

# 2013

## H-Diplo

### H-Diplo Article Reviews

[h-diplo.org/reviews/](http://h-diplo.org/reviews/)

No. 413

Published on 9 July 2013

Updated, 13 June 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

**Balázs Szalontai. "In the Shadow of Vietnam: A New Look at North Korea's Militant Strategy, 1962-1970." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14:4 (Fall 2012): 122-166. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00278. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00278](http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00278)**

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR413.pdf>

Reviewed by **Jiyul Kim**, Oberlin College

---

**B**alázs Szalontai has written one of the most important recent historical studies of North Korea. 'Doing' diplomatic history of North Korea is not for the faint of heart for the obvious reason that essentially no archival material is available save for the highly selective and thus problematic collection of documents captured during the Korean War in the fall of 1950. But the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and East Europe and the subsequent opening of the archives there, as well as the limited opening of Chinese archives, have provided a rich work-around that has greatly expanded our historical knowledge of North Korea. Szalontai has been the pioneer in exploring what is obviously a rich repository of North Korea-related material from the Hungarian archives.<sup>1</sup> This article continues his highly productive work at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) and the North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP).<sup>2</sup>

Szalontai covers the history of North Korean foreign and military policy during a critical decade long period from 1962 to 1971 with particularly detailed coverage from 1966 to 1968.

---

<sup>1</sup> As well as other formerly or currently archivally inaccessible parts and periods of the world as demonstrated by Szalontai's "The Elephant in the Room: The Soviet Union and India's Nuclear Program, 1967-1989," *Nuclear Proliferation International History Project Working Paper #1*, Woodrow Wilson Center, November 2011.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Balázs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (Stanford University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2005); Balázs Szalontai and Sergey Radchenko, "North Korea's Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Technology and Nuclear Weapons: Evidence from Russian and Hungarian Archives," *CWIHP Working Paper #53*, August 2006.

These years were historically significant for both North and South Korea as it marked the first tangible point of the historical process that led to what both countries have become today: a rich, strong, and vibrant South and an impoverished, weakened, and isolated North. It was also the time when the U.S. became deeply involved in Vietnam, got stuck, and then disengaged while affecting its whole posture and policy in and toward East Asia. The years 1966-1968 marked the high point of involvement in the Vietnam War for the U.S. as well as for its principal non-South Vietnamese ally, South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK). Both nations began deploying combat troops in 1965, greatly reinforced them in 1966-1967, and reached their maximum strength of over 500,000 Americans and 50,000 South Koreans by 1968. The North Vietnamese-National Liberation Front's (NLF) Tet Offensive in January 1968 marked the turning point of the war by igniting doubt in Washington about the course of the war. President Lyndon Johnson withdrew from running for re-election, pulled back on bombing, and opened the door for a negotiated settlement that was eventually secured by President Richard Nixon at the end of December 1972. By early 1973 all Americans and South Koreans were withdrawn from Vietnam

The years 1966-1968 also marked a significantly heightened series of armed provocations by North Korea on the Korean peninsula. Historians mark the start of what Szalontai calls "militant strategy" to Kim Il Sung's declaration on 5 October 1966 at the Korean Worker's Party conference that called for armed actions to destabilize South Korea, invoke a revolutionary uprising, and reunify the peninsula (footnote 2, 122). After a series of deadly actions along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) from late 1966 and throughout 1967, the high point of the North Korean campaign was reached in late January 1968 with the large bold raid [known as the Blue House Raid] to assassinate South Korean President Park Chung Hee at his residence (Blue House) on 21 January followed by the capture of *USS Pueblo* on 23 January in international waters off the North Korean coast.<sup>3</sup>

Eight days later, on 31 January, the Tet Offensive was launched in South Vietnam. Most historians have concluded that these events in Korea and Vietnam were not coincidental but rather a highly coordinated and integrated grand strategy by North Vietnam and North Korea. The explanation for their motives and objectives vary but in general it can be stated thusly: that North Korea and North Vietnam conducted coordinated actions against the U.S. and South Korea to tie down forces in their respective theaters and thus dissipate their ability to concentrate in one theater; and this also facilitated both North Korea and North Vietnam in the pursuit of their respective objectives. This interpretation implies close relations and coordination of action between Pyongyang and Hanoi. The problem, as Szalontai points out, is that it is not based on documentary evidence. It is conjecture, speculation, and in essence based solely on the close timing of the three actions, the Blue House Raid, the *Pueblo* Incident, and the Tet Offensive, which occurred within eleven days of each other.

---

<sup>3</sup> Szalontai provides a list of works that argue this interpretation in his footnote 3.

There has been no authoritative history of North Korea-North Vietnam relations written, until now. Szalontai provides the first and only comprehensive account of this relationship beginning from 1950 until 1973 when, as Szalontai concludes in his article, the two became estranged due to the negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War, which Pyongyang opposed. The bulk of Szalontai's evidence comes from the Hungarian archives. From a rich collection of cables and memoranda from Hungarian embassies in North Korea, North Vietnam, the USSR, China, and Cuba as well as the Hungarian Foreign and Defense Ministries, Szalontai has assembled the story of North Vietnam-North Korea relations and the linkage, or not, between events in Korea and Vietnam.

On one level, we have a rich new archivally-based interpretation of a previously unknown and only conjectured history of North Korea-North Vietnam relations. On a deeper level, Szalontai provides a new and nuanced history of the linkage between military actions in Korea and Vietnam. For example, this account reveals that the previously held interpretation of the linkage between Blue House, *Pueblo* and Tet was overly simplified and even wrong. Szalontai convincingly challenges the notion that the main objective for North Korea's militant strategy in 1967 and early 1968, especially the capture of the *Pueblo*, was, in coordination with North Vietnam, to divert U.S. efforts in Vietnam and thwart South Korean deployments to Vietnam. Szalontai does not reject the effect of the Vietnam Wars on North Korean strategy and actions, but he shows that the intensity of their impact varied greatly. North Korea's objectives for what Szalontai calls *Südpolitik* or policy toward South Korea, a policy that the militant strategy was designed to fulfill, were three-fold: to gain a foothold in South Korea; to isolate the Park Chung Hee regime; and to cause the U.S. to withdraw from South Korea. The course of the Vietnam War, South Korean domestic politics, and changes in U.S.-South Korea relations were all significant factors in influencing North Korea's strategy. In the end, Kim Il Sung used the Vietnam War only when it suited the attainment of these objectives and he thus operated his militant strategy "in the shadow of the Vietnam War" (125).

Szalontai also moves back the starting point of North Korea's militant strategy from October 1966 to 1962 when Kim Il Sung drew inspiration from the NLF insurgency to decide on "low-intensity irregular warfare" instead of a conventional military offensive to reunify Korea (127). Such a strategy would avoid the risk of an American nuclear response from nuclear weapons stored in South Korea. From 1962 to early 1971, Szalontai traces no less than six stages of North Korea's militant strategy, its beginning in 1962 followed by significant changes in strategy in fall of 1966, spring of 1967, January 1968, the winter of 1968-69, and mid-1970. The campaign ended in the spring of 1971 when inter-Korean relations thawed, a state that ended in early 1973 when both North and South Korea became antagonistic again, driven by a series of developments that began with President Richard Nixon's Guam Doctrine in 1969, a large drawdown of American forces from Korea in 1970, rapprochement between U.S. and China in 1972, and the settlement in Vietnam in early 1973, a development that created an acute sense of crisis in both Seoul and Pyongyang. But that is another story.

Szalontai has thus provided an extremely useful historical framework with details and nuances that illuminate North Korean and North Vietnamese histories of that period. For example, a significant reinterpretation in Szalontai's account concerns the seizure of the *Pueblo*. He puts to rest the notion that Vietnam was the primary motive for the seizure and modifies Mitchell Lerner's conclusion that the peculiar course the *Pueblo* incident to its resolution in December 1968 was primarily due to domestic propaganda purposes.<sup>4</sup> Szalontai does this by providing a detailed interpretation that Pyongyang was, above all, concerned about its credibility with Moscow and Beijing where there had been great skepticism and criticism over North Korea's provocative policy and strategy since late 1966, a critique that was hardened by the disastrous Blue House Raid.

Szalontai also adds to the main account with an ancillary development, the emergence of a Hanoi-Havana-Pyongyang triangle in 1966-67 as the three considered themselves "the sole true manifestations of armed revolution" versus what they perceived as the compromised revolutions in Moscow and Beijing (134). Although not central to the article, the trilateral cooperation provides a new insight on the state of communist relations during that period.

As path breaking and important as this article is, it should be pointed out that Szalontai's work is not based on any North Korean documents, but mostly on Hungarian material that is subject to interpretation by the reporting Hungarian official or agency. Thus, in discussing North Korea and Kim Il Sung's thinking and decision-making process, Szalontai frequently modifies his account with conditional words such as 'probably,' 'seems,' 'likely,' 'undoubtedly,' 'must have known,' and 'may have.' North Vietnamese material is missing as well. Those archives are theoretically available, as has been demonstrated by Mark Bradley, and provide another source and avenue of approach to further fill in the details of this fascinating and important story.<sup>5</sup> However, it appears that documents relating to North Vietnam-North Korea relations are, for the time being, inaccessible to foreign researchers. Nevertheless, Szalontai has done yeoman's work in teasing out North Korea's thinking and decision making. His work leaves plenty of room for future confirmation, revision and refutation if and when North Korean archives become available.

**Jiyul Kim** retired from the U.S. Army after 29 years and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of history at Oberlin College, Ohio, where he teaches a course on the use of historical and cultural knowledge in formulating U.S. foreign and national security policy and strategy. In the Army, he was a Japan and Korea specialist and taught national security policy, theory of war, and Asia-Pacific regional study at the U.S. Army War College while being Director of Asian Studies. His master's thesis,

---

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy* (University Press of Kansas, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

## H-Diplo Article Review

“U.S. and Korea in Vietnam and the Japan-Korea Treaty,” was an early work that examined the relationship between the Vietnam War and developments in South Korea and Japan. He is the author of *Cultural Dimensions of Strategy and Policy* (Strategic Studies Institute, 2009).

© 2014 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).