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**Lorenz Luthi.** "The Vietnam War and China's Third-Line Defence Planning before the Cultural Revolution, 1964-1966." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10.1 (Winter 2008): 26-51. doi: 10.1162/jcws.2008.10.1.26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2008.10.1.26> .

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Khoo-Luthi.pdf>

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In 1964, the Chinese leadership decided to relocate strategically important industries from the country's vulnerable coastal and border provinces (known as China's first-line) to its interior. As part of this effort, new cities were also constructed in the Chinese interior. The project, known as China's Third-Line Defence (TLD) programme, lasted from 1964 to 1979 and was viewed by the leadership as critical to national security. Accordingly, scarce resources were channelled into its implementation. The scale of the enterprise was staggering. The provinces involved in the programme constituted 30 percent of China's surface area, stretching from Sichuan, Yunan and Guizhou in the Southwest to Gansu, Qinghai and Ningxia in the Northwest. In a time of financial weakness, the budget allocated to the project was generous. By the time of Mao's death in 1976, 200 billion Yuan had been spent in TLD related projects.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, we know surprisingly little about the TLD. Those interested in the English language literature on this topic have mainly Barry Naughton's 1988 article in the *China Quarterly* to consult.<sup>2</sup> Lorenz Luthi's article is a welcome addition to the literature on this topic. In a lucid and well-researched article that draws on copious Chinese sources (including material from provincial archives), Luthi argues that the development of the TLD during the period from 1964-66 was a response to the security threat presented by the U.S.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, the TLD represented one aspect of Beijing's response to the threat posed by Washington's increasing involvement in an escalating conflict with the Vietnamese communists, occurring on China's southern periphery.

<sup>1</sup> Lorenz Luthi, "The Vietnam War and China's Third-Line Defence Planning before the Cultural Revolution, 1964-1966," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 10 no.1 (Winter 2008), pp.28-29.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Naughton, "The Third Front: Defense Industrialization in the Chinese Interior," *China Quarterly* No. 115 (September 1988), pp.351-386.

<sup>3</sup> Luthi, "The Vietnam War," p.26-28, 49.

The author is certainly correct that the U.S. threat played an important role in the development of Chinese policy on the TLD. The People's Republic of China had been locked in persistent conflict with the U.S. since its establishment in 1949. More immediately, the American presence in Vietnam was itself in large part motivated by the perceived need to contain the spread of a Chinese-backed communist project in Asia. This in turn necessitated a response from China. Security dilemma dynamics were clearly at work in the Sino-American relationship and the TLD was an important part of this picture. However, in examining Chinese policy during the 1964-66 period, it strikes this reviewer that perhaps more consideration could be paid to the role of the Soviet Union in Beijing's strategic calculus. The development of the TLD occurred at a time when the Chinese were dedicated, in equal measure, to opposing both the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The Sino-Soviet disputes of the second-half of the 1950's and early 1960's, on which Luthi himself has recently written with insight,<sup>4</sup> meant that the alliance between Beijing and Moscow had in effect collapsed. Given the animus that characterized and resulted from these developments, it is highly plausible that the Chinese constructed the TLD just as much to deter the Soviets as the Americans. Indeed, even as policy-makers in Beijing worried about the possibility of Sino-American conflict over Vietnam during this period,<sup>5</sup> the Sino-Soviet conflict showed little evidence of abating, and arguably even escalated. These dynamics can be detected in the article under review. Thus, the author cites Mao articulating fears of a Soviet nuclear strike on China in October 1965.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, it is pertinent to note that China detonated a nuclear weapon in 1964, the same year the TLD gathered steam. Luthi also quotes Deng Xiaoping calling for prioritizing the development of China's nuclear programme over the construction of defensive capabilities in the TLD in May 1965.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, Luthi does note that the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations was one of the reasons behind the decision to construct TLD, but this recognition does not obscure the point that the central factor in author's analysis of the TLD article is the U.S. threat.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding the discussion above, the article has much to recommend itself. Clearly, it is relevant to, and can play a valuable role in, a debate on the relative role of security concerns, as opposed to ideology in Cold War era Chinese foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, Luthi has made a valuable contribution in exploring the role of security concerns in China's Cold War era policy. Further work can seek to build on his efforts.

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<sup>4</sup> Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> James G. Hersberg and Chen Jian, "Reading and Warning the Likely Enemy: China's Signals to the United States about Vietnam in 1965," *International History Review*, Vol. 27 no. 1 (February 2005), pp.77-84.

<sup>6</sup> Luthi, *The Vietnam War*, p.34.

<sup>7</sup> Luthi, *The Vietnam War*, p.41.

<sup>8</sup> Luthi, *The Vietnam War*, p.49.

<sup>9</sup> Two leading examples of research that focuses to varying degrees on ideology are: Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

## **H-Diplo Article Review**

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge*