

## Comment on “Regionalism in the Asia-Pacific” and U. S. Interests

YI OKYEON

SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Professor Ito, in his draft titled “Regionalism in the Asia-Pacific” and U. S. Interests”, points out how regionalism has evolved in East Asia, followed by the contrasting patterns of regional order-making in East Asia, which he argues to be all subject to and susceptible to U. S. interests in East Asia. In doing so, he draws a conclusion that a more assertive role is desired of Japan in the “New Asia.” Although his draft is at its incipient stage, I am dazzled with the scope and magnitude of his probing into contrasting perspectives on regional order in East Asia, in particular, and its ramifications in the Asia-Pacific. I am eagerly anticipating that his final draft will shed some innovative insights into the new era in which China, Japan, South Korea and U. S. are respectively faced with a mission to cope with a multitude of issues, both old and new. To improve the main logic behind his arguments, he will undoubtedly streamline the structure of arguments which are rather scattered. It will be my utmost privilege if some of my comments can somehow assist him in refining his writing in the process.

Professor Ito starts with a typology of regionalism in Asia. He first divides regionalism into the one that grew out of economic cooperation and bloomed into political and/or security one like the APEC, and the other whose initial political and/or security needs spread into subsequent economic demands for cooperation like ASEAN, including the ASEAN plus Three. He then contrasts two sub-regional frameworks in the region, namely between the ASEAN in consultation with China, Japan and South Korea, which has been promoted since the 1997 financial crisis, and ASEAN-based cooperation such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) or the ASEAN Security Community (ASC), which the ASEAN countries persistently prioritized over the East Asian imperative. He also distinguishes the statist or institutionalist tendency to emphasize the importance of formal institutions in strengthening integration from the so-called “soft” trend to steer clear from the self-guarding state institutions and instead concentrate on building informal networks.

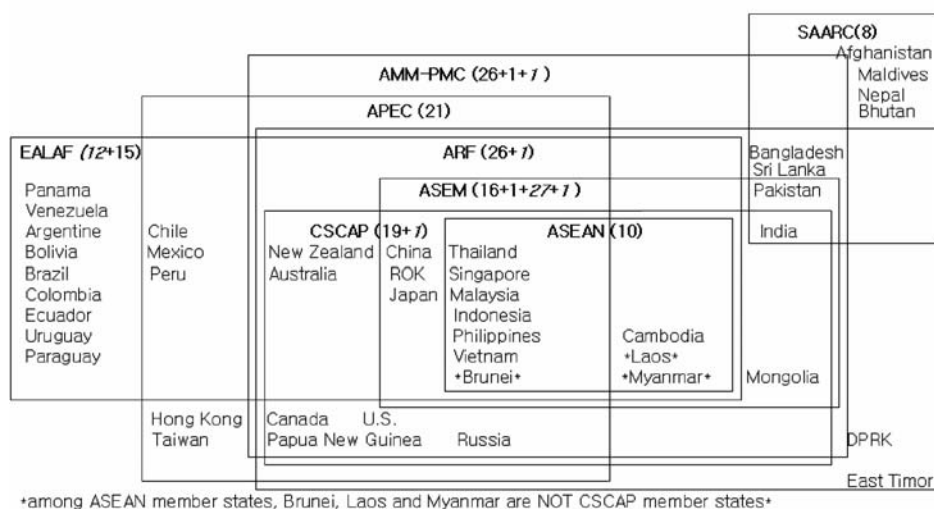
Yet it still remains an evasive issue how these intricate configurations of region are interrelated. Nesadurai (2005), for instance, distinguishes three distinct types of regionalism: an Asia-Pacific trans-regional one centered on APEC, a Southeast Asian-led regional one centered on ASEAN and its derivatives like AFTA and AEC, and an East Asian-led regional one centered on the ASEAN plus

Three. These configurations of region are not only diverse but also overlapping in their membership, thus it is only natural to inquire whether these different regional institutions are competing or complementing one another. Figure 1 illustrates this diverse and overlapping nature of regional configurations in the Asia-Pacific. In addition to pondering the nature of relationships between these overlapping regional arrangements, Nesadurai raises a question of how these diverse regional configurations have an impact on the current U. S. -centered world order.

Professor Ito, instead, turns his attention to explore how American hegemony affects these intricately interrelated configurations of region. He points out that American preponderance pervades regionalism in Asia primarily because there is no perceived adversary common to all counties in the region and many remain skeptical about collective security arrangements due to their bitter recollection of the Japanese aggression both before and during the World War II. These two characteristics, unique to Asia, perpetuate the intricate networks of U. S. -led unilateral relationships at the expense of an integrated Asia, thus foreboding a grim and uncertain future for regionalism in Asia, he argues. However, it is not entirely clear whether this uncertainty of regionalism in Asia stems from its inherent two-tier and/or two-speed development, or if American preponderance debilitates any integrative attempt, which contributes to the intra-regional animosity. What is certain, nonetheless, is that Asian regionalism has to resolve the problem of intra-regional reconciliation in order to expedite its multilateral effort to establish the region-level solidarity or even its regional identity.

To account for this uncertainty about the future of regionalism in Asia, Professor Ito alternatively chooses to elaborate how regionalism in Asia emerged and developed since Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, a former prime minister of Malaysia, proposed the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG) in 1990. Professor Ito points out that both the US and other East Asian countries were critical of Dr. Mahathir's proposal but stops short of elaborating why regionalism in Asia provoked skepticism across the Asia-Pacific region. It is easier to figure out that the US was reluctant to yield its leverage over the region and thus criticizing a separate track of regionalism. Yet it is not necessarily clear whether other East Asian countries were positive about the membership itself, which was never specified, or its legal binding power—to be more precise, its lack of impact.

In this context, Professor Ito also stops short of clarifying how the ASEM is labeled as a “virtual realization of Dr. Mahathir's proposal.” Is it because the ASEM finally specified its qualification requirements to be a member country, or because the ASEM can penalize a member country if and when the member country violates its agreement, or because more than economic issues are included for discussion in the more encompassing ASEM? There is indeed agreement among scholars and practitioners of regionalism that Dr. Mahathir is genuinely owed credit for his vision when he urged China, Japan, the Asian NIEs, ASEAN and other Southeast Asian countries to form a regional framework for discussion



<Figure 1> Regionalism in Practice, the Asia-Pacific Region and Beyond

- AMM-PMC: ASEAN Ministerial Meeting-Post Ministerial Conference (26+ASEAN Secretariat+EU)
- APEC: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (21)
- ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations (10)
- ASEM: Asia-Europe Meeting (16+ASEAN Secretariat+27 EU member states+European Commission)
- ARF: ASEAN Regional Forum (26+EU)
- CSCAP: Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (19+Europe SCAP)
- EALAF: East Asia-Latin America Forum (15+12 Latin American states)
- SAARC: South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (8)

of issues common to all the prospective member countries so as to establish trade and economic links, which in turn stimulate economic interactions in the region.

Professor Ito instead suggests that regionalism in Asia emerged thanks to both negative and positive impetuses. Asian countries became increasingly anxious about protectionism and regionalism sweeping across the North America and Europe in the form of NAFTA and EU. Yet Asian countries were simultaneously confident of their economic prosperity based on the “East Asian Miracle.” These mutually complementing common grounds motivated leaders to pursue regional solidarity, if not regional identity. However, Professor Ito argues what made regionalism in Asia sustain its form after the 1997 financial crisis was the entrepreneurship of the ASEAN plus Three, that spearheaded a coalition of those who were devastated by global regionalism and those who could remerge to provide aid to other countries in the region. In other words, a debacle, which shattered their sense of pride and security was an incentive powerful enough to bond diverse member countries together. It remains to be seen whether the ASEAN plus Three is successful in ushering a meaningful partnership in the region, which Professor Ito stays rather somber about.

What remain unaccounted for in Professor Ito’s draft are the more intriguing puzzles. First, is regional identity followed by regional institution, or does

regional institution accompany regional identity? Professor Ito seems to suggest that regional identity is more likely to form if regionalism expands from political and/or security to economic cooperation, if it develops on the basis of the ASEAN in close consultation with China, Japan and South Korea, i. e. the ASEAN plus Three, if it is built around informal networking, and if it pursues “non-military ways of exerting non-military influence.” However, Professor Ito falls short of explicating how and why these preconditions arguably befit the formation of regional identity in Asia better than an alternative path.

Second, does institutionalization necessitate a crisis? If sharing collective identity was sufficient only until a crisis forced East Asian countries to “seek beyond *ad hoc* reactions,” can a regional military conflict short of a war have a similar effect upon building the political and/or security community in the region? Professor Ito explicitly and unequivocally insists that it should be desirable to seek out “non-military ways of exerting influence,” even in dealing with potentially military threats in the region. At the same time, he admits that such a non-military endeavor entails a dilemma especially because there still remains the possibility of an armed clash, however remote it may be, in the region. Although he discusses a potential outbreak of an armed conflict by the PRC against Taiwan, he entirely foregoes the North Korean nuclear problem which has been plaguing the Six-Party Talk and stalling the progress of regional integration.

A regional calamity foreboding a crisis, then, does not necessarily accelerate an initiative to form a regional institution. In the case of controversies surrounding the North Korean nuclear problem, Professor Ito is correct in commenting that “[w]hile a military security policy was extremely simple and easy to understand, responding to force with force, foreign policy based on dialogue must be carried out through diverse channels including dialogue and negotiations with a country that may represent a latent threat.” His comment is all the more pertinent to the precarious nature of “non-military ways of exerting influence” in countering the remote possibility of military conflict. Yet he does not delineate exactly how such a daunting task is to be carried out. In fact, a challenge is to provide a roadmap on how to exert non-military influence when military threat, however small, still exists in the region. For example, can Japan offer ODA unconditionally or guarantee the free individual visits to a country that is a latent threat to its military security? Instead, he leaps into an argument that Japan has to better equip herself in this age of “New Asia” by proposing the “New Fukuda Doctrine,” which abruptly became outdated as Fukuda stepped down as prime minister.

Nevertheless, it still stands valid that whether a prime minister is a conservative pan-American or a liberal Asianist primarily determines the very nature and direction of his regional policy. For example, Asianist Fukuda pursued a “region-wide framework building” by treating China and ASEAN as equal partners and addressed “Asia as one world.” Contrarily, a pan-American prime minister such as Koizumi prioritized the needs of the United States so as

not to provoke it, which would otherwise perceive its interests being curtailed by the advancement of regional integration in East Asia. It is also persistently poignant that the U. S. influence upon the very existence and maintenance of regionalism in the East Asia is more or less perpetual. In fact, a number of scholars have been wrestling with how best to conceptualize the evolution of regionalism in Asia within the context of American hegemony, including Peter Katzenstein. In that respect, Professor Ito’s acute observation that a recent change in the American approach to regionalism in East Asia is sure to signal how the neighboring Asian countries would react to is resounding.

Yet there is a caveat to this obvious change in appearances. Professor Ito notes that the U. S. is not as antagonistic as it was in the past about regionalism in East Asia by citing that the U. S. even proposed the Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative (EAI) and promoted FTAs between itself and ASEAN countries. He also points out that its concern with anti-terrorist cooperation led the U. S. to pursue bilateral links with ASEAN countries. The tricky question, then, is whether the U. S. put political necessity ahead of economic need in East Asia, or is this recently observed change in the U. S. posture simply a fortunate side-effect of its pursuit of anti-terrorist cooperation everywhere? The U. S. indeed accelerated its effort in signing bilateral FTAs in Asia but so did its exertion in all the other regions. Then the real question to ask is whether the U. S. is engaged in an off-shore balancing against China through increasing bilateral FTAs around the world. Figure 2 shows that the number of FTAs negotiated since 2002 in the Asia-Pacific increased to 119 and that China has proposed or is negotiating bilateral FTAs with 28 countries. Figure 3 illustrates this expanding participation in regional trade agreements by many countries circa 2006. Yet Figure 4 tells us that the U. S., at least for now, is not so concentrating on Asia when proposing

<b>Bilateral Trade Fever</b>	
Free-trade agreements around the world	
FTAs negotiated globally	Approx. 300
FTAs negotiated since 2002 in Asia-Pacific	119
Percentage of world trade occurring through FTAs	50%
Countries with which China is negotiating or has proposed FTAs	28
EU FTAs	21
U.S. FTAs	10

Source: Business Roundtable, March 2007

<Figure 2> FTAs Around the World



<Figure 3> Participation in Regional Trade Agreements 2006

<Figure 4> US FTAs

existing	multilateral	DR-CAFTA (2005), NAFTA (1993)
	bilateral	Australia (2004), Bahrain (2005), Chile (2003), Israel (1985), Jordan (2001), Morocco (2004), Oman (2006), Singapore (2003), S. Korea (2007)
pending	awaiting implementation	Peru (2007)
	awaiting legislation	Columbia (2008?), Panama (2008?)
proposed	multilateral	FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas), MEFTA (Middle East Free Trade Area), TAFTA (Transatlantic Free Trade Area)
	bilateral	Ecuador, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates
	on indefinite hold	US-SAC (Southern African Customs Union Free Trade Agreement on hold since 2006), Thailand (on hold after 2006 coup), Qatar (on hold since 2006)

bilateral FTAs as much as it is argued to be. It remains to be seen whether the U. S. is indeed seeking off-shore balancing when it comes to bilateral FTAs in Asia.

Professor Ito’s draft on regionalism largely centers on a conceptual exploration by comparing and contrasting behavioral patterns China, Japan and the U. S. display when making a regional order. He first contrasts China’s strategy of “hierarchy”—acting upon the regained stability both within and

without China—with that of “among equals”—being mindful of power games both within and without China when contemplating leadership all the time. Then he contrasts Japan’s strategy of “balancing”—counterbalancing China’s rise to a regional hegemon by joining forces against China—with that of “bandwagoning”—lending support to China’s rise by joining forces with China. He goes on to argue that Japan’s choice is conditional upon the U. S. perception of China. Lastly, he contrasts the American strategy of “distance”—adroitly labeling it as “off-shore balancing”—with “alignment,” which he further divides into “balancing” as in containment and “bandwagoning” as in engagement.

This conceptualizing of Japan as a middle power between the U. S. and China, however, is rather difficult to follow.

Is Japan a middle power due to the intrinsic characteristics of regionalism in Asia that necessitates regional reconciliation among discordant member states?

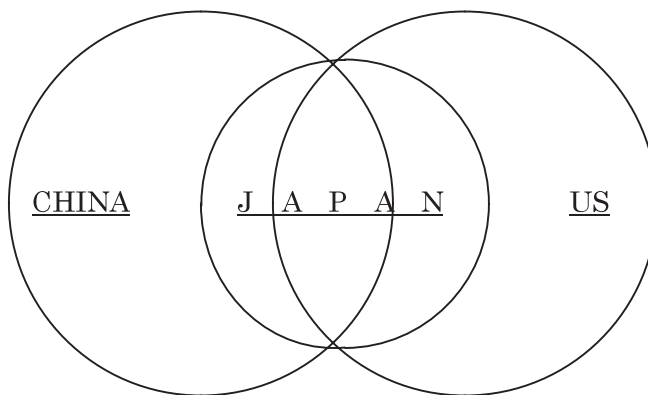
Or does Japan choose to claim its status as a middle power due to the external characteristics of regionalism in East Asia where the U. S. military presence is a fixture?

In an effort to model Professor Ito’s conceptual exploration, I drew a tripartite relationship between China, Japan, and the U. S., with Japan in the middle, as seen in figure 5.

This depiction does not accurately capture the fact that the U. S. and China are also directly interrelated to a certain extent.

The main purpose of this seemingly futile exercise is to picture the perception of Japan when dealing with China and the U. S. at the same time if and when China and the U. S. conceptualize regionalism in the region.

After all, Professor Ito’s main argument lies in envisioning Japan’s role in promoting the solidarity and identity of Asia, if not the entire Asia-Pacific.



<Figure 5> A tripartite relation: China, Japan and U. S.

Professor Ito proposes that Japan should and can contribute to promoting the solidarity and identity of Asia, “not by uniformly imposing the mode of integration on all Asian countries but by brokering a consensus among blocs of

Asian countries via informal networking through increasing ODAs and individual visits.” Yet without mapping regional approaches to such an alternative, Professor Ito’s proposal sounds like wagering “between fear of marginalization and domination (Nesadurai 2005, p. 159).” What Professor Ito does not address, however, is a more impending issue when mapping approaches to diverse and overlapping regionalism in Asia. Which configuration of regionalism is ultimately adopted depends on the motivations of actors who play key roles in regionalization. More importantly, regional identity, in particular, is social construction in which more involvement of citizens in a regional integration drive is necessary, if not mandatory. In Europe, for example, where the build-up of a European identity did not keep pace with the institutional processes of deepening regional integration, the so-called “democratic deficit” stalled further progress.

As seen in Figure 6, the information gap is diverse and immense at times among Asian countries. Even among East Asian countries, China is lagging far behind Japan and South Korea, both in telecommunication and internet distribution. A more noticeable gap is between East Asia and Southeast Asia, except for mobile phone use in several Southeastern countries. In this postmodern age, information is a source of power. If we focus on the number of personal computers owned in contrast with a number of internet users, however, the lack of hardware does not stop ordinary people from accessing the internet

<Figure 6> Motivational Forces of Political Integration

country	FHI <sup>1</sup>	Telephone <sup>2</sup>	Mobile <sup>3</sup>	PC <sup>4</sup>	Internet <sup>5</sup>
China	7	269	302	41	83
Japan	1	460	742	542	668
S. Korea	1	492	794	545	684
Indonesia	2	46	141	19	52
Philippines	3	41	387	29	58
Thailand	3	106	420	74	112
Malaysia	4	176	573	170	392
Vietnam	7	70	53	11	65

Sources : World Bank, *Information and Communications for Development 2006 : Global Trends and Policies* & Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Country Ratings 1972-2006*.

1. The figure for political rights ranges from 1 to 7; 1 ~ 2. 5 free, 3 ~ 5. 5 partially free, 6 ~ 7 not free.

2. The figure indicates a number of telephones installed per 1,000 persons (2005).

3. The figure indicates a number of mobile phone owned per 1,000 persons (2005).

4. The figure indicates a number of personal computers owned per 1,000 persons (2005).

5. The figure indicates a number of internet users per 1,000 persons (2005).

and perhaps acquiring information and knowledge. Even Southeast Asian countries show dramatic utilization of internet by ordinary people who do not own their own personal computer. Thus, even though China is ranked low on political rights and relatively low on the ownership of personal computers and internet usage, twice as many people log on to the internet than those who actually own theirs. This phenomenon by itself attests to the possibility of an information revolution leading to a political revolution.

Furthermore, if a group of “netizens (internet citizens)” across borders manage to form a cybernetic identity over regional issues such as human rights, including human trafficking and smuggling, or environmental protection, they will become a formidable collectivity that may be able to exert political pressures over various issues at the regional level. Professor Ito does not include this type of regionalizing actors when discussing diverse types of regional order-making. Although it remains to be seen whether transnational civil society groups can actually respond to regional issues effectively, policymakers and politicians still have to make the political decision on regionalism by considering their respective domestic imperatives. Japan is not completely immune from these homegrown grievances against regionalization projects, especially if policymakers and politicians turn their deaf ears to these politically motivated and technologically sophisticated citizens who are interested and perhaps politically motivated to address regional-level problems independent of their political leaders.

Professor Ito concludes that “we need various kinds of cooperation that will go beyond functional issues.” I am in a complete agreement with him. But I also need to augment his conclusion that mapping regionalism involves not only extending issues beyond conventional ones—such as prosperity and security—into new ones such as natural disasters, intellectual property protection, etc., but also extending actors beyond national policymakers and politicians into businesses and even civil society groups. What is certain, though, is that whichever type of regionalism is pursued in the process, it is destined to function within the context of a prevailing world order, which is at present centered on the U. S. interests. Thus no matter how various regionalizing actors stretch their influence on various regional issues, both conventional and new, the contour of regionalism is conditional upon the present U. S. -centered world order and its regional ramification.

Professor Ito instead specifically focuses on this very point that neither Southeast Asian nor East Asian regionalism is unlikely to challenge the fundamental tenet of the U. S. prevalence when conceptualizing how the American preference conditions the complicated and interrelated regional order-making efforts in the region. That is why I presume he selectively chooses to concentrate on certain types of regionalization actors, namely nation as a unit of analysis, and exclude others such as ordinary citizens or their collectivities. Therefore, it is entirely up to his discretion whether he decides to include non-state actors in his conceptual scheme.