

**Laura M. Calkins.** *China and the First Vietnam War, 1947-54*. Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia Series. New York: Routledge, 2013. 200 pp. \$155.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-63233-1.



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The literature on the Indochina wars is large and growing larger. Until recently, however, the literature showed an overwhelming tendency to focus on the decision making in Washington. Moreover, most scholars in the field specialize in the Second Indochina War. When they discuss the First Indochina War, the agenda is usually to trace the origins of the later U.S. involvement in the Second Indochina War. As a result, the “other side” of the war is rendered invisible and many of the war’s origins remain obscure. But the picture is changing, and fast. More and more scholars have begun to internationalize the study of the Indochina wars by modifying the previous U.S.-centric approach, often with the benefit of using non-U.S. archival sources. Laura M. Calkins’s book *China and the First Vietnam War, 1947-54* is the latest contribution to the study of the internationalization of the First Indochina War.

The book’s goal is to examine “the political and military relationship between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communist regimes, particularly in relation to the Franco-Viet Minh conflict.”

Calkins particularly explores “the cooperation and the tensions which arose as the two regimes simultaneously pursued the not always complementary goals of security and revolution” (p. 1). Indeed, this detailed monograph follows the research path charted by previous scholars who focused on non-U.S. players during the two Indochina wars.[1] Calkins also pays attention to what the historian Priscilla Roberts once called the new research orientation of studying intra-alliance relations among the Communist powers during the Indochina wars.[2] To this, Calkins’s book is a welcomed contribution.

Calkins locates the origins of Sino-Viet Minh military cooperation in 1947-49, showing how the changing strategic situations in China and Vietnam were closely interlocked. For the Chinese Communist leaders, a major strategic concern at that time was how to win the civil war by defeating the remaining Chinese Nationalist forces in China’s southwest areas bordering Indochina. As their army advanced toward the Sino-Vietnamese border, Mao Zedong and his lieutenants quickly

realized the importance of cooperating with Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh forces to deal with the Nationalist forces that retreated into Indochina. For Ho and his colleagues, the prospect of a Communist victory in China would greatly enhance the possibility of winning their own war against the French. Calkins shows how the two Communist forces developed military cooperation in 1947-49, including the transaction of weapons and occasional coordination of localized battles against the Chinese Nationalist troops.

As Calkins shows, the Vietnamese Communists clearly anticipated significant support from the Chinese Communists once it became clear that the latter was going to control China. This expectation pushed the Viet Minh leaders to articulate a new strategy of waging war against the French. They now argued that the Communist victory in China created favorable conditions for the Viet Minh force to launch the "second phase" of the anti-French war. While guerrilla warfare was the norm during the initial phase of the war, in the "second phase" the Communists "would adopt more sophisticated military tactics, including 'mobile warfare' involving larger concentrations of troops" (p. 16). More important, this "second phase" was supposed to quickly pave the way for the final stage of the war, a "general counteroffensive" that would drive the French out of Indochina.

While Calkins also discusses the ideological fraternity between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists, she makes it clear that strategic concerns played a major role in shaping the early Sino-Vietnamese alliance. Indeed, she also explores the differences between the two Communist parties regarding the overall strategy for the war in Indochina. On the one hand, the primary concern of the Chinese, Calkins argues, was to secure the Sino-Vietnamese border in their struggle against the Nationalist forces. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, wanted a larger commitment from the Chinese to defeat the French not just in

Vietnam but also throughout Indochina. Calkins thus reminds us that although "the tension between the Chinese and Vietnamese views had yet to emerge publicly ... it is useful to bear in mind that bilateral differences on this issue were already apparent by March 1949" (p. 18).

The cooperation and tensions that characterized early Sino-Vietnamese relations, Calkins argues, continued after the exchange of diplomatic recognition between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). According to her, a Sino-Vietnamese strategic consensus emerged in the first quarter of 1950. This consensus gave priority to the establishment of DRV control in North Vietnam, which would both secure PRC's southern border and clear the way for the DRV to receive Chinese aid directly across the border. At the same time, recognizing the weak Communist presence in South Vietnam, Mao and Ho agreed upon the need to first build up Communist strength there before escalating the war against the French. Calkins documents how Beijing provided aid to the DRV in line with this strategic consensus, and while she acknowledges that the Chinese help was crucial to the DRV, she emphasizes the tensions between the two caused by the Chinese highhandedness in dealing with their weaker neighbor. Nonetheless, the DRV leaders were so encouraged by their new relationship with China that they decided to shorten the "second phase" of the war and move to the final "general counteroffensive" stage. On October 7, 1950, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) launched the Le Hong Phong II offensive as the opening move of the "general counteroffensive" against the French.

Only eight days later, however, Ho cancelled the offensive and the DRV leadership sharply reversed its policy by arguing that it was still premature to launch a "general counteroffensive" against the militarily superior French. Calkins argues that this change was a result of the new international situation created by the Chinese inter-

vention in the Korean War. As Korea now became Beijing's primary concern, Calkins claims, China not only reduced its aid to Vietnam in order to first supply Chinese troops in Korea, but also wanted to slow down the process toward the climax of DRV's anti-French struggle. China feared that an escalated Franco-Vietnamese conflict would only give the United States a pretext to intervene in Indochina, thus bringing a larger war to China's southern flank. Because China could not afford another war when it was engaged in the Korean War, Beijing withdrew its earlier support for a DRV "general counteroffensive" against the French. As a result, the DRV leadership was forced to reevaluate its strategy. Calkins thus concludes that "the context of military developments in Korea was a key factor in the Vietnamese leadership's decision to change its policy direction" (p. 67).

Between late 1950 and mid-1951, the DRV leadership developed a new strategy that differentiated the war in North and South Vietnam. In North Vietnam, the DRV would continue to use "main-force" or "mobile group tactics" in waging the war. This prolonged "second phase" of the war would consolidate DRV's control of the Tokin area, which would buy DRV more time preparing for the final "general counteroffensive" stage, and perhaps, more important according to Calkins, secure China's southern perimeter. In the South, the DRV leadership resolved that the Communist forces must again rely on guerrilla warfare as the primary strategy, both buying time to build up Communist strength there and precluding a possible U.S. intervention in the war. This differentiated strategy, however, created a considerable split among the Vietnamese leadership. The final chapters of the book thus examine the difficulties faced by northern DRV leaders when they were selling this strategy to their southern counterparts. Calkins argues that those difficulties emerged because the southern Communist leaders resented the new strategy that did not allow them to be more aggressive in the pursuit of the

war. Those difficulties were highlighted by the 1954 Geneva Agreements, which, in the eyes of southern Communist leaders, at least implied the abandonment of South Vietnam into the hands of their enemies. The book's epilogue further examines the post-Geneva strategic debate within the Vietnamese leadership. It concludes that once the southern Vietnamese leaders were forced to swallow the new strategy, the Chinese were pleased and a new era of Sino-Vietnamese alliance started, with China now providing massive aid to build socialism in the DRV.

While this book provides some fresh details of Sino-Vietnamese relations during the First Indochina War, it also raises several questions. First, Calkins's decision to give the 1954 Geneva Conference only a brief and rather conventional coverage in the book's epilogue is somehow surprising. Most scholars agree that the Geneva Conference crystallized the complicated intra-alliance relations among the DRV, the PRC, and the Soviet Union. While a major consensus still seems to hold that in the broader scheme of things, Moscow and Beijing sacrificed the interests of Hanoi to promote their own strategic interests at Geneva, a powerful "revisionism" has already emerged.[3] Since Calkins's major agenda is to examine the simultaneous existence of cooperation and tensions between China and Vietnam, a detailed discussion of the 1954 Geneva Conference that engages the current scholarship on this topic would have been useful. What makes the book's organization even more unbalanced is the fact that the book's five chapters only cover the time period from 1947 to mid-1951, leaving the thirteen-page-long epilogue to cover the years from 1952 to 1955.

A second problem is that, perhaps too eager to show that tensions existed between China and Vietnam even during the initial stage of their alliance, Calkins occasionally overdraws her conclusions. For example, she claims that when China established diplomatic relations with the DRV,

“Beijing intended something less than acknowledgment of the DRV’s full sovereignty over all of Vietnam” (p. 39). Her evidence is that on the day after the PRC had recognized the DRV, the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai declared that China would communicate directly with the French regarding alleged French mistreatments of ethnic Chinese in Tonkin. Zhou’s message, Calkins argues, “conveyed China’s acceptance of the French authority in Indochina” (p. 40). However, this evidence does not necessarily support her conclusion, especially since Calkins does not provide materials showing whether or not the Chinese and Vietnamese leaders perceived any connection between Zhou’s message and its supposed limiting effect on DRV’s sovereignty. Calkins then immediately proceeds to discuss Ho’s secret visit to the Soviet Union in early 1950. Ho did not get a “treaty of friendship” from Joseph Stalin, like the one Stalin signed with Mao. Ho’s presence in Moscow was also not publicly noted. Calkins thus concludes that Ho’s visit demonstrated “the limited significance of China’s diplomatic recognition decision” (p. 40). However, there was no necessary connection between China’s allegedly limited diplomatic recognition of the DRV and Ho’s failure to get Stalin’s full commitment to his cause. On the contrary, a number of scholars have pointed out that China’s recognition of the DRV actually paved the way for the Soviet recognition of Ho’s regime and greatly increased the importance of Ho’s revolution in Stalin’s eyes. They have also proved that the limited Soviet commitment to Vietnam at that time was determined by the Soviet and Chinese Cold War “division of labor,” and had nothing to do with the DRV’s sovereignty and legitimacy.<sup>[4]</sup> While Calkins’s decision to emphasize the potential loss, not the potential gains, of the DRV during Ho’s visit to Moscow should be respected, she should have had a more balanced analysis in light of other scholars’ work.

Calkins’s analysis on the relations between the Korean War and the DRV’s subsequent change of strategy in its own anti-French struggle is also

open to further debate. Calkins emphasizes that the key factor behind DRV’s decision to slow down its anti-French struggle was China’s determination not to trigger a U.S. intervention in Indochina in the middle of the Korean War. At the same time, she spends a considerable portion of her book discussing how the weaknesses of the Vietnamese force sobered the DRV leaders’ eagerness to launch a premature “general counteroffensive” against the French. While her analysis of DRV’s internal weaknesses can be complemented by other scholars’ work, Calkins does not fully establish the primacy of Beijing’s strategic calculation in the DRV’s change of strategy. This is the case partially because Calkins relies on two categories of primary sources. One is the information contained in monitored radio broadcasts by Communist radio stations, collected by the British and U.S. governments. Another is the records of the two governments, especially the central files of the U.S. State Department. Of course, it is perfectly legitimate for historians to use those two categories of primary sources. However, the thesis that China intentionally tried to rein in the DRV’s war effort against the French cannot be substantiated without archival sources, such as meeting records, memorandums of conversation, policy position papers, and other materials that originated directly from the Communist governments.

In fact, Calkins herself occasionally acknowledges this problem. For example, she discusses a joint Sino-Soviet military mission that visited Tonkin in early 1951 to investigate the DRV’s capabilities of waging a widened war. “This mission’s findings were not disclosed,” Calkins admits, “but it seems likely that one of the principal issues being communicated to the Vietnamese ... was that the Franco-Viet Minh war would not attract the full measure of material support from the major Communist powers” (p. 85). The only evidence supporting this speculation is a statement made by Ho. However, Ho’s statement, as quoted by Calkins in the text, only admitted that the DRV was not ready yet to launch the “general coun-

teroffensive.” Nowhere does Calkins show whether Ho reached this conclusion under Chinese and Soviet pressure or on his own.

Calkins seems to be aware of the gap between her thesis and her evidence. And she suggests that her evidence can only show that the shift in Vietnamese strategy took place at the same time when the Chinese were trying to prevent the Korean War from further escalation. Thus her conclusion about the impact of the Korean War on the First Indochina War, which is the book’s main thesis, should be best treated as a hypothesis. Nonetheless, a good hypothesis is a necessary first step toward solid scholarship. Overall, Calkins provides a concise description of Sino-Vietnamese relations during the first Vietnam War, which is useful for students in this field.

#### Notes

[1]. For a few prominent examples, see Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-64* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Priscilla Roberts, ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam War: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann, eds., *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam: Un État né de la Guerre, 1945-1954*

(Paris: Armand Colin, 2011); and Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

[2]. Roberts, ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain*, 32-43.

[3]. Pierre Asselin, “The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique,” *Cold War History* 11, no. 2 (May 2011): 155-195.

[4]. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 13-17; Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, 120-123; and Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China*, 16-21.

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