Regionalism in Asia as Disguised Multilateralism: A Critical Analysis of the East Asia Summit and the Trans-Pacific Partnership

David Camroux

Revolving around the concept of ‘Community’ or ‘community’, debate on an Asian region has ostensibly pitted those who proposed an entity limited to East Asia (China, Japan, South Korea and the ten countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN) against those who proposed a much wider region embracing India, North (and, perhaps, South) America, as well as Australasia. Previously these two conceptualisations possessed their eponymous translation in the East Asian Economic Caucus (reincarnated as ASEAN+3) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. However, with the creation in 2005 of the East Asian Summit to include India, Australia and New Zealand and, above all, its 2011 enlargement to include the United States and Russia, the contrast between the two conceptualisations of an Asian region has become confused. In order to explain this development, this article suggests that the language of ‘region’ or ‘community’ is a discursive smoke-screen disguising changes in approaches to multilateralism. An examination of the East Asia Summit, contrasting it with another recent regional project, the Trans Pacific Partnership, suggests that the actors involved are seeking to ensure the primacy of individual nation states in intergovernmental multilateral relations.

Keywords: multilateralism, regionalism, regional integration, Asian community, East Asia Summit, Trans Pacific Partnership

David Camroux is Senior Researcher – Senior Lecturer at Sciences Po (CERI), Paris. Email: david.camroux@sciences-po.fr. This article draws on Camroux, “The East Asia Summit”. Thanks to Mark Beeson, Lorenzo Fioramonti, Julie Smith and three anonymous reviewers for suggestions for improvement to earlier drafts. Also, my appreciation to Deborah Elms and John Ravenhill for providing me with access to some of their as yet unpublished work. Research for this article was conducted under the auspices of the project, ‘Mercury: Multilateralism and the EU in the contemporary global order’, funded through the EU FP7 programme (Project ID: SSH-CT-2008-225267).
Defining Asia is not at all self-evident. During the last quarter of the 19th century with the high age of Western imperialism and the related rise of movements for national independence, a larger Sino-Indic conceptualisation of ‘Asia’ was much more to the fore amongst Asians themselves. This notion of Asia reached its apex at the Afro-Asian summit in Bandung in 1955: an event, as argued by Acharya, that determined many of the norms of regionalism and multilateral behaviour in Asia.1 With India’s growing domestically focused policies after independence and within the context of the Cold War, this notion fell into abeyance until the 1990s and the launch of the ‘Look East’ policy of the then Indian finance minister, and later prime minister, Manmohan Singh. At this point India can be said, at least rhetorically, to have entered into the Asian developmental state schema that in various nuances is a common characteristic of East Asia.2

If defining Asia has had its pitfalls, describing Asian regional integration has also posed a challenge for scholars, especially in terms of trying to differentiate it from forms of regional integration elsewhere, particularly the European Union (EU), which remains, for better or worse, a reference point in terms of institutionalisation. With the notable exception of IR scholars of a constructivist persuasion,3 both neorealists and scholars in the IPE school have raised serious reservations about Asian regional integration,4 suggesting that process overwhelms substance. In this context it is not surprising that a plethora of adjectives to qualify Asian regionalism have emerged starting with the term “open regionalism” associated with APEC and the Japanese approach5 and moving more recently to concepts of “monetary regionalism”, “regulatory regionalism”, “networked regionalism”, “mandalic regionalism” and “strategic regionalism”.6 Defining its limits has led to formulating expressions such as “frustrated regionalism”, “reactive regionalism” and “reactionary regionalism”.7

The article is concerned with examining the various (often confusing) trajectories of regional integration in Asia. Such processes may involve not only forms of intraregional cooperation and ostensible community building, but also forms of bilateralism and, above all, multilateralism. In particular, what if the processes involved were only limited to the latter? What if, in other words, ‘region’ and

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1 Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter?*
2 Devare, *India and Southeast Asia*.
4 Jones and Smith, “Constructing Communities”; and Ravenhill, “East Asian Regionalism”, respectively.
5 For APEC, see Ravenhill, *APEC and Pacific Rim Regionalism*; and for the Japanese approach: Terada, “The Origins of Japan’s APEC Policy”, and “Constructing an ‘East Asian’ Concept”.
7 Nair, “Regionalism in the Asia Pacific/East Asia”; Searight, “The United States and Asian Economic Regionalism”; Beeson, “ASEAN Plus three”, respectively.
‘regionalism’ were merely misleading labels to indicate multilateral behaviour within a geographically defined area? This article aims at answering these questions by providing an analysis of the East Asian Summit in comparison with, yet another, regionalism initiative, the Trans Pacific Partnership. The choice of comparing these two case studies is prompted by three considerations. First, and most importantly, they are ostensibly examples of, respectively, East Asian regional integration and trans-Pacific regional integration. Second, they are both recent creations (and thus relatively unstudied) whose memberships are in a state of flux and whose trajectories would appear to be conflicting. Finally, they are, at least potentially, elements in new forms of global governance.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with an overview of theories of multilateralism and then discusses the origins of the East Asian Summit prior to turning, in the third section, to its enlargement to Russia and the United States (US) in 2011. Through an overview of the Trans-Pacific Partnership provided in the fourth section, it is then suggested that similar factors are also at play in this new regional integration. Based on this analysis, therefore the article concludes by resituating the language of ‘region’ in contemporary Asia.

**Multilateralism clothed in regionalism?**

According to one of its most well known scholars, John Ruggie, multilateralism is a difficult notion to pin down. He defined it as a “generic institutional form” involving coordination among three or more states and relying on generalised principles of conduct, indivisibility and diffuse reciprocity.\(^8\) With time and the rapid evolution of the global system over the last two decades, such a definition has been found wanting, on the one hand, for failing to take into account the role of non-state actors and, on the other, for being preconditioned on the existence of institutions. Thus, this article takes as its definition a broader and institutionally neutral definition proposed by Bouchard and Peterson, which understands multilateralism as “three or more actors engaging in voluntary (and essentially) institutionalised international cooperation governed by norms and principles, with rules that apply (by and large) equally to all states”.\(^9\)

Taking into account this wider and more satisfactory definition of multilateralism and returning to the original formulation by John Ruggie does provide insights into an analysis of ostensible regionalism. In particular, his insistence on the importance of architectural design is of direct relevance.\(^10\) Indeed the trope “regional architecture” is a constant theme for political actors in Asia and the

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Asia-Pacific referring to the multilateral structures they are seeking, rhetorically at least, to put in place. Ruggie’s reference to the early 19th century “Concert of Europe” as a first example of such a framework is of particular salience. For example, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s promotion of what was depicted as an equivalent 21st century “Concert of Asia” led to a hostile reaction from his Asian peers. Moreover, qualifiers such as “nominal” and “qualitative”, or “formal” and “substantive” applied to multilateralism have their echoes in discussions of regional integration.

James Caporaso’s further refinement of the concept of multilateralism also provides useful insights for thinking of ‘regionalism’. He argues that much of ostensible “multilateralism” is in fact some form of “aggregate bilateralism”, a description that is particularly appropriate for three quarters of the free trade agreements that exist in the Asia-Pacific today, which are purely bilateral, despite some claims to their regional purvey. Caporaso furthermore indicates that multilateralism involves “shared language and norms”, the very aspects that constructivist scholars see as lying at the heart of Asian regional integration.

Finally, part of the difficulty in using ‘multilateralism’ as a concept is that it is an ‘ism’, a doctrine that has evolved over time and the pursuit of which, depending on one’s standpoint, may be considered positively or negatively. For example, Chinese policymakers profess a “sovereignty based multilateralism” that, while recognising economic interdependence and a concomitant acceptance of some degree of multilateral oversight of such issues, regards questions such as human rights and civil liberties as purely domestic matters. The language of regionalism would appear to offer a solution to resolving some of the domestic-global tensions, for it can be seen as an acceptable face/form of multilateralism legitimised by reference to accepted, and much vaunted, aspects of economic and socio-cultural (but not political) integration. Political actors in East Asia may not be ready to proclaim themselves ‘citizens of the world’, but they would glory in their membership of a (dynamic) Asian world. Be that as it may, as suggested below, ‘regionalism’ as doctrine also poses its own difficulties.

The East Asian Summit: the first phase

The East Asian Summit (EAS) is generally conceptualised as a putative East Asian Community, at least a community with a small ‘c’. Yet, if examined empirically it is not more than a regular summit or, as expressed by an eminent American scholar,

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11 This was indeed the impression this author gleaned during informal conversation with Southeast Asian participants when attending the conference organised by the Australian Foreign and Trade Ministry in Sydney (3–4 December 2009) to promote the idea of an Asia-Pacific community.
13 Wu, “Chinese Perspectives on East Asian Community”, 68.
“a dinner followed by sixteen speeches”. The summit is an annual half-day meeting tacked onto the annual summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN+3 meeting (involving also China, Japan and South Korea) as well as a series of bilateral summits with the US. Unlike ASEAN summits, which are the culmination of literally hundreds of meetings between ASEAN policymakers supported by a permanent secretariat in Jakarta (Indonesia), the EAS is a one-off event in which the photo-op is the message. While there are usual meetings among ‘sherpas’ (senior officials) before the event, there is no permanent secretariat or even permanent institutional arrangements, with the ASEAN Secretariat acting merely as a clearing house. In spite of its lack of institutionalisation, the EAS has become the avenue through which the Obama administration has been attempting to re-engage with Asia and, as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently declared, “half of diplomacy is getting there”.

“One Vision, One Identity, One Community”: the banners adorning the streets of Kuala Lumpur in December 2005 revealed the grandiose ambitions of the Malaysian hosts for the first EAS, which followed the usual ASEAN Summit. They also revealed many ambiguities in defining Asian regional integration. The key question in this context was whether the intergovernmental meeting being promoted was that of the ten ASEAN governments or the extended group of ASEAN+3 (with China, Japan and South Korea). Eventually, the invitation was extended to a larger group of countries, including India, Australia and New Zealand, as had been envisaged for several years. Behind the tedious international relations algebra lay an important issue: Southeast Asia’s cohesiveness and centrality in the construction of a putative (East) Asian Community, against the backdrop of an economically powerful and diplomatically assertive China and the ‘return’ of India to Asia.

The first two days of the ASEAN summit in 2005 saw the Association being concerned with its own internal consolidation, having fully recovered from the economic crisis of 1997. By expressing demands for tangible political reforms in Burma/Myanmar, the Association broke with its sacrosanct principle of non-interference. Moreover, the appointment of an Eminent Persons Group to draft an ASEAN Charter demonstrated that the Association had finally come to grips with establishing rules for club membership. Perhaps the greatest success for the summit chair, then Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, was to ensure ASEAN’s centrality in the process of regional construction, at least rhetorically. To use the shorthand language of the summit, ASEAN would remain in the ‘driver’s seat’ and future annual East Asian Summits would be held in ASEAN countries ‘back-to-back’ with the Association’s annual meetings.

14 Emmerson, Asian Regionalism and US Policy, 2.
Given Sino-Japanese rivalry and the unwillingness of the governments of either country to accept the leadership of the other, by default ASEAN remained the least unacceptable alternative as regional coordinator, a view ostensibly also held by new invitees such as India, Australia and New Zealand. In the diplomatic formula endorsed by the EAS, a compromise was reached with respect to the definition of a potential East Asian Community being defined by the ASEAN+3, with India, Australia and New Zealand sharing common interests. However, at the same time, in the jargon of ‘inclusiveness’ and ‘openness’ common to the EAS rhetoric, the Asian Community was seen as extending to embrace all these countries plus Russia. Regions, as Katzenstein once suggested, are porous entities indeed.\(^{16}\)

Nevertheless, the summit demonstrated divisions within ASEAN. While Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia supported an expansion of the ASEAN+3 formula, Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam were in favour of a more restricted membership. Most Asian actors had, and continue to have, rather different expectations with regard to an Asian community. For example, documents emanating from major pro-governmental think tanks in South Korea and Singapore have been advocating a putative East Asian community, essentially an exercise in confidence-building concerned primarily with security issues.\(^{17}\)

By the time the second EAS took place, there had been two important developments in China. The first was a realisation by the Chinese leadership that, in order to limit the impact of the inevitable enlargement of the ‘Asian community’ to India (as well as Australia and New Zealand), it ought to complete the negotiations for an East Asian inner circle (i.e. ASEAN+3) in which China would be the main player through a China–ASEAN free trade area.\(^{18}\) The second development was a decision to subordinate these intraregional evolutions to a number of bilateral initiatives, for example, by securing energy supplies in Africa or Australia and by reinforcing relations with Central Asia. At the same time, on the multilateral level, the Chinese leadership decided, albeit reluctantly, to reassess the value of the renminbi slightly, thus contributing to readjusting global trade balances.

From the second summit onwards, there has been a growing acceptance that the creation of the EAS was a superficial addition to Asia’s complex regional architecture. In the words of the late Hadi Soesastro, “the creation of new clubs did not necessarily mean progress”.\(^{19}\) Moreover its creation did not diminish the search for bilateral solutions, especially the pursuit of free trade. On the contrary, the five years following the first summit saw an acceleration in this process in the Asia Pacific, a development discussed below.

\(^{16}\)Katzenstein, *A World of Regions*.

\(^{17}\)Kwon and Hong, “Challenges for East Asian Summit” (in Korean); and Malik, “The East Asia Summit”.


\(^{19}\)Soesastro, “East Asia: Many Clubs, Little Progress”, 53.
EAS enlargement: widening trumps deepening

During the five years following the first two summits, differing conceptualisations of an Asian region continued to compete. With the ratification of the ASEAN Charter in 2009, the Association not only made a further step towards institutionalisation but also became a recognised legal entity in international law. The ASEAN Secretariat found representation both as an invitee to the G20 but also within the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). The latter also experienced two enlargements, firstly with India and Mongolia in 2008 and then with the participation of Australia, New Zealand and Russia in 2010. These enlargements further challenged a purely East Asian conceptualisation of the Asian region while raising questions about the efficacy of a body now comprising some 47 members.20

Moreover, the proposal to extend EAS membership to the US and Russia ratified in December 2010, despite receiving little media attention, proved to be a crucial development, given that it will effectively confirm the de-Asianisation of the EAS. Given previous Chinese hostility to such an enlargement, the US’ reticence to engage regionally, and Japan’s notorious difficulties when it comes to exercising regional leadership, this development represents a watershed in Asia-Pacific relations. Such an enlargement is worthy of explanation. Paradoxically it occurs against the background of the ousting of the two political leaders in Asia and the Pacific who had been most vocal in articulating a vision of an Asian community in the first two years of their shortened terms: Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his Japanese counterpart, Hatoyama Yukio. While Rudd had agitated for an Asia-Pacific community involving the US, Hatoyama had been ambiguous and ambivalent about potential US membership, reflecting disagreements amongst Japanese political leaders and their ministries on the subject.21

A number of authors have argued that this process is a consequence of China’s preference for engagement in multilateral fora, partly due to domestic pressures. China has become a normal status quo power whose foreign relations are subordinated to domestic political objectives.22 Although China may not yet be a hegemonic power in Asia, it is nonetheless clear that US dominance is not as assured or unchallenged as it once was.23 Prior to the current global economic crisis, China was already an international power with global ambitions. The crisis has seen a rapid acceleration of this trend, with China becoming the lender of last resort in Europe and the US, while bank-rolling infrastructure development amongst its southern neighbours.
Since the first EAS in 2005, while the Chinese may still remain cautious concerning regional institutionalisation, their view of multilateralism has evolved to the extent that they are no longer preoccupied with excluding the US from the region. Within China, many analysts and policymakers recognise that an international order requires multilateral norms and must be inclusive. Outside of China there is an increasingly wide spectrum of views about Beijing’s foreign policy and its regional policy, which is much more nuanced than the traditional dichotomy between the so-called ‘panda huggers’ and ‘dragon bashers’. Carlson has highlighted the re-emergence of the concept of tianxia (all under heaven) in Chinese foreign relations discourse as a reflection at the multilateral level of the ideal of a harmonious society traditionally applied to the Chinese domestic context. This is not to suggest that the objective of a Sino-centric regional order, or a new form of tributary system, has fallen by the wayside. Rather, these objectives have been subsumed under a global commitment to multilateralism within the international environment.

The consequence is a reformulation of Chinese foreign policy in terms of multiple levels of multilateralism in which the pan-Asian, Asia-Pacific and Eurasian are placed in an evolving hierarchy. At the same time, Chinese reassurance for its neighbours about the continuity of the Middle Kingdom’s benign intentions was certainly required and acceptance of an EAS enlargement would reassure the countries of the Asia-Pacific of China’s inclusive peaceful intentions, at minimal political cost. As evidenced by the Defence White Papers published in 2009 and 2010 of the United States’ major allies in the Western Pacific, Australia and Japan, there has been increasing apprehension in the Asia-Pacific region on significantly increased Chinese military expenditure, the acquisition of increasingly sophisticated weaponry (such as missiles and stealth aircraft) and the enlargement of a blue water navy (including the planned construction of an aircraft carrier).

This rapprochement with the US has been taking place in the context of potential divisions within ASEAN. Indeed, forms of de facto economic regionalisation based on China-led production chains and industrial cooperation mechanisms could potentially have the effect of dividing ASEAN between its mainland members and its island members. Propelled by the Chinese government, and with the support of the (Japanese-led and partly Western-financed) Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Greater Mekong Sub-Region has become the most dynamic part of Southeast Asia. Nominally its membership includes Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, as well as the two southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi.

24 Chung, “China’s Approaches to Regional Multilateralism”.
25 Zhang, China and Asian Regionalism.
27 Carlson, “Moving beyond Sovereignty?”.
The ADB alone has contributed a third of the approximately USD11 billion of infrastructure investment since 2000, the lion’s share of the remainder coming from China. In Myanmar alone in 2010, the Chinese invested some USD8 billion in oil, gas and hydropower and agreed to USD80 billion in investment projects in Cambodia. These forms of economic integration on the ground will see mainland Southeast Asia, along with Yunnan and Guangxi, served by a Chinese sponsored, integrated network of high-speed rail networks, pipelines and highways by 2020. Following the China–ASEAN free trade agreement that came into force in January 2010, which in reality involves individual agreements with ASEAN members, it is not unreasonable to see these developments, clearly related to China’s rise, as being harbingers of future divisions within ASEAN.

While the above-mentioned evolutions allowed for a gradual re-integration of America’s presence in Southeast Asia, the US’ re-engagement with Asia can be traced to the election of Honolulu–born Barack Obama as the first self-proclaimed Pacific president of the United States. In relation to thinking in Washington and the Beltway on the East Asian Summit, one useful indicator is a comparison of two documents from the Congressional Research Service, one dating from the time of the EAS’ inception and the second five years later.28 In the former, the EAS was considered mildly inimical to US interests. While it was realised that expressing strong US opposition would be counterproductive, it was hoped that “it would simply ‘die on the vine’ leaving APEC as the premier venue for regional cooperation”.29 This did not happen and in the latter document the EAS is presented as a body to be potentially embraced. In taking office as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, began a campaign to demilitarise American foreign relations and to put greater emphasis on diplomatic means. The first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review published in late 2010 proclaimed a first priority in adapting to the new international environment as “building our capacity to organize ourselves regionally and work through regional organizations”.30 A year later, in a significant article in Foreign Policy (November 2011) entitled “America’s Pacific Century”, she reiterated that the US was an indispensable player in Asia and the Pacific and that it would invest in regional organisations. For David Capie and Amitav Acharya, US participation in the EAS has a triple significance. First, it demonstrates that ASEAN+8 (with Russia and the US) has become a crucial pattern for regional cooperation. Second, as argued above, it shows the US placing regional institutions at the heart of its new Asia policy, a major change from the previous stress on bilateralism. Third, heightened US interest in regional

28 Vaughn, East Asian Summit: Issues for Congress; and Nanto, East Asian Regional Architecture, respectively.
30 US State Department, Leading through Civilian Power, 52.
multilateralism comes at a time when China sees such institutions as an irritation and constraint on its power.\textsuperscript{31}

As for the Chinese and Japanese leaderships, this new approach on the part of the US is not seen as necessarily undermining either unilateralism or hub and spokes bilateralism,\textsuperscript{32} but rather as a potentially useful adjunct. It is also a reactive approach prompted by concerns with China’s increasing global activism and the interdependence between the US and China, strengthened by the global economic crisis. Contrary to much popular opinion, the rise of China’s military power in Asia and its increasing assertiveness is seeing a related increase in American influence, one to which the political and economic elites of the smaller Asian and Australasian countries – ever keen to balance and hedge against China – are quite receptive.\textsuperscript{33}

Between the US and China, the point of convergence would appear to be around the position advocated for some time by the Japanese. The Japanese provided much of the intellectual input prior to the first summit, as they had previously on the ASEAN+3 concept.\textsuperscript{34} Yet, till the appointment of Kan Naoto as prime minister in June 2010, the internal disagreement about building an Asia-Pacific regional body (one usually associated with the Japanese Foreign Ministry) and that of an exclusively East Asian body (usually associated with the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) remain unresolved. Former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, like his successor Hatoyama Yukio, was more favourably disposed toward the ASEAN+3 project of regional cooperation, while continuing to pay lip service to APEC.\textsuperscript{35} Nevertheless, the Japanese were also the strongest advocates of Indian (and Australian and New Zealand) membership of the East Asian Summit as a balancing measure in relation to China.\textsuperscript{36} Yet two factors militated for the extension of the Summit to include the United States, albeit at the price of membership of Russia with which the Japanese have a longstanding territorial dispute. On the one hand, in pursuing the logic of balancing a China whose economic (and military) potency seem even more threatening in 2011 than in 2005, a US presence seemed increasingly desirable.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, following the devastating tsunami that struck Japan in March 2011, the Japanese leadership has sought to balance a kind of introversion

\textsuperscript{32}For unilateralism, see Cumings, “History and Practice of Unilateralism”; for bilateralism, Hemmer and Katzenstein, “Why is there no NATO in Asia?”.
\textsuperscript{33}Sutter, “Assessing China’s Rise”.
\textsuperscript{34}Terada, “Constructing an ‘East Asian’ Concept”.
\textsuperscript{35}Koizumi, Japan and ASEAN in East Asia.
\textsuperscript{36}Terada, “The Origins of ASEAN+6”.
\textsuperscript{37}Sohn, “Japan’s New Regionalism”; and Sudo, “Japan’s ASEAN Policy”.

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with a new regional internationalism. On the other, the global economic crisis has
seen a revival of the concept of ‘open regionalism’ central to APEC. Like their
counterparts in China and the US, the Japanese political and economic elites
see their regional actorness as subsidiary to Japan’s global role. From this per-
spective an enlarged EAS would be a useful, if minor, adjunct to a G20 in which
Asian countries have at last found a place commensurate with their economic
weight.

Coming just a week after the APEC Summit at which the Trans Pacific
Partnership was vigorously promoted, the Fifth East Asia Summit in Bali on 19
November 2011 saw US President Barack Obama reinforcing his message that the
US had returned to, and remained central in Asia. The new dynamics at play saw
Chinese president, Wen Jiabao, chided by virtually all the other leaders present for
his country’s position on the South China Seas.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership: free trade vs regionalism

Although the EAS may, at a superficial level, be an indication of a new impetus to
regional integration, we have seen that there are reasons to doubt that this is the
case. The Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 did not trigger deeper integration,
despite a number of important reforms. The Chiang Mai Initiative, which permits
swaps between Asian central banks, has been mentioned as an example of ‘mone-
tary regionalism’. However its impact on regionalisation is largely exaggerated
given that only 10 percent of the funds can be disbursed without the agreement of
the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. More substantive institutional
creations such as an Asian Bond Market, an Asian Monetary Fund or even a
common currency have not yet materialised and, for all we know, may never see
the light of the day. Even the global economic crisis of 2008 did not spur a new
wave of Asian regional solidarity. Although Asia was only marginally affected by the
downturn, it is surprising that no major political leader took the opportunity to
proclaim the decline of the West and promote a pan-Asian agenda.

Since the Asian financial crisis, we have seen a twofold tendency in the region.
On the one hand, a questioning of the reliance on exports and a concomitant
concern to build up domestic economies. For political elites, both internal factors,
namely the need to strengthen their political legitimacy, and external ones, the
shrinking markets in the US and Europe due to the crisis, are engendering this
focus on national markets. On the other, there has been a proliferation of free trade
agreements in Asia and the Asia-Pacific. According to the ADB, the number of

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38. Oga, “Open Regionalism and Regional Governance”.
39. Fukushima, “Japan’s Perspective on Asian Regionalism”.
40. Dieter and Higgott, “Alternative Theories of Economic Regionalism”.

agreements increased from just three in 2000 to 61 at the end of 2010. Furthermore, another 79 are either being negotiated or proposed.\textsuperscript{41} Yet these agreements hardly provide evidence of multilateralism, let alone, regionalism within Asia, as 77 percent of them are bilateral arrangements.

The ADB sees four factors underlying the spread in the last decade of FTAs: deepening market driven integration; a response to economic integration in the EU and North America; a reaction to the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis; and a reflection of disenchantment with the slow progress in the WTO Doha negotiations. Political economists add two more factors: first, a catching-up effect, that is, a fear of being left out if neighbouring countries are signing free trade agreements and, second, in the case of the agreement signed with the US, an expression of the instrumentalisation of trade as part of a global securitisation strategy.\textsuperscript{42} Most of the debate on FTAs centres on whether they contribute ultimately to global free trade. On the one hand, there are bodies such as the ADB and some trade economists who see them as building blocks or a matrix\textsuperscript{43} for a pan-Asian or Asia-Pacific FTA, a part of a global movement to free trade. On the other, there are those who, following Jagdish Bhagwati, see the development of the ‘spaghetti bowl’ as undermining the movement towards free trade at both the regional and global levels.\textsuperscript{44}

The proliferation of free trade agreements reveals a good deal about regionalism/multilateralism in Asia, as demonstrated by the recent attempts to create a Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership, also known as Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP has its origins in the P4 agreement that came into force in 2006 between four of the smallest countries in the Asia-Pacific: Brunei, Chile, New Zealand and Singapore. In the last days of the George W. Bush administration in September 2008, the US announced that it would join the talks when the P4 partners began working on the final chapters in the agreement concerned with financial services and investment. However actual participation in talks waited until the Obama administration determined its trade policy with the American president himself announcing in Tokyo on 14 November 2009 that they would join the talks. In the first round of negotiations in 2010, the new US Trade Representative, Ron Kirk, was joined by his counterparts from Australia, Peru and Vietnam, and later by the Malaysian delegation, a negotiator of symbolic significance for previous Malaysian governments had been staunch defenders of a purely East Asian regional construct. According to some proponents of the TPP,\textsuperscript{45} including the ADB, this partnership is the single most important US trade

\textsuperscript{41} Kawai and Ganeshan, \textit{Asian FTAs}, 4.
\textsuperscript{42} Dent, “Free Trade Agreements in the Asia-Pacific”; and Ravenhill, “East Asian Regionalism”, respectively.
\textsuperscript{43} Baldwin, “Spaghetti Bowls as Building Blocks” and Petri, \textit{Noodle Bowl or Matrix?}, respectively.
\textsuperscript{44} Dent, “Free Trade Agreements in the Asia-Pacific”.
\textsuperscript{45} Bergsten, \textit{Pacific Asia and the Asia Pacific}; and Barfield, “The Trans-Pacific Partnership”. 108
initiative in Asia of the past few years. One estimate from the East-West Centre has the TPP contributing annual welfare gains rising to USD104 billion annually by 2025. These benefits could increase to USD862 billion if a mega Free-Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) were to emerge, one that consolidates, and goes beyond, the current ‘noodle bowl’ of smaller bilateral trade agreements.46

Thus, the TPP is, in a sense, the latest evolution of an Asia-Pacific free trade agreement as initially envisaged a quarter of century ago at the time of the creation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Like the latter, its establishment needs to be situated in the global context. Just as APEC was seen as an antidote to the problems in the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations that ultimately led to the establishment of the World Trade Organisation, so the agitation around the TPP is linked to rather pessimistic assessments of the Doha Round as well as a reaction to EU-led free trade areas. In other words, opting for ‘microlateralism’ (i.e. regionally bordered multilateralism) has become a default option due to the limits of bilateralism and the impossibility of achieving global multilateralism. In this regard Anne Capling and John Ravenhill see four distinctive features of the TPP:47 it is trans-regional (Asia-Pacific); it is designed as a political signal symbolising the ‘return’ of the US in Asia; it attempts to deal with regulatory policies; it aims to achieve the APEC goal of free trade amongst its members; and most significantly from the perspective of this article, it seeks to “multilateralise regionalism” by rationalising existing FTAs, being open to future members.

Despite the initial enthusiasm, the Japanese government postponed its decision as to whether to participate in the talks, mainly due to internal divisions. Once again Japanese political actors appear to be caught between their country’s bilateral relationship with the US – and a related Asia-Pacific focus – and the continuing salience of a pan-Asian region. The change from the long rule of the Liberal Democratic Party to that of the Democratic Party (DJP) has not resolved this dilemma. On the contrary, on the eve of the APEC Summit held in Honolulu on 12–13 November 2011 and despite the overwhelming support of the Japanese Business Federation (Keidanren) the DJP’s third prime minister in as many years, Noda Yoshihiko, when faced with the lobbying efforts of the agricultural community and their defenders in the Diet, still remained non-committal.48

Within the US, disagreements of a different kind exist: between labour unions and employers, between manufacturers and those in the service industries, amongst producers of agricultural products, etc.49 Furthermore, the poisonous political climate in the US Congress in the run-up to the 2012 presidential elections did not bode well for the ratification of any FTA, let alone one that was not bilateral.

46Petri et al., The Trans-Pacific Partnership.
47Capling and Ravenhill, “Multilateralising Regionalism”.
49Elms, “From the P4 to the TPP”.
Moreover, as Gannon suggests, “elite attitudes towards an East Asia community are linked to the dynamics of the trilateral China-Japan-US relationship” and Beijing has neither been invited nor sought to participate in the TPP. 50 Indeed from a Chinese perspective, the TPP is likely to be seen as a fait accompli in the evolution of the regional trade regimes to which Beijing will have to acquiesce or, more negatively, as a strategy to hedge against a more globally assertive China.

Expectations had been lowered, with a meeting of the 21 APEC trade ministers in Montana in May 2011 agreeing merely on a joint statement to push for “the broad outlines of an agreement by November” of that year. 51 It thus remained debatable whether the APEC Leaders Summit of 3 and 4 November 2011 in Hawaii would resolve what Pempel calls the economic-security nexus in US approaches to regional integration. 52

Despite significant opposition from his own Democrat Party – and the vociferous opposition of the agricultural lobby in Japan – Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko was more receptive to the entreaties of the Japanese Employer’s Federation, the Keidanren, and announced just prior to his arrival in Honolulu that Japan would indeed participate in the negotiations for the TPP. 53 From the Japanese perspective, a TPP without China in the initial negotiations would be one that could be used later as a lever against its main rival. At the same time, however, Prime Minister Noda reiterated that he was committed to negotiating a northeast Asian agreement with China and Korea. Japanese involvement in the TPP has prompted both the Canadian and Thai governments to announce they are also contemplating joining in the negotiations. With the East Asia Summit previously discussed, the APEC Summit in Hawaii demonstrated both the level of US recommitment to Asia under the Obama administration and a return to the conceptualisation of the Asia-Pacific as a region, which was very much en vogue in the mid-1990s.

**Conclusions**

Over one decade into the new millennium, conceptions of region in Asia still remain in a state of both competition and complementarity. Ultimately, finding a conception of an Asian region that reconciles economic imperatives with underlying geopolitical concerns, while still being able to generate a sense of adhesion/identification continues to be an elusive task. Yet it could well be a task that does not in fact preoccupy many political leaders in Asia and the Pacific. As one Thai

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52Pempel, “Soft Balancing, Hedging and Institutional Darwinism”.
scholar has aptly phrased the question, “Who wants an East Asian Community (and who doesn’t)?”54 Perhaps Asian regional integration is a little like Saint Augustine’s chastity, something to be prayed for, but not quite yet. The global economic crisis has accelerated a number of developments already en train, the most important being the virtual emergence of a China–US ‘G2’, although both parties would vehemently deny its existence. The result has been, at least potentially, a new injection of life into the Asia-Pacific multilateral project that, only a few years ago, was considered largely superseded by the East Asian regionalisation project. However it would be premature to judge whether this will mean a revival of APEC or the creation or strengthening of another structure, such as the EAS. As the foregoing analysis suggests, the Obama doctrine implying a military recommitment in Asia would militate, on the economic level, for a strengthened APEC-like structure such as the TPP. At the same time, Russia would seem, as part of a hedging strategy, to wish to play an active role in the East Asian Summit as a ‘regional’ element of its own ‘Look East’ strategy which has, for example, seen the development budget for Vladivostok increase massively from USD241.2 million to USD13.7 billion in the last five years.55

As this article has argued, concepts such as ‘region’, ‘regionalism’ and the concomitant notions of ‘community’, with either a small or capital ‘c’ may very well be discursive subterfuges for promoting multilateral relations within a porous Asia. The dilemma of ‘widening’ versus ‘deepening’ (a fundamental ongoing challenge also in the European integration process) would appear therefore to be much less of a problem in Asia. Why is this the case? Part of the answer lies in the particularly Asian notion of concentric circles of ‘regions’ with ASEAN at the centre. However it has been suggested in this article that regional integration is not an objective per se, but rather conceals an overriding quest for pan-Asian (and Asia-Pacific) multilateralism and cooperation driven by the disparate agendas of regional and global powers.56 The EAS and TPP are merely two of a number of initiatives to this end.

If ‘regionalism’ can therefore be a misleading heuristic concept for examining international relations in Asia, does it have some other utility? This question is pertinent because, as described above, these actors operate multilaterally at the Asian regional level in order to promote various interests and achieve certain tangible goals. In Arnold Wolfers’ seminal distinction, these can be described as “possession goals” (e.g. gaining market access, defending sovereignty, constraining China, etc.).57 Nevertheless as Amy Searight has suggested concerning American interest in a pan-Asia Pacific free trade agreement, this “is not really about

54 Phongpaichit, “Who wants an East Asia Community?”.
56 Webber, “Regional Integration that didn’t Happen”.
57 Wolfers, Discord and Collaboration.
delivering a final deal; it is rather about shaping process and perceptions”. Using again Wolfers’ terminology, the promotion of a discursive regionalism can thus best be seen as pursuing a “milieu goal”, that is one designed to frame the norms of multilateral behaviour at the regional level.

References


