

Region Building in East Asia: ASEAN Plus Three and Beyond

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1 Introduction

In the wake of the ending of the cold war, the states of ASEAN scrambled to redefine the *raison d'être* of the Association, which had been created in 1967 as a bastion against communism. There was much speculation as to the relevance of the organisation and its contribution to the future of the region. In 2004, having faced the consequences of the 1997 financial crisis and seen its own membership expand to include the previously conflict-bound states of Vietnam and Cambodia, not to mention Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, the Association has begun to develop a strategy of broader regionalism. The pursuit of membership expansion gave the leaders of ASEAN an opportunity to delineate closer regional ties, whilst situating the Association itself at the heart of greater, East Asian, initiatives. These changes appeared to represent a self-conscious move away from a loose Asia Pacific gathering, to a more coherent form of East Asian regionalism, with the explicit inclusion of China, Japan and South Korea as part of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process. This new format is the central focus of this chapter. Differentiated regional responses to the financial crisis also provoked some soul-searching with regard to the very identity of ASEAN and led to calls for greater and more cohesive levels of intra-regional cooperation, culminating in proposals for the APT. Scholars are divided on whether these developments signify a further step towards regional integration (STUBBS 2002) or whether this is simply a necessary *ad hoc*

response to systemic changes throughout the region and beyond (BEESON 2004). To date, many assessments of East Asian cooperation and integration have tended to compare the extent to which the ASEAN or APT processes lead East Asia towards an EU-style regional trajectory. This chapter contends that such a comparison negates the relevance of East Asia's particular history and offers, rather, an examination of the ways in which the formation of the APT and developments associated with it contribute to the very concept of East Asian regionalism itself and to the proliferation of regional activities. The chapter is divided into two parts: part one examines how the concept of regionalism might be applied to an assessment of the APT; and part two considers the actors and events that led to the development of this new form of dialogue.

2 Regionalism and East Asia

Neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist scholars focus for the most part on the interplay of states in the economic and politico-security dimensions of alliance-building, and regard states as maximising their own advantage in the face of changing systemic conditions. The approach adopted here integrates conventional accounts with constructivist interpretations of how the ongoing interaction of actors and structure may lead to changes in the patterns of behaviour of the former and the very delineation of the latter over time (BROWN 1997: 87). As part of this process, the very notion of the region itself can play a central part, and several scholars have come to note that the regional dimension of inter-relations is assuming increasing significance and the perception of power politics is also affected by the perception of the arena in which they are played out. Thus, whilst the region may offer a locus for cooperation, may codify institutional rules, or may be the site of structural change (ABBOTT and SNIDAL 2001: 10; GILL 1997: 7), it may also provide an arena for influence and even for the development of new patterns of behaviour (RUGGIE 1998: 56). HETTNE defines a region as a group of countries with a more or less explicitly shared political project, thereby highlighting the ideological aspect of social relations within the geographic area (1999: 1). For him, as a social system, a region implies different types of region-wide cross-cutting relations, as well as the convergence of values among state and non state actors. Most distinctly, he identifies how the very identification of a region can become embedded in intra-regional and extra-regional relations as a whole (1999: 10-11). In this way, it is the region itself which becomes the focal point for specific actions and even, especially in the case of ASEAN, it can provide a means of balancing interests among key actors, by locating the latter within an explicitly regional context.

Elsewhere, I have examined region-building from the three perspectives of 'autonomist', 'integrating' and 'defensive' models (GILSON 2002). In its autonomist form, regionalism places an emphasis on the gradual, often *ad hoc* events and encounters which cumulatively engender the formation of regional identity. Most frequently, such encounters might derive from shared histories or geographical