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Europe's Crisis and Asia

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THE present EU crisis over its constitution and budget has revived the question whether the European Union represents a model of regional cooperation that Asia and other parts of the developing world should emulate.

With their minimal bureaucracy, avoidance of legalistic mechanisms, and strong commitment to the non-interference principle, Asian regional organisations present a sharp contrast to the EU, which is known for its extensive institutionalisation and the “Brussels bureaucracy.”

The EU has been for some time regarded as the most advanced form of regionalism in the world, and there is a tendency in the academic community and Western policy circles to judge the progress of regional cooperation elsewhere by comparing it to the EU. For example, before the current European crisis, it was commonplace among Western scholars to note that while the EU had overcome age-old rivalries and fostered a common “European” identity, Asia's regionalism remained mired in competitive nationalisms and the naked pursuit of state sovereignty.

Asian policy-makers and analysts have generally rejected the EU as a suitable model for Asia. Instead, they have presented the Association of South-east Asian Nations or ASEAN as an alternative and distinctive form of regionalism, as captured in the phrase “ASEAN Way”. When Asia developed new forms of regional cooperation after the end of the Cold War, these institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Plus Three, were built on the ASEAN model, rather than the EU's.

But were the EU's institutional mechanisms really supplanting national interests and identities? And is the ASEAN process as unique as claimed?

These and related questions about the design and performance of regional organisations around the world are the focus of a joint research project launched in 2002 by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore and the Asia Center and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. Co-directed by the author and Harvard Professor Iain Johnston, the findings of the project challenge both propositions.

First, the EU's claim to have developed a collective identity did not stand up to scrutiny. In his paper on the EU, Jeffrey Checkel of Oslo University, found that “the identities, discourses and public spheres fostered by European institutions are still dominated by their national

counterparts or, at best, co-exist uneasily side by side with them”. While European institutions were and will remain different compared to other regions, these differences might be narrowing.

As the EU expands its membership and scope, covering new policy areas such as citizenship, immigration policy, and fundamental rights, “one might expect the importance of national contexts to increase - and to do so in a direction that likely weakens the degree of cooperation”. Completed in May 2004, Checkel’s paper anticipated the EU’s present constitutional crisis.

What about the distinctiveness of the ASEAN model? This too does not stand up to scrutiny. The findings of the project show that sovereignty and non-intervention remain the core principle of all the regional groups in the developing world. For example, in his paper on Latin America, Jorge Dominguez, who directs the Weatherhead Center at Harvard, describes Latin Americans as “rule innovators” who “pioneered the defence of ‘hard shell’ notions of sovereignty and non-intervention”. While qualified somewhat by the Organization of American States’ new agenda of democracy promotion, non-intervention remains a robust norm in the OAS.

Similarly, the consensus principle is not distinctive to ASEAN, but has been followed by all other regional groupings, including the African Union (formerly the Organisation of African Unity) the Arab League, and most strikingly NATO, whose effectiveness in the post-Cold War era, as German scholar Frank Schimmelfennig points out, has been subject to its ability to forge intra-mural consensus, rather than to American dominance.

Moreover, while regional institutions in Asia, Africa and Latin America are deemed to be “weak” when compared to the heavily institutionalised EU, this institutional weakness is part of a deliberate strategy to protect state sovereignty and ensure regime survival. Weak institutions are desired by African leaders as a means to self-preservation, argues the author of the study of the OAU/AU, Jeffrey Herbst of Princeton University.

Indeed, a consistent and common feature of all regional organisations is the importance of domestic political considerations in shaping the agenda and extent of regional cooperation. The study on Asian regionalism, co-authored by Yuen Foong Khong of Oxford University and Helen Nesadurai of IDSS, points to the tendency among Asian states to be “extremely protective of their sovereignty” and focus on “regime legitimacy and survival” while participating in regional projects.

But Asia is hardly unique. Regional cooperation, whether in Europe or elsewhere, works best if it helps leaders to address their domestic problems and bolster their legitimacy. Hence, it is a mistake to assume that there is an inevitable conflict between sovereignty (or, more precisely, the prerogatives of individual leaders) and regional cooperation. African leaders, for example, usually seek to promote regional or continental agreements in order to enhance their own domestic standing and to cement their state’s sovereignty. And in France, we have an example of how the politically significant domestic farming constituency has dictated Paris’ reluctance to accept the elimination of the EU’s controversial farm subsidies.

The project also found that regional cooperation based on an ideology of unification, such as pan-Arabism or pan-Africanism, has been a failure everywhere.

But if success is defined as the ability of a regional group to preserve sovereignty and territorial integrity, then the performance of regional groups in Africa, Asia and Middle East can be seen in a different light. The OAU developed a successful regime to preserve post-colonial boundaries, whose alteration by nationalist leaders would have been profoundly destabilising. The Arab League, normally regarded as a failed institution, could claim a major achievement; this, as pointed out by the paper co-authored by Michael Barnett of University of Minnesota and Etel Solingen of University of California at Irvine, was to frustrate Nasser's attempts to unify the Arab world, which ran counter to the nationalist aspirations of fellow Middle Eastern leaders.

In terms of its policy implications, the project's findings are a reminder that there need be no single measure of success in regional cooperation, defined by the EU's single currency and constitution. Success should be measured in terms of the regional context and the initial goals that regional organisations set for themselves. At the same time, differences in the objectives and approach among regional organisations, implicit in labels such as the "European model," or the "ASEAN Way," could be overstated. Regional cooperation, in the EU as elsewhere, is not a linear process, but proceeds through a series of ups and downs.

The EU, NATO and ASEAN face similar challenges related to agenda and membership expansion. Finally, the past or future success of the EU lies not in creating a pan-European state, but in ensuring that political and other differences within the existing nation-state system are not settled through zero-sum competition and the use of force. Instead of looking at the EU's constitution and other experiments in supranationalism as unsuitable referent objects (which they may well be), regional organisations in Asia and other parts of the developing world should focus on lessons from the EU that might help them to ensure a stable peace among their members. This singular accomplishment of the EU is yet to be damaged by the current constitutional and budgetary crisis.

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