

One wonders about the possibilities that might stem from an alternative perspective that saw the Asia/Pacific as the new centre of gravity for both global economics and global politics, the site of which may well be the two most powerful countries on earth (Japan and China) early in the next century, and the locale of what may be the next Cold War. Such a perspective would demand that analysts of the Asia-Pacific region formulate new models and identify new patterns based on East Asia's own political experience.

Arms Control in the Post-Cold War World is primarily a book about arms control in general, with the Asia/Pacific region as a subset. But students of the region might be excused for suggesting that in this "post-Cold War world", perhaps the reverse approach might be better: a book about international politics in the region that also deals, in an East Asian political context, with arms control.

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***Vietnam — The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism.* By Gareth Porter.**
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993. 227 pp.

The inner workings of communist regimes have fascinated scholars ever since there were such regimes to study but, up till the mid-1980s, it was a frustrating field to work in. Official pronouncements and press reports, which formed the basic data sources, were not to be taken at face value; thus developed a complex but not always reliable methodology of reading between the lines of the Marxist media. Supplementing this would be the cloak and dagger harvest of the intelligence community but these were not always accessible to academic researchers. With liberal reforms introduced in almost all Marxist states since the mid-1980s and the eventual replacement of some of these totalitarian regimes by democratic governments, public discourse in these countries has become more open and truthful. This is what makes Porter's ambitious book on Vietnam possible: the more reliable post-1986 Vietnamese documentation (press reports, speeches and academic journal articles) of the situation in that country.

Porter's usage of these sources is painstaking and therefore impressive. Every interesting development in his political narrative is accompanied

by documentary evidence. It is also an account of the Vietnamese polity which is much awaited for because so much has happened since reforms were formally endorsed by the leadership at the 1986 Sixth Party Congress. The book charts these changes through five of its seven chapters: political institutions, leadership selection and policy-making, economic liberalization, political participation and human rights, and foreign policy. The first two chapters set down the historical context as well as the more recent socio-economic realities. This is really vast territory to cover for a book this size and in many ways, as much as it does a great service to scholarship on Vietnam by presenting a comprehensive picture of the country's governance (the bureaucratic socialism of the book title), it also spreads itself too thin on some of the most interesting questions that are being asked of Vietnam's politics today.

In fact, some of the skimpiness leaves the reader wondering if the book should not have been sent for another draft revision by the author. Let us start with the little inadequacies. In the chapter on political institutions, Porter tells us an interesting little detail that since 1977 any interested individual can join the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), the membership of which was hitherto only by invitation. But no reason is provided and this particular question so cries out to be asked. Perhaps a small omission, but in that same paragraph, on page 89, is another unexplained gem of an information: the two political parties, Socialist Party and Democratic Party, dissolved themselves in October 1988, after years of being co-opted into the VFF.

The omissions can get larger. In the same chapter on political institutions, there is a fairly long explanation about the leadership's failed attempt to upgrade the role of the local People's Council (read elected body) *vis-à-vis* the People's Committee (read party apparatchiks) by giving the former a Standing Committee. What the reader ended up with is just an awareness that both party and state organs cannot agree over this, and that some of the disagreement went right down to the local level. Nothing was said about what were the forces fuelling the disagreement. Neither does Porter pose or answer a pertinent question: What difference does it make if the People's Council were given more power when one of the book's central theses is that power is so abrogated by the party that every other state institution is just a managed version of this one dominant authority?

Essentially, this is a book which sets out to look at the authoritarian heart of the Vietnamese regime and what emerges is an inventory of its failings since it came into power in 1954, in the course of which the writer also purveys some interesting observations: the obstructing orthodoxy of old leaders, the inertia of collective leadership and the co-optation tactics

of the Communist Party masquerading as democratization. But as much as the writer has done a good job in setting down enough for the newcomer of Vietnamese study to understand, it also leaves the better-informed readers dissatisfied — for instance, the assertion that the first generation of leaders held back reforms for too long. It is a plausible theory and probably true except that it could do with a more detailed recounting of who in that first generation were the most doctrinaire and how did they wield their influence over their colleagues. And that is one major lacuna in this book. It has not attempted to give readers an understanding of what constitutes a politician's power base in Vietnam and how those personal leverages of power work. In the recent political history of the country, there were allegations of individuals becoming very powerful and placing relatives in key positions. The late Le Duc Tho was one example. In the section on leadership selection on page 103, a brief mention was made of how top leaders promoted protégés but it was once more a case of a reference too briefly made. Another glaring omission would be an explanation of how the control of the military is crucial or not to the power game in Vietnam and the extent of the influence of the military élite in the civilian bureaucracy. This certainly merits a chapter on its own.

Then there is another popular belief about Vietnam's collective leadership (which the book also subscribes to) which describes a form of ineffectual leadership because it was devoted more to preserving party unity than to solving pressing economic problems. This is probably true, but again it could be fleshed out by an exploration of how consensus was forged. The book says, on page 117, that such indecision at the top was much criticized in the 1980s. Then in a subsequent chapter on economic liberalization, it casually mentions, on page 148, a majority position within the Politburo, somewhat hinting that the old consensus model was being replaced by a form of decision by clear majority. If so, such a shift in leadership style definitely requires a more thorough examination.

But the book is not one continuous tract of inadequate explanations. For the most part, it does a reasonably good job of sketching out the process of governance and its results. The approach is anecdotal more than analytical, and this is one of the book's strengths for the less rigorous reader. It is easy to read and readers can plunge into any chapter they wish or even read segments within each chapter. Even for such a desultory reader, there are frequent gems to discover through the pages which provide valuable glimpses into the mechanism of this bureaucracy. For instance, there is the "umbrella" system which protects, at every level of the bureaucracy, officials who abuse the system. There is also the revelation that there were intellectuals in Vietnam who saw that the system was flawed very early on and tried to change things from within the system.

Here, he narrates the story of Tran Phuong, a leading economist at the Institute of Economics, who tried as early as 1964 to return the economy to a more rational form of market economy. But the war with the United States got in the way, and Hanoi's top leaders who were preoccupied with the war were not inclined to engage themselves with a thorny ideological debate. Although the book did not say it, Tran Phuong went on to head his institute and became a Deputy Prime Minister.

Finally, it must be said in defence of this book that the gaps in the explanations are perhaps unavoidable. The Vietnamese system has just opened up. Harmless but informative material hitherto classified is becoming more accessible but by no means to be taken for granted. The Vietnamese themselves are more comfortable when discussing their system of government but the process of offering information is still fraught with risks. Moreover, as Porter has stated in his preface, he was last in Vietnam as long ago as 1984 and a more recent field trip, if taken, might have provided more up-to-date information. But all things said, the writer has done those aspiring to work in this field a great service. He has written a basic text for them to carry the investigation further.

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