

2013

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 431

Published on 13 November 2013

Updated, 14 June 2014

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

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Eliza Gheorghe. "Atomic Maverick: Romania's negotiations for nuclear technology, 1964–1970." *Cold War History* 13:3 (August 2013): 373–392. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2013.776542. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2013.776542>

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR431.pdf>

Reviewed by **Dennis Deletant**, Georgetown University

The noun 'maverick' is used frequently to describe Romania's foreign policy in the period from the late 1950s until the end of the 1980s, but the employment of the adjective 'atomic' will doubtless come as a surprise to most students of Cold War history. In the late 1950s Romania's leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej set the country on a course which pushed back the boundaries of Soviet tolerance, enabling it to pursue a policy of autonomy in foreign affairs without breaching its limits. Satisfaction of Soviet security needs and the maintenance of ideological cohesion were the parameters that had defined Romania's relations after 1945 with the Soviet Union and its position in the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Autonomy, defined by the right to formulate indigenous policy rather than independence, characterized Romanian foreign policy under Gheorghiu-Dej and under his successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu, for throughout the Cold War Romania remained a member, despite some misgivings, of both the Warsaw Pact and the CMEA and consistently restated its loyalty to the Socialist camp.

Romania's nuclear acquisition strategy is an integral but understudied dimension of its foreign policy. Eliza Gheorghe has remedied this defect. In a stimulating and highly original article, based on recently declassified documents from archives in Romania, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and France, she shows how Romania's communist leadership sought to persuade its international partners to grant the country dual-use nuclear technology.¹ Bucharest's quest for nuclear technology helped to

¹ The term 'dual-use' is applied when fissile material, such as plutonium, produced by many types of nuclear reactor, is capable of being diverted to the development of a nuclear weapon. Whilst nuclear reactors are used for peaceful purposes, such as providing electricity or developing radiopharmaceuticals, some states have been accused of having nuclear weapons programs based on dual-use technology, notably in most recent years, Iran and North Korea. The International Atomic Energy Agency attempts to monitor

consolidate its position as a 'maverick', anchoring Romania into the arena of global politics.

Between 1963 and 1968, Romania engaged in negotiations for nuclear technology with both East and West, without making a firm commitment to any of the potential partners. Gheorghe Gaston Marin, the President of Romania's State Committee for Nuclear Energy, arrived on 18 May 1964 in the U.S. to talk to Averell Harriman, wartime U.S. ambassador to Moscow, who had played a significant role in the post-World War II settlement regarding Romania. Gaston Marin touched on the issue of Romanian-Soviet nuclear cooperation, rightly thinking that the US would be worried about shipments of Romanian uranium to the Soviet Union. He pointed out that Romania had uranium which it preferred to put into "generating electric power rather than in fissionable material" (379). Some members of the Johnson administration took this statement at face value.

The view that Romania should be granted nuclear technology for its autonomous foreign policy was advanced by Secretary of State Dean Rusk. In August 1965, the Chairman of the Joint Atomic Energy Committee pointed out that the U.S. should elicit an agreement from Romania that it would neither manufacture nor accept a nuclear weapon on its territory. Romania's position towards nuclear weapons and proliferation was ambivalent. On the one hand, it supported total disarmament, but on the other hand it objected to signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Gheorghe identifies a fascinating piece of the jigsaw of Romanian policy by revealing that the Romanians disclosed their actual reasons for opposing the NPT only to their Soviet counterparts. Prime Minister Ion Gheorghe Maurer declared to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in March 1967 that by signing the NPT, Romania would tie its own hands, giving up the possibility of acquiring a nuclear weapon in the future (381).

Despite these considerations it remained the case that U.S. legislation restricted nuclear trade with Romania on national security grounds. The U.S. Export Control Act of 1947 provided for the denial of a license where "the President shall determine that such export makes a significant contribution to the military and economic potential of such nation or nations which would prove detrimental to the national security and welfare of the United States."² The main obstacle in this respect was Vietnam because Romania supported the North Vietnamese with substantial political, economic, and military assistance. The Romanians condemned the U.S. aggression against Vietnam in international fora such as the UN General Assembly, organized rallies in Bucharest to protest against U.S. bombings

dual-use technology in countries which are signatories of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to make sure that fissile material is not diverted to military functions. In 1991, over a year after the fall of Ceaușescu, Romania reported previously undeclared nuclear activities by the former regime and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported this non-compliance to the Security Council for information only.

² (Foreign Relations of the United States, IX, Washington DC 1997, 'Report of the President's Task Force on Foreign Economic Policy', undated, 473)

in Vietnam, and tried to influence other countries to support North Vietnam's position. Supporting the North Vietnamese automatically put Romania on an embargo list regarding transfers of sensitive technology, including nuclear reactors. With the Vietnam issue in the way, Romania had little chance of success in its pursuit of Western nuclear technology.

The Romanians sensed, nevertheless, that an intermediary role they could play between the North Vietnamese and the Americans might get them enough support from the U.S. executive branch to allow the Johnson administration to make an exception for Romania from the provisions of the Export Control Act.³ "The US had been probing Bucharest for clues on Vietnam since the fall of 1965. On 14 October, Dean Rusk nudged his Romanian counterpart, Corneliu Mănescu, towards the possibility of Romania mediating between the warring parties of the Vietnam War: 'if anyone is entitled to thinking of a role which could peacefully solve the Vietnamese issue, then Romania may come to mind' he stated. The Romanians, however, refused to relay any messages. The R[omanian] C[ommunist] P[arty] continued to supply North Vietnam with aid, to the displeasure of the Johnson administration, which naturally avoided pushing the nuclear deal forward" (382). The ambivalence of the Romanian stance on mediation is illustrated by Ceaușescu's support in autumn 1966 of the Soviet position on ending the war by urging the Vietnamese to negotiate while fighting (383).⁴

Cooperation on nuclear technology was the first topic addressed by Ceaușescu in his meeting with Richard Nixon in Bucharest in August 1969. The U.S. President believed the Romanians were a useful channel in negotiations with Hanoi and with Beijing and therefore indulged the Romanians more than any other U.S. president had. After his visit, Nixon urged the Atomic Energy Commission to approve Romania's bid for the heavy water plant. Romania was able to acquire the licenses for a heavy water plant, a 14 MW TRIGA II research reactor, and hot cells for plutonium reprocessing. Using its political leverage, on 20 May 1970, the Soviet Union signed an agreement with Romania for the purchase of a 440 MW VVR plant on Olt River, with a delivery deadline agreed for 1978.

³ In his recent monograph on the Vietnam War, James Hershberg points out that Romania's mediation was an attempt to improve its ties with the West and Washington specifically, for political and economic reasons. (James G. Hershberg, *Marigold. The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2012), p.639.)

⁴ In a meeting with the US ambassador to Bucharest on 31 January 1967, Ceaușescu pressed for closer economic ties between their two countries, pointing out that although the Vietnam War was an obstacle, Romania was working hard to solve the conflict. He told the American Ambassador that Hanoi 'does not wish to have intermediaries but would like to talk directly with you'. Ceaușescu applied the 'mediator-in-denial' approach: he agreed to relay the message that Washington wanted to talk to the leadership in Hanoi, but then quickly added that doing so did not mean that Romania wanted to be a mediator between Hanoi and Washington. Ceaușescu was reluctant to officially accept the role of mediator between the Americans and the North Vietnamese because he did not have a mandate from the VWP and because he feared the reaction of the Chinese (Gheorghe, p.383).

However, after considering Canadian CANDU (Canada Deuterium Uranium) technology, Ceaușescu decided to adopt the latter in constructing a five-unit power plant at Cernavoda on the Danube. Work on the first unit started in 1980.⁵

After Ceaușescu's 1974 assertion that "no state need refrain from a weapons acquisition," U.S. specialists concluded that "if Romania were to opt to produce nuclear weapons, it can acquire the necessary know-how and material over a reasonably short span of years, from Western suppliers, such as the Germans, British, or French, or even Chinese" (391). The United States continued to supply Romania with highly enriched uranium (93% enrichment) for the TRIGA II reactor until the second half of the 1980s, even after Ceaușescu publicly declared that he possessed the ability to develop nuclear weapons. Throughout this period, the U.S. Department of Energy provided Romania with 38 kg of highly enriched uranium (HEU), a quantity that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) deems sufficient for producing a nuclear bomb. Romania was, therefore, the only country in the Soviet bloc with CANDU nuclear energy technology and Western plutonium reprocessing technology

Gheorghe's article, with its emphasis on Romania's efforts to acquire nuclear technology in the 1960s, is a major contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the dexterity of Romania's foreign policy in the Ceaușescu era. She shows how the Romanians took advantage of talks on Vietnam to press Washington to strengthen economic ties with Romania, which would facilitate, they hoped, the transfer of the desired nuclear technology. The strategy worked, primarily because Western leaders sought to use Bucharest to advance their own economic and political interests. East-West relations, including Romania's nuclear dealings with capitalist countries, were in part driven by the West's search for profits as well as political advantage and in part by political and economic dynamics between Romania and the Soviet Union.

© 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/).

⁵ Canada Deuterium Uranium is a type of pressurized heavy water reactor which uses deuterium-oxide (heavy water) as moderator and natural uranium fuel. This type of reactor was developed in the 1950s and 1960s by the Atomic Energy Canada Limited (AECL) in partnership with the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario, Canadian General Electric and a variety of other companies. Cernavoda was based on technology transfer from Canada (AECL), Italy and the USA, with Candu-6 heavy-water reactors. Construction of units 2-5 began in 1982. In 1991 work on the latter four was suspended in order to focus on unit 1, responsibility for which was handed to an AECL-Ansaldo (Canadian-Italian) consortium. Unit 1 was connected to the grid in mid-1996 and entered commercial operation in December 1996.