Whither Asian Regionalism
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Whither Asian regionalism at a time of unipolar US dominance, bilateral trade agreements, and the emerging tripolar Asian power configuration featuring China, Japan, and India?

Last year marked a turning point in the evolution of Asian regionalism. The most awaited development in Asian regionalism for the past several years, the first East Asian summit, was held in Kuala Lumpur on 14 December 2005. But what its visionary promoters hoped would be the basis for a “bona fide regional community…for peace, prosperity and progress”, to quote the East Asian Vision Group report of 2001, fizzled out for a number of reasons, with the result being a number of questions clouding the future of this community-building process.

Growing Sino-Japanese mistrust, fuelled by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine cast a shadow over the summit and would pose a long-term challenge to the success of East Asian regionalism. Controversy marking the decision to broaden the summit by inviting “non-East Asian” nations – Australia, New Zealand and India has led to differences and uncertainty over the relative importance of the ASEAN Plus Three process over the East Asian Summit as the institutional means for realizing an “East Asian Community”.

The role of the US in the East Asian process also remains in doubt. While Washington feigns disinterest in membership, it is also keeping a wary eye on whether it could turn into a vehicle for its own marginalization and exclusion from regional interactions.

How the newer East Asian institutions such as APT and EAS would relate to existing Asia-Pacific organizations, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation also remains unclear. Avoiding duplication of tasks between these groupings would be key to and hence the continuing rationale for keeping them distinct.
And while the broadening of its membership might have dispelled any fear of Chinese dominance, this could also mean possible Chinese disinterest in the East Asia Summit process. Yet, if the purist view of keeping leadership, if not membership, in the East Asian club exclusively for “East Asians” remains the future norm, then the non-East Asian summiteers from India, Australia would have good reason to be unhappy about their “second-class” status.

Despite a rather disappointing start, East Asian regionalism will remain a force to contend with as the region works out its future institutional arrangements. In the meantime, ASEAN, the hub of Asian regional interactions, is going through a metamorphosis, which, if pushed to its logical extreme, could significantly redefine the nature and purpose of regionalism in Asia.

Three changes currently underway in ASEAN are especially noteworthy. The first is its community-building agenda, featuring an ASEAN Security Community, an ASEAN Economic Community and an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Though seemingly a rhetorical device, the ASEAN Security Community process does include initiatives such as a meeting of ASEAN Defence Ministers, which would be the first such gathering in the history of an organization that has traditionally shunned intra-mural defence cooperation. This will not lead to an ASEAN alliance, but would facilitate confidence-building from within Southeast Asia, thereby complementing the Shangri-la Dialogue organized by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies.

A second change is ASEAN’s move towards greater institutionalization and legalization through an ASEAN Charter. The goals of this charter making process include specifying the rights and responsibilities of the grouping’s members, consolidating and rationalizing its institutional mechanisms, and giving the organization a legal personality in dealing with the outside world. If realized, the Charter will mark a departure from the “ASEAN Way” of informalism, which has been blamed for organizational inertia and a lowest-common denominator mindset.
Finally, there are also growing signs that ASEAN is rethinking its noninterference doctrine, especially in relation to Burma. It has publicly expressed anxiety over the slow pace of political reform in the country. The shift is not very pronounced yet, because several ASEAN members remain wary that criticizing a regime for its domestic political practices might backfire on them one day. But at least the Burma issue can no longer be swept under the carpet.

Why these changes? The very impetus for East Asian regionalism and the impulse for reforming ASEAN come from a number of sources. One is growing criticism by the international community of Asian style regionalism, especially the noninterference doctrine. Another is the demonstration effects of norm-making and institution-building outside the region, including at the global level and in Europe. A third factor is the danger of transnational threats. The recent disasters that have befallen the region in recent years, such as the financial meltdown of 1997, the terrorist attacks on Bali and elsewhere in the region, the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 and the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, do have a silver lining. They have fostered a sense of shared vulnerability in the region to complex transnational disasters, which come with little warning and respect no national boundaries. They have also severely tested the limits of the region’s noninterference dogma.

Another factor leading to change in the existing regionalist mindset is the rise of India and China, coinciding with recovery and nationalist reassertion in Japan. The simultaneous rise of Asia’s three core powers, unprecedented in the region’s history, challenges ASEAN to think and act more cohesively in urging moderation and restraint in their behaviour towards each other and towards ASEAN itself, or be swept aside in the resulting geopolitical maelstrom. Regional forums provide a platform for these rising powers to demonstrate their credentials as responsible and constructive members of the regional community.

Asian regionalism can mean different things to different people, only aspect of which is captured by formal institutions. Regionalism can take on an informal character and manifest through the spread of regional production networks and supply-chains, the role of regional epistemic (think-tanks and policy-intellectual)
communities, transnational civil society movements and the forming of ad hoc coalitions of concerned states dealing with specific issues. While bilateral trading agreements are seen by some critics as a threat to regionalism, economic interdependence in the region, the *de facto* basis of Asian regionalism, is continually fostered by the spread of production networks and the rise of intra-regional trade.

Some of the more serious forms of regional action in Asia today are being undertaken outside the framework of formal regional institutions. Example include the six-party talks involving North Korea, the coordinated patrols in the Straits of Malacca organised by the armed forces of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and a range of informal understandings and cooperation among countries – such as Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore – in fighting terrorism. A group of ASEAN parliamentarians is leading regional pressure for political reform in Burma.

The SARS crisis showed the potential for issue-specific, just-in-time regional cooperation, featuring frontline health and immigration officials as much as foreign and health ministers. Cooperation over issues affecting the region, whose scope goes beyond Southeast Asia or even East Asia, was demonstrated in the response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami, where a number of regional nations, with Japan, China, India, Singapore, Malaysia playing important roles and thereby complementing assistance from the international community at large. These new dimensions of Asian regionalism will become increasingly important in the coming years.