

# H-Diplo

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**Harish C. Mehta. "Soviet Biscuit Factories and Chinese Financial Grants: North Vietnam's Economic Diplomacy in 1967 and 1968."** *Diplomatic History* 36:2 (April 2012): 301-335. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.01024.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.01024.x>

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Review by **Pierre Asselin**, Hawaii Pacific University

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This article addresses Soviet and Chinese assistance to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, or North Vietnam) and the "considerable agency" (302) exercised by Hanoi policymakers and diplomats in obtaining that assistance. It aims to demonstrate that Washington never correctly estimated the nature and quantity of foreign aid to Hanoi and, as a result, "failed to understand the remarkable resilience of the DRV economy to survive U.S. bombardment" (301). To achieve his purposes the author draws from revealing documentary evidence collected from Vietnam National Archives Center 3 in Hanoi. That evidence is chock-full of fascinating data about foreign aid to the DRV at the height of the Vietnam War.

Contrary to popular belief, China, not the Soviet Union, was the DRV's biggest aid provider in the period under consideration. That, plus the fact that Beijing provided grants while Moscow offered loans with "stringent conditions" (303), meant that "Sino-DRV relations thrived and were conducted in an atmosphere of trust" (305). Hanoi's appreciation for China and consequent disdain for the Soviet Union were such, the author writes, that they may have induced a massive purge of members of the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP, the organ controlling DRV decision-making) who embraced pro-Soviet views in 1967. That purge may also have been the product of differences between Hanoi and Moscow over strategy in the war against the United States. Whereas the Vietnamese communist leadership's early commitment to military victory over Washington and its 'lackeys' in Saigon was consistent with Chinese advice and revolutionary doctrine, Soviet leaders did not want the war to derail Soviet-American détente and therefore called for a diplomatic solution. Hanoi actually thought that "the Soviet Union was undermining the Vietnamese revolution by carrying on its own rapprochement with the United States" (306), Mehta surmises. Accordingly, VWP leaders

kept a certain distance from Moscow as they purged those within the Party who adhered to Soviet revolutionary prescriptions.

Foreign aid to the DRV was indeed substantial. China and the Soviet Union financed sixty percent of the DRV budget in 1965-67. That Hanoi managed to secure so much assistance from both Moscow and Beijing at the height of the Sino-Soviet dispute is nothing short of remarkable. According to Mehta, this success had much to do with the shrewdness of DRV leaders who “attempted to straddle the middle” (307) in the dispute despite following Chinese revolutionary theses in their struggle against the United States. It also helped that North Vietnamese diplomats and other officials entered into negotiations on economic assistance with their allies “well prepared” (319) and never afraid to make specific demands. DRV negotiators “succeeded in getting almost all the funds they had asked for” (320) during 1967-68, the author claims, even though talks with the Soviets did not always go smoothly.

It is a well-known fact that U.S. bombings of the North in the period 1965-68 failed to meet their intended purposes. Less clear, however, are the reasons for the failure. Mehta offers one of the more plausible – and convincing – exposés of the reasons for the shortcomings of the bombing. According to him, the persistent inability of Washington to gauge accurately the level of assistance from the socialist camp provided to North Vietnam “misled Johnson administration officials into believing that the DRV economy was weaker than it was and that the bombardment would make Hanoi beg for peace” (325). In fact, bombing was “a futile policy” because “Communist allies would continually inject economic aid to replenish supplies destroyed by American bombardment” (325). Mehta’s comparative analysis of Vietnamese and CIA documents on the DRV economy and foreign assistance to Vietnam is excellent, providing valuable insights into American perceptions and Vietnamese realities. “Proper understanding of the resilience of the North Vietnamese economy would have led American officials to accept Hanoi’s standpoint that it would not negotiate under bombardment” (326), he writes. Specifically, Washington failed to dislocate the North Vietnamese economy because production shortfalls due to bombings were offset by increased imports and assistance from the socialist camp. Knowledge of the extent of foreign support to the DRV, Mehta concludes, “would have enabled U.S. officials to understand that bombardments would not bring Hanoi in a weakened state to peace talks” (304).

The article has faults. The introductory section on Hanoi’s revolutionary strategy and intra-VWP squabbles in the period before 1965 is convoluted. The use of *Nhan dan*, the Party mouthpiece, to corroborate a statement that the DRV surpassed production targets in some sectors of the economy in 1968 is dubious at best. And DRV president Ho Chi Minh had far less authority over VWP decision-making than the author suggests, particularly after 1963.

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Nonetheless, the article sheds important new light on key aspects of the Vietnam War. It contains much revealing information; on account of the new Vietnamese evidence alone it is a must-read for anyone interested in the conflict.

**Pierre Asselin** is Associate Professor of History at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu. He is the author of *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (North Carolina, 2002). Recent publications include “The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique” in *Cold War History* (2011); “Revisionism Triumphant: Hanoi’s Diplomatic Strategy in the Nixon Era” in *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2011); and “‘We Don’t Want a Munich’: Hanoi’s Diplomatic Strategy, 1965-1968” in *Diplomatic History* (2012). His current book project tentatively entitled “Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-65” is forthcoming from the University of California Press.

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