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Review by Ang Cheng Guan, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Tao Wang’s “Neutralizing Indochina: The 1954 Geneva Conference and China’s Efforts to Isolate the United States” is the most recent account of China’s intentions and role in the 1954 Geneva Conference, which officially ended the First Vietnam/Indochina war.

Scholarly writings on the 1954 Geneva Conference from the Chinese perspective (as well as the Communist side) date back to the 1980s. Those familiar with the literature will remember the research of Chen Jian and Zhai Qiang on this subject, the first two historians who wrote in the English language to make use of Chinese neibu and related sources (selectively made available since the mid-1980s) to re-tell the story of the 1954 Geneva Conference from the Chinese side.¹ I consider them the ‘second wave’ of historical writings on this important event. Prior to that, scholars, most notably, Kuo-Kang Shao, could only rely on contemporary media sources for the Chinese angle.²

The Chinese sources Chen and Zhai referred to included “previously unknown telegrams, directives and inner-party documents” and in particular, military-related documents and memoirs, which as Chen noted, had been selectively declassified “under the politically sensitive circumstance of a total confrontation between Beijing and Hanoi.”³ The new Chinese materials pertaining to the 1954 Geneva Conference were, however, relatively limited compared to the western sources, as can be gleaned from the footnotes of Qiang Zhai’s


At first glance, Tao Wang’s article may not appear to offer anything particularly new since “Chinese leaders’ goals in Geneva, the tactic they adopted there to realize their objectives, the perceptions among Chinese officials of U.S. policy toward the conference, and the impact of all this had on Chinese policymaking” (3) have mostly been previously explored. However, a more careful reading reveals that the article does offer a fresh perspective on China’s role at the Geneva Conference, which is different from the focus of Chen Jian and Shu Guang Zhang (7-8). Aided by the Chinese Foreign Ministry documents (then not available to Qiang Zhai), it goes beyond the analysis of Zhai (whose argument Wang shares). Another positive point of this article is that Wang made good use of the most recent research on the Geneva Conference from the Soviet and Vietnamese communist perspectives, particularly that of Illya Gaiduk 9 and Pierre Asselin. 10

The article has five substantial parts: The first part—“PRC Policy in Geneva” describes the background leading to the participation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the Conference and discusses Chinese goals. After this Wang describes Chinese efforts to build a ‘united front’ with Moscow and Hanoi. The third part describes how Beijing prevented the United States from sabotaging the conference. Part four of the article recounts Chinese Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai’s diplomacy outside the conference, and


in the final part, the narrative returns to China’s last efforts to neutralize Indochina. Specialists will be familiar with the narrative. A more effective presentation of the article would have involved Wang moving his critique/summary of the historiography and his own contribution (on pages 7 and 8) to the beginning of the article. In this way, readers would immediately have been able to locate his argument in the extant literature. The conclusion could also benefit from a more focused discussion of the implications of the Geneva Conference on Sino-U.S. relations since the discussion of the relationship is what differentiates this article from the others.

Wang successfully shows how China “aimed to neutralize Indochina to forestall direct U.S. intervention there, which would endanger China’s southwestern flank” (3). The Chinese achieved their aim by successfully exploiting the differences between the United States and its allies, Britain and France on the one hand, and coordinating closely with the Soviet Union and North Vietnam, on the other. Wang showed that Beijing’s “strategy of isolating the United States by winning over a majority of the participants at the Geneva Conference contributed to the final agreements” (40). Although the Communist side (Beijing, Moscow and Hanoi) “closely coordinated their positions and maintained a division of labor because of their common anxiety about U.S. intervention in Indochina” (40), Wang is cognizant that the Vietnamese Communist dimension was “much more complicated” (41). The article would have benefited from a discussion of Laura M Calkins’s China and the First Vietnam War, 1947-54. Although Calkins does not dwell in detail on the Geneva Conference itself, it would be useful to incorporate her discussion of the Vietnamese Communist charge that the Chinese delegation compromised with the French at the expense of the Viet Minh and Beijing’s assistance for the economic reconstruction of North Vietnam soon after the Geneva Conference into the narrative.11

It is perhaps interesting to end this review by comparing this article not with those of Chen Jian, Qiang Zhai, or Shu Guang Zhang, but with that of Kuo-Kang Shao, as both authors pay considerable attention to the Chinese efforts to neutralize Indochina. We certainly have very much more information now but the thrust of the argument and the broad narrative remain very much the same. This reviewer is thus reminded of the Chinese saying, ‘Just as the waves of the Yangzi River behind drives on those ahead, so does each new generation replace the old one.’

Finally, although the focus of Wang’s essay is China’s role in the Geneva Conference, those who are interested in the Geneva Conference itself, particularly non-specialists, will benefit from reading his article.

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