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H-Diplo Article Review of Kosal Path. “The Politics of China’s Aid to North Vietnam during the Anti-American Resistance, 1965-1969.” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27:4 (2016): 682-700. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1238701>.

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Review by **Frances Yaping Wang**, University of Virginia

It is a national myth in China that Vietnam, a former brotherly ally, cold-bloodedly turned against China in the late 1970s despite the great sacrifice the Chinese people had made for Vietnam’s independence cause. The relationship deteriorated so drastically that the animosity culminated in a decade-long war between the two countries. Some blame the Le Duan government; others condemn the ingratitude of the Vietnamese people. There has been some faint self-examination within China of its insensitivity to Vietnam’s autonomy and of its assertion of superiority in the relationship. Others substantiate this claim to some degree. For example, Brantly Womack in his book *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* notes that “Although Mao criticized Red Guards who crossed into Vietnam because they ‘do not know what an international border means,’ he himself would occasionally lapse into talking about ‘our troops in the South’ when talking to Vietnamese leaders.”¹ Li Danhui’s article on the Sino-Soviet competition and conflicts of interests over the aid to Vietnam also alluded to this problem.² But none tells a story from the Vietnamese perspective like this article does.

Path describes from the Vietnamese perspective the processes and the symptoms of how China’s highly politicized economic and technical aid during 1965-1969 at the height of the Cultural Revolution sowed the seed of suspicion and mistrust between the two countries. The article’s focus is on economic and technical aid, but it suggests that it was the spillover of the Cultural Revolution’s ultra-leftism and the ideological

¹ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 176, quoting from “Working Paper No. 22” in Odd Arne Westad, Chen Jian, Stein Tønnesson, Nguyen Vu Tung, and James G. Herschberg, eds., *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-77*, Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (1998), 102, 140.

² Li Danhui, “The Sino-Soviet Dispute over Assistance for Vietnam’s Anti-American War, 1965-1972,” in Priscilla Roberts ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 289-318.

chauvinism, together with the unease the deepening Sino-Soviet split had forced on Vietnam, that drove a wedge between the two former allies and eventually doomed the relationship. Path's discussion of the spillover effect of the Cultural Revolution on the relationship from a Vietnamese perspective is particularly refreshing.

The Chinese aid was highly politicized: Beijing demanded Hanoi to take a clear stand against Soviet 'revisionism;' an increasing number of Chinese experts were propagandists and spies disguised as technical experts in the aid programs; and Chinese experts consistently pressed their Vietnamese colleagues on ideological matters. These demands only caused a backlash in the receiver's end. Path goes into interesting details of how Hanoi reacted by going to great lengths in making sure it had independent political and administrative oversight of Chinese aid, out of the suspicion of Chinese ideological infiltration. Hanoi's suspicion sometimes grew into paranoia even on technical matters such as translation.

Path's argument serves as a timely reminder to the Chinese government at a time when China's international aid programs have grown exponentially. In its resource scramble in Africa, or wielding economic statecrafts to win hearts and minds in neighboring countries in Central and Southeast Asia, Beijing should take what happened during 1965-1969 as a grave lesson in the dangers of gearing economic and technical aid towards immediate, sometimes short-sighted, political ends.

This article illuminates not only the potential risk of politicizing aid for immediate political gains, but also how smaller powers react to the great power competitions, which has enormous policy implications today. Vietnam was caught in the crossfire between China and the Soviet Union. It struggled to obtain more aid, which it desperately needed, from both powers, while avoiding slanting towards either side. Hanoi's strategy was "combining a gradual assertion of independence with a measured dose of deference toward its two patrons" (687). This balancing act, as proved by history, eventually failed. China's ideological aggressiveness and insensitivity to the asymmetric power dynamics in the relationship led to Hanoi's resentment and distancing itself from Beijing.

Path also shows in a minor point that Hanoi's differential treatment of the Chinese experts and Eastern European experts was viewed by the Chinese as a sign of disrespect, constituting yet another point of contention in the relationship. However, the article does not discuss what had caused the differential treatment. One wonders whether this was due to the Chinese being less demanding so as to show their revolutionary dedication, or because the Vietnamese had already leaned towards the Soviet Union in the Sino-Soviet rivalry.

The weaknesses of the article are mainly cosmetic. For example, the article could be better organized, either in terms of specific topics of aid, in Chinese and Vietnamese perspectives, or in a chronological order. The loose organization of the article may have also caused the suggestion that some claims made by the author are seemingly unsupported by evidence. For example, the claim that "[China] attempted to influence Hanoi to adopt Maoist ideology as the standard-bearer of international communism" is made without the support of evidence (684). The reasoning does not become clear until much later in the article. The presentation of the argument could have been made more cohesively.

However, these presentation issues do not take away from the strength of using original and valuable Vietnamese documents in recounting the Vietnamese side of the story—a story that has rarely been told in rich detail and must be heard especially by the Chinese side. Indeed, this should be included as a must-read

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for all students of Sino-Vietnamese relationship and especially Chinese policy makers on issues of international aid.

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