

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Socialist Vietnam's Economy, 1975–85: An Assessment.* By Vo Nhan Tri.**  
V.R.F. Series No. 139. Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, January 1987. 134 pp.

Vo Nhan Tri is rapidly gaining the reputation of being one of the Western world's leading writers on the economy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Tri has held research positions at the Institute of Economics in Hanoi (1965–75) and the Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City (1975–84). He left Vietnam in 1984 and has been active in publishing since. Tri brings to his research a knowledge of four languages (Vietnamese, Russian, French and English), socialist economics, and first-hand experience. Unlike many others who have left Vietnam with a bitterness that has soured their research, Tri maintains a sense of humour and healthy scepticism about the society and problems he has left behind.

The monograph under review is an overview of Vietnam's second and third five-year plans, covering the period 1976–80 and 1981–85, respectively. It is based mainly on Vietnamese-language sources, including unpublished internal documents. Tri also cites — and comments on — the writings of Western colleagues. Tri's approach, as befits his training and experience, is that of a political economist. As such, it will disappoint more orthodox economists but delight Western social scientists.

Tri begins his analysis with a short section outlining the salient features of the Vietnamese economy up to 1975 and defining key terms and expressions used by the communist media (for example, "proletarian dictatorship", "collective mastery", and "socialist industrialisation"). The introductory section ends with a discussion of the unfinished tasks of

the “national democratic revolution” in southern Vietnam in the 1975–76 period, including the campaign to eliminate the power of the so-called compradore bourgeoisie.

The core of the research monograph rests on Tri’s exposition of the goals and shortcomings of Vietnam’s second and third five-year plans. In the first period, Tri notes, despite the Communist Party’s pledge “to achieve a leap forward in agriculture”, stress was placed on investment in heavy industry. Agricultural production actually fell because of the ill-conceived programme of collectivizing the southern peasantry, the lack of incentives, and natural disasters (p. 28). Private trade and light industrial production fell victim to the same collectivist mentality. Tri rounds off his discussion by reviewing the foreign aid and trade sectors. Tri calculates that the standard of living of the average person decreased during this period (p. 45), leading to a re-think of regime policies.

Tri’s discussion of the third five-year plan proceeds in similar fashion. After reviewing Vietnam’s “new economic policies”, such as the product contract system, the family-based economy, priority on raising the general standard of living and currency devaluation, Tri concludes that no progress was made in improving the conditions of the ordinary Vietnamese, especially those on fixed salaries. At the same time, Vietnam increased its dependency on and indebtedness to the Soviet Union.

By word and deed, in Tri’s view, the communist regime stands condemned for its failures. These are precisely the sentiments voiced by many party members in the criticism-self-criticism campaign which unfolded in 1986 and which led to major policy changes at the sixth party congress at the end of that year. Tri is correct to hold the communist leadership accountable for its policies and performance. Yet, in focusing on these internal factors, Tri neglects to weigh in his assessment important external factors such as the U.S. trade and aid embargo, the costs of Vietnam’s wars with China and Kampuchea, the outflow of boat people, and recurrent natural disasters and adverse weather.

Tri’s study ends abruptly with the rather discordant prediction — given his preceding analysis — that “if we look at the horizon to the year 2000 and after, and if the Party’s leadership advocates an economically rational strategy of development . . . Socialist Vietnam may yet emerge as a regional power which must be reckoned with by the world.” This may well be so, but this possibility will only arise when Vietnam totally withdraws its military forces from Kampuchea, normalizes its relations with Washington and Beijing, and makes peace with the Overseas Vietnamese community.

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