

# Perceptions of Developmental State Theories and Developmental State Mindset in Vietnam

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**Abstract:** There has been a controversy around the theory of the developmental state in general, the developmental state mindset in Vietnam in particular. The debate on the most effective pathway for development has reached somewhat of an impasse, with the two dominant approaches of market-led (neoliberal) development and developmental state approaches still at loggerheads. This paper will bring a brief literature review on developmental state and then analysing some characteristics of the developmental state mindset in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Developmental state, developmental state theory, developmental state mindset.

**Subject classification:** Politics

## 1. Introduction

Power and the state are not constant objects and change frequently in different periods. Although the composition of states change, the nature of the state is to impose itself upon, or intervene in, communities. This intervention can be strong or weak and direct or indirect, depending on the type of state or political regime functioning and the different historical context. In modern society, many states can be roughly grouped into one of two broad types of state: state-controlled systems meaning socialist states and dictatorial states some of which emphasise a centrally planned economy and bureaucratic subsidy; and regulatory state systems, meaning (more or less) democratic

states and emphasising the supposed passivity of the state in the context of laissez-faire capitalism. Standing between the two is the model of the “developmental state”, which features states taking a proactive leading role in driving economic development in a market economy [9], [20], [16]. Therefore, this paper tends to review literature on developmental state, define the idea of a “developmental mindset”, and then evaluate the perceptions of the developmental state mindset in Vietnam.

## 2. The Developmental State

The concept of the developmental state was first posited by Chalmers Johnson in 1982

through his investigation of the models behind Japan's successful industrialisation. Unlike the neoclassical state that supposedly automatically adjusts to overcome market failures and adjusts for social justice, developmental states take the initiative not just to overcome market failures, but to focus on tectonic shifts in the market and to utilise the both the economic and political roles of the state for developmental purposes [9], [23], [16], [17]. Specifically, the state focuses on the design of specific guidelines, directions and policies to create priority mechanisms in key productive areas. For example, Japan concentrated on the automotive industry in the 1970s, Malaysia focused on electronics and India now focuses on the software industry. The aim is to use industrial-commercial policies to create an impetus for growth.

When considering the economic development of Japan between 1925 and 1975, Johnson (1982) highlighted the important role of the Japanese Government, in particular the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), in ensuring a very high growth rate after World War II. Prior to Johnson, the prominent approaches to state development studies during the Cold War period was to differentiate between the "state-controlled" approach of the Soviet Union and socialist countries (emphasising centralised planning) and capitalist or "regulatory states" like the United Kingdom and the United States. However, Johnson (1982) pointed out that Japan, though fundamentally following Western model of capitalism and democracy, was nevertheless different. The

state was not a marshal, as in the socialist countries, but it did not play the "passive" role of capitalist states, rather it had a much larger role to play, particularly in orienting and concentrating resources on key economic areas over a long period. He used the term "developmental state" to refer to that difference. Thus, the developmental state is a capitalist state that has some similarities with a socialist state in terms of development direction over the economy but is more focused on using market mechanisms.

In recent decades, most countries have accepted private ownership of property and a competitive market economy as the main way to organise economic activities. But the debate about the relationship between the role of the state and the market in politics and economics continues. The main question is whether the state should actively lead and create, or should it prioritise market-driven signals (supply-demand), and therefore only function as a regulatory agency. The success of the Japanese state as well as the new industrialising countries (NICs) of East Asia, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, has led a range of scholars to suggest that this model warrants further attention. The developmental state model offers more possibilities for thinking about development trajectories than the current US-European free-market model for developing countries. Many scholars believe that the development state model is actually better than regulatory state and different scholars specify particular conditions as the key to successful developmental states [9], [23], [16], [14], [17].

It is not easy to define what a developmental state is nor its characteristics,

which could be used as a common formula against which to measure historical and contemporary states. Indeed, each successful developmental state has featured its own particular characteristics. Johnson (1982), albeit using the term “Japanese model”, warned of overly generalising based solely on Japanese research. In other words, the idea that the way in which the Japanese Government oriented and guided economic development is a “model” needs to be used with caution as the generalisability of the approach is low and research of other similar cases in East Asia is required. In the case of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Bagchi (2003) outlines that the developmental state there featured: peasant land reform, a strong sense of nationalism, an export drive, a key role for industrial conglomerates (*chaebol*), expenditures on research and development (R&D) and an effective collaboration between government and business (Bagchi 2003: Chapter four) [20].

What is equally important is that, as Bagchi [19], [20] demonstrated, the developmental state has existed for a long time and in many different countries. Developmental states were present in earlier times in a number of today’s developed countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, the UK and the US. He also included the Soviet Union and China prior to the 1980s in his list of developmental state countries. Ha-Joon Chang (2003) equally finds this historical pattern. He argues that using the most common definition of a developmental state, it is possible to see three types of developmental state in different socio-political context and development

conditions: East Asia (and France), Scandinavia and the US.

East Asia is considered the “classic” model, especially in Japan from the 1950s to 1980s. However, across East Asia, there are also differences. The Republic of Korea (South Korea), for example, in the 1960s to 1980s demonstrated initiatives to lead development through breakthrough policies (by selecting spearhead industries), operating a powerful super coordinating agency (the Economic Planning Commission) and state ownership of the entire banking sector. Japan does not have these characteristics. Compared with Japan and Republic of Korea (South Korea), Taiwan (China) did not have such a proactive and strong orientation, partly because the private sector in Taiwan is small and there are no large private companies as in Japan and Republic of Korea (South Korea). The active leadership in Taiwan was expressed primarily through the promotion of R&D and state owned enterprises (SOEs). Singapore is also a distinct developmental state model, combining both free trade and investment with the large state-owned sector. Chang (2003) argues that France used a similar development strategy to East Asia, the government through the Planning Commission (*Commissariat Général du plan*) actively oriented and led investments and the country used the power of state-owned enterprises as a leading sector.

The developmental state models in Scandinavia (except Finland), until the 1970s, all had developmental state characteristics, in particular they had active industrial development policies, though not as broad as East Asian ones. The Swedish

state focused on such industries as metallurgy (mid-18<sup>th</sup> century), railways (1850), hydroelectric power (1890), etc. through cooperation with the private sector. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Swedish government also adopted policies to protect heavy industries [16, p.39]. The Danish government has intervened and prioritised policies for the development of agricultural exports, and this was the main driver of growth in the 1930s. Thus, Scandinavian countries have invested in development, underpinning selected and prioritised industries. Major research and development institutions and centres in these countries remain largely state-owned. Chang (2003) also highlights the role of welfare policies in these societies and he argues they contribute to economic and structural change, thereby reducing the political pressure on state-led economic restructuring. Thus, the Scandinavian countries show that it is not necessary to overemphasise the role of state in techno-industrial development as is the case in East Asia, developmentalism can be done through a variety of tools, such as welfare, education, etc., depending on the socio-political context and development conditions.

The US was also one source of developmental state ideas. One of the core ideas of the developmental state was the protection of infant industries and strong protectionist trade policy [16, p.75], [21, p.248]. Protection was a governmental policy in order to promote investment in a range of sector and the infrastructure to support it. In addition, the US also actively prioritises R&D. Even after World War II, when it held dominant positions and began

calling for trade and investment liberalisation, the US retained the characteristics of the developmental state in a range of ways. For example, it created a network among experts in and outside the state to apply scientific and technological achievements to the economy in the fastest and most profitable way [16, p.86]. Block and Keller (2011) defined this type of state as a developmental network state that differs from the developmental bureaucratic state in East Asian countries. Of course, in the US there cannot be a coordinating ministry for investment, which is common in East Asian developmental states. The US government's orientations are often hidden under R&D funding schemes in national defence or public health, with the results being commercialised and helping the US gain or retain market dominance globally.

Thus, it is clear that the developmental state does involve a range of theories and practices and has been practiced in a range of successful industrialised states. It is a state governance model in which the state develops policies oriented to development, that is to creating the environment and conditions for all sectors of the economy and society to take full advantage of their assets. It involves a strong degree of state surveillance to detect possible imbalances and challenges, ensuring not just macroeconomic stability but broader social stability too. There are some similar characteristics among developmental states but many differences too as a key issue is adaptability to different circumstances and working with the strengths of the particular state. Further, as noted earlier, the ideational aspects of developmental states have not

received the attention of its other aspects, in this case what following Thurbon (2016) is termed the developmental mindset.

### 3. A “Developmental Mindset”

It cannot be denied that there are challenges in distinguishing developmental states from other state types in leading national development<sup>2</sup>. However, in addition to the different characteristics and forms of intervention and orientation different states have in leading the course of national economic development, Thurbon (2016) argues that one of the most important elements that distinguishes developmental state from other types of state is a “developmental mindset”. The developmental mindset in Thurbon’s view is “a set of ideas about the primary purpose of economic activity, the central goals of the state, and the appropriate role of the state in achieving these goals” [13, p.16]. According to the author, most developmental state analysis, despite Johnson’s original conceptualisation, has focused on institutions and policies rather than ideational aspects. Giving central attention and responsibility to institutional or policy change, in her view, is “problematic”, because of it leads erroneously implying that institutional and policy change can be clearly observed and measured by specific evidence and data [13, p.18]. However, the rootedness of such change is fundamentally influenced by the mindset of the policymaking elite. Therefore, Thurbon asserted that “mindset informs the

institutions and policies” and thus allows for “developmental state evolution” and thus she concludes that ideas need to be returned “to the center of developmental state theorising” [13, p.17].

Thurbon explores what the central element of developmental mindset are and finds that it can be condensed to a focus on “developmentalism” as the central element of developmental state [13, p.24]. Taking the case of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Thurbon convincingly argues that the state’s financial activism embodies the key transformation of the developmental mindset after the Asian financial crisis. Korea was a typical developmental state in the 1960s and 1970s and undoubtable model for the concept. After the Asian financial crisis, some authors argued that Korea transformed into a “neoliberal or regulatory state” because of the liberalisation and the other reforms that followed during and after this crisis. However, by investigating and demonstrating the continuing, through transformed, central role of the state in the Korean financial system, Thurbon concludes that Korean state did not transform into neoliberal or regulatory state. What was key in this was that the developmental mindset of policy makers and “the role of the president in shaping the direction of developmental state evolution” [13, p.91].

In short, Thurbon’s central argument is that developmentalism has a distinguishing ideational element (see table below) and her intention is to “highlight the significance of an often-overlooked aspect of developmentalism - the *mindset* of the

governing elite” [13, p.17]. Her arguments are based on detailed investigations into the case of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) starting from 1960s and 1970s, which featured the influential developmental mindset of President Park Chung Hee. In the post-Asian financial crisis period, Thurbon shows how developmentally

minded Korean policymakers helped solve the financial crisis. As a result, Thurbon has made a notable contribution to developmental state theorising by creating a framework and methodological approach to the study of the developmental state through “a mindset-strategy framework” [13, p.153].

Table 1: Distinguishing Developmental States from Other State Types: Role of Developmental Mindset

| Developmental States  | Non-developmental States   | Neoliberal States   |
|---|--|---|
| Ideational Level  | Ideational Level   | Ideational Level  |
| High level of consensus amongst policymaking elite around primacy of goal of national techno-industrial catch-up and export competitiveness AND the desirability of an active role for state in facilitating the creation, commercialisation, production & export of technologies/products by local firms in strategic industries. Long-term competitiveness concerns drive policy interventions in strategic industries. | Low level of consensus amongst economic policymaking elite concerning state’s primary economic goals and the role state should play in governing the industrial economy. Battles may exist between developmentally and neo-liberally oriented actors as well as political pragmatists and opportunists. Short-term political considerations often drive industry policy interventions. | High degree of consensus amongst economic policymaking elite around idea of the allocative efficiency of the free market-targeted industry policy assumed to distort the allocative efficiency of the market and create perverse outcomes |

Source: Thurbon, Elizabeth (2016), *Developmental Mindset: The Revival of Financial Activism in the Republic of Korea (South Korea)*, Cornell University Press, p.20.

Thurbon’s mindset-strategy framework is clearly relevant to analysing the case of Vietnam. Vietnam implemented reform in 1986 to transform from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market

economy. In this transformation, the Vietnamese party-state has maintained a notable role for a developmentalist-oriented state to guide and mind reform [26], [2]. However, the extent to which Vietnam is a

developmental state is not agreed amongst scholars, different scholars have brought different aspects of developmental states in Vietnam, thus examining the developmental mindset can shed new light on this debate.

In examining the developmental mindset, however, this paper examines not just the techno-industrial policy but also socio-economic policy. This follows Chang's (2003) argument outlined earlier about the central role of welfare policies in Scandinavian societies in contributing to economic and social change. Thus, the Scandinavian countries show that it is not necessary to overemphasise the role of state in techno-industrial development as is the case in East Asia, developmentalism can be done through a variety of tools, such as welfare, education, etc., depending on the socio-political context and development conditions. Vietnam's developmental mindset has always had a strong social policy element and thus the approach adopted on the developmental mindset here is not just about economic, financial and industrial policy but rather a broader conception of a socio-economic developmental mindset.

### **3. The Developmental State mindset in Vietnam**

For developing countries, the characteristics of a developmental state are often not fully or clearly expressed. Further, the effects of globalisation in general, and of international factors in particular, are significant contributors to their developmental

capacities. The institutional capacity of the state plays important role for development trajectories and it has been enhanced by interacting with global capitalism. For example, in a work by Walter and Zhang (2012), eight dynamic economies (China, Japan, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia) were chosen to measure the institutional domain of the state in global capitalism by examining three pillars – the business system, the financial system and the labour market. The authors showed all pillars, though influenced from global factors, were still maintained by the state, but that there has been a “growing heterogeneity of internal institutional practices in East Asia” [5, p.271]. In contrast Nolke argues that the features of the developmental state may change in the context of globalisation because of “the close collaboration between emerging market MNCs and their home governments” and “that may be considered a new form of state capitalism” [4, p.196]. In these type of states “it is difficult to imagine a state that still has the capacity for coherent, centrally directed industrial planning during the current phase of global liberal capitalism” [4, p.197]. Vietnam is a good case study to evaluate such contesting claims and the central focus of this paper is to contribute to clarifying the influences and contributions of international actors on national development strategies, by examining any changes in strategic thinking by Vietnamese policy makers and leaders.

When Vietnam shifted to the goals of a market economy with socialist orientation, this was meant to be an economy based on

the principles and rules of the market economy, but with the state-owned economic sector still playing a significant role in the national economy [30], [31], [29]. The strong socioeconomic developmental mindset here is notable. Further, the organisation of the government and socialist-oriented market economy in Vietnam was influenced by, and many similar characteristics and contexts to, China. Another key influence was “the social and ecological market economy” of the Northern Europe countries [11, p.168]. In China, the socialist market economy and then “socialism with Chinese characteristics” was the terminology used to describe the reform process. This “can be interpreted as the gradual decline of the socialist plan in favour of the market” but notably the most important economic sectors were still dominated by Chinese government [15, p.501]. In the context of China’s socialist market economy, the function of government was changed from central planning and administration to one that involves “management” and “governance” [15, p.496]. In Northern Europe countries, the model of the “social and ecological market economy” was recognised as the one that includes ecological ingredients, market elements and social characteristics and these factors “chime with each other as equally essential elements in a melodious triad” [10, p.23]. Thus, we can clearly see that developmental state ideas, in the broader form encompassing social and economic development, were a strong influence on *đổi mới*.

Pietro Masina (2006) was one of the first scholars to provide a historical overview of Vietnam's development strategies. The central focus of the book is to explain the successful transition in Vietnam’s strategic development policies from the central-planning economy to a market-oriented economy and whether Vietnam applied the developmental experiences of East Asian states in their reform. Ending the book with an open conclusion, the author put the question “Transition: where to?” He found that the Vietnamese strategic development model was, in fact, “something very different” from Asian developmental state, because these models had required “a different kind of political consensus”, “modern governance”, and that “alternative strategies should be more openly discussed” [24, p.158].

In Masina’s (2012) later work, he argued that the international financial institutions (IFIs) repeatedly pushed the country to speed up reform of “state owned enterprises, the financial sector, the trade system, and the role of private sector” but that Vietnam repeatedly slowed action. Yet, he notes that although these institutions “repeatedly voiced its disagreement but,” they still consider “Hanoi as a key customer, continued to lend to it profusely” [25, p.191]. Therefore, Masina concluded that Vietnam followed a path between that of a developmental state and neoliberalism, it adopted “a gradualist approach in contrast with the shock therapies...” that were promoted by the IFIs and that it “...did not apply key aspects of the Washington and Post-Washington Consensus” [25, p.191]. Vietnam strongly supported and used



elements of the import substitution industrialisation, an early approach used by East Asian developmental states. Further, “the very notion of Western-style governance (which is the cornerstone of the revised Washington Consensus) remained totally extraneous to the national political system” [25, p.191].

Thus, the characteristics of a developmental state in Vietnam are often not fully or clearly expressed. Different scholars have brought different aspects of developmental states in Vietnam that they may review by themes – developmental leadership, industrial policy, management of other economic adjustment, and social and welfare policy. The following section explores these themes.

*First*, regarding issues of developmental leadership, Pham (2012) provided a comprehensive analysis on “committed leaders” and “consensus and coherence in leadership” in Vietnam [18, pp.148-149]. The author analysed separately the role and position of the party general secretary as well as the elite leadership such as Politburo and showed that the Vietnamese political system has operated on a basic principle, “democratic centralism”, in which “no single person can decide an important issue” and all political decisions were normally made “based on the consensus of the leadership” [18, p.149]. Specifically, the committed leaders and consensus of the Vietnamese leaderships are generally recognised by their strong and independent ideology. Regarding issues of ideological influences, Gainsborough (2010) has criticised scholars who “emphasise the very great power of

neoliberal institutions in our world today” seen in slogans such as “Neoliberalism-dominant ideology shaping our world today”, “an age of neo-liberalism” and “neoliberalism as powerful” [22, p.476]. His main evidence for this argument was his analysis of the shift from the pre-reform to the post-reform Vietnamese state. According to Gainsborough, although the post-Washington Consensus era neoliberal policies were an influence on reform, the Vietnamese state still maintains much independence despite these influences<sup>3</sup>. In the economic field, although Vietnam’s business sectors have expanded, state actors still have “led the way” [22, p.482]. From specific evidence such as one ruling party or party-controlled mass organisation, combined with an analysis of the form of Vietnam’s regulatory state, Gainsborough provided a strong argument that “the influence of neoliberalism on the working of the Vietnamese state has been relatively small” [22, p.475].

*Second*, in term of industrial policy, Pham (2012) also provided an overview of the strategic industries given by Vietnamese Party-State. Accordingly, selecting industrial sectors (heavy or light industries; handicraft, textile and garment (T&G), footwear, or energy industries, including petroleum, gas, coal and electricity, etc.) and degrees of those priority was different choice from different periods. He showed that:

T&G and footwear industries have been considered as prioritised industries since 1996 (CPV, 1996), and will be so until 2020, while the plastic industry was prioritised before 2010, but has not been so since 2010. Or steel and bauxite industries

have been prioritised since 2007, and will be so until 2015, but will no longer be prioritised after 2015 [18, p.297].

Those features as Pham's consideration is similarity with industrial strategy of "the archetypal developmental state" by the way that "they also actively select to focus on a certain key industries and will phase them out when those industries have become mature or less strategic" [18, p.297]. However, the typical feature toward industrial policy in Vietnam is state leading key industries (including infrastructure - electricity, petrochemical, and high-tech industries) and those are important things to see how "the Vietnamese state has intervened in their development processes and its specific roles and contribution to their development" [18, p.299]. Starting with similarity arguments about the role of the Government of Vietnam as above, Fforde (2010) explained that this process (the development process and transition from centralisation to market-oriented policy) "may have effects upon static economic efficiency that are positive during transition but negative afterwards, so that the significance of "rents" depends upon context" [3, p.126]. In other words, that Vietnam has been able to benefit from its economic transition but that these benefits may not continue. Through investigating the changing economic structure, mainly focusing on changing economic policies, Fforde realised "these policy measures were in fact conservative in intent, seeking to slow the process of transition rather than support it" [3, p.130]. This demonstrates that the Vietnamese state has actively sought to manage economic globalisation.

Fforde concluded that Vietnam has undergone "a conservative transition from central planning to a market economy followed by the emergence of a form of capitalism" [3, p.141].

*Third*, regarding issues of the management of other economic adjustment, most scholars writing about *đổi mới* in Vietnam have acknowledged that, although the Vietnamese Party-State leadership implemented the "opening up" of the economy; prioritised industrialisation and modernisation policies; and called for FDI attraction; Vietnam's gradualist approach to reform was known as the dominant direction rather than applying "shock therapy" [7], [27], [12]. A gradualist approach to reform is understood and applied in two basic respects, economic reform first followed by a gradual political reform and in economic renewal, the state and collective economies still play as "the decisive role" in economic development. The private and foreign sectors play a dynamic role in the economy. All economic sectors are organised following two principles; the principles of the market economy and the principles of "nature of socialism" [31].

*Fourth*, in terms of the social and welfare policy, those are special characteristics in Vietnam's developmental strategies. In the long-term vision, Vietnam has targeted to build a dominant party political system but with a friendly relationship with the market and civil society [1, p.78]. The social and welfare policies would be considered as a "key bridge" for that strategy. However, in fact, the Vietnamese social organisations are not completely independence with state agencies [1, pp.78, 87, 91]. These authors

defined that the state administrative apparatus and the rule of law in Vietnam exposed optimistic indications of the developmental state. However, in the field of civil society separately, their points are similar with some other international scholars. For example, as Gainsborough noted “the Party-controlled mass organisation structure still persists” [22, p.481] or as Thayer raised a challenge for “how Vietnam's one-party state manages the challenges posed by political civil society” [8, p.1]. Thayer argued that there was an explosion of these groups in Vietnam from the early 1990s and that they often played a crucial role in community development such as “managing natural resources, combating environmental pollution, promoting development for a sustainable livelihood...” [8, p.5]. The role of these groups is likely more and more important in demonstrating the political efficacy of networking that espouses religious freedom, human rights and liberal democracy. From this context, Thayer concludes that “over the next few years Vietnam's one party state will face major challenges to performance as the basis of its legitimacy”, and challenges from “joint action by members of the ruling elite acting in concert with elements of political civil society in the long term” [8, p.23].

#### **4. Conclusion**

Thus, there has long been controversy in the research literature over the traditional model of a developmental state and a new debate about the components, or indeed model, of contemporary developmental states. The

concept of the developmental mindset offers a new, more dynamic, future-oriented way to investigate this debate, focusing on the perceptions of a range of developmental actors. In light of these debates, despite some different interpretations of aspects of Vietnam's developmental approach, it is clear from the literature that Vietnam's developmental strategy has vacillated between developmental state policies and a more neoclassical or even neoliberal approach to development. Most studies clearly show the proactive, autonomous role of Vietnamese state in leading the country's development and growth. These studies do explore issues around Vietnamese state's developmental strategies, in terms of the state apparatus, the role of political leader and the forms of state intervention in economic development. The focused ideational elements of Vietnamese developmental mindset are recognised around the themes - developmental leadership, industrial policy, management of other economic adjustment, and social and welfare policy.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This paper was edited by Etienne Mahler.

<sup>2</sup> Other varieties of state discussed in the literature include: competitive states, neoliberal states, welfare states and democratic states. Some of this fits with the varieties of capitalism literature.

<sup>3</sup> Post-Washington Consensus is a term used to describe the policies of the key international financial institutions, especially the World Bank and IMF, after the costs of the structural adjustment era or Washington Consensus policies, were agreed to be too high in terms of increases in poverty and misery (Engel 2010).

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