing economic assistance to Vietnam. In this period, China carried out assistance agreements it had signed with Hanoi before the end of the Vietnam War, and handled this assistance issue cautiously. As Mao stated, “we should not criticize Vietnam before we can see the post-victory development.”⁶⁴ After the fall of Saigon, China acclaimed Hanoi’s victory and promised to offer support.⁶⁵ Multiple editorials in *Renmin Ribao* conveyed the message that China would continue its support for Vietnam.⁶⁶ Subsequently, after the signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese aid agreement on May 12, 1975, Beijing also signed an aid agreement with Vietnam. The agreement provided an interest-free loan and a supply of “general commodities.”⁶⁷ According to a Chinese report, China’s assistance projects included constructing industrial projects, improving military equipment, and expanding rifle and ammunition plants.⁶⁸ A CIA report estimated that Chinese aid kept at about \$300 million annually.⁶⁹

⁶² “Huang Hua’s Report on the World Situation,” *Issues and Studies* 13, no.11 (1977), 82-83.

⁶³ “Huang Hua’s Report on the World Situation,” *Issues and Studies* 13, no.12 (1977), 79.

⁶⁴ “Chiang Chi’ing’s Address to Diplomatic Cadres,” March 1975, in *Classified Chinese Communist Documents*, ed. Institute of International Relations, 541.

⁶⁵ *Renmin Ribao*, May 3, 1975.

⁶⁶ For example, see, *Renmin Ribao*, May 2, May 3, June 6, 1975.

⁶⁷ CIA, “The President’s Daily Brief,” September 27, 1975, 8, in FOIA: President’s Daily Brief 1969-1977, document no. 0006014913.

⁶⁸ Commentary, “Why have Sino-Vietnamese Relations Worsened after Vietnam’s Reunification?” *Renmin Ribao* and *Xinhua*, November 26, 1979, in *On the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry’s White Book Concerning Vietnam-China Relations* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1979), 29.

⁶⁹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “Sino-Soviet Competition in Indochina,” November 14, 1978, 8, in DNSA collection: China and U.S. Intelligence, 1945-2010.

COERCION AS A COMPLEMENTARY STRATEGY

China used coercive wedge strategies to complement its accommodation, to signal a restrained accommodative strategy as well as its displeasure with improved Vietnamese-Soviet relations. The major tool for Beijing to drive a coercive wedge was also its economic assistance policy to Vietnam. While delivering promised assistance, China denied most of new aid programs to Vietnam. By turning down multiple Vietnamese requests, Chinese leaders could not only avoid a bidding war with the Soviets, but also show their dissatisfaction toward improved Soviet-Vietnamese relations. As mentioned above, China only carried out agreements signed before the end of the war. Thus, this policy allowed China to accommodate Vietnam, but only to a limited extent.

As early as in 1973, China planned to decrease its total foreign aid.⁷⁰ Based on this decision, China had rejected many requests from Vietnam in 1975. In April, Beijing decided not to increase the total amount of foreign aid, keeping it at 5 billion yuan every year. Meanwhile, Beijing decided to decrease the share of foreign aid to Vietnam, North Korea, Albania, Laos, and Cambodia from 70% to 50%.⁷¹ Overall, Chinese economic assistance to Vietnam decreased.

When Le Thanh Nghi visited Beijing, he remarked, “The Vietnamese people are proud to have as their close comrades and brothers the Chinese people who always regard it their bounden internationalist duty to give support and assistance to the Vietnamese people’s revolutionary cause.”⁷² In contrast, the Chinese were less enthusiastic. Li Xiannian, in his welcome speech, even dropped the line that “China would continue to perform [its] internationalist duty.” Instead,

⁷⁰ Ma Jisen, *Waijiaobu Wenge Jishi* [Record of the Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry] (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), 241.

⁷¹ Ibid., 242.

⁷² “Li Hsien-nien Hosts Banquet,” *Peking NCNA*, August 13, 1975, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-75-158, August 14, 1975, A7.

he merely said, "The Chinese people will, as always, firmly support the just struggle of the Vietnamese people." Li also stressed the "spirit of self-reliance" of Vietnam.⁷³

China also showed its displeasure toward Vietnam's Soviet policy when Le Duan traveled to China. Although China signed a new aid agreement with Vietnam after Le Duan return from Moscow, Chinese leaders changed their policy from providing grant aid to interest-free loan.⁷⁴ Moreover, in their discussion Mao told Le Duan, "Today, you are not the poorest under heaven. We are the poorest. We have a population of 800 million."⁷⁵

On November 15, 1976, Pham Van Dong requested aid from China for a number of projects. Chinese leaders did not reply until February 1977 when they replied that they were unable to satisfy these requests.⁷⁶ Hanoi complained about the level of Chinese assistance and claimed that Beijing was applying economic pressure to alter Hanoi's pro-Soviet positions.⁷⁷

China's economic assistance policy to Vietnam remained the same in 1977. In February, a Vietnamese economic delegation visited China. The only result of their trip was the signing of a mutual supply of goods and payments agreement.⁷⁸ Moreover, after Le Thanh Nghi signed new economic agreements in Moscow in August, China signaled its displeasure. When Nghi stopped in Beijing, the Chinese leadership gave him a cool welcome. Not only did Xinhua adopt a more restrained tone reporting Nghi's trip, but Li Xiannian refused Nghi's new aid request.⁷⁹

⁷³ Ibid., A6. For a more detailed analysis, see Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979*, 63.

⁷⁴ CIA, "The President's Daily Brief," September 27, 1975, 8, in FOIA: President's Daily Brief 1969-1977, document no. 0006014913.

⁷⁵ Discussion between Mao Zedong and Le Duan, September 24, 1975, in *77 Conversations*, 192.

⁷⁶ "Memorandum on Vice-Premier Li's Talks with Premier Pham Van Dong, June 10, 1977," *Peking Review* no. 13 (March 30, 1979), 22.

⁷⁷ CIA, "The President's Daily Brief," May 11, 1976, 2-3, in FOIA: President's Daily Brief 1969-1977, document no. 0006015105.

⁷⁸ "PRC, SRV Sign 1977 Goods, Payments Accord," *Peking NCNA*, March 19, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-77-054, A5.

⁷⁹ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979*, 132. "Li Hsien-nien Meets Vietnam's Le Thanh Nghi," *Peking NCNA*, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-77-157, August 15, 1977, A8.

Reportedly, by the end of 1977 China had only provided a quarter of the amount Vietnam expected in the 1976-1977 period.⁸⁰ These moves indicated China's dissatisfaction with closer Soviet-Vietnamese relations.

In addition to its economic assistance policy, China also bluntly voiced its dissatisfaction toward Vietnam. For instance, in 1976 Deng Xiaoping complained to Le Duan, "There have been some problems in the relations between our countries... In fact, you stress the threat from the North...for you, it means China." After reminding Le Duan that this issue had been raised previously, Deng continued, "For the last few years, such things have still occurred and they seem to be more frequent than before. The threat from the North is the main theme, even in your textbooks. We are not at ease with this." Deng concluded, "We have not annexed a centimeter of your territory."⁸¹

China Turning to Coercion, July 1977-February 1979

China's accommodation failed to reduce Vietnam's dependence on the Soviet Union. Instead, Vietnam moved increasingly close to the Soviet Union. More economic support from the Soviet Union emboldened Hanoi to challenge China on the issues of territorial disputes and overseas Chinese. Meanwhile, the CPK proved to be difficult to restrain. As a result, China's leverage over Vietnam gradually became insufficient. Consequently, China's choice of wedge strategies became a function of its threat perception. When the Chinese leaders' threat perception heightened as a result of the increasing level of security cooperation between the Soviet Union and Vietnam, China began to exert more pressure on Vietnam.

⁸⁰ Francis Nivolon, "Vietnam on the Aid Trail," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 9, 1979, 38.

⁸¹ Discussion between Deng Xiaoping and Le Duan, September 29, 1975, in *77 Conversations*, 192-93.

HAHONI'S CONTINUED TILT TOWARD MOSCOW

During this period, USSR-Vietnam relations rapidly improved. When Pham Van Dong traveled to Moscow in September 1977, he appeared on Soviet television and expressed his gratitude to Soviet assistance. As he remarked, "When you drink water, you must not forget the source... We assure you that we will make every effort to deepen the friendship and fraternal cooperation."⁸² On the same day, Brezhnev declared that the Soviet Union was "particularly pleased to note that the friendship and cooperation" between Vietnam and the Soviet Union "in all fields have developed more and more vigorously and with a more and more profound meaning." He further promised that the Soviet Union "will continue to give the Vietnamese people an all-sided assistance and support in your cause of socialist construction."⁸³

In addition to verbal support, the Soviet Union stepped up its economic assistance to Vietnam. In December 1977, the two governments signed a trade protocol, in which the Soviet Union agreed to provide "machines and equipment...raw materials and fuel...and supplementary" food to Vietnam.⁸⁴ One month later, Moscow announced that it had extended loans to Vietnam to assist building 40 more enterprises.⁸⁵ Moscow also sent a substantial number of personnel to Vietnam. According to a CIA estimate, by early 1978 there were about Soviet 3,000-4,000 personnel in Vietnam. Most of them were involved in economic assistance.⁸⁶

⁸² "Pham Van Dong Discusses October Revolution on Soviet TV," *Moscow Domestic Service*, September 2, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-SOV-77-173, L1.

⁸³ "Soviet Leaders' Message," *Hanoi VNA*, September 5, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-APA-77-172, K2.

⁸⁴ "Trade Protocol, Supplementary Food Pact Signed with USSR," *Hanoi VNA*, December 18, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-APA-77-243, K1.

⁸⁵ "USSR, SRV Observe 38th Anniversary of Relations, *Moscow*, January 28, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-SOV-78-020, L1-L2.

⁸⁶ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Sino-Soviet Competition in Indochina," November 14, 1978, 12, in DNSA collection: China and U.S. Intelligence, 1945-2010.

Hanoi also changed its position on joining the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON, also known as CEMA), a Soviet-led institution. Despite Soviet constant urging, Vietnam resisted the idea of joining COMECON in 1975 and 1976 because it believed the membership would compromise its independence and damage its relations with China.⁸⁷ However, in late May 1977, Vietnamese leaders decided to join the International Bank of Economic Cooperation and the International Investment Bank, two banks of the COMECON.⁸⁸ These moves were the first step for Hanoi to join the COMECON. In late June the COMECON admitted Vietnam as its member and *Nhan Dan* [*People's Daily*] remarked that this admission was a “logical development of our motherland on the road to socialism.”⁸⁹

CHINA LOSING ITS LEVERAGE

Compared to the previous period, Beijing's leverage over Hanoi became weaker. Enhanced Soviet economic and military support emboldened Hanoi to challenge China. By taking measures to enhance its control over its population of ethnic Chinese and constructing checkpoints along the Chinese-Vietnamese border, Hanoi constrained Beijing's influence and thus undermined Beijing's leverage. This challenge to China's interests also showed Vietnam's confidence in Soviet support to resist China's influence.

In this period, Hanoi chose to publicize its territorial claims in the South China Sea, as well as escalating tension in the border area on land. On the anniversary of the occupation of some islands in the Spratly Islands, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* [*People's Army Daily*] praised

⁸⁷ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Intelligence Memorandum, “Sino-Soviet Competition in Indochina,” November 14, 1978, 13, in Digital National Security Archive (DNSA) collection: China and U.S. Intelligence, 1945-2010.

⁸⁸ “CEMA Investment Bank Admits Vietnam to Membership,” *Moscow Izvestiya*, May 29, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-SOV-77-106, June 2, 1977, D4.

⁸⁹ “Nhan Dan Comments,” *Hanoi VNA*, July 2, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-APA-78-128, K18.

Vietnamese soldiers as striving to “stand combat ready and firmly defend the fatherland’s territorial water.”⁹⁰ On land, Vietnam started to fence off the border, build trenches, and move in ammunition. By October, 1977, Hanoi had built a new border defense line. This buildup further escalated the border tension.⁹¹ In addition, Hanoi began to “nationalize” the private sector in southern Vietnam, and the Chinese who lived in southern Vietnam were the principal target in the operation and suffered the most.⁹² By doing so, Hanoi enhanced its control over the overseas Chinese community.

As a result, there was only one source of China’s leverage left: influence in Kampuchea. However, the CPK became increasingly difficult to restrain. First, the CPK leaders did not follow exactly the “Chinese model of revolutionary and construction.”⁹³ Moreover, in a political seminar in July 1978, Ieng Sary expressed his disapproval of both Soviet and Chinese policies. According to him, the Soviet Union was “plunging into an inextricable quagmire, with China following the same path.”⁹⁴ Second, the CPK defied Beijing’s advice on the treatment of Sihanouk. As Huang Hua stated in a report in 1977, “It has been confirmed that Sihanouk no longer holds any position.” In response, Beijing directed Ambassador Sun Hao to express their necessary concern. Moreover, when Sihanouk made a request for settlement in China, China submitted it to the CPK. However, the CPK rejected Sihanouk’s request.⁹⁵ According to

⁹⁰ “Army Paper Notes Spratly Archipelago Liberation Anniversary,” *Hanoi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, April 26, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-APA-78-102, K1.

⁹¹ CIA, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” undated but information as of March 5 1979 was used in preparing this report, 3, in DNSA: The History of the National Security Agency: 1945 to the Present, document no. 16790856353.

⁹² Chang, “The Sino-Vietnamese Dispute over the Ethnic Chinese,” 206.

⁹³ Laurence Picq, *Beyond the Horizon: Five Years with the Khmer Rouge* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 37.

⁹⁴ Picq, 125.

⁹⁵ “Huang Hua’s Report on the World Situation,” *Issues and Studies* 13, no.12 (1977), 80.

Sihanouk, in January 1978 he offered his services to the CPK, a move Beijing welcomed.

Nonetheless, the CPK rejected this offer.⁹⁶

Third, the CPK pursued an increasingly provocative policy toward Vietnam. The CPK's military guideline, as Pol Pot explained, was to take initiative attacks against Vietnamese forces. In a speech Pol Pot asserted that as Vietnam had to take the defensive posture, the CPK would continue to fight until they could make Hanoi publicly succumb to Phnom Penh and sign a cease-fire agreement.⁹⁷

INCREASED THREAT FROM MOSCOW AND HANOI

When its leverage became weak, China needed to consider its threat perception. In this case, the threat resulted from the level of security cooperation between the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Because such cooperation had reached a high level in this period, China adjusted its primary wedge strategies from accommodation to coercion. Meanwhile, China used accommodation as its complementary strategy. As Moscow and Hanoi increasingly consolidated their security cooperation, China gradually dropped accommodation in the mix of its wedge strategies. Eventually, when Vietnam signed the alliance treaty with the Soviet Union and fully invaded Kampuchea, China used coercive wedging as its pure strategy.

When Pham Van Dong traveled to Moscow in June 1977, he and Premier Alexei Kosygin stressed "the great significance of all-round Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation with a view to further consolidating relations of friendship and fraternal solidarity."⁹⁸ Accompanying this general trend was increased Soviet-Vietnamese military cooperation. In the first half of 1977,

⁹⁶ Norodom Sihanouk, *War and Hope: The Case for Cambodia*, trans. Mary Feeney (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 67.

⁹⁷ Speech by Pol Pot on the Third Anniversary of Revolutionary Victory and Establishment of the DK, April 4, 1978, Documentation Center of Cambodia (DCC), D00476.

⁹⁸ "Meeting with Kosygin," *Moscow TASS International Service*, June 6, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-SOV-77-109, L1.

Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap met with his Soviet counterpart Dmitry Ustinov and Brezhnev in separate meetings. In those meetings Moscow and Hanoi cleared obstacles in their security cooperation as their leaders expressed the “readiness to promote the expansion and deepening of the friendly ties between the armed forces” of the Soviet Union and Vietnam.⁹⁹

Table 1. Estimates of Soviet Military Assistance to Vietnam (million U.S. dollars)

	1975	1976	1977	1978
Source A	123-150	44-50	75-125	600-850
Source B	25	30	100	190
Source C	280	450	630	720

Sources: A: Douglas Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of An Alliance* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 139;

B: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Soviet Economic Relations with Selected Client States in the Developing World*, October 14, 1982, cited in Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle A Thayer, *Soviet Relations with India and Vietnam* (New York: St.Martins Press, 1992), 118.

C: Thai Quang Trung, “The Moscow-Hanoi Axis and the Soviet Military Build-up in Southeast Asia,” *Indochina Report* (Singapore) 8 (October 1986), cited in *ibid.*, 118.

The above table showed the rise of Soviet military assistance to Vietnam in 1977 and 1978. Following Giap’s visit, the Soviet Union reportedly sent two destroyers and four squadrons of MiG-21’s to Vietnam.¹⁰⁰ Subsequently, in later July a Soviet military delegation visited several places of military interest in southern Vietnam, including Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay. As a result of this visit, Moscow agreed to deliver two old submarines, one destroyer, patrol boats, and four squadrons of MiG-21 fighters. Meanwhile, the number of Soviet military advisors in Vietnam began to rise.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ “Hanoi Report,” *Hanoi Domestic Service*, May 4, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-SOV-77-087, L1. “Apparent Text of ‘Report’ on Giap Visit Published, *Moscow Krasnaya Zvezda*, March 22, 1977, FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-77-074, L1.

¹⁰⁰ Takashi Tajima, “China and South-East Asia: Strategic Interests and Policy Prospects: Introduction,” *The Adelphi Papers* 21, no. 172 (1981): 12.

¹⁰¹ Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War*, 189–90; Tajima, “China and South-East Asia: Strategic Interests and Policy Prospects: Introduction,” 12.

With enhanced Soviet-Vietnamese security cooperation, Hanoi and Moscow also consolidated their relations with Laos.¹⁰² In February 1978 a high-level Soviet military delegation visited Laos to inspect strategically important locations as well as pledged to increased Soviet military assistance to Laos.¹⁰³ Shortly after this visit, Vietnam and Laos held the second session of the Laos-Vietnam Economic Cooperation Commission and signed several protocols regarding Vietnamese economic aid and loans to Laos in 1978.¹⁰⁴ These moves suggested an expansion of Vietnamese, as well as Soviet, influence in Indochina.

The Soviet Union not only increased its supply of military equipment to Hanoi, but also signaled its readiness to get involved in Indochina. In April 1978, Brezhnev and Ustinov visited Khabarovsk and Vladivostok to observe a “combined-arms tactical exercise” on the Soviet-Chinese border.¹⁰⁵ In the same month, a Soviet delegation from Vladivostok visited Haiphong and discussed with Vietnamese leaders on “strengthening relations” between two ports.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, Vietnamese Chief of Staff Van Tien Dung paid a highly publicized visit to Haiphong. He inspected a Soviet-built missile base located about 60 miles from the Chinese border, and observed Vietnamese soldiers’ maneuvers.¹⁰⁷ In May, a portion of the Soviet Pacific fleet, sailed southward and into the water off the coast of the Philippines. Deng Xiaoping, in a conversation

¹⁰² Martin Stuart-Fox, “Factors influencing relations between the Communist parties of Thailand and Laos,” *Asian Survey* 19, no. 4 (1979): 337.

¹⁰³ “Increased Soviet Aid Cited,” *Vientiane Domestic Service*, February 4, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report FBIS-APA-78-025, I1-I2.

¹⁰⁴ “16 March Banquet Speeches,” *Vientiane Domestic Service*, March 18, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report FBIS-APA-78-054, March 20, 1978, I1-I3.

¹⁰⁵ Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking against China* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 1982), 175.

¹⁰⁶ “Vladivostok Delegation in SRV,” *Vladivostok Domestic Service*, May 10, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-SOV-78-100, L2.

¹⁰⁷ Nayan Chanda, “Exit the Wolf, Enter the Bear,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 100, no. 20 (May 19, 1978): 13.

with a “foreign dignitary,” said this movement of Soviet ships was associated with the Chinese-Vietnamese tension.¹⁰⁸

Eventually, on November 3, Moscow and Hanoi signed the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.¹⁰⁹ After signing the treaty, the Soviet Union further increased its military and economic assistance to Vietnam. In the next two months the Soviets delivered two Zhuk-class coastal patrol craft and two Petya-class frigates to Vietnam.¹¹⁰ By the end of 1978 the Soviet Union had sent six hundred military advisors to Vietnam.¹¹¹

Enhanced Soviet security cooperation with Vietnam heightened Beijing's threat perception. In a speech in 1977, Ye Jianying commented on the tension between the Soviet Union and the United States: “War is just a matter of time.” He also warned his comrades to “pay attention to the possibility that a major war may break out soon.”¹¹² Similarly, in an interview with a British journalist, Vice Premier Li Xiannian stressed on the Soviet threat to the world; he promised, “if the Soviets attempted to expand in some region, China will not stand idly.”¹¹³ In September, Huang Hua delivered a speech in the United Nations. He stressed that the international situation became more intense, risk of war was increasing, and socialist imperialism was especially dangerous. Huang concluded that appeasing socialist imperialists could only

¹⁰⁸ “USSR Accused of Being Behind Recent SRV Moves,” *Paris AFP*, June 1, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-78-107, A12-A13.

¹⁰⁹ “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” *Chinese Law & Government* 16, no. 1 (1983), 16.

¹¹⁰ Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), “Military Developments in Indochina,” January 23, 1979, in DNSA collection: China and U.S. Intelligence, 1945-2010.

¹¹¹ Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War*, 190.

¹¹² “информация: по китайскому вопросу для руководства братских партий социалистических стран” [Information on the Chinese issue for the fraternal parties of socialist countries], undated (probably September 1977), in East China Normal University, *Collection of Copies of Russian Archives: Sino-Soviet Relations*, vol. 18, 4579-4589.

¹¹³ “информация: по китайскому вопросу для руководства братских партий социалистических стран” [Information on the Chinese issue for the fraternal parties of socialist countries], undated (probably September 1977), in East China Normal University, *Collection of Copies of Russian Archives: Sino-Soviet Relations*, vol. 18, 4579-4589.

make war more likely. Therefore, he continued, China was against war but also not afraid of war.¹¹⁴

Developments in the Soviet-Vietnamese security cooperation in 1978 further alarmed China. Responding to the Soviet and Vietnamese military coordination, Defense Minister Xu Xiangqian claimed that the Soviet Union had increased its preparation for an “aggressive war against China” and it posed a “direct military threat to China.”¹¹⁵ Xu further denounced Cuba as “Soviet mercenaries” and asked rhetorically, was there “any region where a change is taking place or a disturbance is going on where the evil shadow of Soviet social-imperialism does not loom?”¹¹⁶ Not coincidentally, Chinese leaders started to call Vietnam the “Cuba of the East.”

CHINA ADJUSTING THE MIX OF ITS STRATEGIES, JULY 1977-FEBRUARY 1978

Losing leverage over Hanoi and perceiving increased threat from the security cooperation between Moscow and Hanoi, Beijing changed its primary strategy from accommodation to coercion. Meanwhile, as Beijing was concerned about the risk of balancing blowback, it applied coercive wedge strategies to Vietnam with caution. With increasing level of the security cooperation between Vietnam and the Soviet Union, the risk of alliance backfire decreased. China thus gradually enhanced its coercion against Vietnam.

First, compared to the previous period, China took a more confrontational position on the overseas Chinese issue. During his meeting with Pham Van Dong in June 1977, Li Xiannian raised the overseas Chinese issue for the first time. Li accused Hanoi of treating overseas Chinese in southern Vietnam with “coercion...and regardless of their own wish.” Li explicitly

¹¹⁴ *Renmin Ribao*, September 30, 1977.

¹¹⁵ Xu Xiangqian, “Tigao Jinti, Zhunbei Dazhang” [“Heighten Vigilance, Be Ready to Fight”], *Red Flag*, no.8 (August 1, 1978), 42-50.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

expressed his dissatisfaction: "You have now unilaterally taken measures to compel Chinese to adopt Vietnamese nationality without consulting us, thus placing us in an awkward position politically."¹¹⁷ In late 1977 and early 1978, Chinese leaders sent a series of confidential notes to their Vietnamese counterparts, expressing Beijing's objection to the treatment of the overseas Chinese.¹¹⁸

However, Hanoi refused to heed Beijing's warnings. As mentioned above, in the first half of 1978, Vietnam took a series of steps to "nationalize" its economy in southern Vietnam and seriously hurt economic interests of the overseas Chinese. As a result, China stepped up its warning. On April 30, 1978, Liao Chengzhi reiterated China's policy towards overseas Chinese. Different from his previous editorial in *Renmin Ribao*, this time Liao singled out Vietnam: "Recently, large numbers of Chinese residing in Vietnam suddenly began to return to China. We are concerned about this and are closely following the developments."¹¹⁹

This warning failed again. Xuan Thuy, Secretary of the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) Central Committee, declared that if the overseas Chinese wanted to leave Vietnam, they simply needed to make a formal application.¹²⁰ Responding to Hanoi's incomppliance, China sent a note in May with a more severe warning. After complaining Vietnamese treatment of the overseas Chinese, Beijing warned, "Vietnamese side considers China's sincere desire to preserve Sino-Vietnamese friendship...as a weakness and thinks it can bully China...It is...seriously impairing the friendship between the two peoples."¹²¹

¹¹⁷ "Memorandum on Vice-Premier Li's Talks with Premier Pham Van Dong," 21-22.

¹¹⁸ "Foreign Ministry Issues Communiqué on May-June Notes with PRC," K14.

¹¹⁹ "Teng Hsiao-ping, Keng Piao at Party for Overseas Chinese," *Peking NCNA*, April 30, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-78-084, A1-A3.

¹²⁰ "Xuan Thuy Interviewed on Chinese Residents Returning to PRC," *Hanoi Domestic Service*, May 4, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-APA-78-088, K1-K2.

¹²¹ "Foreign Ministry Issues Communiqué on May-June Notes with PRC," K15.

A more direct warning came from Deng Xiaoping. Commenting on the overseas Chinese issue, Deng Xiaoping confirmed that as retaliation, China had reduced aid to Vietnam. He further warned, "We tolerated patiently until the Vietnamese had taken ten steps. When they took the eleventh step, we took our first retaliatory step. When they take the twelfth step, we will take our second step."¹²² Nonetheless, the warnings failed again. Vietnam not only set obstacles to the evacuation of the overseas Chinese, but also essentially rejected China's demand of opening a consulate in Ho Chi Minh City, in which a large number of Chinese lived.¹²³

Hanoi's defiance further provoked China. In June Beijing closed all of Vietnamese consulates in China, and recalled its ambassador from Vietnam.¹²⁴ Meanwhile, Beijing stepped up its warning. In August, Beijing sent a delegation to Hanoi to hold talks on the overseas Chinese issue and mainly used this forum to send warnings. At the second session, Zhong Xidong, head of the Chinese delegation, claimed that sending ships to Vietnam was Beijing's "legitimate right to protect the interests of its nationals." Zhong further condemned the Soviet-Vietnamese "collusion" on this issue.¹²⁵ In his subsequent speeches in September, Zhong charged Hanoi of "seeking regional hegemonism." Hanoi, Zhong commented, had "long made its mind to make the Soviet Union its ideal patron. As for the Soviet Union, it wants to push its global hegemonism and control the Southeast Asian countries...Therefore [the Soviet Union] needs the service of Vietnam's regional hegemonism and wants it to play the role of an outpost in Southeast Asia." Zhong Xidong also claimed that Vietnam did "not have any intention to

¹²² "Comments on SRV Dispute," *Tokyo Kyodo*, June 5, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, PRC, FBIS-CHI-78-108, A8-A9.

¹²³ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979*, 184.

¹²⁴ "Chen Chih-Fang Returns," *Paris AFP*, June 16, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, PRC, FBIS-CHI-78-117, A5. On an analysis on the diplomatic purpose of the withdrawal of the ambassador, see Ross, 311, endnote 54.

¹²⁵ Statement by Chung His-tung, Leader of the Chinese Government Delegation at the Second Session of the Sino-Vietnamese Talks," August 19, 1978, in *On Viet Nam's Expulsion of Chinese Residents*, 59-70.

settle questions through negotiation. What they believe in is force.” As a result, Zhong concluded, it was “impossible for the talks to go on.”¹²⁶

China also signaled more of its support for Kampuchea in the Kampuchean-Vietnamese conflict. This stance, in turn, was coercive against Vietnam and showed China's displeasure with Hanoi's enhanced cooperation with the Soviet Union. On the banquet welcoming Pol Pot in October 1977, Hua Guofeng asserted, “Both China and Kampuchea are developing socialist states, belonging to the third world. In the struggle of opposing imperialism and hegemonism, two states will stand with other third world states side by side.”¹²⁷

Meanwhile, China tried to restrain its coercion. Even after the large-scale conflict between Kampuchea and Vietnam broke out in December 1977, Beijing still sought a negotiated solution between the two Indochinese states. Before Deng Yingchao left for Phnom Penh, Phan Hien, reportedly, arrived in Beijing. According to a diplomatic source, his trip was for “consultations with the Chinese government,” and the Vietnamese embassy in Beijing did not deny this trip.¹²⁸

In February 1978, China further voiced its support for negotiation. When the Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs Don Jamieson visited China, Chinese leaders explained to him that Hanoi and Phnom Penh “should cease all hostilities...initiate talks leading to a peaceful resolution...They should properly settle [the dispute] among themselves.” Chinese leaders also assured Jamieson that China had not “instigated in any way the present border dispute.” In the

¹²⁶ “Statement by Chung His-tung, Leader of the Chinese Government Delegation at the Seventh and Eighth Sessions of the Sino-Vietnamese Talks,” September 19 and 28, 1978, respectively, in *ibid.*, 94-119.

¹²⁷ *Renmin Ribao*, September 28, 1977.

¹²⁸ “AFP Reports Vice Foreign Minister Phan Hien in Peking,” *Hong Kong AFP*, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-78-025, K3.

end of their discussion, Chinese leaders also accused the Soviet policy of seeking to “extend its...hegemony” in Southeast Asia, and especially Vietnam.¹²⁹

CHINA EMPHASIZING MORE ON COERCION, MARCH 1978-JANUARY 1979

As Hanoi continued to enhance its security cooperation with Moscow, Beijing perceived increasing threat from the Vietnamese-Soviet alignment. Therefore, China further adjusted its mix of wedge strategies and put increasingly more emphasis on coercion.

After Vietnam continued to defy Chinese demands for treatment of the overseas Chinese and border issues, China gradually dropped the accommodative component in its wedge strategies and emphasized more on coercion. China turned to more and more resolute support for Kampuchea, and eventually abandoned its neutral stance. According to Brzezinski, “the extent of concern shown by all of the Chinese leaders” about Vietnamese aggressiveness toward Kampuchea had surprised him. China, Brzezinski commented, was concerned with Soviet efforts to create Vietnamese domination in Southeast Asia.¹³⁰

In June 1978, Xinhua provided extensive coverage of Ieng Sary's travel in Asia and cited his remarks that Vietnam attempted to “annex and swallow Kampuchea...carry out acts of aggression and subversion...to...force Kampuchea to join the Indochina federation.”¹³¹ This was the first time Chinese media used such polemics to refer to Vietnam on this issue.¹³² In July, *Renmin Ribao* carried an editorial supporting Kampuchea: “When imperialists invade Vietnam and Cambodia, China support Vietnam and Cambodia, and assistance to Vietnam is way more

¹²⁹ “Comments on SRV-Cambodia Dispute,” February 4, 1978, *Hong Kong AFP*, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-APA-78-008, A21-A22.

¹³⁰ “Conversation between Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda and Zbigniew Brzezinski,” May 23, 1978, in DNSA collection: Korea, 1969-2000.

¹³¹ *Renmin Ribao*, June 26, 1978. See, also, the series of reports by *Peking NCNA*, June 10, June 11, and June 12, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-78-114, A10-A11.

¹³² Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979*, 191.

than assistance to Cambodia.” It continued, “Now Vietnam is invading Cambodia, it is no doubt that China will support and sympathize Cambodia.”¹³³

After Vietnam and the Soviet Union became allies, China quickly stepped up its support for Kampuchea. At a press conference, Deng Xiaoping condemned Vietnam as invading Cambodia under the instruction of the Soviet Union. He continued to denounce Vietnam as “Cuba of the East”: “After signing the treaty with the Soviet Union, Vietnam will increase its hegemonic policies. We must be alert to the Cuba of the East... We will make our policy according to how far Vietnam will push its hegemonic policy.”¹³⁴

Meanwhile, China decided to “give incessant assistance” to Kampuchea and “support the Cambodians to fight to the end.”¹³⁵ After the war broke out, more than 1,500 Chinese remained working in Kampuchea. “Some of them engage in construction work and some others are helping the Cambodians to fight on the battlefield,” as Geng Biao explained. All of them volunteered to “renounce their Chinese nationality...and to take part in this war of salvation against Vietnam.” Therefore, Beijing had “no way to prevent them from doing so.”¹³⁶

Beijing also put pressure on Hanoi by decreasing its economic assistance. In the end of 1977, Le Duan traveled to China after visiting Moscow. The Chinese expressed their dissatisfaction with improved USSR-Vietnam relations. At the welcoming banquet, Hua Guofeng reminded his Vietnamese guest that “the forces against superpower hegemonism are daily expanding.”¹³⁷ Nonetheless, Le Duan fought back right away. Replying to Hua’s speech,

¹³³ *Renmin Ribao*, July 12, 1978.

¹³⁴ *Renmin Ribao*, November 9, 1978.

¹³⁵ “Keng Piao’s Report on the Situation of the Indochinese Peninsula,” *Issues and Studies* XVII, no.1 (1981), 88.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹³⁷ “Hua Speaks at Banquet,” *Peking NCNA*, November 20, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-CHI-77-224, November 21, 1977, A11-A13.

Le Duan in his speech remarked that Vietnam believed that China “will not allow any class of exploitation or any reactionary force to rear up and change the color of the new China.”¹³⁸ These words were harsh for a communist leader.

With the bilateral relations further deteriorating, China completely cut off its economic aid to Vietnam in 1978. On May 4, the same day Xuan Thuy gave his statement on the overseas Chinese, Beijing began to withdraw its experts from a Vietnamese textile.¹³⁹ On May 12, 20, and 30, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Trade sent three notes to Vietnam, informing that China would terminate some of China-assisted projects to fund relocation of Chinese refugees.¹⁴⁰ Eventually, on July 3 China informed Vietnam that China terminated all economic and technical assistance, and would withdraw all technicians who remained in Vietnam.¹⁴¹

China also pressed on Vietnam on the territorial dispute. When Phan Van Dong visited China in June, Li Xiannian blamed Hanoi on provoking disputes on the land border issues. Li also told Dong that the offshore islands now became a “major subject of dispute in Sino-Vietnamese relations” as “you create this dispute.”¹⁴² He declared that China hoped Hanoi “will return to their original stand on this question.”¹⁴³ China also put more pressure on the Chinese-Vietnamese border. In 1978, the earliest border clashes, according to a CIA estimate, occurred on February 13 and 15 in two different locations. Chinese border guards fired and killed 30 Vietnamese. A more serious incident occurred on August 25, when unarmed Chinese border officials confronted Vietnamese soldiers at the *You Yi Guan* (Friendship Pass).¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸ “Banquet Held 20 Nov,” *Hanoi VNA*, November 21, 1977, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-APA-77-224, K3-K7.

¹³⁹ “Foreign Ministry Issues Communiqué on May-June Notes with PRC,” *Hanoi VNA*, June 17, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report, FBIS-APA-78-118, K4.

¹⁴⁰ Shanghai Municipal Archives, document no. B-32-2-268, 3, 7-8.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁴² “Memorandum on Vice-Premier Li’s Talks with Premier Pham Van Dong,” 21.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴⁴ CIA, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” 2-3.

Following these tensions on the border, China exerted more pressure on Vietnam with a display of force. Between May and the fall of 1978, Chinese military aircraft penetrated into the Vietnamese airspace, and conducted overflights in the Gulf of Tonkin near Vietnamese coastal cities.¹⁴⁵ In September, the Chinese Foreign Ministry warned that Hanoi “must shoulder all responsibility for the consequences arising from the...encroachment on Chinese territorial integrity and sovereignty.”¹⁴⁶

By October, the situation on the border further deteriorated. Responding to the Vietnamese military buildup along the border, Li Xiannian remarked that the “dispute had gone beyond possible conciliation and that the situation would not be helped even if China were to cede its two border provinces to Vietnam.” He continued to state that China was now preparing for a “nasty and protracted ordeal.”¹⁴⁷ A week later, Deng Xiaoping told a visitor that China had “given up” on Vietnam, but hoped to avoid armed conflict. He further asserted, however, if Hanoi started the fight, they “will get into trouble.”¹⁴⁸ On October 26, the Chinese Foreign Ministry lodged a strong protest; China “solemnly demands” that Vietnam “stop at once all of its acts of encroachments.”¹⁴⁹ On the same day, Xinhua delivered a more severe warning: should Hanoi continue to “obdurately go their own way, continuing to act provocatively on the border...and to threaten China with war, they will eventually be the victim of their own evil deeds. Let’s see how much further the Vietnamese authorities have decided to go.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁶ *Renmin Ribao*, September 18, 1978.

¹⁴⁷ CIA, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” 6.

¹⁴⁸ CIA, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” 5-6.

¹⁴⁹ *Renmin Ribao*, October 26, 1978.

¹⁵⁰ “Let’s see how much farther Hanoi will go,” *Peking NCNA*, October 26, 1978, in FBIS Daily Report PRC, FBIS-CHI-78-208, A17-A19.

None of China's coercive strategies worked, as Vietnam ignored all of China's warnings and eventually became a Soviet ally in November 1978. Consequently, Chinese leaders decided to start a punitive war against Vietnam. In November, at a Central Military Council meeting, Chinese leaders decided it was "necessary" to use force against Vietnam.¹⁵¹ In mid-December, Beijing ordered the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions to deploy troops on the border.¹⁵² Meanwhile, the South Sea Fleet began to patrol in the South China Sea and monitor Soviet naval and air forces activities.¹⁵³

On February 17, 1979, China launched attack from Guangxi and Yunnan. The direct objective of this war was to save the CPK from complete destruction. Through this war, China tied down 16 Vietnamese divisions, nearly half of its army.¹⁵⁴ As a result, China was able to ease some pressure on the CPK and prevent Hanoi from achieving a quick and decisive victory in Kampuchea. Second, Beijing aimed to punish Vietnam and raise the costs of Vietnam's cooperation with the Soviet Union. The war ended soon. But China continued to carry out attacks along the border to keep military pressure on Vietnam. Throughout the 1980s, the Chinese and Vietnamese armed forces exchanged artillery fire and competed for control over mountainous positions.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Zhang Zhen, *Zhang Zhen huiyilu* [Memoir of Zhang Zheng] (Beijing: jiefangjun chubanshe, 2003), vol.2, 165-66.

¹⁵² Guangzhou Military Region Political Department ed. *ZhongYue bianjing ziwei huanji zuozhan: Guanxi fangxian canzhanbudui zhengzhi gongzuo jingyan huibian* [The Counterattack in Self-defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border: Compilation of Selected Experiences of Political Work of Military from Guangxi] (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Military Region Political Department, 1979), vol.1, 50-51.

¹⁵³ Ibid., vol.2, 274-295.

¹⁵⁴ DCI, Intelligence Brief, "Sino-Soviet," February 23, 1979, in DNSA collection: The History of the National Security Agency: 1945 to the Present.

¹⁵⁵ For a detailed account of this prolonged conflict, see Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 141-68.

Conclusion

This paper sought to explain China's choices of wedge strategies. It developed a theoretical framework and test it with the case of China's wedge strategies toward Vietnam in the late 1970s. It argued that the theoretical framework fit China's actual choices. After the fall of Saigon, China enjoyed strong leverage over Vietnam. China provided economic assistance to Vietnam and played an important role in restraining Cambodia's hostile policy toward Vietnam. Additionally, China was able to use the issues of territorial disputes and overseas Chinese to exert influence on Vietnam. Consequently, when the Soviet Union tried to enhance its relations with Vietnam, China responded with accommodative wedge strategies. Meanwhile, China restrained its economic assistance to Vietnam in order to warn the latter against standing close with the Soviet Union.

This began to change in the mid-1977. Receiving a large amount of Soviet equipment and economic assistance emboldened Hanoi to step up its control over the overseas Chinese community and disputed territories. Meanwhile, it turned out China was unable to restrain Pol Pot. Consequently, those developments undermined China's leverage. Meanwhile, Vietnam continued to enter the Soviet orbit. Therefore, China adjusted its primary wedge strategy from accommodative to coercive. Vietnam continued to enhance its cooperation with the Soviet Union and in November 1978 the two states signed the alliance treaty. Correspondingly, China adjusted its mix of strategies and increasingly emphasized on coercion.

Though this paper examines a single case, its findings have broader theoretical implications. First, they contribute to the growing literature on wedge strategies by emphasizing the role of mixed strategies. Existing studies on wedge strategies have focused more on pure

strategies.¹⁵⁶ In contrast, in this paper I develop a theory that analyzes the use of mixed strategies. As the case shows, China consistently considered mixing coercive and accommodative strategies when driving a wedge. Using complementary strategies can compensate for the vulnerability of the divider's primary strategy. By explaining how a divider mixes coercion and accommodation, this paper furthers our understanding of wedge strategies.

Second, this paper sheds light on the alliance politics literature. Research has suggested that factors, such as balance of power, threat, and interests, can affect formation and collapse of alliances.¹⁵⁷ The case study in this paper provides additional evidence showing that balance of power or common threat is not sufficient to explain alliance dynamics. Vietnam chose to align with the Soviet Union mainly because the Soviet Union supported its regional ambition. Meanwhile, the stable Vietnamese-Soviet alignment was not because they shared the common threat from China. Rather, the alignment was stable because Moscow continued providing rewards to keep Hanoi in its orbit. This case highlights that alliances are results of dynamic rather than static equilibrium.

This paper also entails policy implications. With growing power, China is seeking to weaken the U.S.-led alliance network in East Asia. China tried to drive a wedge between the United States and the Philippines in the 2010s and 2020s. China has also been preventing a trilateral alliance among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Beyond East Asia, China is also trying to undermine U.S. relations with its partners and allies. The most recent example is the China-brokered agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to restore their bilateral relations.¹⁵⁸ Although it is still early to fully assess the importance of this agreement, China's

¹⁵⁶ Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," 160; Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics," 505–13.

¹⁵⁷ Randall L. Schweller, "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 927–30; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72–107; Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 17–49; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 102–28.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Baker, "Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges U.S.," *New York Times*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html>.

move showed its attempt to undermine the U.S. influence in the Middle East by brokering rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a long-time U.S. partner in the region.

As China is actively using wedge strategies to revise the status quo across regions, it is essential to understand the logic underlying China's choice of particular wedge strategies. If China has strong leverage over states that it aims to detach from the United States or other great powers, we would expect to observe China accommodating those states. In contrast, when China lacks leverage, more aggressive moves are expected. This understanding can not only shed more light on China's foreign policies in the contemporary era, but also help policymakers employ appropriate strategies to respond to China's policies.