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## Vietnam's Epochal Saga of Beating Back Massive Chinese Invasion 1979

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China's impulsiveness to launch a militarily flawed massive invasion of Vietnam in 1979 was impelled by a greater Chinese geopolitical blueprint of checkmating the perceived former Soviet Union's strategic intrusiveness in South East Asia courtesy Vietnam, and also thereby ingratiating itself geopolitically with the United States that China was available to play the role of a quasi-strategic ally of the United States in the region to counterbalance the former Soviet Union.

The latter stands substantiated by the fact that Deng Xiao Peng who headed China then visited Washington in January 1979 and briefed US President Carter about China's plans to nip in the bud the emergence of a "Cuba of the East". Reportedly, the United States did not raise any objections to the Chinese plan of a massive invasion of Vietnam, logically too, when placed in the context of the United States being forced into an inglorious military exit from Vietnam in 1974 after its prolonged military intervention and occupation.

Two major developments concerning Vietnam occurred in 1978 which irked China considerably and China perceived them as Vietnamese strategic provocations aimed at China. The first was the signing of a Mutual Treaty of Friendship between the Former Soviet Union and Vietnam and the second was Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia to contain the genocide underway there by the Chinese-backed regime.

The major Chinese military aim in launching the massive military invasion in 1979 was to force Vietnam to withdraw Vietnamese military formations from Cambodia to stem the Chinese invasion of Vietnam. Nothing of that sort happened as Vietnam employed its battle-hardened Border Guards and Local Militias only to combat the Chinese invasion and did not divert any of the Vietnam Army Regular Divisions from Cambodia. In fact despite the Chinese invasion, Vietnam continued to maintain its regular army forces in Cambodia for another ten years.

Vietnam thereby negated China's larger strategic aims.

Consequently, in 1979, China embarked on a massive invasion of Vietnam by Chinese Army formations numbering over 200,000 supported by 200 tanks and with savage artillery bombardments which lasted for 29 days from February 17 to March 16 1979. Notably China stood checkmated by Vietnam and repulsed by use of only Vietnamese Border Troops and Local Militias. That Chinese Divisions were soon forced into retreat from Vietnamese territory and thereby stood exposed at that time the serious limitations in China's military to strategize and execute large scale military operations.

China's invasion of Vietnam involved massive major 'human wave' attacks at 26 points besides smaller actions across a front of 900 kilometres and in the first phase from February 17-25 1979 managed to intrude 20 kilometres deep into Vietnamese territory capturing some small border towns. This was made possible by the element of major surprise as Vietnam never expected that China as a fraternal Communist country would attack a smaller Communist country.

Such was the fierce response of Vietnam to the Chinese invasion that Chinese Army suffered very heavy casualties involving over 20,000 dead and an equal number wounded in a war that lasted barely four weeks. The 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam involved some of the bloodiest fighting suffered by China after the Korean War.

Vietnamese forces of Border Guards and Local Militias fought with Vietnamese historical and traditional tenacity to defend the sovereignty and integrity of Vietnam and they too suffered nearly 20,000 dead and over 100,000 civilian casualties. But what mattered was that Vietnam in its valorous military traditions which had earlier forced the French retreat from Vietnam and later the inglorious United States military exit from Vietnam had in 1979 imposed a similar retreat of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam with superior manpower and overwhelming firepower.

Coverage of this Chinese invasion of Vietnam received widespread international media attention and the international community was shocked by China's propensity to resort to war and invasion without provocation merely to achieve its geopolitical ends unmindful of the human costs of war. China's propensity to indulge in armed conflict to impose its will on its adversaries continues to be manifested even more than three decades thereafter as visible in China's current escalation of conflict in the South China Sea against Vietnam and the Philippines and against Japan in the East China Sea.

But the wider international media coverage focussed on how Vietnam hardly recovered from the ravages of the decade-long United States military campaigns in Vietnam could manage to checkmate the Chinese massive invasion of Vietnam with limited military resources and within three weeks forced the Chinese Army to withdraw from Vietnam. Noted by military strategists internationally was the fact that all this was achieved by Vietnam by employment of Border Guards and Local Militias and without committing Regular Army Divisions.

Such was the impact that India sent an Indian Army Study Team to Vietnam in 1979 to gain first-hand experience of the military operational

techniques and tactics used by Vietnam to repel the Chinese invasion.

China shirked to publicly examine the military lessons that emerged from this ill-fated Chinese invasion and has done so till date. I could find only one instance lately where a Chinese commentator has come out with an unofficial analysis on this Chinese invasion.

In the present geopolitical context in the Asia Pacific some lessons/ observations that need to be made are as follows:

- China's propensity to resort to armed conflict/invasion to impose its will or solutions has not waned even after over three decades since 1979. It stands currently manifested in Chinese escalation of the South China Sea and East China Sea conflicts and resort to dangerous military brinkmanship.
- With China in an ascendant trajectory of military expansion and modernisation, China's propensity for strategic irresponsible actions in the Asia Pacific is likely to be enhanced and thereby endangering Asian security and world peace, that much more.
- United States like in 1974 can be expected now also to exhibit its propensity to be permissive of China's destabilising actions in the Asia Pacific as long as China is expedient to serve America's larger geopolitical games.
- Vietnam therefore would be well advised to buttress its defence postures and its war preparedness to meet any emerging threats from China as in the South China Sea.

Signing off, finally, it needs to be stated that strategists from any part of the world would concede that Vietnam's repelling the massive Chinese invasion in early 1979 and inflicting 20,000 dead on the invading Chinese Army in furious battles within a month with limited military means, surely needs to be counted as an epochal military saga.

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