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Review by **James Carter, Drew University**

During a relatively well known official Moscow junket in February, 1964, the Vietnamese delegates, led by Le Duan, sparred with their Russian hosts on a range of matters. The Vietnamese criticized the Soviet Union's pursuit of "peaceful coexistence" with the West, while the Russians concluded their visitors had fallen under the heavy influence of their friends in Beijing. The visit was, by all accounts, unsuccessful. In the weeks and months that followed, Soviet assistance to Hanoi dropped significantly: economic assistance, exports, and heavy equipment deliveries all fell steeply. As is also well known, this was the period of the Sino-Soviet split—of pronounced tensions between the two communist powers at a particularly important juncture in the Cold War. Vietnamese leaders attempted, on the whole successfully, to navigate these tensions and to achieve their own objectives. Amid this split, the United States simultaneously changed its own policy toward its on-going (and floundering) project in southern Vietnam to build a separate, independent state below the 17th parallel. By the middle of the following year, the U.S. officially escalated the situation in Vietnam to bring large-scale war to the whole region. The Vietnamese responded in kind. Beijing responded with ramped up assistance to Hanoi. The result is well known.

The author of the present article wades into this thicket to offer a seemingly simple, yet fresh, argument: the Sino-Soviet split, and China's global strategy more generally, "greatly contributed" to the decision by U.S. president Lyndon Johnson to escalate in Vietnam. It is a simple argument because many of us studying the topic have assumed that China mattered in those calculations. It is fresh because, as the author points out, historians have not sufficiently explained just how, why, and to what degree China mattered.

The author's hypothesis is a fairly straightforward one: the Johnson administration was "greatly" concerned with China's presence and role in Vietnam for reasons of Cold War credibility. China's "wars of national liberation" strategy made Vietnam a test case for

that particular path to revolution. If successful, so American officials imagined and feared, Vietnam could be the kind of example that undermined all U.S. efforts in the third world for years to come. Furthermore, and perhaps even more dangerous, the success of the Chinese strategy for the third world might well knock the Soviet Union off its détente track by confirming for the world to see that Russia's "peaceful coexistence" strategy was indeed misguided and that it played into the hands of the Western imperialist powers. This possibility might well force Soviet leaders to tack toward a hard line to save face, thus ending détente in its infancy.

The solution, even if fraught with complications, seemed quite clear. China must be contained in Vietnam; its strategy mustn't succeed there. This is certainly an argument that makes sense on the surface of it to anyone who has studied U.S. escalation and for anyone who has gone over the documents related to the Johnson administration's deliberations on these matters. But, for this reader, there are substantial problems with the thesis as presented here.

There can be little doubt that China mattered in the Johnson administration's calculations for wider war in Vietnam. For that matter, so did the Soviet Union and a handful of other nations. But none among them mattered more than Vietnam. The author's presentation excludes the Vietnamese—they only show up 15 pages into the essay, are dealt with in only a few paragraphs and then vanish like the morning fog. This requires shunting aside a pile of evidence that would make more than a dent in the current argument.

For starters, Johnson administration officials spoke far more often about the Vietnamese than any of the other actors when discussing problems there. After all China wasn't causing the problems in Saigon; China wasn't to blame for the "dry rot and lassitude," as Ambassador Henry Lodge termed it, that plagued the regime; China wasn't behind the success of the revolution in the countryside.[1] In fact, even if there had been no China, the U.S. would still have faced a failed project below the 17th parallel in 1964-5. Why? Because it was the Vietnamese who thwarted U.S. objectives in Vietnam, not the Chinese. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, among other top officials, pointed this out more than once. The problems and obstacles to American success in its state building project were overwhelmingly coming from below the 17th parallel.

To be clear, the relationship between China and officials in Hanoi mattered. Both were wary of what they perceived as aggressive moves on the part of the United Sates. By July, 1964, the Chinese and the Vietnamese had concluded, in the face of mounting evidence that the U.S. would indeed continue to escalate the conflict in Vietnam, that it would expand its use of air power/bombing, and that it would also ultimately land troops to prevent a loss. Around the same time, the Chinese assured Vietnamese leaders of support

[1] James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (Cambridge, 2008), 151.

in the event of increased American aggression, saying "when they [the Americans] do something about Vietnam, they will have to think of China."[2] And think of them they did. But to conclude, as the author does, that "the Johnson administration…had concluded that the war in Vietnam was primarily a manifestation of the Chinese strategy of 'wars of national liberation'" runs counter to too much of the evidence. This conclusion is, in fact, undermined by a closer reading of NSAM-288 as analyzed in *The Pentagon Papers*, the document and source the author cites as justification for the conclusion.[3] The administration had trotted out the typical, tried-and-true public rationale for the whole Cold War to justify ramping up the American commitment to prevent the collapse of its client in Saigon.

Nor, in my view, was escalation timed with the "sudden" recognition of the importance of China and American credibility. The administration did not suddenly recognize and make urgent the need for escalation and the salvaging operation in southern Vietnam. It had in fact discussed these matters beginning shortly after the ousting and murder of Ngo Dinh Diem. The whole experiment had been plagued with problems for years. Now, U.S. officials began to see that in starkly clear terms. The timing issue, that is, when precisely to ramp up the U.S. military effort and how, had more to do with domestic politics and finding stable leadership in Saigon than China's ambitions in the third world. After reading the essay, I am just not convinced that China was the most important factor for the Johnson administration. In fact, it seems even more to have been a relatively minor one.

James M. Carter received his Ph.D. from the University of Houston and is Assistant Professor of History at Drew University. H-Diplo featured a roundtable on his *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968*. He has also written articles on war profiteering in Vietnam and Iraq and the U.S. advisory effort in Vietnam.

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[2] Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 209.

[3] *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, Volume III, 50-51.