

BOOK REVIEWS

***Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking During the Third Indochina War.* By Kosal Path. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020. Hardcover: 291pp.**

In stark contrast to the voluminous literature on the First and Second Indochina Wars, studies on the Third Indochina War are few and far between. Kosal Path rightly highlights only two books in English that focus on the Vietnamese perspective of the Third Indochina War. But even in those two books, namely David W.P Elliot’s *Changing Worlds: Vietnam’s Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (2012) and Tuong Vu’s *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (2017), that conflict only forms part of their overall stories.

Kosal Path’s *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking* is therefore a pioneering and targeted study of the conflict covering the period from 1975 to 1986. The book addresses two fundamental questions about the Third Indochina War: why did Vietnam “engage in a costly program of regime change and nation building” in Cambodia which ended in failure, and what caused the Vietnamese to subsequently “withdraw its forces from Cambodia and shift from military confrontation to reconciliation with China” (p. 3)? The author believes the answers to these questions can best be found by perusing the “large volume of internal reports circulated within the top leadership of the Vietnamese party and government at that time”, which he did so over five research trips to Vietnam beginning in 2006 (p. 11). In his assessment, these internally circulated records are “superior to other party documents and memoirs used in the existing scholarship” (p. 11).

The two above questions are succinctly answered through a very readable and coherent narrative spanning six chapters. Chapter One describes the short period from the end of the Second Indochina War in April 1975 to mid-1977 when the priority of the Vietnamese

leadership was economic recovery. During this period, the “economy-first” faction within the leadership held sway. However, the failure to achieve its economic goals and “failure in foreign policy and diplomacy abroad” forced the Vietnamese leadership to shift its focus to national defence. As relations with Cambodia and China deteriorated, the “military-first” faction gradually took control of the levers of power and remained influential for much of the 1980s. In early 1978, the Vietnamese leadership “began to relax state central planning and focus on building local districts into an economic and national defence fortress in preparation for war” (p. 20).

Chapter Two focuses on the decision to invade Cambodia in December 1978. The author argues that the “alliance” between Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and China, backed by the United States, “posed a serious threat” to Hanoi, and was a more significant reason for the war than the border conflict and the historical animosity between DK and Vietnam (p. 51). According to Path, Hanoi’s decision to invade Cambodia was taken in early January 1978 (p. 55).

Chapter Three examines China’s invasion of northern Vietnam in February 1979 to punish the Vietnamese, which created a “two-front war” for Hanoi (p. 79). The invasion solidified the position of the military-first faction and also revealed the erosion of Vietnam’s military capabilities due to the supposed over-emphasis on the economy immediately after the end of the Second Indochina War. Now, “large quantities of national resources were funneled into the war machine instead of economic development” much to the alarm of the economy-first faction (p. 107). China’s continued military presence on Vietnam’s northern border further “enabled the military-first faction to continue to dominate policy making in Hanoi” (p. 80). Why did Hanoi fail to anticipate the Chinese invasion? According to the author, it was because the Vietnamese leadership believed its alliance with the Soviet Union would make China think twice before contemplating a retaliatory attack.

The Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia brought about economic stagnation and international pariah status, destroying its relations with its large northern neighbour, and “further isolating Vietnam in the region” (p. 113). Was it worth it? Why did Vietnam remain in Cambodia for another decade after the invasion? Path addresses these questions in Chapter Four, which, in the opinion of this reviewer, is the strongest among the six. This chapter covers the “murky period” of the Vietnamese occupation, describing “the moral urgency with which the Hanoi leadership carried out its mission of nation building in Cambodia” while “being challenged”

by “insurgency and resistance” led by the Coalition of Government of Democratic Kampuchea (p. 114). This chapter has a very interesting first-person account of the “Siem Reap purge” in 1983, where a large number of government officials were arrested, interrogated and tortured because they were suspected to be “resistance sympathizers”. The purge led to thousands of Cambodians fleeing to the border and accusations of Vietnamese “colonialism” (p. 126). According to Path, the 1983 purge “marked the beginning of the end of Vietnam’s moral high ground and claim to have respect for Cambodia’s national sovereignty” (p. 132).

Chapters Five and Six describe in detail Vietnam’s efforts to rebuild Cambodia. Although Vietnam was “Cambodia’s patron”, it was also “a poor country” (p. 146). Four years after the invasion, the economy-first faction gradually regained influence. From 1983, “the economic threat” facing Vietnam “loomed even larger than the military one” (p. 165). The old guard were slowly persuaded of the need “to consider the costs of the two-front war and alter the course of Vietnam’s foreign policy” (p. 165). Hanoi was compelled to reduce the costs of its occupation of Cambodia and abandon “the idea of Vietnam-led economic regionalism in Indochina”, which it was no longer able to finance by 1985 (p. 202). This led to the *Doi Moi* (renovation) policy adopted at the Sixth Party Congress in December 1986, which marked “the most transformative transition in Vietnam’s modern political history from the Marxist central-planning model to a market-oriented economy” (p. 167).

Path’s book makes a significant contribution to the historiography of the Third Indochina War. It is currently the most detailed account of the decision-making leading to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, the impact of the war on Vietnam (as well as on Cambodia) and the context of the *Doi Moi* policy from the Vietnamese perspective.

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