

# **Regional Worlds, Regional Institutions:**

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## **Towards the Regional Economic Institutionalisation of East Asia?**

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# Regional Worlds, Regional Institutions: Towards the Regional Economic Institutionalisation of East Asia?

Richard Higgott\*

## Abstract

At the level of practice, East Asia offers a veritable alphabet soup of trans-regional institutional activity (ASEAN, ARF, AFTA, APEC, EAS, EAM, RCEP, TPP, FTAAP, AIIB). If rhetoric, and scholarly writing, were a reflection of reality then East Asia would be as highly institutionalised as Western Europe! At the level of theory, realists are pessimistically skeptical of the significance of East Asian trans-regional institutionalization. By contrast, liberals and constructivists are often excessively optimistic. Reflecting this dichotomy, analysis of trans-regional institutionalisation in East Asia is, all too frequently, either theory-rich and narrative-light, or narrative-rich and theory-light. In an attempt to transcend dichotomous thinking, the paper argues that an emerging theory of a 'regionalized world order'—not to be equated with 'blocism'—offers a different way to comprehend what is currently happening in East Asia. Asian trans-regional institutionalisation is developing a bottom-up set of norms and practices that differ from the top-down processes that fashioned the post-World War II global order. But the emerging Asia regional order is not a mere subset of global order. Indeed, there still are competing visions of an Asian regional order. This paper will support this observation via an empirical investigation of the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB) and the US-led Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). AIIB represents a trans-regional institutional activity with distinctly Asian, as opposed to Western, characteristics. That the outcome of this competition is to be determined is less relevant than the fact of it. It is leading to the emergence of new regional norms and institutional practices that will cast wide policy shadows.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This paper was prepared for a conference entitled ‘world society in the making?’ Its sub-title asked ‘can we identify it through the development of varieties of trans-national institutions? These are important questions but they are not unproblematic. They are question posed on a grand scale that invite grand theorising. Scholars, in many different disciplines, dream of developing ‘grand theory.’ Professors of international relations are no different. Indeed, there seems to be a conviction amongst many scholars of world politics that, setbacks notwithstanding, political communities will move overtime (with time measured flexibly on a scale from generations to centuries) towards a world society in which states resemble each other in structure and behaviour. Scholars may of course contest how this will happen. But most theoretical approaches—from the socio-cultural to the politico-economic, expecting what we might call global isomorphism, focus on the relationship between the *interactions* of states and peoples and their gradual *homogenization*.

I venture no analysis of the soundness of this approach in this paper, but would note that scholars of regional integration are, by definition, ‘scholars of interaction’. Many of their theoretical judgments are based on the history of the last 50 years and they are by inclination attracted to the homogenisation of states into wider regions. This paper will address this normative element of that intellectual tradition. It does not do so in a naive or deterministic way. Determinism is invariably historically parochial, methodologically nationalist and blind to the impact of what the late UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillan called ‘events, dear boy, events’. The paper will try to balance the power of major transformations overtime, especially since the beginning of the post-Westphalian era, against a persistent heterogeneity in state formation and state behaviour that underpins global politics. Getting the balance right between ‘events’ and theory (both grand and not so grand) and especially in the relationship between the ‘global’ and the East Asian ‘regional’ is the aim of the paper.

At the level of practice (‘events’), East Asia offers an alphabet soup of trans-regional institutional activity (ASEAN, ARF, AFTA, APEC, EAS, EAM, RCEP, TPP, FTAAP, AIIB). At the level of theory, realists are pessimistically sceptical of the significance of East Asian trans-regional institutionalization (see Ravenhill, 2009). By contrast, liberals and constructivists are often excessively optimistic (see Acharya, 2014). Reflecting this dichotomy, analysis of trans-regional institutionalisation in East Asia is, all too frequently, theory-rich and narrative-light, or narrative-rich and theory-light.

Yet ‘reality’ (a problematic concept in its own right) is invariably more complex than dichotomous theorizing allows. Indeed a cynic might be forgiven for thinking that if

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally prepared for the conference on *World Society in the Making? Varieties of Transnational Institutions* at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research, University Duisburg-Essen December 8-9, 2015.

positive rhetorical writing on East Asian integration was a reflection of reality, then East Asia would be well on its way up the chain of hard institutionalisation. Conversely and, on the basis of current trends, it would soon be meeting an increasingly institutionally troubled EC on its way down! So, this paper aspires to a theoretical analysis of an evolving Asian 'regional world' and regional order supported by trans-regional institutional theoretical innovation but innovation that reflects practical East Asian responses to those wider economic and security imperatives that fashion contemporary global orders.

In an attempt to transcend dichotomous thinking, the paper argues that a recognition of the emergence of regional worlds and an identifiable 'regionalized world order'—not to be equated with 'blocism' or homogenisation—offers one way to help comprehend what is currently happening in East Asia. Asian trans-regional institutionalisation is developing a bottom-up set of norms and practices that differ from the top-down processes that fashioned the post-World War II global order.

We need theoretical lenses that allow us to account for both difference and proliferation of regional and sub-regional organizational activity operating, multi-functionally in over-lapping and multi-jurisdictional contexts driven by the interplay of three principal actions: (i) socio-cultural norms, (ii) market structures and (iii) institutional politics. Given the highly specialised intellectual food consumed in the tightly monitored disciplinary diets of modern social sciences, the kind of balanced multi-disciplinary approach required to undertake such a task is invariably rare. In Albert Hirschman's justifiably famous phrase it requires 'exercises in trespassing' on the part of the analyst. This is the task set for this paper.

Support for this multi-disciplinary approach is found less in the efficacy of many regional initiatives and more in the evolution of thought about the potential for regionness *from within the region*. The trick is not to over-complicate the analysis of Asia but rather to note that some (but not all) East Asian regional activity is in fact innovative; albeit not accompanied by teleological assumptions that institutionalisation will morph into a single and formal quasi-sovereign juridical space on the one hand or attempt to embed regionalism in an imposed theory as for example that of 'international society' along the lines of recent 'English School' writings (see Zhang, 2014) on the other. The English School of international relations is perhaps the quintessential proponent of a grand theory of interaction leading to homogenisation overtime. But for a critique of homogenisation and the entrenched Euro-American centrism of much international relations theory see Hobson (2012).

But any emerging Asian regional order is no mere subset of a wider (initially European and subsequently American driven) global order. Indeed, there have been and still are two competing and long-standing visions of the regional order seen as a contest between East Asia on the one hand and the Pacific on the other (captured in the early analysis by Higgott and Stubbs (1965) through to the recent work of Wilson (2015).

This struggle has a dynamic of its own that continues to generate new ideas, norms and practices that challenge and adjust existing understandings of global order. This paper will scrutinise this theoretical observation via an empirical investigation of several recent regional innovations, specifically: (i) the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB) as one regional, in this case Chinese-driven, response to the absence of reform at the IMF; and (ii) the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and evolving discussions about a Free Trade Agreement of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP) as responses to the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). AIIB and RCEP represent trans-regional institutional activity with distinctly Asian, as opposed to Western, characteristics that seek to re-craft, or craft anew, institutions that better suit wider (not just Chinese) Asian interests. That the outcome of this competition is to be determined is less relevant than the fact that it is in train.

While accepting this competition as part of a wider process of historical change, the primary purpose of the paper will be to show how a growing dissatisfaction with those post-World War II multilateral institutions underwritten by traditional *status quo* assumptions of who sets the parameters of world order is affecting change in East Asia. It is not the argument of the paper that this competition will lead to overnight institutional transformation. But the paper will identify the manner in which it is leading to the emergence of new regional norms and institutional practices that may cast wide policy shadows. The less formalized, but state driven, nature of regional institutionalisation in Asia is facilitating the growth of multilateral practices at the regional and inter-regional level which challenge the norms and practices that have for so long operated in the global institutions.

The paper is in three sections. Section one is a *tour d'horizon* of theorising about regionalism. There are enough surveys of the competing theoretical literatures not to dwell on it, save perhaps to understand the evolution of theoretical thinking overtime. Section two takes a look at theories of regionalism 'de nos jour' in Asia and offers a theoretical perspective within which we might locate the contemporary study of regionalism in that part of the world circumscribed by the Eastern and Western littorals of the Pacific Ocean. Section three looks at recent innovation in regional institutional economic cooperation in East Asia and particularly the role of the major players—the US and China. The Conclusion asks what these innovations mean for our understanding of contemporary regional and, by extension, global order. We finish up at a not entirely unproblematic destination – one showing similarities to Amitav Acharya's depiction of an evolving 'regional world' (2014).

## **1. Theorising About Regionalism**

The intellectual history of the study of regionalism and regional integration is a well-ploughed field. The academic literature, both theoretical and practical, has had a long, if chequered, pedigree with many different kinds of inter-state interaction often badged in far too cavalier a fashion as 'regionalism'. The literature has gone through several phases of development, and scholars fall into a range of different camps.

Unsurprisingly, these camps reflect different competing disciplinary schools. This section of the paper investigates the degree to which the practice of regionalism, and more specifically regional integration, is tied up with and/or affected by, the way we study it. As section three will detail, the political and socio-economic temper of the times is obviously important, but so too are the intellectual-cum scholarly lenses that we bring to bear on our analysis of those times.

While a growing sense of awareness of regional identities and inter-state interactions are clearly part of the international environment dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Fawn, 2009), for the purpose of this essay, I take as my starting point the study of regionalism that developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or more precisely since the beginnings of the European project in the post-WWII era. Since that time, regionalism and regional integration have been addressed through the disciplinary, and sub-disciplinary, lenses of geography and then economics, political science (more precisely international relations) and, perhaps most effectively over the last several decades, the inter-disciplinary lenses of international political economy and sociological institutionalism with their focus on the ‘new regionalisms’ in the post bipolar world (see *inter alia*, Hettne *et al.*, 1999, 2000a, b and c; Shaw and Soderbaum, 2004; Bøås *et al*, 2005 and works in the Ashgate *International Political Economy of the New Regionalism* Series; see also Katzenstein, 2005).

Following on from the new regionalism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars turned their attention to “regulatory regionalism”. This gave greater salience to the manner in which regional projects transform not only regional activity but also states themselves (see for example the work of Jayasuriya, 1999 and 2001 and Hamieri, 2013). More recently still, Marxists have identified an emerging “world market regionalism,” within which regional projects are seen as strategically oriented support for the ‘completion of the world market’. Paul Cammack (2014) argues that the ADB’s regional strategy wishes to transform East Asia, and its states into ‘... a wider global project aimed at “completing the world market” and transforming both the social relations of production and individual attitudes and behavior.

These intellectual trends reflect the move overtime from a Cold War to a post-Cold War globalised era. Less an exclusive or discrete ‘either-or process’ than ‘a more-rather-than-less process’ in both theory and practice, we have seen a drift from state-led regional cooperative endeavours built around security considerations in the Cold War era to the increasingly market-led imperatives that accompanied the globalisation of the neo-liberal era. This has been an era that has marginalised international relations as our principle set of lenses for looking at regionalism in the several decades that have followed the end of the Cold War at the expense of the influence of IPE. Moreover, as many have noted (see Shaw and Soderbaum, 2004, Breslin, *et al*, 2002) the practice of, and the study of, regionalism comes in waves or more precisely, as Hettne (1999: 8) notes ‘... new patterns co-exist’ with earlier forms.’ Taking this as a starting point the literature commonly identify three general waves of theorising.

The first, neo-functionalist, wave was pioneered in work, primarily on focussing on Europe, of the likes of Deutsch (1957), Haas (1958 and 1964), Lindberg (1957). It was picked up comparatively in extra-European areas in the work of scholars such as Nye (1971) and in the pages of *International Organization* through to the mid 1970s, when Haas pronounced integration theory in its neo-functionalist guise obsolete (1975). Neo-functionalist theory's aspiration to be impeccably rationalist and parsimonious social science foundered. It did so, paradoxically, on the twin rocks of statist inter-governmentalism and interdependence on the one hand and the growing scholarly interest in a much less parsimonious, quasi-rationalist, ideationally influenced, international political economy (for a review of this period see Breslin, et al. 2002: 2-4 and Katzenstein et al, 1998).

The second phase also drew its strength from Europe and the spectacular development of the Single Integrated Market, which gave impetus to liberal-institutional inspired inter-governmental and legal-regulatory understandings of the European experience (see respectively Moravcsik, 1998 and Wincott, 1995). At the same time, initially slow practical starts (as opposed to rhetorical aspirations) of many regionalist initiatives in other parts of the world in the early 1990s, especially in East Asia (*pace* ASEAN and APEC) Latin America (Mercosur) and West and Southern Africa (ECOWAS and SADCC) were suggestive of the regionalisation of world order in name only. The end of the Cold War, and the financial crises which hit Asia and Latin America in the closing years of the 1990s, rendered premature any suggestions that world order would be regionalised.

Thus, the revision of the geo-political security structure following on from the end of the Cold War and the growth of economic globalisation gave impetus to a new mode of thinking about regionalism. Both factors were spurs to the loosening of trans-border economic regulation and enhanced inter-state exchange signalling the blurring of the domestic-international divide. For the first time, considerations of regionalism were as much outwardly focussed as they were inwardly focussed. Moving beyond the more spatially discrete neo-functionalist and Balassian economic traditions, the new regionalism identified the importance of the emerging relationship between various spatial understandings of region and their extra-regional environments under conditions of globalisation. In effect, the new regionalism argued for an essentially 'relational' understanding of the globalisation-regionalisation dynamic, especially in the economic domain.

Often seeing regionalism as either a spur or an impediment to globalisation, scholars tended to live along a normative spectrum that saw regionalism and regional integration as either a good thing or a bad thing. For the pessimist realist scholar of international relations they were a challenge to the sovereignty of the nation state while for the more optimist liberal advocate of interdependence and multilateralism, it is an obvious next step in a process that enhances both security and economic integration.

Economists, until recently, have traditionally tended to be nervous about regional integration, seeing it at best as a sub-optimal form of trade liberalisation and at worst an extension of economic nationalism and protectionism. Perceived weakness in the role of the WTO, and the growth of PTAs, has seen some adjustment in these views.

New regionalists were essentially post-Cold War optimists. The new regionalism scholarship had its roots very much in contemporary international political economy with some discursive influences from constructivism. This is a point of differentiation from the separate disciplinary scholarship of international relations on the one hand and economics on the other. Through the lenses of IPE, as opposed to those of either economics or international relations, regions are not viewed simply as geo-spatial cartographic entities, but rather as socio-politically and economically constructed spaces. Moreover, regionalism encompasses a widening range of actors with greater roles in the creation of wider global orders than previously assumed.

But the study of regions and regional integration has not gone all the way with the new regionalism and stands at a crossroad where many of the assumptions that drove it for the last 30 years have come under challenge. Specifically, the linear theoretical economic assumptions (see Balassa, 1962) married to the teleological narrative of the European project in which the security/pacific benefits of developing strong trans-border socio-economic links were axiomatic, and that have driven understandings of regional integration need dramatic reappraisal and adjustment when looked at in comparative perspective—a perspective under greater challenge now than at any point in the last 50 years.<sup>2</sup>

Other judgments have also not stood the test of time. Regionalisation has moved beyond the international relations-economics sharply demarcated division between state-led *de jure* discourses on the one hand and market led *de facto* driven discourses on the other that were posited stylistically but inaccurately (*mea culpa*) in the earliest stages of the recognition of globalisation (Higgott, 1997). Indeed, even the new regionalism was a step too far in terms of grand theorising. For its leading proponents the new regionalism was nothing less than a theory of world order in transformation (and multilevel governance in evolution) in which regions were to be central agents of that world order (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000, 458; for a review see Breslin and Higgott, 2000). Ambitious, indeed overly ambitious, stuff; especially since it is was never made clear why global transformation necessarily requires a regional dimension.

Nowadays we need an approach that allows for both difference and the proliferation of regional and subregional organisations operating in variously issue specific or/and multi-functional, over-lapping and multi-jurisdictional contexts and driven by a strong

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<sup>2</sup> Balassa (1962) envisaged a linear progression from a free trade area, through customs union, common market, and economic and monetary union through to political union.

interplay between market structures and institutional agents. Baldwin's (2006) spaghetti bowl metaphor, and its identification of regions within regions and regions overlapping regions offered a more useful analytical tool than the earlier European dualism of national state actors on the one hand and multilateral activity on the other that frequented both economics and political science.

In addition, scholars of a sociological persuasion working on globalisation identified the increasingly important (if often impossible to precisely analyse) variables of identity and cultural risk (see Beck, 1992). But we need to go farther still. We should resist the temptation to treat regionalisation as if it is somehow unrelated also to state formation, as had often been the case in the past. They are clearly inter-related. As Hamieri (2013: 313) notes: 'State-making and regionalisation are both manifestations of contested political projects aimed at shaping the territorial, institutional, and/or functional scope of political rule.'

Moreover, as the scholarship of the 'new regionalism movement' recognised, regions today are not simply discrete territorial or cartographically defined spaces; they overlap and contradict one another to form complex webs of socio-political power and economic interaction. This has both theoretical and practical implications for how we must now study and analyse regional integration. In theoretical terms, it means the study of regional integration is not simply a matter of international relations nor is it just about how regions self-organize economic and political space, often based on an assumed Eurocentric model. Rather it is about how they relate to each other and, in turn, help shape global order.

The divide between the 'regional' and the 'global' as discrete, rather than dynamically interactive policy-making spaces is dissipating. Regions become not simply the macro space between the national and the global, but they also take on a trans-national character at both micro and the meso levels. The evolution of regional orders and other non-European regional projects in recent years, have been multi-dimensional, complex and driven by both institutional/public and private/market led actors. The next section asks what this might mean for the regional imperative as it has developed in East Asia (and the Pacific) over the last several decades.

## **2. Theorising 'the Region' in East Asia and the Pacific**

Contending visions of regionalism in East Asia and the Pacific have been unfolding for a long time. Indeed, it is now over two decades ago since I and Richard Stubbs, argued that the institutional activity embodied in the development of APEC, reflecting US liberal policy prescriptions and strategic interests on the one hand and Dr Mohamed Mahathir's East Asian Economic Caucus initiative (EAEC), enhanced by a state led developmental model on the other, were in contest. We saw them as:

'...exemplars of two competing conceptions of regional economic cooperation... economic dialogue in the Asia Pacific...[that]...cannot be

understood simply in rationalist, utility maximizing terms. Questions of politics, culture and identity are also shaping up to be extremely important. The outcome of this contest over how an understanding of 'region' in the Asia Pacific will be constituted over the long term is yet to be determined (Higgott and Stubbs, 1995: 516).

This judgment has stood the test of time. If, as we said '...APEC and the EAEC were engaged in a struggle to constitute the 'voice of the region' on international economic matters...' then that struggle has continued to this date; although now augmented by the massive presence of China. In this regard, and notwithstanding their relatively undeveloped economic agendas at the time, APEC and the EAEC represented alternative political-ideational constructs or 'imaginings' (Nonini, 1993: 176; Anderson, 1983) of region.

As Stubbs and I went on to argue (1995: 526), for countries like the United States, Australia and Malaysia, which, at that time, were avowed advocates of one or the other vision of region, the choice was simple. While for other countries of the Asia Pacific region, especially those named by Mahathir as eligible members of the EAEC, the choice was not so easy. In deciding which conception of the region to embrace a number of crosscutting factors had to be taken into consideration. Unsurprisingly, the issue was fudged at the time and in some ways is still fudged to this day.

The following sub-section of the paper looks at contemporary East Asia in order to illustrate how, at the risk of making another judgment, the resilience of this fudge over the last two decades might be drawing to a close as the contours of an Asian regional order take on a stronger definition. The competing visions of an East Asia regional world, embodied in the positions of the US and China, are becoming more starkly demarcated. For illustrative purposes, section three captures this demarcation in the continued US support for the multilateral style of the international financial institutions (IMF and ADB) of the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century and the trade institutions such as the TPP (and TTIP in Europe) on the one hand and China's advocacy of the AIIB, RCEP and FTAAP on the other.

The working assumption of much scholarship on the economic institutional regionalism in East Asia is that it has invariably been high on rhetoric and low on action: 'much ado about nothing' in the words of John Ravenhill (2009). This essentially pessimistic discourse on Asian regionalism is something of which I too have been guilty (Higgott, 1995). Such analyses invariably emanate from the primacy ascribed to economic and Cartesian formal assumptions of the European discourse on regionalism emanating from Western scholarship. The relationship between regionalism and world order was bolted onto assumptions about the presence of, and the prospects for the continuance of, an American-led liberal order (Ikenberry, 2011).

But this has always been a partial reading of the US attitude towards regionalism. The US has been, and remains, a *selective* supporter of regionalism. usually championing the West European and Transatlantic institutions, especially in a bi-polar Cold War context for sure, but ignoring, and at times actively resisting, would-be region-generating initiatives in other parts of the world if they do not suit. This has been the case in Asia, seen for example in US opposition to the Asian Monetary Fund in the wake of the Asian financial crisis at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through its antipathy towards much regional summitry and its opposition to the Chinese initiated multilateral regional Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

If we look at regional economic institutional cooperation in East Asia through regional lenses rather than through Euro-Atlantic scholarly and political lenses, then analysis becomes more nuanced and, to argue courageously, less pessimistic even. A focus on the US attitudes towards Asian regionalism misses the salience of what is currently happening there. Salience is found less in the current efficacy, or otherwise, of many regional initiatives as tested (and invariably found wanting) through the lenses of Western experience and Western theory and more in the evolution of thought about the potential of region from within the region. Not only has the number of regional institutions grown, so have their remit, extending beyond interests in development, trade, finance and security into new domains of ecology, human rights, humanitarian relief, refugees, pandemics and more (see Beeson 2009).

Scholarship in international organisation is now firmly demonstrating the degree to which activity generated by international bureaucrats are not just occupants of organizational roles constrained by state policy they are also active shapers of the regional environments as well. They matter in the design and evolution of regional cooperation in world politics (see Johnson, 2015). Regional administrative structures and policy cadres can and do take on a lives of their own. There is no reason to assume that the institutional structures in the process of development in East Asia are going to be any different.

It might also be argued that regional activity of the kind developing in East and Southeast Asia is also more important than is often credited by advocates of the more far-reaching concept of global governance. The trick here is to note the wide-ranging nature of this activity without embedding it in some linear teleological assumptions of an end state of regional activity being a single quasi-sovereign juridical space, with EU characteristics, rather than a set of over-lapping spaces where difference is ever present.

Moreover, given the focus of the paper on East Asia, as obvious as it might seem, an Asia-focused, as opposed to Atlantic-focused, take on regionalism needs to be privileged and also needs to be seen as not only an important analytical tool but also a *normative theoretical turn* (Acharya, 2014a). The essence of Acharya's approach to regionalism is to invert our traditional understanding of the role of regions in world

politics. He exhorts us to look from the inside-out rather than the outside-in. In a similar vein, Breslin and Wilson (2015) suggest that we look from the bottom-up rather than the top-down. They also warn us against seeing simply one region in Asia rather than a plurality of regions. Regionalism, for Acharya, is not simply the downward supplanting of global institutional frameworks of the kind provided by the UN system, the International Financial Institutions or, we might add, European-Cartesian-flavoured experimentation. Acharya also sees a potential for regions, and indeed Asian regionalism, as a sources of ideas and actions in their own right in global policy making. That is, they can be innovators rather than simply takers of rules and actions.

‘Regional worlds are not wholly autonomous entities, nor purely subsets of global dynamics. They create, absorb, repatriate and export material and ideational elements of world order. ... They also create and export new ideas, norms and approaches to global order that strengthen global order and challenge the dominance and hypocrisy of great powers.’  
(Acharya, 2014)

This essentially inductive analysis of regionalism and world order exhibits an historical perspective that identifies processes of path dependence and sequencing, an acute sense of the (eventual) role of institutions and the often self-reinforcing relationship between the structural power of markets and capitalism on the one hand and the agential power of actors—be they individuals, organisations or groups such as networks and classes—on the other. Economics and indeed much modern political science, in sharp contrast, prefers more formal deductive methodologies. But these formal methodologies, as iterated financial crises tells us, often find it so difficult to capture the interactive relationships between the activities of a global market on the one hand and the politics of national states on the other (see Dieter and Higgott 2012).

Indeed, it is in the explanation of the organizational elements of regionalism that historico-inductive methodologies become important. This paper lends itself to neither a detailed discussion of methodology and the history of thought on the idea of East Asia as a region on the one hand, nor an empirical discussion of the successes, or more often limitations of the many exercises in both market-led and state-led regionalism in East Asia over recent decades, on the other. However, some background is nevertheless in order. It is provided in the next two sub-sections via a consideration of: (i) recent ideas, especially of a constructivist persuasion, of East Asia and (ii) the recent political economy of East Asian regionalism.

## **2. (i) Ideas and Constructivist Imaginings of East Asia**

An ideational reading of contemporary regionalism in East Asia begun to emerge from what we might call a sociological perspective in international relations—to be found in the work of constructivists in general, and English School scholars of international relations in particular. To their recent credit, English School scholars have recognised the degree to which for too long their macro-level theorising had been constrained by

a lack of attention to the regional level. Buzan and Zhang's recent collection, *Contesting International Society in East Asia* (2014) attempts to address this lacuna. They demonstrate the degree to which the existing social order of that region of which we now think as East Asia was dismantled by European penetration and then reconstructed after World War II and especially in the post-colonial period. This occurred through a widespread acceptance in the region of: (i) a Westphalian concept of sovereign state equality and (ii) the market—the two institutions that the English School identifies as core to its construction of a theory of international society. These institutions, it is argued in support of the extension of the English School to Asia, have been '... creatively accepted, interpreted and adapted to local conditions' (Zhang (2014: 361).

But as Zhang and others (see Ba, 2014) note, this adaptation of state sovereignty must be read differently in East Asia than in Europe. The re-formulation of an essentially European conception of sovereignty represents a sharp change from the pre-colonial and pre-imperial past in Asia, embedded as it was in the 'tributary system' (Zhang and Buzan 2012) within which Asian international relations operated until the onset of European preponderance in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In post-colonial Asia, the state has taken on not only a functional role, but a moral one too. Its role is not only to prevent incursion from without but also disintegration from within (Ba, 2014: 128). Endogenously, the state is central not only to national security but also to regime security. Exogenously, it is central to the manner in which we conceive of the evolution of East Asia as an increasingly important regional actor in global affairs.

While Europeans have spent the last thirty years debating the pooling of sovereignty, East Asian states, and especially those in Southeast Asia that are products of colonialism, are still engaged in sovereignty enhancement. This does not mean that we cannot talk about an emerging East Asian regional world, rather that we must do so with state sovereignty as the defining parameter in mind. Indeed, for Acharya, regional institution building is seen as a sovereignty enhancing activity not sovereignty pooling one (see Acharya, 2004 and 2014). But state-formation and regionalisation are not two separate activities. A statist ideology informs the regional agenda in East Asia in a more overt way than has been the case in contemporary Europe. This is a concept that much European analysis has found it difficult to get its head round. As the remainder of this paper will suggest, however, sovereignty enhancement and the building of a sense and practice of region are not contradictory.

Similarly, as market capitalism has been adopted by the states of Asia, admittedly at different stages overtime, it too has been adapted, or mediated, significantly at the regional level. Acceptance of the role of the market has effectively evolved in a symbiotic relationship with the centrality of the state (see *inter alia*, Amsden, 1989; Wade, 1990; Woo Cummings, 1990; Stubbs, 2009) to give us what is widely known in the literature as the East Asian 'developmental state'. The developmental state might share the competitive characteristics of the Anglo-American model, but it is also quite

culturally specific and differs dramatically, especially in terms of the social purposes to which it is put and the institutional and organisational norms and practices by which it operates (see Katzenstein and Shirashi, 1997: 367 and Bell, 2014). Its impact on the unique development of the Asian regional world should not be under-estimated.

In combination, it is the interpretive and adaptive evolution of state sovereignty and the market, when laced with Asian characteristics in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that has provided the dynamic for the unique articulation of regionalism that is emerging in Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And, as much of the literature tells us, ‘the regional’ clearly sits in a dialectical relationship with the wider global context in which they evolve (see Hurrell, 2007). The analytical difficulty comes when trying to explain the degree to which ‘the regional’ might be unique from ‘the global’ or, conversely, whether it is the embeddedness of regions within the wider global institutional context that is the determining factor.

This is a question that besets certain types of international theory—especially constructivism and the English School of international relations that seems determined to privilege a universalising theoretical position in this argument (see Zhang, 2014 367-8 and Buzan and Zhang, 2014). Indeed, the English school is the exemplars *par excellence* of attempts at a grand homogenizing theory that I identified at the beginning of this paper. It would be unfair to describe this as a chicken-and-egg argument, but it does nevertheless exhibit a degree of circularity beyond which we need to move.

## **2. (ii) Agents, Practices and the Political Economy of East Asian Regionalism**

The preceding sub-section has suggested that ideas and the representation of region are important elements in the gradual regionalisation of East Asia. Whilst recognizing the importance of cultural, ideological and socio-political ideas as significant drivers of the development of regionalization this section privileges the politico-economic variables. As political economists—of all complexions—tell us, structures and practices matter, particularly as they underpin the actions and policies of agents. Policy matters in both a negative sense and a positive sense. Policy affects both push and pull factors, for and against the consolidation of a regional understanding. More than anything else the policies and practices of the major players matter. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, this means the US and China. China’s growing influence has of course been in part at the expense of the US, but more so that of Japan and ASEAN—the early mover in Asia regional innovation.

We have seen overtime in East Asia much experimentation and some innovation in the theory and practice of political and economic regionalization: that is, exercises in the creation of various institutional forms with distinctly Asian, rather than Western characteristics. Briefly, this trend can be traced back to:

- (i) The initial experiments in the creation of ASEAN some 40 years ago
- (ii) Later ASEAN-led initiative to develop an East Asian Economic Community

- (EAEC) as a counter to APEC (Higgott and Stubbs, 1995)
- (iii) Discussions (albeit fruitless) about an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) in the wake of the financial crisis of the second half of the 1980s (Higgott, 1997)
  - (iv) The subsequent development of the Chiang Mai initiative (Higgott and Dieter, 2003, Higgott, 2009) and its further multilateralisation in 2015. (<http://www.bsp.gov.ph/downloads/publications/faqs/cmim.pdf>).
  - (v) These strands of activity in the political economy of the region continue through to this day in activities such as:
    - a. The 2015 formalisation of the AEC (<http://www.asean.org/asean-economic-community>).
    - b. The routinisation of the East Asia Summits (EAS) processes (EAS) (Beeson and Stubbs, 2012)
    - c. And the initiatives around RCEP (Wilson, 2015).

China's contemporary foray into regional power diplomacy with the development of the AIIB and proposals for an FTAAP as a counter to the TPP thus represents continuity in regional innovation. What these activities signal if we look at them collectively overtime is that the East Asian region writ large and Southeast Asia writ small are not simply takers of the multilateral politico-economic form but reflect a positive intent to create institutions and process that might challenge existing multilateral forms of activity or indeed develop new ones.

Various constructed regional coalitions, in different issue areas and policy spaces, are looking to craft institutions that suit better their interests than what has gone before. What we see is the emergence of regionally, endogenously led, challenges to the institutional practices of the international *status quo* arising from a growing dissatisfaction of the rule takers with multilateral institutions underwritten by a traditional assumption of who sets the parameters of world order. It is important here to recognize the differences between multilateralism as a liberal institutional practice and multi-polarity as a realist concept of power politics. The evolution of regional orders is not simply, or even primarily, synonymous with multi-polarity.

To illustrate from the Chinese-led AIIB initiative: control of global development finance has long been contested space. It has become increasingly so as continued Western dominance over decision-making in both the World Bank and the IMF has resisted adjustment to the growing wealth, influence, and intellectual and political aspirations, of the emerging states. For example, depending on the lenses used, China's desire to create the AIIB can be seen not only as traditional realist power politics but also as an attempt at liberal multilateral institution building. Through the lenses of traditional IR scholarship, and to the extent that it would reduce US leverage in the IMF, the World Bank and the ADB, it is certainly intended to present a challenge to US influence and is thus the stuff of power politics.

But the AIIB initiative can also be seen less as power politics and more as a broader

attempt at multilateral structural reform to the embedded institutional practices (especially quota control) of the US led traditional donors—the IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank until the recent break in the log jam when the US Congress agreed to adopt the legislation approving the Governance and Quota reforms at the IMF (<https://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2015/pr15573.htm>).

The degree to which Congressional softening was influenced by the AIIB initiative is difficult to determine. But there can be little doubt that if successfully implemented, and nothing to date suggests it will not be, then the AIIB will represent not only a major diplomatic success for China but also offer an alternative loan source for developing Asia, the development of different multilateral rules and practices to the IMF and the ADB and also a more favourable policy orientation for its members. This in turn would change the relationship of its members to the *status quo*-oriented IMF and ADB. So, the creation of an AIIB reflects an alternative multilateral challenge to the *status quo* arrangements created after WWII and embedded in a US-led order.

In theoretical terms, the proposal for an AIIB represents, as with the BRIC New Development Bank, a reflection of what Morse and Keohane (2014) have labeled ‘contested multilateralism’; that is, the contest offered to institutions that have proved less than amenable to change from within—as is the case with the Bretton Woods institutions. Contested multilateralism aims less at overnight institutional transformation but more to the creation of new, or at least reformed, norms and practices. Overtime these practices may (or not) flourish; in large part depending on whether the institutions they seek to replace are resistive or adaptive. The AIIB initiative might be an exercise in diplomacy by the Chinese as indeed is their advocacy of FTAAP at the 2014 Beijing APEC meeting. But what the diplomacy shows is that these regional initiatives are for China also more than simply strategic moves in the new Great Game with the USA. They are also about substantive change within what Acharya would call a ‘regional world’.

The proposed AIIB and FTAAP as exercises in ‘competitive regime creation’ (Morse and Keohane, 2014: 392), whatever else they may be, reflect a multilaterally motivated regionalism. Moreover, the November 2014 APEC and G20 meetings demonstrated that China can work cooperatively in some policy domains in order to ease tension, or buy it space in the more fiercely contested security domains. An important element of what is happening in an Asian context is that the traditionally less formalized nature of regional institutionalisation—when compared with the European project (see Higgott, 2008 and Acharya, 2016)—may well facilitate the growth at the inter-regional level of a strategy for regional states as they gain confidence overtime with these processes, especially if reform processes in the longer standing multilateral institutions are stalled.

At the intra-regional level, the high-on-rhetoric, low-on-substance, summit-led focus of many of Asia's larger multilateral enterprises often hides a range of more effective functionally cooperative arrangements in less high-profile policy-specific issue areas

and regulatory policy domains. This is the case with a range of policy dialogues and technical forums (some references to Jayasuriya, 2001 and 2005). Moreover, China is not alone in wanting greater representation in, and reform of, the existing international economic institutions. Other major players such as its BRIC partners, especially India and Brazil, are equally keen to see reform or new regional initiatives: further evidence of the salience of the dialectical relationship of regionalization with world order identified by Acharya and others. While activity gives credence to the increased salience of this dialectical relationship, we cannot say in much greater detail at this stage how these nascent instruments of 21<sup>st</sup> century regional collective action problem solving will evolve.

Any new world order is a work in progress. The longstanding institutions of multilateralism (both global and regional) are presently in need of a refresh. None of the current major international organisations and activities, principally the UN, IMF World Bank, WTO, G20 or G8, reflect unbridled self-confidence as vehicles for the institutional management of the modern global order. To be effective under contemporary economic and political conditions, they will require a continuing transformation across the spectrum of both their structure and purpose. More drastically, some may even be ripe for replacement through a process of forum shifting and contested multilateralism.

### **3. Large Actors and the Political Economy of Region**

We cannot yet know how the changing power dynamics in the relationship between China and the US across the economic-political spectrum, will definitively determine the constitution of the modern East Asian regional order. But we can see the directional effects, more or less, that the pursuit of various policy options would have. For both the major powers the balance sheet in any analysis of their policy is mixed. But in China and the US's competing visions of Asia's regional future, China in its preference for an East Asian future seems to be getting it more right than wrong while the US with its Pacific vision of region is getting it more wrong than right. The determinant of this contest will be the degree to which the Trans-Pacific Partnership will fulfil, as one of its principle aims, the US's politico-strategic interests in the region as much as the economic ones.

China, in the economic domain at least, is moving into the regional leadership role that was for so long attributed to ASEAN. That ASEAN never actually 'led' in the region is not to belittle the role that ASEAN as a vehicle for regional socialisation (as Acharya puts it) has played for so long. Particularly, the rhetoric and practice of ASEAN over the last several decades has done much to cement an understanding of region and region-ness at the level of East Asia rather than the Pacific. But what is happening should be seen not only as a power shift as China comes into its own. It should also be seen as what Acharya calls, if somewhat dramatically, as 'paradigm shift' that is bigger than, and predates China's rise.

This process will more likely be played out on one ‘political economy’ chessboard rather than two separate economic and security chessboards. The juxtaposition of an ‘Economic Asia’ and a ‘Security Asia’ as two competing, as opposed to inter-related dynamics (*pace* Feigenbaum and Manning, 2012) confuses more than it clarifies. It is not to deny the crucial security issues at stake in the region to recognize that the dynamic of the region is driven as much if not more by market forces than state activity. In addition, economic growth is also driven by extra-regional/global economic activity as much as regional activity. China’s economic interaction with its strategic rival the United States is much larger and stronger than with its strategic partner ASEAN. Moreover, the integration of the region into global supply chains is proceeding rapidly apace (see Elms and Low, 2013). So, tight, state-led, competing economic regional bloc formation—the arrival of TPP notwithstanding—is most unlikely.

But to say so is not to suggest that the state is but a silent partner rather than an active participant in regional economic activity. Given the developmental nature of most Asian states, this is certainly not the case. It is state activity—especially if economic nationalism arising from deteriorating state-to-state relations among major players manifests itself as mercantilism—that could bring regional economic integration processes to a rapid halt. But the US will not exit the region and Chinese political dominance will be constrained in the absence of it gaining soft power credentials to match its economic and growing military power. China’s frequent undiplomatic regional demeanor and closed political model might not prevent, but it will moderate, the growth of its soft power. As China’s economy grows and, if its diplomacy becomes subtler, it can perhaps have an easier route than the US to regional leadership. China’s model of semi-authoritarian capitalism, or what David Bell recently called ‘meritocratic democracy’ (Bell, 2015) while criticized in the West looks more appealing to many regional partners than the contemporary Anglo-American version of democratic capitalism.

In any case, neither the US nor China will have a hegemonic position similar to that which pertained under uni-polarity when the US was dominant both economically and militarily. Both the US and China need to maintain strong bilateral economic ties, and this is likely to constrain military competition. Both states would have to account to their regional allies if they needlessly stoked up politico-security rivalries in a manner that undermined the positive economic dynamics of the region.

The US clearly took its eye off the ball in the East Asian region prior to the so-called ‘pivot’ or rebalancing. In trying to regain position, it now seems to have misjudged regional and wider global opinion in its opposition to the AIIB (especially given the break by some of its key allies like the UK and Australia). Sure in theory China was free to join the TPP, but in reality the US devised the TPP to ensure, at this stage at least, the practical exclusion of China. In so doing, it sent a signal to other regional players that it is more interested in countering China than cooperating with it, at least in the inauguration and establishment stages of the TPP

In this regard, the Trans-Pacific Partnership is clearly as much a strategic endeavour as it is an economic one. Indeed, the US has explicitly described the TPP as the "economic wing" of the pivot/rebalance to Asia (see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisor-president-united-states-an>.) In some ways the TPP was one of the strongest elements of the pivot/rebalancing. Obama appeared to understand this in a way that Congress appeared not to or at least chose not to.

In choosing to develop TPP without China, rather than seek to integrate it into the liberal international order, the US was, and still is, playing a high-risk strategy. As the economic arm of the US's regional rebalancing act, its new grand strategy towards China would be seriously diminished without the completion (Congressional ratification) of the TPP (see Blackwill and Tellis, 2015). Moreover, were such an investment in time and energy to fail, this would send a signal more widely that the US's authority and ability to lead to the region is equally diminished.<sup>3</sup> This, in turn might well boost the alternative, but as yet less well-formed cooperative economic game in the region supported by China, this time with the US pointedly not invited—the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (see Wilson 2015).

Ostensibly ASEAN-led, RCEP is in actual fact China led. RCEP is aimed at countering the TPP, and for most regional governments, even though the TPP has now been signed, the calculus is still about which horse to back. At the very least, the RCEP provides a good example of how China's push back against its exclusion from the TPP is part of a larger regional game that is in play. China, and the other major developing countries, especially the other BRICs, clearly wants a place at the global economic (both trade and finance) governance tables. The US reluctance for so long to acquiesce in, let alone lead, the reform of the World Bank and the IMF and newer US-led preferential regional trading initiatives among a selectively limited sub-group of partners in the TPP and TTIP does not offer this. Rather regional trading initiatives are seen as exercises to protect US political and economic interests in traditional markets. Even less subtly they look like a thinly veiled attempt to push China to the margins of global trade policy governance and indeed global economic governance more broadly.

Moreover, to the extent that TPP and TTIP are attempts to rewrite trade rules they weaken the WTO as the arbiter of a rules-based system at a time when many countries without similar longstanding roles as trading nations to that of the US are becoming increasingly socialized into the rules based system put in place by GATT and the WTO

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, partners to the TPP signed the agreement in early February 2016. But formal ratification by the parliaments of the members, not a forgone conclusion in all instances (including the USA), is unlikely to be completed for at least two years.

since the end of World War II. Rather than protecting an open liberal trading system, the US may be assisting the consolidation of regional worlds. Other developments in addition to RCEP and FTAAP should be seen in this context.

For example, the 'Eurasian' push reflected in the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road concepts, announced by Xi Jinping in 2013 are eminently practical pieces of East Asian realpolitik reflecting China's growing influence. But at its heart is the 'idea of region'—of re-opening Eurasia—with attendant implications for the competing visions of regionalism in East Asia and the Pacific. Of course, we need to keep a sense of perspective about these projects. It was only *after* its multilateral economic reform efforts failed that China started setting up (or doubling down in the case of SCO and BRICS) on new institutions. The AIIB came into being because China couldn't achieve its preferred option, of reform of the WB and ADB. RCEP is a poor alternative to TPP. They are clearly projects whose potential lies in the longer-term, not immediate, future. But if successful, not only will they assist the internal rebalancing of the Chinese economy, they would also rebalance the geo-strategic map of East Asia. They will represent, if not a challenge then at least westward facing regional in contrast to an Eastern Pacific seaboard one.

#### **4. Conclusion: From Regionalism to 'Regional World' in Asia?**

This paper has rejected the too easily levelled charge that East Asian regionalism is all 'rhetoric over substance'; but it has not tried to push the narrative much beyond the modest efforts at regional institution building in East Asia. It has resisted most of the grander constructivist and especially English school terminology about the evolution of world society applied to regionalism. While some strong regional institutional characteristics might be evolving their course is neither set in stone nor irreversible. It is not to privilege events over theory to say that the study of regionalism needs the inductive research of the political economist to accompany the deductive reasoning of the socio cultural historian.

As I have tried to demonstrate, discrete disciplinary analyses found in history, sociology, economics and political science, and specifically international relations, lead either to an excessive theoretical abstraction (of the world society variety) or a crude empiricism (of the strategic studies variety, one that sees an 'Economic Asia' on the one hand and 'Politico-Security Asia' on the other. This duality fails to capture the complex interplay between the economics and the (international) politics of the region, especially with regard to the nature how nascent regional forms might participate in the shaping of the wider global order.

But, and this is a big but, implicit in the paper has been an assumption that the benefits of regional interaction depend on how a given region is spatially defined and how the political dynamics internal to the region's key states affect various regional projects. While trans-nationalization of the East Asian economy is indeed proceeding apace, that should not lead us to assume, for example, a necessary arithmetical

complementarity of interest amongst the regions ruling elites. They may, at the broadest level, share a Asian developmental perspective on capitalism writ large, or at least one that differs sharply from current European and American perspectives. But widely divergent views on how to secure the essentials of development have ensured an '...elite fragmentation ... [that] ... makes the formation of a new and widely accepted East Asian "sovereignty regime" unlikely' (Hamieri and Wilson, 2014). Thus as and if institutionalization takes place, the terrain of regional economic governance will remain complex, uneven and contested each step of the way.

In addition, regions constructed principally for 'geopolitical reasons', as has increasingly been the case in both Cold War and post-Cold War eras can have negative externalities that can outweigh the supposed benefits of greater regional cooperation. Nowhere is this trend better illustrated than in the politicisation of trade politics as the multilateral trade agenda, in theory driven by the WTO, has fallen fallow in the wake of the global financial crises, and in the failure to bring the Doha round of multilateral trade negotiations to a conclusion. As is understood, not only have bilateral and regional PTAs proliferated, but the big-ticket items of contemporary trade politics (TTIP and TTP) are ocean-spanning. And these are as much driven by US considerations of geo-politics as by rational economic considerations.

As discussed, TPP and TTIP are seen by the US as exercises in defensive trade politics, under-written by the rhetoric of fair trade for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are exercises in regional geo-politics rather than regional economic integration. How else could the exclusion of China from the TPP be explained? It certainly cannot be explained in rational economic terms. There might be some economic reasons, to do with the changing structure of trade, for privileging these initiatives over the multilateral trading order. But they are not convincing ones.

So, four suggested conclusions: First, the practice of regionalism and regional integration should be seen as perpetual works in progress. Second, and similarly, analysis and theorisation about regionalism are equally works in progress. And as I have suggested, theory and practice are inextricably to ne another. Third, any theorised teleological assumptions about an end state of 'regional society' should be resisted. Practical political reality—especially Macmillan's 'events' of which the global order is replete at the moment—invariably trump normative theoretical aspirations. Finally, I have suggested that the messier, less parsimonious approaches to the study of regionalism and regional world orders offered by IPE gives us a better purchase on how to understand regions, including regionalisation in East Asia, than either the tight mono-culture of economics on the one hand or the more discursive approaches of the scholar of international relations, especially world society theorists, on the other.

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