

Passive Aggression: Explaining The Strategic Logic of Military Attrition

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Introduction and Literature Review

Wars of attrition are long and costly.¹ Why do states deliberately choose to wage expected wars of attrition over an ex-ante bargaining settlement? For defensive realists and deterrence theorists, the expectation of denial favorability induces rational deterrence.² For offensive realists, the expectation of denial favorability induces the bait-and-bleed strategy, defined as “inciting a rival to engage in a protracted war against the baiter or, preferably, its ally.” However, John Mearsheimer concluded that “It is difficult to trick rival states into starting a (protracted) war (of attrition) that they would otherwise not fight” and dismissed the bait-and-bleed strategy.³ If the conventional wisdom is true, then no great power belligerent should expect wars of attrition in pre-war decision-making, and almost all great power wars result from false optimism caused by psychological biases and institutional pathologies.⁴ Being unfavorably thought of, the strategic logic of attrition is not well-studied. I propose a novel theory of Passive Aggression to rationally explain the attrition strategy. The expected denial favorability incentivizes states to conceal the private military information. Under persistent ex-ante optimism, the adversary is likely to attack and the defender can exploit the favorable loss-exchange rate for relative gain.

¹ I define land wars of attrition as wars that engage at least a corp from each belligerent in active combat and feature no successful breakthrough.

² Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 199, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>.

Charles L Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 75–76.

Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “General Deterrence between Enduring Rivals: Testing Three Competing Models,” *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 1 (March 1993): 61–73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938956>.

John J Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 28-30.

³ Mearsheimer defined bait-and-bleed as a strategy that “involves causing two rivals to engage in a protracted war, so that they bleed each other white, while the baiter remains on the sideline, its military strength intact.” Diverging from Mearsheimer, this research accepts that the baiter and the victim are disparate in the case of third-party baiting but are the same actor in the case of direct baiting. Bait-and-bleed is a broader mother set of what Glenn Snyder termed alliance incitement, defined as “encouraging an ally to attack an enemy, and then withdrawing one’s own support to the ally after the fight begins.” In contrast, bait-and-bleed can take forms of letting an enemy/neutral/ally to attack oneself/allies/neutrals/enemy. The successful baiter throw its weight behind the victim to the extent John J Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 53.

Glenn H Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 318.

⁴ Branislav L Slantchev and Ahmer Tarar, “Mutual Optimism as a Rationalist Explanation of War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 1 (September 29, 2010): 135–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00475.x>.

Dominic D P Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Tyler Jost, *Bureaucracies at War: The Institutional Origin of Miscalculation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

Defensive Realism	Offensive Realism	Passive Aggression Theory
Expectation of defense favorability induces rational deterrence. Psychological biases/institutional pathologies cause misplaced optimism and attritional war occurrence.	Expectation of defense favorability induces bait-and-bleed strategy. Rational states would not take the bait and wage attritional wars.	Expectation of defense favorability induces bait-and-bleed strategy. Strategic concealment of private information prevents the adversarial ex-ante updating.

Table 1: The Theoretical Landscape of Strategic Logic of Attrition

Indeed, the combination of an anticipated large and sudden shift of relative power and pessimistic assessment of the adversary's intention reduces the credibility of current war-avoidance deals.⁵ However, commitment problem is not sufficient to convince a bargainer that it is facing an adversary it would rather fight than accommodate as Robert Powell claimed.⁶ If a rational bargainer expects its post-fighting relative power to be worse off than or equal to its anticipated power position projected by the no-fighting trajectory, why would it choose to fight rather than settle on even a non-credible deal? War is more attractive than a deal under commitment problems only when military optimism reigns.

Deficient understandings of the causes of attrition wars have deep roots in the lack of scholarly interest in the strategic logic of attrition. John Mearsheimer asserted that attrition strategy always entails an unfavorable exchange rate: "The cost of attrition strategy is always high...attrition strategy emphasizes overwhelming the enemy with superior numbers."⁷ On the other hand, game theorists approximate wars of attrition as second-price all-pay auctions in which both bidders pay the second highest bid, and the prize is allocated to the bidder with the highest bid.⁸ However, contest models only account for the level of persistence in taking symmetrical costs, which is more illustrative of limited nuclear exchanges and symmetric arms racing, than conventional land warfare.⁹ In conventional war, the loss-exchange rate is central in determining whether state A's option of attrition strategy will improve A's ex-post relative power

⁵ Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60, no. 01 (January 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818306060061>.

Dale C Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), chapter 2. Alex Weisiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

Andrea Bartoletti, *Escaping the Deadly Embrace: How Encirclement Causes Major Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

⁶ Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," 180-88, 194.

⁷ Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 36-39.

⁸ John M Smith, "The Theory of Games and the Evolution of Animal Conflicts," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 47, no. 1 (September 1974): 209-21, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-5193\(74\)90110-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-5193(74)90110-6).

Erwin Amann and Wolfgang Leininger, "Asymmetric All-Pay Auctions with Incomplete Information: The Two-Player Case," *Games and Economic Behavior* 14, no. 1 (May 1996): 1-3, <https://doi.org/10.1006/game.1996.0040>.

Robert Powell, "Taking Sides in Wars of Attrition," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 2 (February 14, 2017): 219-36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055416000782>.

⁹ Barry O'Neill, "International Escalation and the Dollar Auction," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30, no. 1 (March 1986): 33-50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002786030001003>.

compared to the balance under non-attribution strategies. Notably, Carter Malkasian's dedicated study of attrition warfare concluded that "In many cases (of attritional strategies), losses are kept at a level beneath that of the opponent."¹⁰ By opening the black box of the operational level, on which warfighting generates relative gain, Passive Aggression Theory turns defensive realism on its head, suggesting that the denial favorability can facilitate relative-gain revisionism instead of the status quo. Offensive breakthroughs are generally more costly than defensive containment. A dyadic denial favorability can indefinitely delay the completion of breakthrough and gravely extend the defender-favorable attrition process. Thus, the defender can reverse the balance of military resources by the end of the campaign.

1	A state would choose a blackmail strategy when it expects a friendly offensive favorability that would enable quick and potent exploitations.
2	A state would choose a bait-and-bleed strategy when it expects a war of attrition with a favorable exchange rate for the defender resulting from third-party assistance if possible or from its own denial favorability if necessary.
3	A state would choose a yielding strategy when it assesses an adversarial offensive favorability to cause its military failures either on the offensive or defensive.
4	If a state chooses the blackmail strategy, it would reveal its private information in crisis bargaining while preparing to attack.
5	If a state chooses the bait-and-bleed strategy, it would be unwilling to bargain ex-ante and conceal its private information while preparing to defend.
6	The outbreak of war is impossible if an ex-ante agreement of campaign expectation is logically dictated.
7	The outbreak of war is contingent if an ex-ante mutual uncertainty about or disagreement of campaign expectations is logically possible.

Table 2: Basic Claims of Passive Aggression Theory

Setting Up Passive Aggression Theory: Definitions and Assumptions

The independent variable in Passive Aggression is the assessment of the offense-defense balance. Ideal-typically, the offense-defense assessment indicates Friendly Offense Favorability, Adversarial Offense Favorability, or Denial Favorability. The offense-defense assessment determines the intermediate variable of campaign expectations ranging Successful Friendly Exploitation, Successful Adversarial Exploitation, and Contained Breakthrough. The intermediate variable of campaign expectation determines the initial strategic choice. As the dependent variable, initial strategic choices have three variations: Blackmail, Bait-and-Bleed, and Yielding. Hoping to avoid the ex-post inefficiency of fighting, blackmail threatens a massive invasion in the form of Large-scale Combat Operations (LSCO) to extract substantial

¹⁰ Carter Malkasian, *A History of Modern Wars of Attrition* (Westport, Ct: Praeger, 2002), 7.

concessions. Bait-and-bleed involves precipitating the commencement of the rivals' offensive against the prepared defensive measures. Both revisionists could bargain diplomatically before resorting to lethal force. A state's initial strategic choice, the independent variable, determines the intermediate variable of its willingness to bargain before the war, namely whether to reveal or conceal private information on its military capabilities. The combination of their respective decision on information revelation determines whether there will be an agreement on the dyadic offense-defense balance and the associated campaign expectation after their post-bargaining updating. The prospect of such an agreement directly determines whether a war will, may, or will not occur.

Passive Aggression Theory is founded on four bedrock assumptions respectively about goals, strategicness, information, and uncertainty propensity. **Assumption 1, the pursuit of relative capability**, is plain and simple: at least two major players in international politics (A and B) would consider using military assets to improve their ex-post relative capability. The pursuit of relative capability, however, does not necessitate that all possible external strategies to achieve this goal are revisionist or agents would choose revisionist strategies all the time. External strategy is also not the only way to improve a great power's relative capability. The sophistication of political organizations and the innovations of military technology are primarily internally grown fruits.

Assumption 2, rational strategic choice, assumes a rational revisionist will choose whatever strategy that has the highest positive expected utility for relative power maximization. The strategic choice assumption allows the revisionist powers to update their strategic assessment and choices to a finite extent after battlefield revelations, and even to a more constrained extent after peacetime military developments and pre-war bargaining.¹¹ In the decision tree, the initially successful defender could generally assume that once entering the bleeding contest, the initially failed attacker would stay in it for an extended period before embracing stalemate and settlement, given the absence of any imminent collapse on its side.¹²

However, rational decision-making and updating cannot be proceeded without information inputs. **Assumption 3, conditional information availability**, treats organizational-technical effectiveness as private information. This assumption is hardly radical given that the peacetime numerical strength of the opponent forces is largely visible and stable. Meanwhile, bean-counting is also the easiest method for ex-ante military assessment. In the last few decades, the service of advanced sensors has become so cheap and accessible that non-governmental analysts can use commercially available technical means to gauge the number, although not necessarily fine-grained

¹¹ Robert Powell, "Bargaining and Learning While Fighting," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 2 (March 3, 2004): 344–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0092-5853.2004.00074.x>.

D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, "The Duration of Interstate Wars, 1816–1985," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (June 1996): 239–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082882>.

¹² This assumption is theoretically upheld by the commitment problem of war termination. empirically confirmed by Bennett and Stam, whose quantitative analysis indicates that the most dramatic increase of war duration occurs when attacking states move from "maneuver" to "attrition" strategies. *Ibid*, 252.

Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), chapter 3.

Scott Wolford, Dan Reiter, and Clifford J. Carrubba, "Information, Commitment, and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 4 (March 22, 2011): 556–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002710393921>.

dispositions of a country's major military assets with impressive accuracy. Compared to the order of battle, organizational innovations and sophistication are substantially more contingent on divergent state agencies and organizational conditioning and, therefore, less visible to their rival party, especially in peacetime.¹³ The orders-of-magnitude failure of the best-informed minds to predict Iraqi military organizational effectiveness is illustrative.¹⁴ The test of the battlefield is the necessary condition for revealing the balance of organizational effectiveness. Even with access to domestic dynamics inside the "black box," professional analysts often fail to accurately grasp other countries' military organizational effectiveness.¹⁵ The fallacious consensus that the British Army in WWI was "Lions led by Donkeys" persisted until the 1980s. Wehrmacht's organizational effectiveness was considerably overrated by leading military historians until the 1990s. Until the last decade, Western security elites had a much higher regard on the organizational effectiveness of Soviet nuclear forces than the Soviet security elites themselves. Therefore, it would be hardly surprising when states' ex-ante assessments of dyadic, composite offense-defense balance are erroneous.

Measuring Offense-Defense Balance: The Prime Cut

Offense-defense balance, defined as the ratio between the net payoff of arms buildup and warfighting required for offensive missions and the net payoff of arms buildup and warfighting required for defensive missions in a dyad, is crucial for the calculus of bargaining.¹⁶ Analysts can minimize the confounding effects of the dyadically relevant costs of arms buildup for theorizing system-level dynamics via Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and other standardizations. While the traditional scholarships blackbox operational dynamics and portray the offense-defense balance's impact on net assessment in oversimplified sketches, Karen Adams duly noted that states can capitalize on denial favorability, initiating war but not large-scale attacks, and beating the adversary through attrition.¹⁷ This thesis will follow her suit to conceptualize the impact of offense-defense favorability on the state calculations through the campaign-level mechanisms. In modern military operations, two-to-one theater-wide material superiority usually secures victory for the attacker. This analytical baseline enjoys empirical support and frequent applications in conventional warfare. John Mearsheimer posited: "The defender would probably be in serious trouble if the overall balance of

¹³ Jonathan Shimshoni, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 226–27.

Stephen P Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 8-22.

¹⁴ Jacob Weisberg, "Gulfballs: How the Experts Blew It, Big-Time," *New Republic* 204, no. 12 (March 25, 1991), 17-19.

¹⁵ Brian Bond, *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 6–12.

James A Wood, "Captive Historians, Captivated Audience: The German Military History Program, 1945-1961," *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 1 (2005): 123–47,

<https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2005.0071>.

Brendan R Green and Austin Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (July 7, 2017): 606–41,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1331639>.

¹⁶ Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, 34.

¹⁷ However, Adams also used the untenable systemic rather than dyadic OD balance.

Karen R Adams, "Attack and Conquer? International Anarchy and the Offense-Defense-Deterrence Balance," *International Security* 28, no. 3 (2003): 47, 50, 59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137477>.

Armored Division Equivalents (ADEs) in a theater favored the attacker by 2:1.” Christopher Lawrence’s exploration of an up-to-date battle datasets indicates that 20th-century attackers, regardless of effectiveness, terrain context, and force employment schemes, often succeed with a roughly 2:1 theater FFR.¹⁸

The theater force ratio is a good rule of thumb used for conservative planning. However, a necessary and sufficient explanation for military outcome must also account for intangible factors like civil-military relations, social cohesion, military inequality, military organizational design, and small unit leadership, all powerfully shape the military balance.¹⁹ Organizational effectiveness is especially important for assessment when the military balance is not lop-sided in terms of the theater force ratio. Stephen Biddle convincingly proved that absent of lopsided material balance, the exchange between a well-organized attacker and a well-organized defender will result in a contained offensive. The exchange between a well-organized attacker and a disorganized defender will result in the latter’s quick collapse. The exchange between a disorganized attacker and a disorganized defender will result in little change in the line of actual control.²⁰ This relation between dyadic balances of organizational effectiveness and combat outcomes is weaker yet still salient in naval warfare.²¹ Table 2 lays out a composite measurement of offense-defense balance that accounts for both material balance and organizational effectiveness. I assume that states assess their military prospects using similar standards. The biggest challenge for states’ ODB assessment is that, although the material balance is nicely correlated with the level of military resource, and therefore polarity and coalition, the balance of organizational effectiveness is not.²²

Numerical Balance between State A/B	A:B>2:1	2:1>A:B>1:2 2:1>B:A>1:2	B:A>2:1
	A’s Offense Favorable	Denial Favorable Given Effectiveness Parity	B’s Offense Favorable
Organizational-Technical Effectiveness of State A/B	High		Low
High	Denial Weakly Favorable	B’s Offense Favorable	
Low	A’s Offense Favorable		Denial Strongly Favorable

Table 3: Assessing Offense-Defense Balance²³

¹⁸ John J Mearsheimer, “Numbers, Strategy, and the European Balance,” *International Security* 12, no. 4 (1988): 176, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539001>.

Christopher A Lawrence, *War by Numbers: Understanding Conventional Combat* (Lincoln: The University Of Nebraska Press, 2017), 9–11.

¹⁹ Risa Brooks and Elizabeth A Stanley, *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

Dan Reiter, *The Sword’s Other Edge: Tradeoffs in the Pursuit of Military Effectiveness* (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Stephen Biddle, “Rebuilding the Foundations of Offense-Defense Theory,” *The Journal of Politics* 63, no. 3 (August 2001): 750–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-3816.00086>.

Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²¹ Stephen Biddle and John Severini, “Military Effectiveness and Naval Warfare,” *Security Studies*, August 8, 2024, 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2024.2363533>.

²² Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, “Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 2 (June 1996): 171–212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399608437634>.

²³ For the complete version of the new theory of offense-defense balance and the empirical tests of the new theory, see:

Offense-Defense Assessment and the Strategic Choice

Proposition 1: A state would choose a blackmail strategy when it expects a friendly offensive favorability that would enable quick and potent exploitations. A successful conquest increases the friendly relative power vis-a-vis the adversary, and friendly offense favorability makes the probability of achieving that outcome high. Moreover, the revisionist here does not need to worry about the commitment problem in the case that its rival also assesses friendly offense favorability and moves first since the friendly offense favorability comes from sheer relative strength instead of mechanisms of surprise and initiative. Even when becoming the second-mover, it could confidently choose a general counteroffensive followed by an initial strategic defense-in-depth, launching flanking maneuvers to encircle the invading spearhead and threaten the supporting infrastructure behind the main enemy echelon. Both Marshal Manstein's maneuver-strike in Kharkiv in 1943 and General Sharon's crossing of Suez in 1973 exemplified aspects of general counteroffensives.²⁴

Proposition 2: A state would choose a bait-and-bleed strategy when it expects a war of attrition with a favorable exchange rate for the defender resulting from third-party assistance if possible or from its own denial favorability if necessary. Third-party bleeding provides a double gain of non-friendly capability attrition for A since two potential competitors suffer instead of one. Third-party bleeding also incurs a lower cost of bleeding for A since such cost is provided by the capabilities of both A and the third party instead of just A. Therefore, a rational baiter would always prefer third-party bleeding over direct bleeding whenever available. However, rational states choose this militarily defensive strategy over the militarily offensive strategies only under the expectation of a favorable exchange rate (the necessary condition) for the defender, which is only plausible when battlefield denial is judged favorable. In this case, B's forces would be stretched when encountering indirect bait-and-bleed, resulting in a low risk of a breakthrough on A's homefront and, at most, a moderate risk of a breakthrough on the diversionary front facing the third party, promising low risk and effective bleeding. Even if B's main weight falls on A when encountering direct bait-and-bleed, A would still only face a moderate risk of breakthrough at most. Malkasian emphasizes: "Attrition has been implemented primarily on the operational level."²⁵ In breakthrough battles between a modern system attacker and a modern system defender, the loss-exchange ratio often approaches 2:1.²⁶ Thereby, the military defender can transform the LSCO engagements initiated by the attacker into attrition engagements of favorable exchange rate for the defender if it can delay the attacker's spearhead in a series of tactical fighting withdrawals and contain the attacker's main echelon, preventing exploitation following the attacker's successful and early breakthroughs.²⁷ A illustration of how bait-and-bleed brings relative gain is shown in

Deye Li and Musa Ali, "Toward a Better Assessment of Military Balance," in *ISSS-IS Annual Conference 2024* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2024).

²⁴ David M Glantz and Jonathan M House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 143–47.

Kenneth M Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: University Of Nebraska Press, 2004), 123–28.

²⁵ Malkasian, *A History of Modern Wars of Attrition*, 3.

²⁶ James F Dunnigan, *How to Make War: A Comprehensive Guide to Modern Warfare in the 21st Century*, 4th ed. (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1988), 533, 536.

²⁷ Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 52.

Table 4. Offensive breakthroughs are generally more costly than defensive containment. Given a 1.4:1 ex-ante numerical balance between the attacker and the defender and controlling for qualitative differences, the offense-defense balance in this dyad favors denial. The completion of breakthrough can be indefinitely delayed and the defender-favorable attrition process can be gravely extended under denial favorability. Thus, the defender can reverse the the numerical balance by the end of the campaign.

Successful Blitzkrieg	Attacker Assets	Defender Assets	Differential
Ex-ante	10	7	3
Breakthrough	-4	-2	-2
Exploitation	+5	-5	+10
Ex-post	11	0	11
Net relative gain	11-3=8		
Successful Bait-and-Bleed	10	7	3
Ex-ante	-4	-2	-2
Breakthrough	-4	-2	-2
Extended breakthu	2	3	-1
Net relative gain	3-(-1)=4		

Table 4: An Illustration of How Revisionist Strategies Generate Relative Gain

It should be emphasized that the initial choice of bait-and-bleed does not guarantee the occurrence of a war of attrition. The post-crisis bargaining update may result in a change of strategic choice, and the real test of the battlefield could still generate a decisive breakthrough and falsify the choice of bait-and-bleed at the onset of war.

A critical puzzle in explaining the bait-and-bleed strategic design behind attrition war initiations is why states that assess dyadic denial favorability throw out costly baits instead of merely waiting to be attacked. When revisionist A assesses denial favorability before the crisis bargaining process, it looks for bleeding momentarily rather than waiting for the distant future. Distant future is plagued by Knightian uncertainty, which means that there is no scientific basis on which to form any calculable probability whatever. Even when states have a high discount rate, exclusively acting upon the prospect in near future would still be rational.²⁸ However, state B that perceives friendly offensive favorability after the crisis bargaining process would prepare for attack momentarily and baiting is unnecessary and inefficient. The answer to this puzzle lies in the usefulness of “Bayesian persuasion.” Whereas costly

²⁸ David M Edelman, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 14–28.

signals enable the distinction of the strong type from the weak type, senders may be able to *commit* to a strategy where they don't lie so much that their messages still affect the receiver behavior.²⁹ The sender can design signals of “window of opportunity” or “gathering cloud” that are credible enough to be believed. Thus, baits can increase the adversary's subject belief in the importance and the likelihood of breakthrough of attacking now.

A prominent refutation of my theory holds that the victim in the triad of indirect bait-and-bleed would exercise its agency instead of waiting idly for victimization. However, this research would counter that the relationship and agency of the potential third party, unless it is a great power, could not substantially influence the ledger of revision. Therefore, the contest is mostly between A and B. Importantly, as the case of Soviet baiting of China to attack Vietnam in the late 1970s would demonstrate, an ex-ante alignment between B and C does not preclude A from contemplating and successfully implementing bait-and-bleed against them. The relation's purported stickiness does not exempt the relations from structural preconditioning and interactional incentivization, the stress of which has no ceiling. The ex-ante bargaining failure between B and C is also eminently plausible, constituting another permit for A's bait-and-bleed. A can lock B and C into a conflict by throwing out a bait that has high intrinsic value, and therefore, less divisible for both B and C. Moreover, the threat of A's abandonment that substantially raises C's costs of war against B can lead C to conceal its true capability and willingness to fight, securing strategic support at the price of an elevated risk of war even if C can credibly signal its strength and resolve.³⁰

Ex-ante bilateral conflict-resolution bargaining in a triad of three equivalent powers is difficult enough. When the potential third party is of lesser power, which is more likely, the toe-to-toe bargaining would be replaced by delegation dynamics. Given that the preferences of the principal and the agent do not perfectly align, information asymmetry and commitment problems ensure that the principal's ex-post punishment/reward efforts to overcome misalignment and induce agent compliance will have sub-optimal outcomes.³¹ Eli Berman et al. suggested replacing the agent with high preference misalignment with an agent with high preference alignment or selecting the latter in the first place as the solution.³² This could well be unnecessary. Baiters can manipulate options, seeking to bind the proxy's decision-making by attempting to control a proxy's options for actions it feels it can and cannot take.³³ Marc Grinberg pointed out that implementing tailored capacity building and geopolitical counterbalancing under the condition of high misalignment yields the level and effectiveness of delegation superior

²⁹ Andrew T Little, “Bayesian Explanations for Persuasion,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 35, no. 3 (July 1, 2023): 147–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09516298231185060>.

³⁰ Scott Wolford, “War and Diplomacy on the World Stage: Crisis Bargaining before Third Parties,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 32, no. 2 (January 13, 2020): 236–37, 250–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0951629819893025>.

³¹ Robert Powell, “Why Some Persistent Problems Persist,” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 4 (July 25, 2019): 980–96, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055419000364>.

Eli Berman et al., “Introduction,” in *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*, ed. David A Lake and Eli Berman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 11–14.

³² *Ibid.*, 11–21.

³³ Sara Plana, “Controlling Proxies,” in *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*, ed. Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss (Taylor & Francis, 2023), 221.

to the outcome of merely high preference alignment.³⁴ Alexandra Chinchilla further challenged the direction of information asymmetry in the traditional principal-agent models, suggesting that the private information problem is more of a worry for the agent than the principal. The powerful principals usually have a sophisticated intelligence apparatus, including a network of military advisors deeply embedded in the locality. The monitoring of military advisory, even in the absence of clear-cut conditional sanctions, can reduce the policy distortion of the proxy. By contrast, the proxy agents are more dependent on the word of diplomats and military advisors from the principal.³⁵ An agent also has a vested interest in maintaining principal-agent relations for the same reason for the difficulty of aligning preferences. The contemporary international system is populated by nationalist organizations. Both nationalism and organizational survival demand the enhancement of agent autonomy.³⁶ Being a proxy of another great power is bad for autonomy, but the principal's direct take-over is assuredly worse. The proxy will go to great lengths to limit shirking to ensure that the principal would not choose direct intervention.

Proposition 3: A state would choose a yielding strategy when it assesses an adversarial offensive favorability to cause its military failures either on the offensive or defensive. In this case, not only A expects breakthrough failure and unfavorable attrition rate if going on an offensive. Even if A goes on a defensive under a defense-favorable assessment, it will face a substantial risk of a breakthrough on its homefront, which suggests its rapid and decisive failure in the bleeding game induced by adversarial blitzkrieg. The dangerously low theater numerical strength also means it can spare little capabilities from the demand of the homefront to help the third party on a diversionary front, shall it exist. If the third party is stronger than A, after bait-taking, a rational B would attack A instead, creating an undesired direct bleeding scenario. If the third party is still weaker than A, B would attack the third party first, and the third party can present slight bleeding worth to A. Since no active strategy can enhance A's relative capability, A would choose the passive strategy of yielding (if coerced or attacked). One side's choice of yielding precludes the need for extended ex-ante bargaining.

Initial Strategic Choices, Crisis Bargaining, and War

Proposition 4: If a state chooses the blackmail strategy, it would reveal its private information in crisis bargaining while preparing to attack. The revelation of A's deemed overwhelming strength is necessary to convince adversary B that military resistance would be ineffective and wasteful. The clarification of A's demands will distinguish itself from a deterrent posture and facilitate the yielding of B. **Proposition**

³⁴ Marc T Grinberg, "Misuse and Manipulation: The Strategic Politics of Military Capacity Building" (Ph.D. Dissertation, 2021), 54-73, 205-08, 252-54.

³⁵ Alexandra Chinchilla, "Formal Theory and Proxy Wars," in *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*, ed. Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss (Taylor & Francis, 2023), 56. Alexandra Chinchilla, "Advising War: Limited Intervention in Conflict" (Ph.D. Dissertation, 2021), 54-55, 69-75.

³⁶ Vipin Narang and Paul Staniland, "Institutions and Worldviews in Indian Foreign Security Policy," *India Review* 11, no. 2 (April 2012): 76-94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2012.674818>. James D Morrow, "Arms versus Allies: Trade-Offs in the Search for Security," *International Organization* 47, no. 2 (1993): 213-17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706889>. Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald R Salancik, *The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, 1978), chapter 5.

5: If a state chooses the bait-and-bleed strategy, it would be unwilling to bargain ex-ante and conceal its private information while preparing to defend. The revelation of A's formidable denial strength could well dissuade a once-optimistic attacker from attacking and nullify A's strategic opportunity to outbleed B. When A chooses a surprise attack or bait-and-bleed strategy, B cannot identify A's capabilities based on its failure to send costly signals because there is no way for B to distinguish the possibility of A's false optimism and lack of denial strength from the possibility of A's foresighted optimism and the possession of denial strength.³⁷

Strategic Choice	Bait-and-Bleed vs. Bait-and-Bleed	Blackmail vs. Blackmail	Blackmail vs. Bait-and-Bleed
Crisis Bargaining	both conceal, neither reassess	both reveal and reassess	A reveal, B reassess
Campaign Expectation	Agreement of campaign expectation	Agreement of campaign expectation	Possible disagreement of campaign expectation
Onset of War	Impossible	Impossible	Possible

Table 5: Post-bargaining Updated Assessments and War Occurrence

The two possible initial strategic choices generate three possible dyads of interactive strategies in crisis bargaining. **Proposition 6: The outbreak of war is impossible if an ex-ante agreement of campaign expectation is logically dictated.** If both A and B's choices are blackmail, both A and B would reveal their private information and reassess the offense-defense balance based on the updated information. By laying out a strong demand and signaling strength, both bargainers can credibly reveal their strengths and approximate their updating of the offense-defense assessment.³⁸ Even when the updated offense-defense balance assessment suggests that denial is favorable, bait-and-bleed strategy will be nullified since it requires an environment of incomplete information. As a result, A and B will share an expectation of the campaign outcome suggested by the agreed offense-defense balance. War will be averted due to an ex-ante bargain based on the shared campaign expectation. When both A and B choose a bait-and-bleed strategy, both revisionists will conceal their private information, and neither of them will reassess the offense-defense balance. Then, they would be left with an inadvertent agreement on the denial favorability, which suggests a contained offensive, and war would be averted.

Proposition 7: The outbreak of war is contingent if an ex-ante mutual uncertainty about or disagreement of campaign expectations is logically possible. If A's choice is blackmail and B's choice is bait-and-bleed, only A will reveal private information,

³⁷ Slantchev formulated a similar logic around the dynamics of "feigning weakness." Branislav L. Slantchev, "Feigning Weakness," *International Organization* 64, no. 03 (July 2010): 357–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002081831000010x>.

³⁸ Mark Fey and Kristopher W. Ramsay, "Mutual Optimism and War," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (October 2007): 746, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00278.x>. Evan B. Montgomery, "Signals of Strength: Capability Demonstrations and Perceptions of Military Power," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 2 (June 14, 2019): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1626724>.

and it would be up to B to reassess the offense-defense balance. In this scenario, war can be averted only if B's updated assessment aligns with A's original assessment. Slantchev's "feigning weakness" model suggested a scenario omitted by Fey and Ramsay: a state optimistic in military denial and wanting a war may choose not to appear confident in its strength and resolve. Whereas costly signals enable the distinction of the strong type from the weak type, a strong type determined in feigning weakness is indistinguishable from a genuinely weak type.³⁹ However, war will still commence if B's updated assessment suggests denial favorability.

Designing A Plausibility Probe

The case study will accomplish two tasks. The first is the identification of bait-and-bleed strategies through descriptive inferences. Ideally, a strategy must demonstrate itself in policy-making that can be observed ex-ante. A sound inferential judgment suggests that the observation of action would serve as the hoop test while the observation of deliberation would serve as the smoking gun test.⁴⁰

The second task is the causal plausibility probe of bait-and-bleed. The testing has two parts: the congruence of the predicted value and the observed value of the dependent variable, or the congruence test, and the observation of causal processes identified by the theory, or the process-tracing test.⁴¹ This research design employs time-slice process tracing. The recording and deciphering of observations of assessed offense-defense balance and strategic choices in T1 of a case would be followed by those of potentially altered assessed offense-defense balance and potentially changed strategic choices in T2 between the same actors in a case set. The distinctive advantage of the time-slice method is that it could maximally authenticate a dynamic social mechanism.⁴²

The Case of The Third Indochina War

Passive Aggression Theory provides critical insights into explaining strategic behaviors of the USSR, China, and Vietnam during the unfolding of The Third Indochina War from the unification of Vietnam and the success of the communist revolution in Vietnam in 1975 to Vietnam's general mobilization and remilitarization for a sustained two-front war in 1980.

The Soviets Making Bait-and-Bleed Against China, 1975-1980

On the Soviet policy regarding China and Indochina, KGB Czar Yori Andropov and Head of CPSU International Department Boris Ponomarev favored improving relations

³⁹ Slantchev, "Feigning Weakness," 360-65.

⁴⁰ Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 31-32.

⁴¹ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, chapter 9. James Mahoney, "The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences," *Sociological Methods & Research* 41, no. 4 (March 2, 2012): 578-83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124112437709>.

⁴² Janet M Box-Steffensmeier, *Time Series Analysis for the Social Sciences* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chapter 1.

with China.⁴³ However, they were "pushed aside" by the powerful anti-China coalition of "real politics" of Brezhnev, MFA Czar Andrei Gromyko, and ideology Czar Mikhail Suslov.⁴⁴ Yet the details of their deliberation on the Indochina policy remained mostly unavailable. The thinking and intent behind Soviet foreign policy action can only be inferred more or less indirectly.

It was clear from the very beginning that the broader strategic imperative drove the Soviet Indochina policy to contain and weaken China. In early 1975, the Soviet embassy in Hanoi asserted "the further closeness of the positions of both of our parties and countries on a whole series of important international problems." However, the embassy noted the aspiration of the VWP leadership to remain "aloof from the struggle of the CPSU and other fraternal parties against Maoism," which constituted the "specific negative phenomena" of the Vietnamese policy for the Soviets.⁴⁵ In 1976, while providing aid to Vietnam, the USSR's policy deliberation particularly eyed the geopolitical dispute between Vietnam and China and the possibility of a war between them. Before baiting, the Soviet anticipation of bait-taking is observed. In August, the draft prepared for the next meeting of Interkit, an important platform for expert deliberation, Moscow's agenda-setting, and bloc coordination related to the China policy, made the case for the plausibility of Sino-Vietnam bleeding: "Beijing has concentrated substantial forces along the land border with Vietnam...Under such conditions, the leadership of Vietnam does not exclude the possibility that [China's] territorial claims against Vietnam might trigger large-scale armed clashes."

Moscow was acutely aware of China's attempts to conciliate with Vietnam and went to great lengths to block the Chinese diplomacy as a credible response to the Soviet bait of isolation and encirclement. At the end of 1976, the No. 2 in the International Department of the Central Committee of CPSU, Oleg Rakhannin, reminded the Prime Minister of Poland, Emil Wojtaszek, in a telegram that "[The Chinese] are making attempts to enter into a dialogue with individual socialist countries at various levels through the so-called "caressing." This is an old tactic to seek ways [to bring about] a split; in other words, [the Chinese are saying] "everyone is good, but only the USSR is the enemy."⁴⁶

Vietnam indeed needed COMECON's economic opportunity and the Soviet alliance's security guarantee. However, the USSR exercised the decisive initiative. Even by mid-1977, Vietnam still refrained from officially joining COMECON due to its fear of

⁴³ James Hershberg et al., "The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship," in *Cold War International History Project* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011), 26.

⁴⁴ Anatoly Chernyaev, "The Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, 1979," nsarchive.gwu.edu (National Security Archive, May 25, 2019), <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/19326-diary-anatoly-s-chernyaev-1979>, 7.

⁴⁵ Stephen J Morris, "The Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese Triangle in the 1970s: The View from Moscow," in *Cold War International History Project* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1999), 21.

⁴⁶ "Secret Telegram No. 3571/IV - From Moscow to Warsaw", December 23, 1976, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Archives of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMSZ), s-Depesze, Moskwa 1976. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by Malgorzata K. Gnoinska. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113573>

Beijing's further antagonism.⁴⁷ As a response, in late October of the same year, Moscow had to make the bargain more explicit by pledging far less than the amount of military aid that Pham Van Dong had requested.⁴⁸ Kosal Path asserted: "Moscow's intended message was clear: until Vietnam joined COMECON and sided with the Soviet Union, Hanoi would have to make do with whatever aid it (USSR) decided to offer."⁴⁹ USSR made a sequel of critical diplomatic moves by incorporating Vietnam into COMECON in June and signing the alliance treaty with Vietnam in early November. Soviet military aid to Vietnam indeed surged from 100 million in 1977 to 500 million in 1978 after Vietnamese "side-picking" in 1977.⁵⁰ However, the wording of Article VI of the alliance treaty was so vague that it gave the Vietnamese the impression that the Soviets would provide direct protection in the event of a Chinese attack without actually committing the Soviets to such a course of action.⁵¹

The top Soviet leaders were also well aware of Hanoi's decision of massive intervention in Cambodia and the proxy war nature of the Soviet support of Vietnam over the invasion. On November 24, 1978, Raúl Valdés Vivó, Cuba's representative at the Havana meeting of Interkit, informed a Hungarian diplomat about Hanoi's plan: "The Vietnamese leadership is preparing for military and political action against the Cambodian Pol Pot regime. The action is presumably scheduled for the coming dry season. Its objective is the removal of the current regime before it could irreversibly consolidate Cambodia through the incorporation of the forces of Sihanouk and the successive Lon Nol regime, bring it fully to China's side, and, as a consequence of the ongoing similar maneuvers against Laos, encircle Vietnam by a ring of hostile [states]... This plan of the Vietnamese leadership is known to the Soviet comrades, and this linkage was also taken into consideration when the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed in Moscow."⁵²

Moscow was well-aware of the risk of inadvertent deterrence success and bait-and-bleed failure stemming from demonstrating too much military readiness against China. The visible military balance must not prevent the adversary from assessing a "window of opportunity" for quick, decisive offensives. Plainly, while making building up widening and deepening alignments with Vietnam, the USSR must attempt to feign weakness against China's vital Northern perimeter. A comparison of Soviet military posture in Far East before and after the Chinese invasion of Vietnam is illustrative. On March 17th, 1979, the day after PLA completed its withdrawal from Vietnam, the USSR staged a massive military exercise at the Sino-Soviet border involving 20 divisions, which surged to full strength with reinforcements.⁵³ This was not the military posture the USSR demonstrated before the Chinese invasion. In January 1979, the eve of

⁴⁷ Kosal Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War* (Madison, WI: University Of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 66-67.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 113.

⁵¹ Sally W Stoecker, "Clients and Commitments: Soviet-Vietnamese Relations, 1978-1988" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corps, December 1989), 5.

⁵² Balázs Szalontai, "Solidarity within Limits: Interkit and the Evolution of the Soviet Bloc's Indochina Policy, 1967-1985," *Cold War History* 17, no. 4 (May 5, 2017): 392, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1319818>.

⁵³ Sergey Radchenko, *Unwanted Visionaries: The Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War* (New York, NY; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 128.

Chinese invasion, none of the 54 Soviet divisions on the Sino-Soviet border were at full strength.⁵⁴

Soviet security interests drove it to stir up the Sino-Vietnamese conflict and maintain a bloodline toward Vietnam but also restrained it from taking the fight in the front. The fact that the Soviet intent had nothing to do with purported ideological commitment fully revealed itself after the dynamics had run its course following the Chinese invasion. The deputy head of the International Department of the Central Committee, Anatoly Chernyaev, recorded the situation of the Interkit meeting in Berlin in July 1979 in his diary:

"We acted like there was unity between the policies of Vietnam-Laos and the USSR as well. Do you really think that it is one policy? And now? Why are we being duplicitous? Why such hypocritical meetings? Is it not dangerous to the policy itself? After all, no one said even a word to make the Vietnamese doubt that they have universal support for their point of view!"⁵⁵

Moscow also went to great lengths to ensure the continuation of its bleeding policy against China after the Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam. In Feb 1980, Boris Ponomarev remarked in an Interkit meeting:

"We can clearly conclude...that Beijing will repay the West for their support with a dogged anti-Sovietism. We should thus pay special attention to providing assistance in all areas to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, as well as jointly and strongly counter Beijing's attempts to undermine these countries' positions and fuel the military conflict in Indochina..."⁵⁶

Overall, it can be said that the argument that the USSR designed and exercised a bait-and-bleed strategy against China passes the smoking gun test since sufficient primary source evidence on Soviet foreign policy decisions suggests the Soviet intent of not only inciting and fueling costly conflicts between Vietnam and China.

The Chinese Taking The Soviet Bait, 1978-1979

The desire to reverse Soviet encirclement is the root cause of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam. Having comprehensively reviewed the PRC's policy toward its neighbors during the Cold War, historian Niu Jun concluded that China's key decisions demonstrate at least two commonalities. One is that the military forces of hostile Powers must not be allowed to come too close to China's borders, i.e., there is a need to maintain a "buffer zone," and the other is to create a balance of power within the adjoining areas through various means, including offensive military operations.⁵⁷ According to Chinese political scientists Fan Chao and Fan Ke, after the Sino-Soviet split, the Soviet Union constructed alliances around China in three main directions: the Soviet-Mongolian alliance on China's northern flank, the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance on China's southern flank and the Soviet-Afghan alliance on China's western flank. The Soviet-Mongolian alliance's threat to China hangs on the framework and logic of the Sino-Soviet border confrontation and the threat of Soviet invasion of China. Among

⁵⁴ Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam 1979-1991*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 98.

⁵⁵ Chernyaev, "The Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, 1979," 23.

⁵⁶ Hershberg et al., "The Interkit Story", 110.

⁵⁷ 牛军, *冷战与中国外交决策* (九州出版社, 2013), 275.

the three, the Sino-Soviet border standoff has entered a relatively stable phase (by the mid-1970s), such that it was primarily the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship that had a major impact on China's national security and the geopolitical situation."⁵⁸ The Chinese leaders took Soviet political hostility, and the military buildup on the border, as evidence of Soviet encirclement and revisionism. They also view the Soviet alliance with Vietnam and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia as triggers for escalations. Since mid-1977, the mounting evidence of Soviet alignment with Vietnam triggered a red alert for Chinese leaders on the "buffer zone" rule, while Vietnam's military pressure against Cambodia triggered the "red alert" for Chinese leaders on the "regional balance" rule. Even Sergey Radchenko, a historian skeptical of Soviet design behind the Indochina tensions, recognized that "The Soviet hand behind the overthrow of Pol Pot was more likely than not an imagined threat, seeming to the Chinese, at the time, much bigger than it really was."⁵⁹

In fact, the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had a more diplomatic stance in bargaining with the USSR for dispute settlements. In August 1978, it submitted the "Memorandum on the Negotiation Options on the Sino-Soviet Relations," for which Deng was disturbed and clarified that the subject should be deliberated in Politburo instead. In the full meeting of Politburo arranged on August 29, Deng explained why China shouldn't opt for diplomatic negotiation with the USSR:

"The central objective of the Chinese negotiations should be to remove the security threat posed by the Soviet Union, i.e., not to improve relations with the Soviet Union when our border faces a million-strong army. Specific principles would be to demand that the Soviet Union withdraw its troops from Mongolia and refrain from supporting Vietnam's aggression against Cambodia."⁶⁰

Led by Deng Xiaoping, CMC made the invasion decision on December 1, 1978, and the entire Chinese leadership concurred with the decision in an expanded meeting of Politburo on December 31.⁶¹ On the eve of the Vietnam showdown, Chinese leaders' fear of USSR expansionism was extraordinary. Although the northern flank was stable for the time being, if leaving the USSR unchecked, once it completed and solidified its encirclement scheme, Deng believed that Moscow would initiate WWII in 1985.⁶² After the invasion, Deng explained China's use of force against Vietnam and the foremost reason is:

"The current international anti-hegemony struggle against the Soviet Union was weakening because the United States, Japan, and Europe were afraid to confront the USSR even as the Soviet Union geared up for war and expanded rapidly. Thus, in light of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and its continuing provocations along China's border, the PRC itself must take a leading role in the struggle."⁶³

⁵⁸ 樊超 and 王珂, "间接消耗战略:20 世纪 80 年代中国对苏联安全战略再考察," *国际政治研究*, 2020.

⁵⁹ Radchenko, *Unwanted Visionaries*, 128

⁶⁰ 沈志华, *中苏关系史纲:1917~1991 年中苏关系若干问题再探讨 (第三版) (上下册)* (社会科学文献出版社, 2016), 712.

⁶¹ Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam 1979-1991*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 59-62.

⁶² *Ibid*, 69.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 60.

Deng asserted that the PRC's "self-defense counterattack" was aimed not at mere border disputes but the regional balance of power between the pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet forces were at stake.

It should be noted that China may well not have invaded Vietnam without the perceived Soviet hind behind the Indochina dynamics. Deng's rival faction, Mao's legacy men Hua Guofeng and Wang Dongxing, held on policy stance of relative restraint toward the limited Vietnam-Cambodia conflict in 1977 and most of 1978.⁶⁴ As late as early November of 1978, although Deng had already instructed the PLA General Staff to plan out an invasion scenario, he was uncertain about whether an attack on Vietnam would be supported by the entire CCP Politburo.⁶⁵ However, the one aspect that Hua fundamentally shared with Deng is the alarmism regarding the Soviet threat.⁶⁶ After the formation of the Soviet-Vietnam alliance and Vietnam's full invasion of Cambodia, Hua's faction not only voted in line with Deng's faction in the December 31st Politburo decision but also "enthusiastically advocated" for the scaling up of the invasion plan.⁶⁷ Overall, sufficient historical evidence supports the claim of the Chinese taking of the Soviet bait.

The Chinese Making Bait-and-Bleed Against Vietnam, 1977-1987

Fan Chao and Wang Ke inferred a critical shift in Chinese security strategy in the spring of 1978 from prioritizing deterring Soviet invasion to prioritizing weakening Soviet encirclement. They called the new strategy "indirect attrition," essentially bait-and-bleed.⁶⁸ However, the shift from deterrence, facilitated by wedging, to bait-and-bleed may have appeared in 1977 rather than the spring of 1978 if one evaluates the Chinese strategy from the substance of its policy action than the rhetoric of Chinese state media and the covertness of Chinese policy action as Fan and Wang did.⁶⁹

Beijing did not support Khmer Rouge on ideological or humanitarian grounds. During the reign of "The Gang of Four," China did share significant ideological affinities with KR.⁷⁰ However, the death of Mao and the fall of "The Gang of Four" brushed aside the element of ideological affinity. Deng Xiaoping was particularly critical of the Khmer Rouge for its deurbanization policy and the starving of the Cambodian people.⁷¹ Beijing also knew about the horrendous treatment that the Chinese habitats in Cambodia had suffered under KR.⁷² Beijing's decision to increase support toward KR amid its ideological dissatisfaction and ethnic grievances over the KR regime revealed the power politics and security competition at the core of PRC leaders' calculations.

⁶⁴ Leszek Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 193.

⁶⁵ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 50.

⁶⁶ Steven J Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (Routledge, 1992), 44.

⁶⁷ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 61.

⁶⁸ 樊超 and 王珂, "间接消耗战略", 90-91.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 93.

⁷⁰ Andrew Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 6.

Wang Chenyi, "The Chinese Communist Party's Relationship with the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s," in *Cold War International History Project* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2018), 21-22.

⁷¹ Ibid, 7.

⁷² Chenyi, "The Chinese Communist Party's Relationship with the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s," 25-33.

When China sent its very first delegation to Cambodia after the establishment of the KR regime in 1975, a large portion of Pol Pot's talk to the Chinese delegation was about how the Vietnamese attempted to dominate and invade Cambodia. Historian Wang Chenyi asserted that "Pol Pot clearly knew that his words of discrediting the Vietnamese would be communicated to the CCP leaders when the delegation returned to Beijing."⁷³ It can be inferred from the following course of the events that Beijing was satisfied by KR's side-picking. Therefore, Pol Pot's assessment of China's intent to have Cambodia playing anti-Vietnam activism was validated.

Nevertheless, China was well-aware of the risk of inadvertent deterrence success and bait-and-bleed failure stemming from sending too much military aids to Cambodia too early. The visible military balance must not prevent the adversary from assessing a "window of opportunity" for quick, decisive offensives. Plainly, while making high-profile diplomatic tango with Cambodia, China must attempt to conceal the actual growth of Cambodian military capability. Although China signed the military aid agreement with Cambodia in February 1976, China did not ship heavy equipment like main battle tanks, useful for fighting capable conventional militaries like the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) rather than internal counter-revolutionary factions, to Cambodia until late 1977.⁷⁴

There could be no misperception of Hanoi's intention in Beijing. Le Duan publicly emphasized the imperative of a "special relationship" between Vietnam and Cambodia/Laos as early as June 1976. "Special relationship" means the regime in Phnom Penh and Vientiane being pro-Vietnam and Vietnam having the final say in their major decision-making.⁷⁵ Hua Guofeng bashed Vietnam's claim when Le Duan visited Beijing in November 1977: "China would strengthen unity with other socialist countries...and ally with all countries subjected to social-imperialist (Soviet) aggressions, subversion, interference, control or bullying..."⁷⁶

Before the baking of the Soviet-Vietnam alliance in mid-1978, Beijing did appear to have a factionalism problem regarding how to deal with Vietnam-Cambodia relations, as noted previously.⁷⁷ When Pol Pot visited Beijing in September 1977, eyeing a combination of deterrence and diplomacy toward Vietnam, Hua Guofeng criticized him for his provocative border policy: "We do not want the problems between Vietnam and Cambodia to get worse. We want the two parties to find a solution by diplomatic means in a spirit of mutual comprehension and concessions."⁷⁸ By contrast, Deng Xiaoping sought military initiative against Vietnam. In fact, 50 days before Vietnam invaded Cambodia, the PLA General Staff under Deng's leadership already contemplated the first offensive plans dealing with Vietnam-related contingency and strongly recommended striking Vietnam.⁷⁹ Thus, the Chinese adoption of bait-and-bleed against Vietnam could come from a compromise between Hua and Deng's factions.

⁷³ Ibid, 19.

⁷⁴ Mertha, *Brothers in Arms*, 81.

⁷⁵ Khoo, *Collateral Damage*, 115.

⁷⁶ Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 44.

⁷⁷ Page 23.

⁷⁸ Khoo, *Collateral Damage*, 122.

⁷⁹ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 49-50.

The Chinese military leaders were likely doubtful of the prospect of Cambodian forces holding against a pending invasion from Vietnam. After reviewing intelligence about the prospect of a Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, most of the participants of the aforementioned PLA General Staff meeting concluded that "any military action by PLA must have a significant impact on both Vietnam and the overall geostrategic situation in Southeast Asia."⁸⁰ In plain words, should Vietnam invade Cambodia, China may have to escalate to check Vietnam's strategic initiative and military momentum. The quick fall of Phnom Penh further confirmed the fear of the PLA General Staff. The war did not lessen Beijing's fear since Vietnam still occupied Cambodia, and the USSR further invaded Afghanistan to "encircle China." Unable to make general offensive work, Beijing decided that the pre-war policy must continue. Deng's consolidation of power at home in the early 1980s ensured that a vigorous bleeding policy against Vietnamese expansionism in Indochina and Soviet encirclement of China could resume and persist without internal resistance.

After meeting PRC's Minister of Foreign Affairs Huang Hua in Beijing, Richard Holbrooke and Nicholas Platt reported to Brzezinski in July 1979 about Beijing's intent on reinforcing its support of Cambodian resistance: "The only realistic strategy is a resolute struggle. No action should be taken to weaken the resistance. The time is not right either for an international conference or a political settlement." Nothing identified the Chinese bid on the continued bleeding of Vietnam better than Huang's own words quoted in the report: "We will bog Vietnam down in the mire."⁸¹ Deng further deliberated with Vice President Walter Mondale on China's bleeding policy in late August: "The reason why the time for political settlement is not ripe is because Vietnam's predicament is not deep enough. Vietnam will concede only when its difficulties later reach an unbearable level."⁸² The Chinese bleeding is against both the USSR (as previously analyzed) and Vietnam: "We will keep up the military pressure... Things will become more difficult (for the Soviet-Vietnam alliance). In that way, it will increase difficulties, and this burden on the Soviet Union will grow heavier and heavier... If the Soviet Union uses Vietnam to attack China by land, we can only welcome them."⁸³ Moreover, since "it is imperative now for all of us to keep up all kinds of pressure on the Vietnamese," indirect bleeding (aid to Cambodian resistance), as well as direct bleeding (border campaigns against PAVN), are going to be employed.

When a round of bleeding does not stretch the adversary to its limit, one bleeds harder in the next round. Beijing ordered the Laoshan Offensive Operations of 1984 based on exactly that logic. On December 24, 1983, Prince Sihanouk's delegation urgently appealed to Deng Xiaoping. Indochina's dry reason had just started. The PAVN forces engaged in an aggressive campaign against the resistance groups at Phnom Malai and the Cardamom Mountains, and the PAVN had cut off Cambodia's only access to outside

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ "Memorandum from Nicholas Platt of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)" (Foreign Relations of the United States, July 9, 1979), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d252>.

⁸² "Memorandum of Conversation" (Foreign Relations of the United States, August 27, 1979), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d264>.

⁸³ Ibid.

assistance via Thailand.⁸⁴ In response, the CMC ordered the 11th and 14th Armies to move to the forward positions and put up a vigorous, non-stop attrition campaign.⁸⁵

Overall, it can be said that the argument that China designed and exercised a bait-and-bleed strategy against Vietnam passes the smoking gun test since sufficient evidence on Chinese foreign policy decisions suggests the Chinese intent of inciting and fueling costly conflicts between Cambodia and Vietnam during both the baiting game, the bleeding game of 1978, and the bleeding game from 1980 to 1987.

The Vietnamese Taking The Chinese Bait, 1978-1987

Vietnam still had a hedging strategy from 1975 to 1976. However, China's backing of Cambodia was a critical factor fostering the spiral of Sino-Vietnam confrontation. The year 1977 oversaw a turning point in KR-Vietnamese relations as armed clashes along the Cambodia-Vietnam border increased from 254 in 1976 to 1150, the majority of which were initiated by the KR.⁸⁶ The surge of KR's anti-Vietnam violence was correlated with the surge of Chinese support for KR. To the Vietnamese, the KR regime's aggressive border provocations and refusal of a negotiated settlement only point to China's ambitious design in Indochina since Vietnam has clear military superiority over DK on its own.⁸⁷ Armed and trained by China, the KR attack on Vietnam on April 30, 1977, "shook Hanoi's leaders out of their complacency" as KR forces overran Vietnamese border defense forces and penetrated deep into Vietnamese territory.⁸⁸

The Vietnamese CMC pushed for an invasion of Cambodia in a meeting on January 26, 1978. On March 23, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Phan Hien, the head of Vietnam's border negotiation team, concluded that "future negotiations would be in vain."⁸⁹ On April 21, Hanoi's Politburo issued Resolution 34, clarifying its imposed regime change objective in Cambodia.⁹⁰ Le Duan and Le Duc Tho were "security-first" conservatives. Pham Van Dong was an "economy-first" moderate but was also very pro-Soviet. Truong Chinh was indeed pro-China, but all his pro-China allies were purged in the Fourth Party Congress.⁹¹ Therefore, the key decision makers in Politburo, who often had divergent stances and lines, converged on militarily dismantling the China-KR alliance.

Compared to the two-month gap between the Chinese decision to invade and the Chinese invasion, Vietnam only launched the invasion on December 25, eight months after Hanoi decided to invade. Three reasons explain Vietnam's larger gap. The first is the need to secure Soviet backing, an imperative for enabling the Vietnamese invasion that the scholars universally agreed on. Vietnam eventually obtained it by agreeing to join the COMECON that June and signing the alliance treaty that November. The

⁸⁴ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 144.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 60.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 59, 62.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 61.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 73.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 9.

Morris, "The Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese Triangle in the 1970s", 26-27, 34-35.

second is Vietnam's rainy season from May to November. No sane decision-maker in Hanoi would launch a massive ground invasion in the rainy season. The third is that the severe economic crisis weakened the PAVN in 1977 and 1978. The military effect of the economic crisis was self-reinforcing trouble because the military had to shift its focus from war-preparation to assisting economic development.⁹² Therefore, the PAVN needed time to replenish its materials and retrain its soldiers.

After the Chinese invasion of 1979, although China initiated the border campaign of 1981, Hanoi's commitment was indispensable for determining the scale and duration of the bleeding game. Relentless counterattacks by PAVN forces prolonged and intensified the combat operations. Hanoi played right into Beijing's design, namely the heavy and extended commitment of PAVN forces to intense warfighting, which was linked to China's strategic goal of "bleeding Vietnam."⁹³ Overall, sufficient historical evidence supports the claim of the Vietnamese taking of the Chinese bait.

The Actual Offense-Defense Balance In Retrospect

Both the USSR in the Soviet-China dyad and China in the China-Vietnam dyad got their respective offense-defense favorability wrong to a limited extent.⁹⁴ A retrospective analysis on the actual offense-defense balance shall be made. To execute its military strategy of obtaining theater-wide escalation dominance through preemptive and unrestrained use of force, the Soviet force structure design placed a premium on sustained advance and combined arms mobility.⁹⁵ Therefore, the Soviet military was a thoroughly motorized and the most heavily mechanized armed force in the world during the 1970s and 1980s.⁹⁶ Among the Soviet forces in the Far East, the ratio between the number of divisions and the number of armored vehicles is 333 armored vehicles per division. The mobility of the Soviet forces would be coded "high." By contrast, China's industrial strength and technological development lagged way behind the advanced industrial countries back in the Cold War years.⁹⁷ The light infantry-centric doctrine of "People's War" dominated the PLA military thoughts and practices from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s.⁹⁸ Therefore, the PLA was fairly motorized but at best modestly mechanized. Among the PLA forces facing the northern border, the ratio between the number of divisions and the number of armored vehicles is 66.7 per division. The

⁹² Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 61-66.

⁹³ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 143.

⁹⁴ For the leadership assessment of the Offense-Defense favorability, see Page 43-47.

⁹⁵ Beatrice Heuser, "Victory in a Nuclear War? A Comparison of NATO and WTO War Aims and Strategies," *Contemporary European History* 7, no. 3 (November 1998): 320-21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0960777300004264>.

Vojtech Mastny, "Imagining War in Europe: Soviet Strategic Planning," in *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and West*, ed. Vojtech Mastny, Sven G Holtmark, and Andreas Wenger (London: Routledge, 2006), 71-79.

John M. Caravelli, "Soviet and Joint Warsaw Pact Exercises," *Armed Forces & Society* 9, no. 3 (April 1983): 397-99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327x8300900302>.

⁹⁶ Todd S Sechser and Elizabeth N Saunders, "The Army You Have: The Determinants of Military Mechanization, 1979-2001," *International Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (June 7, 2010): 491, 494, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2010.00596.x>.

⁹⁷ For China's Cold War defense industrial base, see:

Covell F Meyskens, *Mao's Third Front: The Militarization of Cold War China* (Cambridge, U.K; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), chapter 3.

⁹⁸ M Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), chapter 4.

mobility of the PLA forces would be coded “low.” The comparative assessment of Soviet-Chinese military mobility generates a judgment of offense favorability for the USSR. The mobility assets in the PAVN were only more scarce. Although the PAVN employed armored maneuvers and assaults skillfully, its infantry and logistical formations are modestly motorized and the ratio between its infantry regiments and armored regiments is 19:1.⁹⁹ The mobility of the PAVN forces would be coded “low.”

The organizational factors crucial to exposure-reduction tactics like training, cohesion, and small unit leadership are considerably deficient in the Soviet military from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. The Soviets emphasized more on massive, staged, Potemkin Village-styled exercises. On the matter of practical combat and combat support, the main purpose of the Soviet tactical training regimen is “to teach the young man to follow orders.”¹⁰⁰ Under a restrictive policy, the weapons were removed from the storage only when needed for major exercises once or twice a year.¹⁰¹ The life of Soviet conscripts was so unattractive that no sizable skilled NCO corps emerged. Therefore, the poorly trained conscripts have to be led by career officers. The chain of consequences of a stunningly large officer corps are promotion stagnation, aging, and widespread corruption.¹⁰² The Soviet military organization was also plagued by widespread political apathy, chronic ethnic tensions, and extreme officer-enlisted economic inequality.¹⁰³

The organizational factors crucial to exposure-reduction tactics are not much better in the Chinese military during the same period. Analysts provide divergent accounts of the lasting impact of the Cultural Revolution on the effectiveness of PLA tactical organizations. Harvey Nelsen argued that “training was badly neglected during the Cultural Revolution, but proficiency has been fully recovered in the 1970s.”¹⁰⁴ While Thomas Robinson asserted that “The Cultural Revolution's effects will not be definitively overcome not until the close of the century.”¹⁰⁵ Nothing reflects the real state of training and discipline in Deng Xiaoping’s own words. By late 1977, addressing the Army, Deng said: “Other comrades are worried that unless there is immediate consolidation, the army, which was sabotaged for so long by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, might not be able to go into battle in the event of an enemy attack. These worries are not groundless...Because of the past period of chaos, discipline in much of the army is lax and the work style poor...In particular, the cadres at the various levels do not have the requisite ability to command and manage. None of us, including the veteran

⁹⁹ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* (Presidio Press, 1986), 263-64.

Granger to Kissinger, “Military Balance in the Far East,” 23.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Cockburn, *The Threat: Inside the Soviet Military Machine* (New York, NY: Random House, 1984), 255.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 254

¹⁰² William E Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven; CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 39–43.

¹⁰³ William D Henderson, *Cohesion, the Human Element in Combat: Leadership and Societal Influence in the Armies of the Soviet Union, the United States, North Vietnam, and Israel* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of The Pacific, 2003), 32–37, 86–92, 95, 101-04.

¹⁰⁴ Harvey W Nelsen, *The Chinese Military System: An Organizational Study of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 124.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas W Robinson, “Chinese Military Modernization in the 1980s,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 90 (1982): 233, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/653568>.

comrades, is sufficiently capable of directing modern wars.”¹⁰⁶ Confirming Deng’s assessment, the PLA forces extensively employed human-wave assault to charge across an open field.¹⁰⁷

Primarily due to economic reconstruction and its difficulty, the PAVN organizational sophistication in the late 1970s declined from its excellent status during the late stage of the Second Indochina War. However, the test of combat in serious skirmishes with KR in 1977 and 1978 revealed this deterioration and prompted reorganization and readiness-enhancement measures. As a result, against the superior Chinese invasion force, although the Vietnamese regular forces and militia sometimes used human-wave charging during tactical counterattacks, they effectively employed exposure-reduction tactics in defense.¹⁰⁸ In this period, PAVN placed special doctrinal emphasis on force protection. “To win a protracted conflict,” the PAVN envisaged localizing the warfighting in which the friendly small forces would maximally exploit the natural terrain and the interlocking fortified villages.¹⁰⁹ PAVN’s force protection would be coded “high.”

In terms of numerical balances, from the late 1970s to 1980, the USSR has roughly 45 full-strength divisions on the Sino-Soviet border, containing 15000 tanks and APCs, amounting to 33.5 ADEs. PRC has around 75 full-strength deployable divisions, containing 5000 tanks and APCs, amounting to 42.5 ADEs. Therefore, theater FFR along the Sino-Soviet border saddled on 1:1.3 in favor of the Chinese, not breaching the 1:2/2:1 threshold as predicted.¹¹⁰ China’s initial invasion plan employing readily available forces in the theater of Guangxi and Yunnan has 6 corps and 1 division in its order of battle, and the CIA estimate of PLA forces deployed against the Vietnamese border in 1980 amounted to 20 divisions.¹¹¹ Among these forces, each side possesses 1 armored division and the rest are all infantry divisions. Before the invasion of Cambodia, Vietnam had around 3 corps of forces available for flexible deployment.¹¹² Given time, both sides can reinforce their theater strength from the forces attached to other military districts. Yet, China faced the problem of logistical backwardness, exacerbated by the immense rear-front distance and Vietnam faced the problem of the commitment of military force to civilian economic reconstruction. The comparison yielded a theater FFR of 2:1, reaching the FFR threshold. In conclusion, the cumulative offense-defense balance in the Northeast Asian theater should be coded “offense

¹⁰⁶ Xiaoping Deng, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping: 1975-1982* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1995), 49–50.

¹⁰⁷ Edward C O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War* (Routledge, 2007), 81–83, 104, 134.

¹⁰⁸ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 105, 150.

¹⁰⁹ Pike, *PAVN*, 268–72.

¹¹⁰ M Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 205–06.

Clinton Granger to Henry Kissinger, “Military Balance in the Far East,” National Security Council (Central Intelligence Agency, August 4, 1975).

“National Intelligence Estimate: China’s Defense Policy and Armed Forces” (Central Intelligence Agency, September 1980).

“China Strengthens Its Forces on the Far East: An Intelligence Assessment” (Central Intelligence Agency, December 1982).

¹¹¹ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 75–6.

“National Intelligence Estimate: China’s Defense Policy and Armed Forces” (Central Intelligence Agency, September 1980).

¹¹² Path, *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 63.

favorability for the USSR” and the cumulative offense-defense balance in the Southeast Asian theater should be coded “denial favorability.”

Item	Org-Tech Effectiveness	Mass	Org-Tech Effectiveness	Mass
Military Attributes	Favors Vietnam	2:1 in favor of China	Favors USSR	1:1.3 in favor of China
ODB	Denial Favorable		Offense Favorable for USSR	

Table 6: Actual Offense-Defense Balances in Southeast (left) and Northeast Asia (right), 1975-1984

Assessed Offense-Defense Balance and Strategic Choices

In the Soviet-China case, the causal process between the offense-defense balance assessment and the strategic choice is observed empirically. Throughout the late 1970s, Moscow indeed had an assessment of denial favorability regarding China’s potential usages of the military force.

For the bleeding to occur, a Chinese offensive should be plausible in the Soviet ex-ante assessment. Although the Soviet military doctrine for European warfare is featured by the radically aggressive "Operational Maneuver Group" concept during the late 1970s, the USSR viewed warfare in Asia as distinctively favoring the defense.¹¹³ O. B. Rakhminin, a prominent China hand in Moscow and the First Deputy Director of the International Department of the Central Committee expressed such belief to the Eastern European communist party representatives in April 1977: “These are the first signs of China's departure from the concept of “a people's war” (and thus defensive) in the name of the military offensive concept. They are even saying in China that a new war could break out around 1980.”¹¹⁴ The denial favorability that made the bleeding against such a Chinese offensive profitable to the USSR's relative power can be seen in the script of *The Top 1*. On the Sino-Soviet border, the U.S National Intelligence Estimate in 1981 assessed that the Red Army could not conquer Manchuria with forces available theater-wide. The best offensive they can mount would only obtain a “shallow incursion.” However, they could quickly stop and drive back a Chinese general ground offensive.¹¹⁵ On the China-Vietnam border, the China hand in Soviet MFA, Mikhail S. Kapitsa’s conversation with First Deputy Minister of Mongolian MFA in a meeting in Feb 1979: “China has assembled 18 divisions on the Vietnamese border. But the Vietnamese army is well-armed, well-experienced, and battle-worthy. If it (the Chinese) comes to a fight with Vietnam, one needs to fight really well. Or they will be completely crushed. If a war happens, the world public opinion will support Vietnam. The Chinese are really scared of the USSR. China will

¹¹³ David M Glantz, *Deep Attack: The Soviet Conduct of Operational Maneuver* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, 1987), 73-84.

Sergey Radchenko, “The Evolution of Soviet Strategy in Asia, 1969-1991,” in *Jeju Forum Journal*, vol. 2021, 2021, 2–5.

¹¹⁴ “Informational Note on the Meeting of the Representatives of International Departments of Six Fraternal Parties,” April 15, 1977, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Polish Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN), KC PZPR, LXXVI-1977. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by Malgorzata K. Gnoinska.

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113211>

¹¹⁵ “National Intelligence Estimate: Soviet Military Forces in Far East” (Central Intelligence Agency, 1982).

probably make a single strike against Vietnam. Probably, they will do it like they did in 1962, when they made a strike against India, going in 20-30 kilometers. Then, they will try to capture a large number of Vietnamese soldiers (a response to the capture of Chinese soldiers in Cambodia). But Vietnam may be able to break through by 10-15 kilometers into China.”¹¹⁶

If the Soviets assessed that the anticipated Chinese offensive would quickly overrun Vietnam, then it would have to choose between an effective diversion, the militarily untenable and strategically risky option of a blitzkrieg across the Sino-Soviet border, and a feasible limited incursion as the ineffective, symbolic punishment.¹¹⁷ Denial favorability on both fronts allowed Moscow to assume away this unpalatable scenario.

The Chinese leadership believed China could victoriously walk out of a general offensive against Vietnam without losing too much blood. This stood in contrast with Soviet confidence in Vietnam’s defensive success. The deliberation between Deng and his close confidant Chen Yun and the deliberation in Politburo’s invasion decision revealed the Chinese anticipation of its quick campaign success. Within three weeks, the invasion force would seize two Vietnamese border provincial capitals, Lang Son and Cao Bang. Furthermore, the Chinese force would then disengage and withdraw to avoid being entrapped in a prolonged conflict.¹¹⁸ Determined to avoid having the invasion turned into a quagmire for China, Deng instructed the CMC to grant operational autonomy to regional commanders but kept the duration and space of the fight under the command of the central leadership in Beijing.¹¹⁹ Deng declared that the campaign against Vietnam would last no longer than the China-India War of 1962.¹²⁰ When making the invasion decision, “No one, however, seemed to anticipate that the 1979 war would trigger more than a decade of continuous military confrontations on the PRC-Vietnam border,” military historian Zhang Xiaoming claimed.¹²¹ An important cause of the pre-war disagreement on the offense-defense balance between the Soviet-Vietnam alliance and China is their different criterion for assessing the relative military importance of the tangibles vis-a-vis the intangibles. Barry Posen noted that to generate military power, “the [Warsaw] Pact prefers accounting major weapons and formations over training, the experience of military personnel, logistics, and the command, control, communications, and intelligence functions.”¹²² However, for the PLA at that time, as Zhang concluded, “this use of quantitative (material) indicators is secondary to the subjective factors that are embedded in Chinese strategic culture—

¹¹⁶ "Mongolian Record of Conversation with Soviet Officials in Moscow, February 1979", February 9, 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Mongolian Foreign Ministry Archive, Ulaanbaatar, fond 2, dans 1, kh/n 440b. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by Sergey Radchenko.

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113310>

¹¹⁷ Harry Gelman, “The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking against China” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corps, August 1982).

¹¹⁸ Ezra F Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 527–28.

Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 63-64.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 76.

¹²⁰ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 528.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 69.

¹²² Barry R Posen, “Measuring the European Conventional Balance: Coping with Complexity in Threat Assessment,” *International Security* 9, no. 3 (1984): 51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538587>.

most notably, the emphasis on “wits, wisdom, and strategy” that largely determine a war’s outcome.”¹²³

In the China-Vietnam case, the causal processes between assessed offense-defense balances and strategic choices are observed empirically. Amid Beijing’s baiting efforts from 1977 to 1978 and when it returned to the bleeding efforts from 1980 to 1987, Beijing indeed had an assessment of denial favorability regarding China’s potential usages of the military force. By contrast, Beijing shifted its strategy to the combination of general offensive and blackmail from late 1978 to early 1979 when offense appeared superior to the Chinese leader.

PAVN’s combat performance in its counteroffensive against KR forces in the spring of 1977 was mediocre. KR had not yet unfolded its great purge, and PAVN’s mobilization was slow, military intelligence was poor, war material shortage was manifest, soldiers’ war wariness was rampant, and the ratio of flag officers to field grade officers was abnormally high.¹²⁴ Numerous Chinese military advisors in the KR forces have likely observed and reported back about PAVN’s sublime offensive performance and KR forces’ impressive resistance against materially superior PAVN. When the PLA General Staff made the updated assessment of the Vietnam-Cambodia offense-defense balance after PAVN’s recuperation in late 1978, it was all too late, and Vietnam had already decided to invade.¹²⁵

In 1977, Hua Guofeng still had the upper hand at the apex of the PRC’s power structure. However, Deng took the lead in the 1979 shift from bait-and-bleed to a combination of general offensive and blackmail. Deng and his followers in the PLA’s leadership echelon had a different assessment of offense/defense favorability with the USSR and its proxies, which significantly contributed to their aforementioned anticipation of a quick Chinese victory against Vietnam and the resulting bait-taking.¹²⁶ During the Chinese Civil War, Deng served as the political commissar of Liu Bocheng’s Central Plain Field Army in central China and advocated for averting pitched battles whenever in a position of military inferiority and seeking classic quick and decisive engagements whenever in a position of military superiority.¹²⁷ Similar military thought was also embodied in China’s strategic guideline by 1979, which Deng extended from Mao’s 1964 guideline despite their political divergences. Viewing offense as militarily dominant when fighting against a superior adversary like the USSR, it called for averting engagement with the brunt of the enemy’s initial offensive, luring the enemy spearhead into the depth in a bold strategic retreat, and then launching massive encirclement campaigns against the invasion force in the strategic interior.¹²⁸ Fighting an inferior enemy like Vietnam called for quick and decisive offensive operations on exterior lines.¹²⁹ Deng was a prominent decision-maker when the PLA successfully executed this strategy in a quick and decisive campaign against India in 1962, and

¹²³ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 114.

¹²⁴ Path, *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 62-63, 65.

¹²⁵ Page 27.

¹²⁶ Page 32.

¹²⁷ 邓小平, “对二野历史的回顾,” www.reformdata.org (中国改革信息库, November 20, 1989),

<http://www.reformdata.org/1989/1120/1789.shtml>.

Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 100.

¹²⁸ Fravel, *Active Defense*, 113–14, 1447-48.

¹²⁹ Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 99.

Vietnam's surprising blitzkrieg against Cambodia again reinforced Deng's assessment of the favorability of the offense in 1979.¹³⁰ Deng was acutely aware of the numerous problems that the PLA suffered in the turbulent 1970s. Yet, his strong belief in offensive superiority still made him believe in a quick success against Vietnam.¹³¹ As a result, the invasion's planning eyed the overwhelming, encirclement, and annihilation of two Vietnamese divisions in the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA) and the deep penetration maneuver to isolate the FEBAs from PAVN reinforcements.¹³²

The offensive operations proved to be quite costly to China. The mere war materials cost one-fourth of China's entire defense budget in 1979.¹³³ Zhang Xiaoming noted that the Chinese leadership understood that "it would be unrealistic either to launch a second attack despite repeated threats of such or to maintain a large number of forces in the border regions for a long time."¹³⁴ Commanding an overwhelming material superiority in the FEBAs, China still suffered about 50000 casualties in exchange for similar Vietnamese casualties within the 29 days of the war.¹³⁵ The wartime revelations shifted Beijing's assessment of the offense-defense balance toward defense, making general offensive and blackmail less attractive than bait-and-bleed.

With Deng's post-war resignation from the position of the Chief of General Staff and the PLA's professionalization, the defense-dominance assessment was reinforced, ensuring the continued superiority of the bait-and-bleed strategy in the 1980s. Having carefully studied and observed modern defensive techniques, tactics, and operations in the Yom Kipper War, Colonel General Su Yu published his doubt-raising pre-invasion remark to the PLA Military Academy in May 1980, saying, "confined by the radical leftism, for a long time, people do not attach importance to positional warfare, do not dare to talk about positional warfare, for fear of being said to be "passive defense." I was not about to double down on this.... But if we can't even obtain the local air superiority, it is practically impossible to wage large-scale battles of annihilation."¹³⁶ The 1980 strategic guideline of "Active Defense," crafted by the PLA General Staff heavily influenced by Su Yu's thoughts, emphasized the salience and viability of forward defense against a sophisticated invading force. By delaying and containing the enemy spearheads along the forward defensive area, the PLA would deny attackers an early breakthrough and squeeze more time for mobilization and reinforcement.¹³⁷ In fact, China will have sufficient time to mobilize before the Soviet invasion since The White House agreed to help China with monitoring of Soviet forces in Far East during Deng's state visit in January 1979.¹³⁸ Taylor Fravel argued that the 1980 strategic guideline primarily targeted the USSR's stronger military on the northern front instead of Vietnam's weaker military on the southern front.¹³⁹ However, I believe that China's

¹³⁰ Ibid, 101.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 76-78.

¹³³ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 533.

¹³⁴ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 139.

¹³⁵ Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 61.

¹³⁶ Fravel, *Active Defense*, 146.

粟裕, "对未来反侵略战争初期作战方法的几个问题的探讨," *bbs.wenxuecity.com* (文学城, January 11, 1979), <https://bbs.wenxuecity.com/memory/52834.html>.

¹³⁷ Fravel, *Active Defense*, 142-43, 148-51.

¹³⁸ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 98.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 163-65

new strategies in both the northern and southern fronts are consistent and are only consistent under an assessment of an overall defense superiority, as had been the relation between the assessment of offense favorability, the northern strategy, and the southern strategy of China in 1979. Since defense is superior, utilizing initiative to lure enemy forces into the killing field of forward, defensive positions became an efficient strategy against a weaker adversary.

Kosal Path made the case for Hanoi's rational calculation of the benefit of the Vietnam-Soviet alliance for Vietnam's national survival before the invasion of Cambodia.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Nicholas Khoo argued that Hanoi "would not have dared to overthrow the Pol Pot regime had it not been for the presumed deterrent effect of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance treaty."¹⁴¹ Two days before the invasion, Pham Van Dong declared to Vietnam's National Assembly that with the full backing of the USSR, China would become a "paper tiger" and would not dare to attack Vietnam.¹⁴² It can be established that Hanoi believed that the escalation risk of its invasion of Cambodia would be low. After the 1979 invasion, the influx of massive aid from the Soviet bloc and the maintenance of a million-man-strong army following the massive national wartime mobilization under Directive 44-CP and Directive 58-CP made for a credible deterrence in Vietnamese leaders' minds.¹⁴³

As early as mid-1976, Vietnam's MOFA's top-secret report recorded the professional diplomatic insight that "China is attempting to incite conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia in order to limit Vietnam's role and influence in the region."¹⁴⁴ In January 1977, the Border Commission of the VWP Central Committee informed Politburo that "Beijing's main intention was to weaken Vietnam."¹⁴⁵ Le Duan's assistant Tran Phuong also recalled that in late 1977, PAVN's limited offensive in Cambodia captured military documents that confirmed Hanoi's suspicion that China was behind the KR regime's aggressive behavior toward Vietnam.¹⁴⁶

Being aware of the Chinese design, Hanoi only launched the invasion after its assessment of PAVN's odds of rapid military success had reached a high level. Vietnam's vigilant updating and China's belated alarmism on the changing Cambodia-Vietnam military balance created an information gap from late 1977 to mid-1978, during which Vietnam took the bait. Vietnam's limited offensive in 1977 operated combined arms fairly well, penetrated thirty kilometers from Cambodia's southwestern border, and took its designated objectives.¹⁴⁷ In May 1978, the Vietnamese leadership received the intelligence that KR had pulled a bulk of troops from the border region to quell an internal revolt in the Eastern zone.¹⁴⁸ During the second half of 1978, to failure-proof the full invasion, Vietnam not only received a major influx of Soviet equipment

¹⁴⁰ Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 77.

¹⁴¹ Khoo, *Collateral Damage*, 115.

¹⁴² Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 76.

¹⁴³ Page 20.

Pike, *PAVN*, 92.

Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 101-02.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 60.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 73.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 70.

¹⁴⁷ Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 50-51.

¹⁴⁸ Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 75.

but also drafted another 350000 men into service.¹⁴⁹ The invasion plan arranged a clear preponderant theater FFR of at least two-to-one in favor of PAVN.¹⁵⁰ Given these well-thought preparations, Pham Van Dong boasted an “assured victory” against Cambodia two days before the invasion.¹⁵¹

Summarily, the descriptive inferences of bait-and-bleed and causal inferences about bait-and-bleed drawn from the cases of Soviet bait-and-bleed against China from 1975 to 1979 and Chinese bait-and-bleeds against Vietnam from 1977 to 1978 and from 1980 to 1987 passed all designated tests, proving the usefulness of the bait-and-bleed concept and the validity of my theory.

	Perceived Balance	Strategic Choice		Perceived Balance	Strategic Choice	Supporting Theory?
Dyad 1: USSR, 1975-84	Denial Favorable	Bait-and-Bleed	Dyad 1: China, 1979	Friendly Offense Favorable	Blackmail	Yes
Dyad 2: Vietnam, 1978	Friendly Offense Favorable	Blackmail	Dyad 2: China, 1977-78	Denial Favorable	Bait-and-Bleed	Yes
Dyad 3: Vietnam, 1979-84	Friendly Offense Favorable	Blackmail	Dyad 3: China, 1980-84	Denial Favorable	Bait-and-Bleed	Yes

Table 7: Assessed Offense-Defense Balance and Strategic Choices

Conclusion

Via the overlooked bait-and-bleed concept, I developed a novel theory of Passive Aggression that explains why some states deliberately choose to initiate or enter an expected attrition war over an ex-ante bargaining settlement. My theory posits that rational major powers choose bait-and-bleed, especially indirect bleeding, if possible when they assess dyadic, composite denial favorability because the breakthrough is more likely to be contained, and the favorable attrition rate in a contained offensive increases net bleeding gain in a war. Vice versa, major powers choose blackmail when they assess dyadic, composite offense favorability because the costly breakthrough is likely to succeed quickly, and the profitable exploitation is made plausible. Crucially, baiting is a rational but inefficient strategic behavior. The bait-and-bleed strategy demands the ex-ante concealment of private information. Depending on the informational nature of the rival strategy, the ex-ante bargaining outcome of a revisionist with an initial strategy of bait-and-bleed varies from a certain peace, possible war, to a certain war.

After setting up the theory, this thesis designed a plausibility probe on the ground of Soviet and Chinese bait-and-bleed efforts in the unfolding of the Third Indochina War, 1976-1979. The fine tracing of causal processes in empirical evidence confirms my theoretical propositions. During the unfolding of the Third Indochina War, the Soviet assessment of denial favorability facilitated the Soviet choice of bait-and-bleed against China and Vietnam during the late 1970s. The Chinese assessment of denial favorability facilitated the Chinese choice of bait-and-bleed against the USSR and Vietnam from 1976 to 1978 and again from 1980 to 1984, and an altered Chinese assessment of

¹⁴⁹ Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 53.

¹⁵⁰ Stephen J Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 103.

¹⁵¹ Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 76.

friendly offense favorability facilitated the Chinese choice of blackmail against Vietnam in 1979. The empirical evidence also validates my argument that rational great powers are not prone to be deceived by manipulative signaling. The baiting only has modest efficiency, yet the rational revisionists did them anyway.