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Review by **Balázs Szalontai**, Kwangwoon University

Kosal Path's article skillfully investigates the interlocked relationship between the political and the economic spheres of the Sino-North Vietnamese partnership in the last years of the Second Indochina War (1971-1975). On the one hand, it analyzes the political considerations which alternately induced China to increase or reduce its economic assistance to Hanoi; on the other hand, it describes the effect that the various economic difficulties and disputes produced on Vietnamese political attitudes toward the People's Republic of China (PRC) (and vice versa). This bilateral relationship is placed in the context of Sino-American, Sino-Soviet, and Soviet-North Vietnamese relations so as to explain how the process of Sino-U.S. rapprochement influenced Chinese aid policies toward the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), how Beijing sought to create friction between Moscow and Hanoi, and how Hanoi's gradual alienation from Beijing resulted in a Vietnamese tilt toward the USSR.

While Path duly acknowledges the validity of the observations of Li Danhui, Chen Jian, Qiang Zhai, and Shen Zhihua on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship on the basis of Chinese archival sources,¹ he seeks to refine and partly modify the picture drawn by the

¹ See, among others, Chen Jian, "China, the Vietnam War, and the Sino-American Rapprochement, 1968-1974," in *The Third Indochina War. Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, ed. Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33-64; Li Danhui, "Vietnam and Chinese Policy Toward the United States," in *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations*, ed. William C. Kirby, Robert S. Ross and Gong Li (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 175-208; Li Danhui, "The Sino-Soviet Dispute over Assistance for Vietnam's Anti-American War, 1965-1972," in *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia*, ed. Priscilla Roberts (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 289-318; Shen Zhihua, "Sino-U.S. Reconciliation and China's Vietnam Policy," in *Behind the Bamboo Curtain*, 349-368; and Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

aforesaid scholars by providing new insight into the perceptions and grievances of the North Vietnamese leadership. He makes excellent use of a wide range of previously untapped Vietnamese archival documents, such as reports, memoranda, and statistical tables prepared by the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Foreign Trade, the Prime Minister's Office, and the State Planning Committee.

On the basis of these primary sources, Path re-examines the claim, made by Li Danhui and other Chinese scholars,² that the post-1970 Sino-American rapprochement was accompanied by a substantial increase, rather than decrease, of Chinese aid to Vietnam. The significance of this issue goes well beyond the sphere of economics, since a careful analysis of the extent of China's readiness to provide material support to the DRV might at least partly enable scholars to decide whether Hanoi's well-known disapproval of the Sino-U.S. rapprochement process was justified or not. After all, the Vietnamese Communist leaders argued that China, having decided to improve its relations with the United States at a time when Washington still sought to enhance its negotiating position vis-à-vis Hanoi by means of military pressure, essentially sacrificed Vietnam's interests for the sake of Sino-American normalization. In contrast, the Chinese government sought to refute Vietnamese charges of 'betrayal' and 'sellout' by emphasizing the post-1971 increase of Chinese aid to Hanoi, and thus implying that the root cause of Sino-DRV alienation had been Vietnam's 'ungratefulness' and narrow-minded nationalism, rather than a lack of Chinese support.

Path's sophisticated analysis of the interlocked dynamics of Sino-American relations and Chinese aid policies reveals that in certain respects, both the Chinese and the Vietnamese arguments overlooked the multi-phased nature of the Sino-American rapprochement process, and the sharp differences between the two perspectives partly resulted from the fact that each side extrapolated the impact that one or another specific phase of this process made on the Chinese aid program. That is, in March 1971 Mao Zedong "issued instructions for a huge increase in China's economic and military assistance to North Vietnam to dispel Hanoi's fear of abandonment as a direct result of China's reconciliatory approach toward the United States" (523), but after he "achieved his paramount foreign policy goal of Sino-US rapprochement to counter the Soviet threat in February 1972, Vietnam was no longer of strategic importance" (545). Path insightfully notes that the appointment of Lian Dianjun, a Party cadre whose earlier activities had been wholly unrelated to Vietnam, as China's Economics Representative to the DRV on 25 February 1972 – that is, soon after President Richard Nixon's visit in Beijing – indicated a major shift in Chinese aid policies, all the more so because Lian, unlike his predecessors, adopted a markedly critical attitude toward Vietnam's real and alleged "misuse and mishandling" (525) of Chinese aid. Hanoi's wasteful practices, Lian charged, necessitated

² Li, "Vietnam and Chinese Policy," 205; Qiang, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1955-1965*; Shen, "Sino-U.S. Reconciliation," 363.

the re-evaluation of every Chinese-assisted project in the DRV, including those that had already been approved.

In Path's opinion, this policy shift was caused by a combination of factors. First of all, the PRC, having been devastated by the Cultural Revolution, found it increasingly difficult to meet Hanoi's requests. Path is willing to accept the view, expressed both by the former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders and present-day Chinese scholars, that the Chinese economy was "genuinely unable" (523) to provide as much assistance to the war-damaged DRV as Hanoi wanted. In other words, both the Chinese and North Vietnamese governments had to cope with grave economic difficulties, which considerably reduced their ability and willingness to feel empathy toward each other. From this perspective, Mao's politically motivated and forcefully implemented decision to increase Chinese aid to Vietnam in 1971 was more out of tune with Chinese economic realities than the post-1972 restrictions on aid, and therefore the latter policies, unpopular as they were in Vietnam, should be regarded as a sensible reaction to the actual situation. Indeed, the validity of the Chinese complaints about Hanoi's inefficient use of foreign aid, such as the problems caused by the lack of proper storage facilities, is at least partially confirmed by the fact that the Soviet bloc countries had also lodged complaints of this kind as early as 1967.³

Nevertheless, the question of whether the Chinese economy was able or unable to fully meet Vietnam's needs for aid should be placed in a broader international context than the scope of Path's analysis. Namely, in 1972-1973, at which time the CCP leaders became increasingly reluctant to fulfill Hanoi's requests, they continued to provide substantial quantities of aid to Burma, Pakistan, and various other developing countries, including several African and Latin American states that signed their very first aid agreements with Beijing in 1972. In October 1972, the PRC went so far as to promise further aid to the Tanzanian government which had not even asked for it (and in fact declined China's offer).⁴ Thus it appears likely that China's decreasing readiness to assist Vietnam reflected more a shift of priorities within the PRC's broadening aid program than an overall re-examination of the program itself. The more countries Beijing undertook to support, the more carefully it had to consider which ones were to be treated more favorably than the others.

³ Hungarian Foreign Ministry, Memorandum, June 1967, Hungarian National Archives (MOL), XIX-J-1-j Vietnam, Top Secret Documents, 1967, 93. doboz, 41, 002414/13/1967.

⁴ On Chinese aid to other developing countries, see, among others, Martin Bailey, "Tanzania and China," *African Affairs* 74:294 (January 1975), 41-43; Thomas W. Robinson, "China in 1972: Socio-Economic Progress Amidst Political Uncertainty," *Asian Survey* 13:1 (January 1973), 7; and Yaacov Vertzberger, "The Political Economy of Sino-Pakistani Relations: Trade and Aid 1963-82," *Asian Survey* 23:5 (May 1983), 645-646.

While Path rarely compares Sino-Vietnamese aid relations with China's assistance to other countries (the single notable exception is a reference to Cambodia on page 543), he does notice certain aspects of this shift of priorities. Among others, he quotes Han Suzhen, China's Deputy Minister of Economic Relations with Foreign Countries, who explained China's inability to fulfill Hanoi's requests by pointing out that "Our diplomatic relations have expanded greatly since 1970 – from 10 countries to 40-50 countries now." (538). He also astutely notes that as early as the fall of 1972, the North Vietnamese leadership became aware of the fact that the DRV – unlike North Korea, Albania, and Romania – was no longer regarded as one of China's "most favourite socialist friends" (527).

Indeed, Path rightly emphasizes that China's declining willingness to assist Hanoi was motivated not only by economic but also by political considerations. Among others, he mentions such factors as "Beijing's perceptions of the waning threat of the American presence in Indochina, the rising security threat from the Soviet Union in the North, [and] the declining ability of Chinese aid to pull Hanoi away from Moscow" (521). The significance of the diplomatic aspects is also confirmed by his well-documented description of the Sino-Vietnamese disputes which occurred over the delayed Chinese transshipment of Soviet aid to the DRV. On the other hand, he seems to underestimate the negative impact that Hanoi's disapproval of the Sino-American rapprochement made on Chinese attitudes toward the DRV.

It would be worth refining this analysis even further. For instance, the dramatic increase of Chinese aid to Vietnam in March 1971 took place in the context of the U.S.-inspired South Vietnamese invasion of Laos (8 February – 25 March 1971), an action that both Hanoi and Beijing sharply condemned. The coincidence of this invasion, Operation Lam Son 719, with President Nixon's new gestures toward the CCP leadership, such as his first public use of the name "People's Republic of China" and his abolition of travel restrictions to China, revealed the complex nature of the Sino-U.S. rapprochement process. That is, the mutual interest of Beijing and Washington in reaching a *modus vivendi* in the sphere of bilateral relations by no means precluded their competition in other theaters (particularly Laos and Cambodia), just as the latter conflicts of interest did not discourage Nixon from visiting the PRC. In the light of the dual-track diplomacy pursued by both Great Powers, the massive increase of Chinese aid to Hanoi in 1971-1972 may have reflected not only Beijing's efforts to alleviate Vietnamese fears of abandonment (and Hanoi's skillful exploitation of China's guilt) – as Path suggests – but also a strategy to prevent the United States from using the Sino-American rapprochement to gain unilateral advantages in Southeast Asia. Probably this is why in mid-1973 Beijing, having achieved the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, decided "to roll back China's past big promises" (535). The fact that the first marked decrease of Chinese aid to Vietnam occurred in 1969 – a phenomenon overlooked by Path – also indicates the importance of

the strategic context, since at that time, U.S. de-escalation in Vietnam was already in progress but the Sino-American rapprochement had not made yet much headway.⁵

These minor deficiencies notwithstanding, this article is a valuable contribution to the existing scholarship on the Vietnam War in general and on Sino-Vietnamese relations in particular. Rich in quotations from previously untapped documents, it persuasively explains how the delayed, tortuous, and incomplete implementation of China's earlier generous pledges aroused the dissatisfaction of the Vietnamese Communist leaders, and thus further aggravated the tension that the Sino-American talks had caused between Hanoi and Beijing.

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⁵ Hungarian Embassy to the DRV, Report, 28 April 1969, MOL, XIX-J-1-j Vietnam, Top Secret Documents, 1969, 92. doboz, 162-1, 00674/1969.