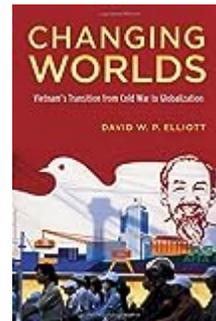




David W. P. Elliott. *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xviii + 408 pp. + 6 pp. of plates. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-538334-8.



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Vietnam's Foreign Policy

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Vietnam has witnessed transformational changes in foreign policy and has prioritized economic development over traditional security. As a result, Vietnam changed strategic partners in the changing international environment, and adjusted its foreign policies accordingly. This is different from what Vietnam used to be. Though many works in the literature of Vietnam studies focus on the transition from different perspectives (i.e., geopolitics, geo-economy, realism, neoliberalism, and ideology), there is less literature on the dynamics of Vietnam's political system and foreign policy after the end of Vietnam War. A concrete analysis of the latter critically needs to explore the shift of the collective mind-set of Vietnam's political elite in the process of transition, the conditions under which the once new thinking among Vietnamese elites eventually became mainstream, and the extent to which the changed collective mind-set has impacted Vietnam's foreign policies. Based on a remarkable number of interviews and Vietnamese-language sources, *Changing Worlds* offers timely answers to the questions mentioned

above.

As a senior scholar and informed observer in Vietnam studies, David W. P. Elliott has made numerous research trips in the country, and established contacts with many Vietnamese academics, government researchers, and officers in the army and security sectors. This makes Elliott's research much more informative and inclusive than many works of the younger generation of Western and Vietnamese scholars.

Since the political process in Vietnam was unable to produce a clear-cut result for the remainder of the decade (p. 170), Elliott systematically examines Vietnamese political history from 1975 to 2006, explains the significant shifts in the collective thinking of Vietnamese elite, and analyzes how Vietnamese leaders saw themselves and their situation in the post-Vietnam War world. Moreover, Elliott stresses that the economic and political necessity to open up is only a partial explanation of the significant transition in Vietnam's foreign policy, and that transition should be traced to the new thinking of the

Vietnamese leadership, which believes that economic development will be the most effective means of pursuing Vietnam's national interests and maintaining a peaceful strategic environment in the long run.

This book has nine chapters. As an introduction, chapter 1 addresses the research purposes and framework of this book. In chapters 2 through 7, Elliott analyzes the historical watershed events (e.g., Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia, normalization with China, entry into ASEAN and the World Trade Organization) in the dynamics of Vietnam's political system and its integration into the global system. At the same time, Elliott reviews the complexity of intra-elite discourse, especially the interpretive debates between reformers and conservatives among the Vietnamese elite. The following pages (chapters 8 and 9) examines the extent to which the "old thinking" (e.g., prioritizing national security over economic development) still matters in explaining Vietnam's actual foreign policy.

As Elliott argues, in Vietnamese leadership, the tensions between reformers and conservatives is still "controversial within the party" (p. 63). In other words, the major shifts in collective ideas are always pragmatic compromises between reformers and conservatives. For instance, after the former Soviet Union's collapse, Vietnam's normalization with China was a second-best solution, because China "resolutely refused to identify itself as the core of an alternative to the prevailing global system" (p. 188). In other words, China would not be the replacement for "the previously supportive Soviet Union that some in Hanoi had hoped it would be" (p. 123). In addition, the United States refused to accept Vietnam into a U.S.-dominated system, and "Vietnam's ambivalence about ties with the United States continued after diplomatic relations were established" (p. 158).

It is not surprising then, that Vietnam has been pursuing "a kind of Bismarckian diplomacy of maneuver"

(p. 108), which diversifies its diplomatic relations with ASEAN countries and the United States, while keeping close economic and ideological relations with China. However, as Elliott points out, "changing partners did not solve Vietnam's problem of devising a new strategy for dealing with the post-Cold War world" (p. 125), because there is an exception to the rule that pragmatic compromises can always be reached between reformers and conservatives. Historically, if any event posed a significant threat to Vietnam's regime preservation, territory, sovereignty, or Vietnamese elites' desire to "preserve their power and position" (p.161), reformers and conservatives among the Vietnamese elite would view the event in realistic terms. Recent territorial tensions between China and Vietnam have shown that economic or ideological interests shared between Vietnam and any other country will not overwhelm conflicts concerning sovereign territory. In such cases, it might be difficult for Vietnam to "maintain a stable and long-lasting strategic relationship with China that served Vietnam's core national interests" (p. 88). In such a case, it becomes necessary for Vietnam to establish a more effective coordinating mechanism for the relationship. If there is an omission in this thought-provoking book, as Elliott confesses, it might be that it cannot consider "events since the research for this book was concluded in 2007" (p. 255).

Overall, *Changing Worlds* is a valuable contribution to the field of Vietnam studies. What distinguishes it from many geo-economic and geopolitical narratives on Vietnam, is that this book provides readers with an alternative, context-sensitive explanation for the shift of the collective mind-set of the Vietnam elite. This book should be read by all scholars and students of Vietnam studies and international studies.

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