

# The View from Vietnam

WEBB MCARTHUR

*Editor's note: Mr. McArthur was part of a Furman University delegation that recently traveled to Hanoi, Vietnam, to represent the United States at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference.*

There is something paradoxical about the nature of change. We change so that we may solve problems, but are invariably surprised when those solutions become problems themselves. And trying to stay ahead of the curve often seems little more than damage control.

Vietnam showed us that the change that globalization brings is guaranteed to happen. How quickly and how complete those changes will be remains the question, and to what extent they can learn from the United States, and us from them.

We were fortunate enough to be present during the CEO Summit for the addresses by the various heads of state and heads of government representing their nations at APEC. We were able to listen to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, Chinese President Hu Jintao, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, Australian Prime Minister John Howard – and the list goes on.

It was truly an amazing experience to hear all of those voices – too often blurred together in the static of international relations – to be talking with one voice about free trade, the Asia-Pacific and the future.

We all bring different issues to the table and different reasons why there will be no easy answers to truly uniting our voices, but a forum like APEC

shows that we are trying, and that is sometimes all that we can do.

It is fortunate that globalization is becoming an accepted position in world economic relations, but we cannot assume that the train will inevitably reach the station. But we have seen the World Trade Organization stall, and our hope is that a more measured body like APEC, working with consensus, can break the globalization stalemate of today.

It is a hard reality that there is no magic formula that developed nations, already plugged into the world economy, can give to those desiring to make that connection. Each nation is individual, with particular promises and troubles that others may not experience.

**“As more nations plug into the world economy, we are forced to adjust the formula and rules of engagement.”**

As more nations plug into the world economy, we are forced to adjust the formula and rules of engagement. It is more of an organic being – this global political/economy, rather than a system – and it needs nurturing, not tweaking.

Vietnam is considering questions that have faced other nations as they begin to plug in. China maintains a similar economy and the world has wondered at its inexplicable progress. But there are problems uniquely Vietnam's, including a history more strained with the U.S. than China.

To an American, it was somewhat disconcerting what seems like an identity crisis. Vietnam is progressing so dramatically due to opportunities like APEC and more recently the WTO and Permanent Normal Trade Relations with the U.S. The Vietnamese people seem willing and able to jump on every new bandwagon that comes to town.

But there is something problematic about these developments being accompanied by a one-party government system, a morph of the command-economy that allows foreign direct investment and a people that do not value dissent as highly as, at least, we Americans.

It is at this point that we must recognize that all nations need not adopt the U.S. formula to find success in the world market. The concerns facing Vietnam today are those questioning the long-term internal stability of the nation. The country touted its political stability as an advantage for attracting foreign direct investment, but the world market will demand that Vietnam exhibit some flexibility. Specifically, concerns of internal political transparency will likely hamper the willingness of some investors.

All nations, including the U.S., will have to be willing to adapt to a new world if we are to take globalization and the rest of the world seriously. Too often we all underestimate the demands change places on us, and that will be the struggle for the future.

To find these common solutions, we need to be able to do more than balance our interests and point of view with those of the rest of the world. We need to have dialogue that will, at times, be awkward. It will demand reciprocity and transparency, as well as a general willingness to engage. And that willingness to change, so essential for nations such as Vietnam, is just as essential for the U.S. today. ☺

*Webb McArthur is a senior political science and philosophy major from McConnells. You can reach him at [webb.mcarthur@furman.edu](mailto:webb.mcarthur@furman.edu).*