

# How China Was Crushed By Vietnam in a 1979 Conflict

Sebastien Roblin, The National Interest



**Key Point:** Beijing and Hanoi released wildly contradictory claims regarding the casualties in the war. External studies estimate around 26,000 PLA killed in action and around 30 to 35,000 Vietnamese troops.

At 5 AM on February 17, 1979, a massive artillery bombardment rippled across Vietnam's mountainous northern border with China. Waves of soldiers from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) swarmed towards the startled Vietnamese soldiers hunkered down in border forts, bunkers and caves. Some outposts, taken by surprise, fell; others repelled the attacks with withering small arms and artillery fire.

However, east of the Vietnamese village of Dong Khe, sitting astride the Highway 4A connecting the key cities of Lang Son and Cao Bang, the diesel motors of two battalions of Type 59 tanks rumbled. Though small units of PLA tanks had sparred with UN forces during the Korean War, this would be their first large-scale engagement.

By the late 1970s, Communist factions involved in Southeast Asia had successfully overthrown Western-backed governments in Saigon, Vientiane and Phnom Penh. But like close friends torn apart by long-festering resentments and mistrust, the former allies soon turned against each other.

The Cambodian Khmer Rouge feared a renewal of historical Vietnamese domination. The Vietnamese harbored a similar fear of China. And the Chinese were locked in a bitter ideological feud with the Soviets. Thus in November 1978, Moscow signed a mutual defense treaty with Hanoi.

Two months later, after years of bloody cross-border attacks, Vietnam overthrew the genocidal Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge regime in a [lightning military campaign](#). China was furious—and mobilized 600,000 troops to southern China's Yunnan and Guangxi provinces.

On February 15, Beijing announced it would launch a “defensive counterattack” to punish Vietnam. It also mobilized troops on its northern border with the Soviet Union.

Nine corps-sized armies averaging three divisions each were committed to the punitive campaign, which had three main objectives. On the western flank, three PLA armies would focus on capturing the border city of Lao Cai, defended by two PVA divisions. Meanwhile, six armies in the east under General Xu Shiyu would advance on Cao Bang and Lang Son—the latter astride a highway leading directly to Hanoi. This front was defended by four Vietnamese divisions.

Overall, the PLA had local numerical superiority of between three and six to 1 in its favor. Most of Vietnam's elite regular units remained engaged in Cambodia, including its extensive inventory of Chinese, Soviet and U.S. tanks and jets.

The PLA's infantry-heavy force was supported by roughly 600 tanks in six regiments for the campaign, plus a seventh held in reserve according to Nikolai Ezhov, a documenter of historical PLA organization. On the eastern Lang Son front, the 43rd Army's tank regiment operated eighty Type 59 tanks, a Chinese clone of the Soviet T-54 tank with a lumpy cast-steel turret. Though outdated, the 40-ton Type 59 remained tough and reliable, with a rifled 100-millimeter gun and between 100 and 200-millimeters of sloped frontal armor.

However, the mainstay were four regiments of lighter twenty-three-ton Type 62 light tanks, a downsized Type 59 with a 85-millimeter gun designed for operations around Southern China's rugged mountains, marshy rice paddies and subtropical forests. Yet with no more than 35- to 50-millimeters of frontal armor, the Type 62 was vulnerable to even light armor-piercing weapons. The regiments, counting 107 tanks each, included organic tank regiments of the 42<sup>nd</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> armies in the east and an independent unit near Lao Cai.

A regiment of eighty similarly vulnerable Type 63 amphibious tanks (based on the [Soviet PT-76](#)) also saw action, suffering heavy losses, including its commanding officer.

Deng Xiaoping forbade committing Chinese aviation to battle against Vietnam's battle-tested air defenses, and Chinese troops were forbidden from moving beyond the air-defense umbrella of Chinese SAMs. Thus, neither side's warplanes saw battle.

### **Breakthrough at Dong Khe**

A Chinese unit history describes how the two 43<sup>rd</sup> Army tank battalions east of Dong Khe were accompanied by a battalion of infantry and a platoon of engineers. However, the PLA forces almost entirely lacked mechanized transport, with fewer than 100 Type 63 armored personnel carriers. Xiaoming Zhang describes the drastic works-around adopted in [Deng Xiaoping's Long War](#):

"Such were the crudities of operational art that PLA infantry fastened themselves to the top of tanks with ropes so that they would not fall off. Accordingly, when they came under enemy fire, they were effectively bound in place..."

As the tanks barreled down a crude canyon, their riders were raked by small arms fire from above. The tanks rumbled on, ramming through an improved roadblock made of boulders. However, when a Type 59 attempted to cross the River Bang, a wooden bridge collapsed beneath it.

Instead, Chinese tankers forded the river assisted by engineers, as mortar and anti-tank rounds rained down from overlooking heights. Several tanks bogged down during the crossing, and another was picked off by an anti-tank missile.

After losing fifteen tanks, the survivors forged through the bombardment and at 10 AM rolled into an undefended Dong Khe. The Vietnamese had not expected enemy forces to penetrate down the mountainous, 18.5-mile long road so fast. But meanwhile, the Vietnamese opened a dam to flood the ford.

### **Long Slog at Cao Bang and Lang Son**

The capture of Dong Khe was only one of dozens of targets assaulted by the PLA to mixed success on February 17. But because most PLA units could only advance at walking speed, they couldn't rapidly exploit its breakthroughs.

The PLA also lacked a modern communications and supply systems, relying on human or animal labor to carry a third of its supplies, and hand and signal flags for tactical communications. Deficient training and education due to the near-collapse of schooling during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was also an issue. Peasants hastily levied for the conflict often received only one or two practice sessions with live ammunition and grenades prior to being sent into combat. One army hastily implemented a policy of teaching three soldiers out of every company how to read maps.

When PLA tanks pushed forward without infantry support, they were ambushed at short range by Vietnamese troops with rocket-propelled grenades, or picked off from afar by medium-range recoilless rifles and long-range Sagger anti-tank guided missiles. Dozens of lightly armored Type 62 tanks were lost advancing on Cao Bang. Rapid-firing 37-millimeter flak guns of a Vietnamese air defense regiment reportedly ravaged another PLA tank unit.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese militias and special operatives launched deadly raids and ambushes on PLA supply lines, and rear-area night attacks intended to trick Chinese artillery into firing on their own troops. [According to legend](#), a lone Vietnamese female sniper managed to kill eight PLA tank commanders before being captured and crushed under a tank by vengeful soldiers.

Though scheduled for capture in two days, Cao Bang finally fell on February 25. PLA troops then focused east on the more valuable prize of Lang Son, defended by the elite Vietnamese 3<sup>rd</sup> Gold Star division.

Here the PLA tankers encountered Vietnamese tankers in T-34/85 tanks of the 407th Tank Regiment. The dated but reliable World War II-era medium tanks actually had a fighting chance against the lightly-armored Type 62s, but the Chinese claimed fourteen T-34s for no loss and captured three, one of which is now displayed in a Chinese museum. In another encounter, a PLA 122-millimeter howitzer battalion reported knocking out six T-34s at long range.

On March 2, Chinese forces secured half of Lang Son. Edward Chen in "China's War With Vietnam, 1979" described the final push:

*The final assault was launched on March 3 preceded by the seizure of Hill 303. Tanks led the infantry in a head-long rush for only ten minutes; then the hill was captured. Shortly after, the Vietnamese artillery on Khua Ma Son mountain heavily bombarded the PLA on that hill. The Chinese tanks once again coordinated with the infantry. After fierce exchanges of fire power, mine explosion, and tunnel blowing-up, the six Vietnamese firing positions on the mountain were destroyed one after another. Finally rockets fired from the mountain's top signaled its capture.*

PLA forces now held a highway leading directly to Hanoi eighty miles away. On March 5, Vietnam announced a general mobilization of the population, and began airlifting units out of Cambodia. Simultaneously, Beijing announced its campaign had concluded and began withdrawing troops.

Fighting nonetheless continued eleven more days during the withdrawal. PLA troops reportedly left regional housing and infrastructure in ruins to inflict maximum "punishment" on Vietnam. Vietnam claimed ten thousand civilians were killed by PLA troops.

And the Soviets? Moscow decided direct military intervention was too risky and logistically impractical, though it did assist Vietnam with air transport, naval communications and arms shipments. China had demonstrated its regional primacy, but Moscow and Hanoi only drew closer.

Vietnamese forces also remained in Cambodia. Over the next decade China, Thailand **and the United States** helped the Khmer Rouge and other groups wage a bloody anti-Vietnamese insurgency. In this context, Chinese tanks saw combat a final time during the **Battle of Vi Xuyen in 1984** when PLA troops assaulted two Vietnamese-held mountains on the border.

### **"Victory"?**

Beijing and Hanoi released wildly contradictory claims regarding the casualties in the war. External studies estimate around 26,000 PLA killed in action and around 30 to 35,000 Vietnamese troops.

The PLA officially records total hull loss of 44 tanks, while Vietnam claimed to have knocked out 134 tanks at Cao Bang, 76 at Lang Son and 66 tanks at Lao Cai. Other sources claim hundreds, or 50 to 90 percent, of Chinese tanks were damaged or destroyed. The higher numbers likely better reflect combat losses, though many may have been recovered and repaired.

**The Sino-Vietnamese war is generally perceived in the West as humiliating for Chinese forces.** Undeniably, the PLA sustained heavy casualties, took longer than it expected to achieve its objectives, and demonstrated the obsolescence of its equipment, doctrine and organization. However, it also inflicted greater casualties on a determined enemy benefiting from fortifications and favorable terrain.

Party Chairman Deng Xiaoping used the PLA's demonstrated shortcomings to consolidate political power and begin **a modernization effort, downsizing it by over a million personnel to improve its quality.** The PLA also began upgrading Type 62s with additional armor and developing **more survivable** tank designs.

Thus, the Chinese war intended to "teach Vietnam a lesson" ended up being instructive both politically and operationally, though only at a terrible cost in human life for both sides.

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