Vietnam: Contemporary Development, Future Promise and the Legacy of the War

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/02/09/vietnam-contemporary-development-future-promise-and-the-legacy-of-the-war/

HARRY BOOTY, FEB 9 2011

Vietnam. Mention the word to many a Westerner today and the reply you will get is more than likely to involve images of napalm, Hamburger Hill, Kent State and a whole other array of brutal and divisive issues that have so scarred the American psyche. It is almost beyond debate that the American experience in South-East Asia can be counted as one of the crucial defining events that have shaped that nation. However, there is another story, almost unknown in mainstream Western academia – the legacy of the war on the Vietnamese themselves, as well as their current and future progression as a unified state. This editorial shall focus on these issues, combining secondary research as well as some personal experiences to try and shed some light on the impact of one of the most momentous events of the Twentieth Century.

The proclamation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976 did not signify the end of the country's problems. In a war which 'Washington lost its sense of proportion' (Anderson, D.L 2005 p108) the Vietnamese had suffered greatly, with 'over 2 million Vietnamese lives' lost (Anderson, D.L 2005 p123) as well as incredible, and in many cases irreparable damage to its agriculture, industry and infrastructure. Against the backdrop of this shattered system the Communist leadership, 'with the enthusiasm engendered from its recent victory' (Collins, N. T. 2009 p24) set impressively ambitious economic targets for the economic reconstruction of their newly unified state. Unsurprisingly, these objectives were not achieved and Vietnam, isolated and friendless in the international system, remained a troubled and backward state. If we add to this mix two bloody and inconclusive wars with Pol Pot's Cambodian Khmer Rouge (a protracted war that can somewhat ironically be considered to be 'Vietnam's Vietnam') from 1978-1989 and a much more brief but possibly more bloody border war against the Chinese in 1979 we may begin to understand the phenomenal problems that underpinned the country at this time.

However, as had been the case during the wars against the French and Americans in the preceding decades, the leadership showed themselves to be more than willing to compromise and adapt to the situation as it arose. This they duly did in the early to mid 1980's, causing a fundamental shift in the Vietnamese state, which all began with the political and economic policy of *doi moi*.

Doi Moi (loosely translated into English as 'renovation') was more of a multi-lateral reformist agenda than a single policy in itself. Both the political and economic systems of Vietnam underwent change – but with different degrees of success and subsequent effect.

If we study the political changes first, it is perhaps difficult to see what changed. Power was delineated from the very few to just the few. Freedoms are still limited – a truth I found out personally through my guide's flat refusal to comment on any aspect of the Hanoi regime. Simply put, 'power…is still in the hands of the Party' (Balme, S. and Sidel, M. 2006 p212) but in a more holistic sense rather than purely that of the Politburo. Outward signs of disagreement are not allowed (Leithead, A, 2011) but, crucially, debate is taking place. Such a distinction may seem pedantic, but it is worth noting when considering the progress of Vietnam as an entity, and does indicate that the state is opening up (albeit in a monitored Communist model).

However, in terms of economics, a much greater change was enacted. Essentially it entailed a shift by the

pragmatists of the Vietnamese Communist Party Politburo away from the stereotypical Soviet-style market-oriented economy, in an attempt to boost their stagnating economy. Private enterprise – previously seen as 'the 'enemy' of socialism' (Collins N. T. 2009 p25) was now allowed, and even subtly encouraged. Ministers such as Vo Van Kiet – who recently passed away (from an anonymous BBC article from 2008) – quietly removed socialist prohibitions upon the free market, and the Vietnamese recovery could begin. The real jump however came on February 3rd 1994 when President Clinton finally lifted the US trade embargo on Vietnam, and in effect opened the country to the world. The effect was soon felt. Between 1993 and 2004, the 'the poverty rate has fallen from 58.1% to 19.5%' (Parvizi Amineh, M. 2010 p76) a phenomenal decrease by any standard. Also, during a similar time span, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) began to take an interest in Vietnam which has led today to 'Vietnam's 81 million inhabitants attracting more FDI than do 1.1 billion Indians' (Ibid.). The statistics here really speak for themselves. *Doi Moi* worked, and allowed Vietnam to develop its economic potential as it is continuing still to do.

Alongside this expansion we should fit in the evolution of Vietnam's role in international relations, both at the regional level and higher. The developing nature of Vietnam's role at a supranational level can perhaps be defined by three major events. The first of these was China, and the economic revolution the country underwent towards the very end of 1970's. Many of the dynasts in the Vietnamese government saw China's success in 'pursuing an open door and market-oriented economic policy' (Collins, N. T. 2009 p25) whilst also keeping a recognisably Communist leadership as an intelligent answer to the complicated problem of the clash between economic success and political ideals. This 'revolution' led to Vietnam become the 'world's number one exporter in pepper, number two in rice and coffee, number six in tea and a major player in rubber, seafood and light manufactured goods' (Parvizi Amineh, M. 2010 p76). Whilst this is of course closely linked to their economic boom discussed above, it does serve to show us here how the actions of another country – China – engendered change in Vietnam, and allowed them to interact in the international economic system as a major exporter as they do today.

The next event to consider was the fall of the USSR. The collapse of communism in Russia and the Eastern Bloc removed a major international supporter of Vietnam (both politically and economically) and 'caused great damage' (Collins, N. T. 2009 p25) to the economy of the state. A major supplier and trading partner had now been replaced by a group of countries who were not as prepared to cooperate with communism. However, if we examine this event from a different perspective it could be seen as a blessing in disguise for the Vietnamese, and a change that may well have been chosen by the Vietnamese government had it not been forced upon them. The collapse of Soviet communism began in 1989 – a mere three years after *doi moi* had begun. Whether a political and economic near-monopoly with the USSR, with its restricted and failing economy would have been in the best interests of the newly economically capitalist Vietnam is unclear. It is highly likely that such reliance upon the Soviet Union may well have hindered the rapid growth that Vietnam has undergone rather than helped it, as the evolution of Vietnam into a single, sovereign country rather than a pseudo USSR satellite state has opened it up to major FDI – see above – as well as global exports of a wide variety of goods that has so expanded the scope of Vietnamese operations.

However, none of this would have been possible without the final shift that favoured Vietnam. This event, which has been touched upon above, was the lifting of the US embargo upon Vietnam. The expansion the state has experienced would not have proceeded at a similar pace had the globe's economic giant not taken away the restraints it had previously placed upon it. A substantial part of the considerable FDI Vietnam has received has come from the USA, and now many states conduct sizeable operations in the area (for example, Coca Cola is as readily available throughout Vietnam as it is in the West). America has therefore contributed through the realm of private enterprise to the economic advancement of its old enemy, and continues to do so today.

So, what is Vietnam like today? It is by no means a universal success. At the international level, whilst it is no longer the pariah that it once was, it is not quite the regional great power it possibly aspires to be. Economically, it is 'still far from being a formidable competitor of Japan' (Balme, S. and Sidel, M. 2006 p105) and although it has sustained impressive growth it still has a long way to go. Politically speaking also, 'somewhat more democratic nature of the National Assembly is still a far cry from that of the Western democracies' (Balme, S. and Sidel, M. 2006 p212). However, the country is progressing – it is a 'full member of the Association of South East Asian Nations' (Balme, S. and Sidel, M. 2006 p105) and is progressing, slowly, towards some measures of political transparency. Yes it still has some way to go, but it is on the right road.

I'd like to finish with a slightly more personal take on the changes in Vietnam. Picture a typical Saigon street. Busy, narrow and full of people, both native Vietnamese and foreign tourist alike. This is one of many experiences I had during my month in Vietnam in the summer of 2009. Everywhere you look someone is trying to sell you something – ranging from the legitimate – t-shirts, sunglasses, moped rides and so on – to the less reputable – such as drugs and prostitution. A typical experience of anyone travelling in certain areas of South East Asia. However one shop sold slightly different products. The dominant stock here was 'authentic' war memorabilia from the US era. Movies, t-shirts and lighters (complete with the engraved cynical sayings of the GI's serving there such as 'let me win your hearts and minds or I will burn down your f***ing hut') were on sale here, commemorating the war that so completely devastated Vietnamese society a few short decades ago. Imagine the comparison –Germans selling souvenirs commemorating Dresden, or Japanese those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And yet this shop was by no means controversial or even unusual – many Vietnamese make their living selling memories of a war that most likely claimed a relative's life. This experience, along with many others, epitomised for me the Vietnamese desire to modernise, capitalise and economise as they push forward into the 21st century. Yes, they still have a long way to go as far as political freedoms are concerned – power is still concentrated in the hands of the Communist Party – but, economically speaking, in Vietnam we have a country of similar size and population to Germany, with the impressive work ethic to match. How much Vietnam has achieved so far is remarkable. How much it has left to achieve may be more so. Whether this trend will continue is unclear, but what is certain is that in the Vietnamese, they have a people who are more than capable of making it so.

Harry Booty *is a first-year undergraduate student studying War Studies at Kings College London. His areas of particular interest include the developing nature of global security, the rise of non-state actors and the resultant conflicts that result from this and regional international relations in the developing world.*

Bibliography

Anderson, David L. *The Vietnam War* (2005)

Balme, Stephanie and Sidel , Mark, *Vietnam's New Order: International Perspectives on the State and Reform in Vietnam* (2006)

Collins, Ngan Thuy, *Economic Reform and Employment Relations in Vietnam* (2009)

Parvizi Amineh, M. *State, Society and International Relations in Asia* (2010)

Two articles from the BBC: – 'Funeral held for Vietnam's ex-PM' – anonymous author (2008)

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7455442.stm

– 'Communist Vietnam's $35 bowl of soup' by Alastair Leithead (2011)

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/9367223.stm

About the author:

Harry Booty is currently a Commissioning Editor for e-IR. He is currently studying a BA War Studies degree at King's College London.