

timely, given the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, until relatively recently an amalgamated security community of sorts. Students of Asia-Pacific security will also bemoan the absence of a U.S.–Japan case study — surely one of the more important and interesting contemporary examples of a security community? But no single volume can cover everything and as the editors note in their concluding chapter, this book only represents the first step towards a constructivist research programme on security communities. As such, it lays down solid foundations for others to build upon.

Security Communities is a timely and thoughtful piece of work which will be of interest to scholars not just of security studies, but also of regionalism, institution-building and IR theory. It marks another important step in the building of an empirically grounded constructivist challenge to the neo-realist/neo-liberal dominance of security studies and regionalism. Students of Asia-Pacific security will surely have much to offer the research programme that eventually emerges.

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Vietnam: The Incomplete Transformation. By Peter Wolff. German Development Institute Book Series No.12. Berlin, London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999. 137pp.

These days, a likely consensus among Vietnam watchers would be that nothing much is going on in the country by way of economic reforms. The international media also deliver a similar message about policy inertia. Some ten years after impressing the world with an initial zeal for market reforms, the socialist regime in Hanoi shows signs of losing its ideological nerves and is finding ways to cling on to the state's costly and inefficient domination over the economy. Policy vacillation, administrative red-tape, and corruption at many levels of the bureaucracy have made foreign investors tire of Vietnam. Many have pulled out and the euphoria over Vietnam as Asia's most likely new tiger economy is over. Vietnam's political élite has not yet found a way out of this dilemma. This is the "incomplete transformation" in the title of Wolff's book.

What went wrong? Wolff's book sets out to answer this fascinating and important question. His explication of the stalled reforms is

essentially a painting in broad brushstrokes. Individual chapters deal with the respective topics on the financial sector, state-owned versus private enterprises, environmental issues and sustainable development, poverty alleviation particularly in the rural areas, and the role of foreign investments and international organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With so much ground to cover over a mere 129 pages of text (not including bibliographic references), the resulting account is, not surprisingly, a concise one.

But the virtue of this book is that the big picture it presents comes with a certain commitment to details even when purveying so general a treatment of such a large and complex subject. For each key area that it ventures into, a tight summary is provided of the nuts and bolts of the issue, usually organized into a crisply functional structure aimed at laying out the bare details of what is not functioning within the reform process.

But as with any attempt at brevity, those looking for a more substantive engagement with the topic may have cause to be disappointed. Occasionally, you will find a statement that cries out for an appropriate reference or some illustrative case studies. For example, Wolff recommends on p. 92: "The strengthening of the private sector should begin primarily with medium-sized enterprises that are potentially capable of adapting modern technologies and producing for export." Who are these medium-sized enterprises? What do they produce? Because the empirical examples are lacking, the book's recommendation risks sounding like much stock advice being dished out to developing economies; not unsound, but not acutely relevant either.

Then there are some spots where readers may find Wolff's unexplained assumptions exasperating. For example, on p. 54: "It can be assumed, however, that the gradual expansion of the Agribanks' small loan business was enough to reduce informal financing". A conscientious reader who bothers to go back through the preceding two pages which talks about Agribank credit will still be none the wiser as to how Wolff arrives at this assumption. On the contrary, Wolff's narrative seems to point to Agribank's inadequacy as a source of credit rather than its ability to reduce informal financing.

Here and there, the book has gems of observation but if only the writer had taken them forward. For instance, on p. 105, Wolff points to a political dilemma that Vietnam's leadership confronts — how to balance the need to invest in manufacturing to raise macroeconomic productivity against the need to invest in the rural sector which will lower the macroeconomic productivity. For those seeking a deeper understanding of the political dynamics behind economic reforms, many

pertinent questions would follow such an interesting observation; chief among them would be how these issues are sorted out at the political level. The key to understanding why reforms have stalled would surely lie in knowing more about how political forces shape contending priorities of development. In particular, a book that deals with the big questions of political economy should engage the issue of the continuing role of the Communist Party. This book, like so many others written about Vietnam, tends to be overly engrossed with just the governmental machinery and the legislation which, in the final analysis, are subordinate to party decree or fiat. Unfortunately, Wolff did not pause to address these issues, choosing instead to move on to more fleeting snapshots of rural development indices.

To be fair, a book that looks at élite politics and system dynamics in contemporary Vietnam with some depth and accompanied by reliable details has yet to be written. So little is known about the post-1996 Eighth Party Congress generation of top leaders and office-bearers and their inter-dynamics. What Vietnam watchers have, up till this point, are the rumours on the Hanoi grapevine as and when they are picked up by the foreign media. Wolff's work does not seem like a book that could go anywhere beyond that kind of anecdotal hearsay of conservatives versus liberals within the establishment. It draws much of its data from World Bank reports, academic works and, in all likelihood, media reports. Nowhere does the author give any indication of primary data collected during field trips. That does not necessarily make the book bad or invalid but the writer's use of sources helps us to see the publication for what it is. It reads more like a good collating effort, the sum wisdom of what the World Bank, international agencies and the media have been saying about Vietnam over the past five years.

With so much cramped into this little book, the thrust of its arguments can end up being more diffused than integrated. Here a lack of political will was alluded to; there ineffectual legislation was the major contention. This also renders the book a task to read because the reader's mind has to be very focused to keep track of the range of issues raised by the author. If there is any singular theme to the range of details, it may be Wolff's obvious partiality for the private sector as the panacea for many of Vietnam's current economic problems. This dovetails with a current international *zeitgeist* that preaches the desirability of business run on market principles by private rather than state interest as far as possible. Depending on your own perspective, you may or may not agree with this, but Wolff's book is not the best place to find a debate on such fundamental issues.

At the risk of sounding like an oxymoron, Wolff's work is a "detailed summary" of the current situation in Vietnam's economic reforms. It

will be useful for assorted people who need to educate themselves in the quickest possible way about Vietnam's retarded economic reforms (for example, students and business executives). But for those who seek a deeper understanding of the malaise, the answers are frequently not there or not to a sufficient degree. Given its scale and the range of issues it attempts to cover, the compressed nature of the work does not come as a surprise. Still, seasoned Vietnam watchers will have cause to value a book like this. Ten years from now, if you want a quick checklist of Vietnam's economic problems in the latter half of the 1990s, this will be a valuable book to have around.

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