

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 345

Published on 27 February 2012

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

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Pierre Asselin. "Revisionism Triumphant: Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy in the Nixon Era."

Journal of Cold War History 13:4 (Fall 2011): 101-131. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS_a_00170.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00170

{An author's response to this review is available at:

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR327-AR345-response.pdf> }

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR345.pdf>

Review by **Ang Cheng Guan**, Nanyang Technological University

In recent years, Pierre Asselin has published a number of articles on the Vietnamese communist side of the Vietnam War, notably in two highly regarded Cold War journals – *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2007) and *Cold War History* (2011). Both articles dealt with aspects of the 1954 Geneva Conference from the Hanoi perspective. He combines the most up-to-date secondary writings on the subject with new Vietnamese sources to re-construct the decision-making process of the North Vietnamese leadership. In the case of the Geneva Conference articles, he drew mainly on the *Van Kien Dang: Toan Tap* (Party Documents: Complete Works).¹ Asselin is perhaps one of the most active historians writing on North Vietnamese decision-making during Vietnam War. The other is Lien-Hang T. Nguyen.

In "Revisionism Triumphant," Asselin shifts his attention to Hanoi's decision-making during the end phase of the Vietnam War – a subject which he dealt with in his 2002 book.² This time he used French and Bulgarian archival documents to complement the "spotty Vietnamese documentary record in print" (103). It has always been challenging to write about the Vietnam War from the communist perspective because of "the Vietnamese authorities' continued refusal to give scholars access to party archives on high

¹ See Tuong Vu, "Van Kien Dang: Toan Tap: The Regime's Gamble and Researchers' Gains" in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 5:2 (June 2010): 183-194. DOI: 10.1525/vs.2010.5.2.183. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/vs.2010.5.2.183>

² Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

diplomacy, the limited usefulness of government documents available... and the subjectivity of Vietnamese secondary sources” (103). The use of French and Bulgarian documents is thus the most interesting and refreshing aspect of this article. Asselin explains his choice and the value of both sets of documents: Asselin found that the French diplomatic archives contain a substantial amount of insightful reports on Hanoi’s foreign policy. French officials based in Hanoi were apparently privy to much sensitive information as the North Vietnamese viewed the French government favorably because of France’s opposition to the American involvement in Vietnam. Bulgarian documents, largely untapped by Western scholars (which Asselin obtained through the help of noted historian Lorenz Lüthi) also reveal “fascinating insights” into Hanoi’s relations with Moscow, Beijing and the negotiations in Paris (103).

Asselin states at the start that the article that he was not offering a particularly new understanding of the diplomacy of the Vietnam War. What he aimed to achieve in the article was to highlight “new ways of looking at those aspects of thinking about the role of diplomacy in Hanoi’s conduct of the Vietnam War, and of interpreting key decisions of North Vietnamese policymakers from 1969 through 1973”. He wanted to emphasize the “active agency” of the DRV policymakers during those years (103-104) and the important role of diplomacy. Indeed, to Asselin, the diplomatic struggle was “quite possibly” a more important contributing factor to Hanoi’s eventual victory than the military struggle (104). The prevalent view that the Vietnamese communists followed a “‘primitive, simplistic’ diplomatic strategy of “‘fighting-while-talking” according to him, downplayed “the importance the North Vietnamese attached to aspects of diplomacy other than negotiations and makes little allowance for understanding the evolution of Hanoi’s use of diplomacy and of its reasons for refusing for so long to negotiate seriously” (104).

On the importance of diplomacy, I concur with Asselin. But I disagree with his premise that a “‘primitive, simplistic’ diplomatic strategy of “‘fighting-while-talking” is the “prevalent view”. To me, “Fighting-while-talking” is just a simple and catchy phrase to describe a far more complex process. If others in the past failed to describe the nuances, it is more because of a lack of information rather than a failure to recognize the complexity of the process. By “other aspects of diplomacy”, Asselin is referring to “manipulating world opinion, coaxing allies and progressive forces worldwide, propagandizing Vietnam’s role as vanguard of the world revolution, and militating against debilitating effects of the Sino-Soviet dispute” (104), although in this article he does not cover most of the different aspects. In fact, the article focuses substantially on the events, forces and developments that drove the negotiations to their eventual conclusion. After his stimulating ‘Introduction’ – which however I felt covered more than he could chew - the rest of the article, which I found the most interesting, is an attempt to trace and explain what led the North Vietnamese leadership eventually to decide to seriously negotiate after dragging its feet through 1968 through 1972, and asking when and why “the policy of merely talking rather than negotiating” ended? To answer this question, it would have been helpful if Asselin had focused on the January 1970 appraisal of the political and military situation of the previous two years presented at the 18th plenary session of the Party Central

Committee. The leadership was of the view that the next critical period would be around the end of 1970 and early 1971 before the U.S. presidential election in 1972. They called for the tighter integration and the intensification of the military, political, and foreign policy offensives in order to defeat the opponent's Vietnamization strategy.³ The formation of the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRGSVN) in June 1969 and which Hanoi was the first to recognize it as the legal government and true representative of South Vietnam was an element of the communist multi-prong strategy. The leadership also expected that the military struggle would become increasingly important and that the next phase of the war would be long, fierce and complicated and involve not just Laos but Cambodia as well. As a consequence of the ouster of Sihanouk, in March 1970, Cambodia was finally fully engulfed in the war as predicted in January 1970. Following the 18th plenary session and indeed through 1970, much energy was spent on reorganizing the People's Army of Vietnam (VPA) to make it more efficient, effective and integrated.

Meanwhile, the first of a long series of secret meetings between Le Duc Tho and Kissinger took place on 21 February 1970. Asselin rightly points out that "the DRV's diplomatic strategy...remained essentially what it had been at the outset of the war" (107) which is not surprising given that diplomacy has rarely been able to gain at the conference table what cannot be gained and held on a battlefield. There was no compelling reason for Hanoi to compromise since its leadership had apparently managed to recover sufficiently from the 1968 TET Offensive debacle to continue the military struggle. Furthermore, Hanoi was aware that the American side was under domestic pressure to broker a deal.

Asselin devotes a considerable portion of his article to Sino-Vietnamese relations and the Sino-U.S. rapprochement, and rightly so. According to Asselin, although the Hanoi leadership tried to play down the impact of the Chinese as well as the Soviet engagement of the United States, these developments dealt a serious blow to their confidence in their negotiations with Washington (112). Indeed, as early as January 1971, the Hanoi leadership had discussed various scenarios related to possible shifts in Sino-U.S. and U.S.-Soviet relations and the implications of these shifts for their struggle. Unfortunately, we do not have details of the analysis presented at the 19th plenary session of the Party Central Committee in late-January 1971. While it was unlikely that the Hanoi leadership had any prior knowledge of the impending Sino-US rapprochement - Kissinger made his secret visit to Beijing on 9 July 1971 - they could not have missed the significance of the appearance of Edgar Snow and his wife at the National Day parade at Tiananmen Square on 1 October 1970 and the picture of Mao Zedong and Snow on the front page of major Chinese newspapers.

³ Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' perspective* (London: Routledge, 2004), 37-38.

After the Kissinger-Xuan Thuy secret meeting on 27 September 1970, the Vietnamese side refused to meet Kissinger for eight months until 31 May 1971 when he finally was able to meet only Xuan Thuy but not Le Duc Tho. Meanwhile, both sides were engaged militarily on Route 9 in southern Laos and Cambodia.

May 1971 was a significant point in the talks. It is unclear why Hanoi made the decision to resume the secret talks on 31 May 1971 after an eight-month hiatus. It was likely based on a combination of reasons: (a) an expected shift in Sino-U.S. relations; (b) deteriorating relations with the Khmer Rouge – in fact a purge of Cambodians seen or believed to be friendly to Hanoi started soon after a July 1971 meeting when the Khmer Rouge leadership decided to break with the Vietnamese communists and even declared the latter as the principal enemy of the Cambodian Revolution; and (c) concern over Nixon's Vietnamization policy, of which Asselin offers a brief but insightful analysis which could be further developed (108-109). Many scholars writing on the American side of the war have questioned the effectiveness of the Vietnamization policy. Asselin argues that Vietnamization "eventually forced an important change in Hanoi's strategy" (108). Indeed, Le Duan was dissatisfied with the efforts to counter Vietnamization. In his 29 November 1971 letter to his southern comrades, he emphasized that political struggle was just as important as the military struggle.⁴

Like all negotiations, success depended on what the opposite party brought to the table. In this case, Hanoi, while it remained dissatisfied with what Kissinger was willing to concede, recognized that Kissinger's latest offer was a significant one as it was the first time the American side had expressed a willingness to fix a date for unilateral troop withdrawal. In the Hanoi leadership's analysis, if they responded positively to the seven-point plan put forward by Kissinger, a negotiated settlement could be reached by the end of 1972; if not, the US would continue the Vietnamization policy and the war could drag on. Hanoi wanted a complete troop withdrawal by the end of 1971. Kissinger thought sometime in 1972 was more realistic.

Just before the next meeting on 26 June 1971, Hanoi announced that Le Duc Tho would return to Paris after an absence of nearly fourteen months. Tho's return was significant because when he last left the French capital, he said he would only return when the developments demanded his return. Kissinger was apparently satisfied with the outcome of the 26 June meeting with Le Duc Tho.⁵

The next meeting was scheduled for 12 July 1971, the day after Kissinger's visit to Beijing and the negotiations bogged down over the issue of the replacement of Nguyen Van Thieu. According to Le Duc Tho, Thieu was the "greatest obstacle". On 17 July, Tho and

⁴ Ibid., 85-86.

⁵ Ibid., 72.

Xuan Thuy were informed by their political masters that the present time was not opportune for a peace settlement as the balance of forces was still not in their favour. They were instructed not to make any concessions and only to focus on the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the removal of Thieu. The message also added that “new complexities” had emerged after the Kissinger-Zhou meeting.⁶

Thus at the end of 1971, the Hanoi leadership had to weigh three sets of factors: (a) the status of the negotiations, since although both sides had narrowed their differences considerably on the military issues, their positions remained far apart on the political issues, particularly with regards to Thieu; (b) the still unclear directions of Sino-U.S. and U.S.-Soviet relations; and (c) the balance of forces in South Vietnam, which in their view, was still not to their advantage.

The Vietnamese communists were making plans for a new spring-summer offensive in the hope of gaining the elusive military/strategic advantage. This of course was the 1972 Easter Offensive to which Asselin devotes a number of pages (117-120). Hanoi was seriously affected by the failure of the Easter Offensive and was very concerned about the effects of renewed U.S. bombing of the North (105). Indeed, by mid-1972, despite their strong showing in the various battlefields, the victory which they had been trying to achieve for years still eluded them. But the US forces were pulling out. On the international front, it was becoming increasingly evident that Chinese and Soviet support for their cause was waning and the leadership was unsure how much longer they could count on their material support. Taking all of the above into consideration, the North Vietnamese leadership finally decided to switch from what they described as a “strategy of war” to a “strategy of peace”. According to an official North Vietnamese account, this was “a turning point in leading the revolution in South Vietnam”. The 1972 Christmas bombings finally brought the negotiations to a conclusion in January 1973.⁷

I enjoyed reading Asselin’s narrative and agree with much of what he wrote although I found the article somewhat long. I am not so convinced by his decisions to privilege “diplomacy” in the article. Nor am I am persuaded that the diplomatic struggle was “quite possibly” a more important contributing factor to Hanoi’s eventual victory than the military struggle (104). To me, it is common knowledge, to borrow Asselin’s words in his conclusion, that Hanoi had always used “diplomacy in conjunction with military and political struggle” (137) and very skillfully too if I may add. It is not easy or even possible to unpack them and give a weight to each component. The way Hanoi negotiated was never simple or primitive.

⁶ Ibid., 79-80.

⁷ Ibid, 102. See Chapter 5.

H-Diplo Article Review

Ang Cheng Guan is Associate Professor and Head, Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group of the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is the author of *Vietnamese Communist Relations with China and the Second Indo-China Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson : MacFarland, 1997) *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002) and the sequel, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004). He is currently working on three research projects: The International History of the Vietnam War: The Denouement 1967-1975; Singapore/ASEAN and the Third Indochina War (1978-1991) and Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought.

Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.