

Regional Community Building in East Asia: Problems and Prospects

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Opinion Paper

Abstract: *Consequent upon the realization that in the modern era, nations have most frequently had more to gain through cooperation and integrated economic relationship than through exclusive economic spheres, the states in East Asia have put in motion a process of shift from regionalization to regionalism. The construction of an East Asian Economic Community was proposed. The proposal anticipates the inclusion of the ten member countries of the ASEAN and Japan, Korea and China. The motivating forces behind this proposal are to increase mutual trade, and to construct a regional group that will offer the participating members trading and economic advantage in the world. But assailing this move has been plethora of problems. Questions of whether the aspiration for an East Asia Community will be forlorn and if the undeniable centrifugal forces that challenge the transformation of the dream into a living reality will be eclipsed, defines the aim of this paper.*

Keywords: *Regional Community, ASEAN, East Asia, Regionalism*

Introduction

The imperative for regional integration derives from the enormous economic dividends it yields to the participating members (see Balaam and Veseth 2003). For this, relations among states since the recent past have shown indications towards trans-national groupings and regional cleavages. As

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captured by Balaam and Veseth, “One of the most powerful dynamics of this era in world history is regionalism with increased drive on states to unite economies for greater efficiency and growth” This is akin to the ethos and philosophy of globalization which to some reasonable degree defines the current international order. This global wave that prompts regionalism does also move in East Asia, manifesting itself in the current collective drive by both Northeast and Southeast Asian states towards the construction of an East Asia Community (Zhang 2008). The new thrusts of regional community building have been thriving within the ASEAN framework. ASEAN, quickly led to ASEAN+3(APT), which created East Asian Vision Group (EAVG). This creation was followed closely by the establishment of East Asia Study Group (EASG) (Termask 2008). In 2002, EASVG submitted its report to ASEAN+3 which included inter-alia, a recommendation to establish an East Asia Summit. The contested assumption is that the expected East Asia Community will arise from the EAS.

The discussion on the possibility of integrated regional relationship and construction of an economic community in East Asia has tended to take the form of a debate between adherents of two distinct schools of thought: Realism and Idealism. According to the realists, international anarchy breeds competition and conflicts among states, and debilitates states’ willingness to cooperate even when they share common interests. The realists therefore, present a pessimistic analysis of the prospects for international cooperation (Grieco 2004, Friedberg 2000). The Waltzian definition of the world system as anarchic informs Lairson and Skidmore’s (2004) view that competition for relative gains among states makes cooperation difficult and tenuous. Still within the purview of the realist pessimist perspective of international cooperation, worry is expressed that there is accelerating emergence of multi-polar system in East Asia with a cluster of big powers like Japan, China, Russia and India. The logic is that the competing agendas resulting from this multi-polarity distances the reality of an integrated regional tie in the region. But idealists hold that in spite of barriers, cooperation is both possible and likely. Compared to realism, idealism offers more optimistic assessment of the

capacity of institutions to help states achieve cooperation. The idealists reject that international politics is that which centers on wars and threats of it. Rather, the belief is that beyond the threats of war, international politics include many actions motivated by the desire to collaborate with others so as to derive mutual benefits. With the triumph of idealism manifested in the realization of the European Union and the creation of regional economic blocs in America and other parts of the globe, this paper predicts a possibility on the current move by the East Asian states to form a regional economic community.

Historicizing Regionalism in East Asia

The idea of regional cooperation as a means to bring forth reconstruction and development to both traditional states and newly independent states in the region had not been high on the agenda in East Asia. As Liu and Reginier (2001) contained, with the semi-exception of ASEAN, regional cooperation has either been largely absent or has tended to embrace politico-military arrangements manipulated by superpowers for most East Asian nations during the Cold War period. The whole concept of regionalism has been perceived as foreign. East Asian nations were tied up with various domestic and external priorities which on the contrary, have had very little to do with any regional commitment. As the authors assert, regionalism became truly, a fashionable construct in East Asia of late. A comparative consideration of the developments in European, America and Africa's regions evidences and authenticates Liu Reginier's statement.

Historically, the first explicit but ill-fated attempt at constructing a regional grouping in East Asia was made by Japan during the World War II, in form of imperialist imposition of the Greater East Asia Co-operative Sphere, in the wake Japanese invasion and occupation. Understandably, this was rejected by peoples and countries in the region, whose interpretation of the move was in the angle of exclusive benefit to Japan, rather than a collective

interest (Zhang 2008, Wikipedia 2008). The creation of SEATO in the post World War II was not unconnected to the Cold War politics and the United States's desire to strengthen the anti-Soviet alliance, and solidify the political unity of the United States and its allies (Gilpin 2001).

Noteworthy is that the rationale for the two formations above was closely associated with the balance and counter balance of power strategies, and not so much with any sense of regional awareness. However, the attempts at regionalism did not wane. Convinced by the need to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of the colonial powers, and to discourage the further stepping in of outsiders, into the Southeast Asia, Thanom Khoman, the then foreign affairs minister of Thailand, initiated a cooperative move. The result was an embryonic organization, ASA, the Association of Southeast Asia, comprising Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. Soon after its creation in 1961, ASA ran into a snag. Quarrelsomeness and contestations over territorial borders became the defining feature of the relations among Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia. This turn of events spelled the collapse of the fledgling ASA.

1966 witnessed a larger grouping with the East Asians under a new organization known as ASPAC, Asian and Pacific Council. Calamity again rocked this formation as the admission of the People's Republic of China and the eviction of Taiwan made it impossible for council members to sit agreeably on the same conference table (Khoman: 2002).

While dispute paralyzed ASA, and fledgling ASPAC, Bangkok did not relax efforts at lasting and working regional cooperative body. In a meeting designed to address the age-long territorial disputes among disputants, Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines, the foreign affairs minister of Thailand initiated the idea of forming an organization for regional cooperation. This was afterwards consented to. With the signing of a short, simply worded document, the Bangkok Declaration, on the 8th of August, 1967, the Association of Southeast Asia Nations, ASEAN, was born. The membership comprised Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Philippines. Subsequently Vietnam, Cambodia,

Myanmar, Laos and Brunei joined, totaling the membership to its present ten. The stated aims include among others, collaboration in economic and related fields, regional peace and stability (Bangkok Declaration 1967). The evolution of ASEAN as a sub regional project was attended by some structural and systemic constraints (Zhang 2008, Khoma 2002). Before the end of the Cold War, regional community among ASEAN countries was at best tentative. The first ASEAN Summit took place only in 1976, almost a decade after its inauguration. Zhang (2008), summarized that in terms of economic integration and confidence building, both precursors to community construction, progress was limited, though encouraging.

Accelerated efforts at regional community construction could rightly be traced to the end of the Cold War. The post Cold War removed the strategic rationale that fragmented the region and hampered rational economic integration. This necessitated the imperative and the launch of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1989.

Alarmed by the growing competition from the mushrooming free trade areas in the world, including the formation of a single European market, the market integration between the US and Canada, and that between the US and Mexico, which led to NAFTA, dismayed by the slow progress in the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade relations, ASEAN began to improve its collective position in the face of the adverse world situation (Zhang 2008).

The idea to establish an East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) began to be espoused in the 1990s by Mahathir, Malaysian prime minister. His view was that countries in East Asia (Northeast +Southeast Asia), should do more in consultation and cooperation to help the economies in the region overcome their difficulties, given that ASEAN members were not strong enough to make a difference in world trade (Tersmak 2008).

The Asian financial crisis in 1997-1998 proved a catalyst for regional community construction in East Asia. It provoked the recognition that greater cooperation by Northeast Asia

and Southeast Asia is both necessary and beneficial, thus shaping the understanding of East Asia as a region. Consequently, the ASEAN+3 was established and subsequently institutionalized. Within the ASEAN +3 framework, determined thrusts of regional construction have been thriving. The East Asia Visionary Group (EAVG) was created in November 2000, by the ASEAN+3 Summit in Singapore, charged with the task of looking into the future of East Asia cooperation. The EAVG Report submitted to the ASEAN+3 leaders, proposed inter alia, the formation of an East Asia Community, establishment of an East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA), supplanting of ASEAN+3 with an East Asia Summit and the broadening of East Asia cooperation. This submission necessitated the swinging into action by the EASG, East Asia Study Group, with the mandate to “assess the recommendations of the EAVG, and to explore the idea and implications of an East Asia Summit” (Termask 2008:8). The completed study and report the EASG upheld many of the EAVG recommendations, including the creation of an East Asia Community, and designation of East Asia Summit as a vehicle driving East Asia Community building. This has been however, not without twists. Detailed discourse of this is reserved for the succeeding section.

Problems of Regional Community Building in East Asia

It remains incontestably factual that the match towards a community construction in East Asia has been assailed by forces that are centrifugal. One sure plaque that eats too deep into the fabric of the East Asia community building is the rather pathological, historically rooted feeling of animosity between China and Japan. Most of the conflicts between the two countries stem from questions that border around the World War 11 and the status of Taiwan. Many Chinese still believe Japan has never properly repented for her sins and atrocities committed during its brutal invasion in 1930s and 1940s, during which the notorious rape of Nanjing occurred. This has strained the relationship between the two countries, China and Japan. Three years ago, this resentment exploded into anti-Japan demonstrations in several Chinese cities (Times 2008). Recently, China voted

against Japanese membership in the UN council. Japan perceives China as a rising economic competitor and a rival political influence in the region. These problems are further exacerbated by other disputes such as competing territorial claims, ownership of oil and gas fields in the East China Sea, dove-tailing into the politics of East Asian regionalism in centrifugal terms. In his expressed pessimism on the actualization of a regional community in East Asia, which was informed by the two countries' tremendous lack of trust and anxiety for themselves Toshikiko (2004: 6) wrote "When you are talking of combining Japan, China and ASEAN, you are just really mixing apples and oranges. I think it is worthwhile to recognize that difference" Adding to this, is Watanabe's observation that efforts at deeper cooperation in the region are utterly unrealistic, since relations between Korea and Japan, and China and Taiwan, far from improving, are growing increasingly tense. As aptly captured by the address of the former president Fidel Rasmos of the Republic of Philippine,

Ballistic missiles are being built competitively on the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan straits. North Korea may have already developed the capability to target Alaska and the American west coast with its missiles; it has proved it can easily reach the vulnerable Japanese mainland. South Korea is negotiating with the United States the lengthening of the reach of its own missile systems, and Japan has agreed to take part in an American proposal for the coverage of its heartland by a theater-missile-defense system. Japan is also launching its own spy satellites - to give it independently early warning of any potential missile threat. On the other hand, Taiwan is apparently contemplating its own missile defense system - against what it sees as china's growing capability is cruise-missile technology. Most unsettling of all is a resurgent China's effort to project power beyond mainland East Asia - where its strategic authority is already widely accepted -to the continent's maritime regions - particularly into the South China Sea, which East Asia has long regarded as its maritime heartland. For sure, what must not be argued about is that, an intra-regional antagonistic relationship is antithetical to regional community building. (Global Forum 2000).

Regionalism in Asia has become increasingly rife due to competing agendas for regional integration. Contending visions and conditions have continued to be articulated and issued. Japan would support the ultimate goal of building an East Asia Community but on the condition that the rest of Asia accept the United States-Japanese alliance as the bedrock of Japanese foreign policy, and democracy, human rights, the rule of law, international law and norms, good governance and other universal values would replace the anodyne phrase of the East Asia Vision Group, 'peace, prosperity, and progress' as the basis for regional cooperation (Noble 2008). Basically, Japan's position may be informed by her western inclinations and political orientations, which unarguably, may be un-suiting to other members. With this, discord has been common in the leaders' meetings over what becomes the hub of the East Asia Community. Some hope that the EAS which includes ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand would be step towards building an East Asia Community, but a major debate ensued when China insisted on differentiating core group which includes the original ASEAN+3 nations, from the peripheral group: India, Australia and New Zealand. A contrary view holds that Australia, India and New Zealand will be a balancer to the growing China's power.

Inter alia, fuzzy and uncertainty over geographical definition still surrounds the expected community. As Zhang (2008) observed "it is hard to imagine a community without certain boundaries". The inclusion of Australia, New Zealand and China in the East Asia Summit (EAS) poses some difficulty in any attempt to geographically define the community under construction. The issue becomes more confusedly compounded with the consideration of the United States as a member. One wonders how this scenario of close involvement of a distant hegemon is applicable across the pacific. Besides the geo-definitional problem it poses, it makes fear likely that even if the East Asia Community becomes eventually constructed, the underlying aims for its creation may not be fulfilled. Among other reasons for the regional economic community, is to create a forum for regional economic freedom, which has been muzzled over the

years by the same external societies whose admittance as members into EAS is under the region's serious consideration. What again can be more perplexing? It boggles the mind imagining the rationale behind the EU and US membership of an East Asian regional body. Perhaps the question will need to be asked: Why is East Asian states not admitted into the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Organization (NATO), and Organization of American States (OAS)?

Begi (2005), an Indonesian scholar argues that the constituting members of ASEAN, ASEAN+3 and EAS that will hopefully integrate into the expected regional body, are historically more divided than united. The area in question encompasses a vast region with states of diverse religious beliefs, cultural traditions as well as ethnic groups. This is exacerbated by the diverse political systems, ideological patterns and differing levels of economic development and military attainments. Within ASEAN, pockets of grave poverty pose a threat to stability. Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are among the world's poorest countries; they must be helped to ingrate themselves into ASEAN's economic mainstream. Development schemes that ASEAN is already packaging -such as the Mekong river project and the Singapore-Kunming rail link - will stimulate growth in these countries. But they will need a lot of capital, technology and years to harvest significant benefits. Against such background, the journey from conceiving East Asia as a region to constructing East Asia as a regional community is daunting. Generally the fear is not entirely dismissed that the less powerful might be marginalized, re-colonized and swallowed up by the bigger states (Rasmus 2000). The clamour for the inclusion of India, Australia and New Zealand as a counter balance against China's possible and perceived overbearing tendencies, is well premised on this context. Needless to say, an atmosphere of this form makes effective regionalization leave more to be desired.

The vision of a regional community has been plagued by outside interferences especially by the US. These interferences are situated in the perception that the fast growing China may exploit the regional platform to increase

her geo-strategic might. Given China's ideological position, the feeling is not yet extricated from the mind of America that a new Cold War may upstart. Besides this strategic consideration, the Asian region which is becoming the global economic epicenter and the center of gravity for international relation in the 21st century is of large economic importance to the United States. The US exports to Asia is estimated at over 200 billion US dollars, accounting for nearly 25% of US total exports (Michalak 2006). This defines its competing interest in the region and its political affairs.

Prospects of Regional Community Construction in East Asia

The centrifugal force pitched against the success terrain of the region is indeed legion, but what might be encouraging is the noticeable common acceptance by the leaders in the region that cooperation for their future economic good is imperative. With this unflinching and concerted determination, surmounting their present obstacles looks possible. Common concerns today are driving East Asia to collaborate in ways that, though still lagging far behind the levels of cooperation achieved in Europe, could nevertheless be considered progressive in the Asian context. The post 1997 creation of regional financial arrangements in the hope of avoiding another 1997-style meltdown, the growth in regional intelligence, and law enforcement collaboration against the threats of terrorism and transnational criminal activities, the move by the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) towards regional collaboration in disaster relief operations following the recent spate of natural disasters and humanitarian crises in the region, and so on. (Begi 2005) These have been as Seng (2009:17) put it, "a fair bit of low key cooperative efforts that incrementally and subtly serve as building blocks for more substantive cooperation among the regional actors"

For two thousand years before the arrival of the Western powers, East Asian international relation order was Sino-centric (Huntington 1996). Most of the other states in the region have long traditions of either cooperating with or

being subordinate to China (Friedberg 2000) As Cohen (2000) will put it, Asians accept hierarchy, and indeed regard a clear ordering of relations as the key to domestic and international tranquility. Such attitude has deep roots in Confucian culture. Huntington (1996), suggests that similar patterns may well prevail in the future. With rapid Chinese power, Huntington predicts that the other East Asian states will be more likely to hop on the Chinese bandwagon, instead of joining together to balance the power of rising China (Friedberg 2000). In favour of this line of thought, Lairson and Skidmore (2004) reason that power relations matter considerably in cooperation. The existence of a single powerful state with significant economic resources and a strong commitment to regional international cooperation can play a key role in whether nations are able to work together. The hegemon's power advantages can be used to win support from other states that otherwise might be reluctant to participate in cooperative ventures.

The Sino-Japanese age-long antagonism and differences may not hang on forever. History is replete with examples that one time chronic animosities can at a time be consigned into the farthest past through a purpose-driven dialogue in a reconciliatory forum. History could be mined to demonstrate this possibility. France and Germany reconciled having had themselves smeared in several years of bitter antagonism and mutual suspicion. Today the Franco-German historical rivalry had to bend for a collective economic good under the European Union. East Asia can draw from this reservoir of example. The interesting fact of the Sino-Japanese Joint Statement, 1972, Peace and Friendship Treaty, 1978, and Sino-Japanese Joint Declaration, 1998, provide a solid political foundation and direction for the two countries to live in friendly co-existence.

The states have reasons to heal old wounds on the issue of the environment. This was a top topic of discussion when in May 2008, presidents Hu Jintao and Yasuo Fukuda met in Tokyo. The two leaders both agreed to place particular priority on working together in green technologies. Since 1999, Japan has extended 6.8 billion dollars in loans for environmental projects in China (Times 2008). Many more

examples like China's request for aid from Japan for the victims of May's earthquake in Sichuan, Sino-Japanese agreement in June, 2008 to jointly develop disputed natural gas fields in East China Sea, and the recent docking of a Japanese warship in a Chinese port for the first time since after the World War 11, are serious indicators that the need for a collective regional community for East Asia will make collaboration between the two giants possible.

The problem of diversity within the East Asia region and the fear of the weak and the less developed in the march towards community construction is understandable. But the European Union should remain an encouraging example. The EU equally faced challenges. The members are diverse. In terms of population, they range from the island of Malta with 400,000 citizens, to Germany, France, and United Kingdom with 82.3 million, 59.2 million and 58.8 million respectively. The new entrants are diverse. From an economic standpoint, only Cyprus and Slovenia have per capita income are roughly comparable to previous EU members. Latvia's per capita income is just a tenth of Denmark's (Balaam and Veseth 2005). Taken as a group, the new members of the EU do not have very much successful experience of the institutions of capitalism, democracy and rule of law that are necessary for them to achieve successful union with their European neighbours. If this reality can hold centripetally for the EU, it can also happen for East Asia.

Conclusion

East Asia encompasses vastly different political and economic systems. Religious and cultural cleavages are often intense and centrifugal. Unresolved territorial conflicts are numerous, and several of the world's most powerful nation-states have competing interests in the region. With so much combustible tinder spread across the region, reducing mutual mistrust is imperative. Though history, cultural diversity and economic rivalries continue to fragment East Asia, but in events in the world make it clear that there are no alternatives to closer economic integration and political solidarity for East Asia. The objective should be to replace the balance of power as the organizer of state relationship in

East Asia with the balance of mutual benefit. East Asia has little choice but to construct a new architecture for the region's community building. The key question is not whether East Asia will integrate. It is how quickly.

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