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**ASIA'S QUEST FOR STABILITY: REGIONALISM AS A
GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY**

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ABSTRACT

Asia's geopolitical landscape is defined by its immense diversity, complex historical legacies, and evolving power dynamics, making regionalism a vital strategy for achieving long-term stability. This paper explores the role of regionalism as a mechanism to address Asia's interconnected challenges, including economic disparities, environmental crises, technological advancements, and security concerns. Regionalism in Asia not only serves as a platform for fostering economic integration but also as a tool for enhancing political dialogue, mutual confidence, and collective security. By analyzing the interactions between historical grievances, cultural ties, and economic interdependence, this study demonstrates how regional frameworks, such as ASEAN and RCEP, enable nations to align their interests while navigating geopolitical rivalries. The paper also delves into the obstacles hindering regional cooperation, such as unresolved territorial disputes, legacy conflicts, and the competing ambitions of major powers. It argues that despite these barriers, Asia's regionalism has proven resilient and adaptive, offering solutions to global challenges like climate change and pandemic management through intra-regional collaboration. Furthermore, it highlights the imperative for policymakers to embrace inclusive regionalism and prioritize multilateral mechanisms to create a genuinely multipolar order that ensures equitable development and peace. For scholars, a broader conceptualization of security—beyond military balances—is necessary to address the socioeconomic and ideological dimensions shaping Asia's

political behavior. In conclusion, Asia's quest for stability lies in strengthening regionalism as a geopolitical strategy that reconciles historical divides, balances national ambitions, and builds sustainable frameworks for cooperation. The paper calls for innovative policy approaches and deeper academic inquiry to ensure that regionalism continues to serve as a cornerstone for peace and prosperity in Asia.

Keywords: *Asia, Regionalism, Geopolitical Strategy, Stability, Economic Integration, Security, ASEAN, RCEP, Regional Cooperation, Multipolar Order, Policy Making, Historical Grievances, Intra-Regional Collaboration.*

INTRODUCTION

Stability is critically important in today's global context. Europe has reached a crucial understanding following the severe impacts of two World Wars, which disrupted the region for nearly four decades. Similarly, Africa has come to acknowledge the vital role of stability as it confronts its own challenges. Asia, however, occupies a unique and complex position in this landscape. The global environment is becoming increasingly interconnected, particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War, which has altered international relations (Cohen, 2023). Conversely, Asia, being a large and diverse continent, exhibits greater cultural and political fragmentation compared to other regions, highlighting the necessity for a specialized strategy to attain sustainable stability among its various nations. This article argues that regionalism is the essential geopolitical approach needed to promote cooperation, mutual understanding, and ultimately, stability among Asian countries during these difficult times.

Asia is currently undergoing a remarkable and profound transition. In order for the new Asia to truly prosper and thrive, it is absolutely essential to cultivate a peaceful and regionally cooperative environment that is responsive to the ever-evolving dimensions of global affairs. The analogy of a diverse group of musicians playing together harmoniously is often used, and it is fitting. Every instrument needs to be finely tuned; the performers must collaborate seamlessly, adhering to a shared musical score and vision. Every individual in Asia is increasingly recognizing the undeniable fact that the intensely competitive world has reshaped its nature and its fundamental components in critical areas, and they are utilizing the elements of regional cooperation to navigate these changes. Such cooperation is likely to secure long-lasting regional stability, which is inherently linked to economic prosperity while simultaneously promoting peaceful political

relations both within the region and beyond its borders. This encouraging regional perspective did not emerge suddenly or without warning. The notable rise of Asia on the global stage has certainly driven the advancement of Pacific regionalism, which has emerged as a significant factor in international relations (Smith & Wesley-Smith, 2021). Crucial to understanding what this entails, a region is identified as a spatial entity in today's interconnected world, characterized by variable and often fluid boundaries. From a security perspective, it serves as the arena where the foreign policy of various political entities is enacted and played out. The goals and purposes of this regional subsystem can therefore encompass a broad spectrum—from the formation of regimes to balancing power among factions and establishing sanctuaries for either authoritarian or democratic governance to forming strategic alliances.

Background and Context

Asia's quest for stability is a pursuit deeply interwoven with the fabric of its history, stretching back through the ages. This enduring search for balance and security has received renewed significance and urgency in light of the massive and transformative geopolitical changes that have been unrolling since the conclusion of the Cold War. In the contemporary context, the concepts of sustainability and stability have become more critical than ever. It is intriguing to observe this increased importance during an era when global systems, structures, and conduct guidelines are not only eroding but are also gradually breaking down, fracturing into three distinct categories: financial, security, and climate (Goh, 2022). Despite this need for stability, states within Asia approach regional structures with a healthy dose of suspicion and caution. They continually seek out windows of vulnerability in their adversaries while simultaneously searching for opportunities to close off such vulnerabilities for themselves. The creation of bipolar frameworks followed by the emergence of multipolar Asian state structures has introduced a complex array of motivations. There exists a widespread desire among these nations to assert themselves as potential balancers in the region, if not outright revealers of threats—this dynamic underscores their multifaceted compulsions. In the current geopolitical climate, states must now navigate a landscape where their actions are influenced not only by the interests of other regions that are intricately interwoven with their own but also by the ever-looming fear of the formation of informal alliances within their region and the potential

ramifications of such coalitions. This intricate web of relationships and interests complicates the quest for stability, necessitating careful maneuvering and strategic thought from each state involved. The balancing act of diplomacy, alliances, and regional security continues to evolve, reflecting the constantly shifting landscape of power and influence within Asia (Mamasoliev2024).

Asia is fraught with many regions and subregions manacled by historical baggage: political conflicts, colonial lines of administration, territorial disputes, military organization, border crossings, trade relations, connectivity, transnational and transregional issues, security and military alliances, threat perceptions, geographical distances, and the role of extraterritorial powers vis-à-vis millennia of intermeshed cultures and societies. Superior narrow parochialism impedes states from actualizing the larger good of the region (Brozgal & Glasberg, 2023). Though Asia, ideologically, does not endorse the ideology of 'anarchy is freedom,' it is entangled in an ideological cobweb from where hues of 'a good anarchy is better than a bad order' can only be heeded though not so accepted. The variant of freedom-anarchy and order-chaos runs parallel in Asia and makes it appear as an ideological hybrid. It is unlike the Euro-Atlantic tradition, but it is internal to itself. The quest for regional stability and sustainability starts but does not end at the altars of internationalism and regionalism. The world is round, but the culture is not. The symmetry gets transformed into asymmetry and vice versa in the new and recurrent circadian rhythms. Given the increasingly interconnectedness and inseparable linkages in the age of globalization, there is no compromise to be indifferent. Culture, thus, enters the calculations conducted at rectangles rather than the causal ones (Börzel, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the past fifty years, various scholars and researchers have made concerted efforts to draw out the subtle yet significant differences that exist between the notions of regional cooperation and regional stability in the complex arena of international politics, thereby making it a crucial and highly debated topic within the broader framework of international relations (Wright, 2021). In the last two decades particularly, this topic has gained even greater prominence and urgency, largely due to the establishment and development of numerous new institutions that cover a wide array of areas, encompassing trade, security, environmental issues, and cultural exchanges. Cooperation and stability provide differing

visions regarding what the term "order" encompasses in the pursuits and objectives of these two distinct and often contrasting concepts (Acharya, 2021). Concepts of regionalism and regional policies are frequently employed across both disciplines, serving as vital analytical tools. They are informed, in part, by a multitude of socio-political ideas surrounding the necessity of governance, community belonging, and group attachment—these serving both as analytical concepts for examination and normative ideals to be aspired towards. This section seeks to delve deeply into identifying the theoretical foundations that underpin these notions and to outline the predominant uses of the term regionalism in isolation within the paradigms of international relations theory, as well as across the expansive academic literature addressing this theme (Anand, 2023). The primary distinction of the term "regionalism" in this case refers to its varied applications in numerous contexts, which include UN Regionalism, neo-realism, neoliberalism, political economy perspectives, constructivist viewpoints, and globalization theory. Different bodies of literature describe this term in a multitude of forms and emphasize its critical significance in various conceptual frameworks. This term articulates a spectrum of interests, encompassing viewpoints such as conflict versus cooperation, cooperation juxtaposed with stability, problem-focused interests alongside ethnographic fields, qualitative dominance present in theories' reliance, and divergent descriptive forms relating to comparative frameworks at the systemic level versus institutional comparative literary instances. Often, the term "cooperation" is invoked to signify that distinct regions are set apart from others due to the multifaceted problems that concern them uniquely, whereas the term "stability" is typically used to highlight the pressing importance of seeking out solutions for specific regions (Pietrzak, 2024). These divergent perspectives frequently result in differing outcomes and varied results. The field of regionalism is now established as a well-recognized domain of inquiry within the discipline of international relations, and it is also examined to a lesser extent from the perspectives of international political economy and other related disciplinary frameworks. However, much of the literature pertaining to these themes has been primarily driven by practical policy concerns, resulting in works that are often heavily normatively laden with values and interests. Despite this, the theoretical debates within this expansive literature yield a solid foundation for critical examination regarding various agreements and frameworks that

arise within this context, depending on differing interpretations and perspectives. The theoretical framework presented here is intentionally concise and selective; indeed, the breadth and depth of the literature in this area is simply too vast to comprehensively cover within a brief space. Its main purpose is to provide students and scholars alike with an informed understanding of the various dimensions of regionalism while discussing some of the principal arguments presented in different bodies of literature (Moritz et al.2022). While many scholars focus on the myriad problems and complex determinants of regionalism from practical reasoning and policy-driven angles, the advantages and disadvantages linked to regionalist developments also provide compelling and thought-provoking reasons for considering these areas comprehensively. Understanding these intricate dynamics is essential for forming at least a general impression of what existing theories are predisposed to predict and explain in greater detail. This understanding thereby underpins the rationale for undertaking more nuanced and in-depth research that is focused on a specific region, area studies, global studies, or otherwise, allowing for a more thorough exploration of the implications and consequences of regionalism. Engaging with these considerations can not only enhance our comprehension of various global interactions but also lead to more effective policies and strategies that reflect the complexities of regionalism in practice.

Conceptualizing Regionalism

It is essential at the outset to make clear what this essay seeks to establish: an in-depth analysis of a variety of ideas, alongside a number of regional initiatives that aim to demonstrate a genuine quest for achieving a sustainable security equilibrium in the world's most populous continent. Several distinct kinds of regional cooperation may be thoughtfully considered in this context: first, economic integration, which can take on a variety of forms; second, monetary arrangements that facilitate smoother trade and financial interactions among nations; third, robust environmental protection systems aimed at ensuring the preservation of natural resources; fourth, enhanced cooperation in the critical field of arresting dangerous international criminals that pose a threat to safety and stability; finally, the establishment of political-military alliances or ententes that might occur periodically or even in a makeshift manner as nations come together to confront a specific, pressing threat that endangers the region (Acharya, 2021).

What is regionalism? The concept of regionalism is utilized on a dramatically diverse range of levels, carrying various meanings: it spans from the global front, serving as a method of organizing international relations and geopolitical partnerships, to the specific realm of world regional dynamics (for instance, a Eurasian regionalism), and even extends to the more commonly understood context of regional economic integration efforts, fostering economic cooperation among neighboring states, down to a localized level of engagement that aims to improve community ties. In contemporary discussions, many scholars and practitioners no longer confine regionalism to a straightforward alliance or a mere legal agreement existing solely within a designated geographic space. Instead, they emphasize that regionalism tends to progress most efficiently and effectively when there is an active and dense system of interconnected political, economic, legal, cultural, institutional, strategic, and diplomatic ties that flourishes among the states of a given region. These states often perceive themselves to be, in some historical or civilizational sense, identical or united, sharing common cultural narratives and interests that bind them together (Lu, 2024). This observation suggests that the identity of the group usually precedes its decisions to cooperate and integrally sustain its regional territory and foster collaborative arrangements. It inherently implies that there are conceptions of a “most characteristic” nature that define the region and a set of shared interests among its states that reinforce this connection. Therefore, to the extent that regionalism is predicated upon a shared sense of identity, it tends to be far more durable and sustainable. Conversely, it is least durable in contexts where regional ideologies are not deeply rooted in such sources as a shared identity among the states involved (Vom Hau & Srebotnjak, 2021).

Asia continues to exhibit several distinct regions primarily due to the influence of global forces that have increasingly reinforced these varying regional identities and interests over time. The ultimate objectives of regionalism can differ significantly from one region to another, despite the fact that the fundamental frameworks of regional separatism are ostensibly categorized under an overarching umbrella comprising economic, political, military, and security aims, alongside differing methods to achieve these goals. It is inherent in the nature of contemporary political ideologies to utilize concepts such as sovereignty and nationalism, which are often used to articulate international issues through the

lens of regions. This ranges from the demarcation of boundary borders to more profound, strategic considerations that influence regional interactions (Wu et al.2022). Consequently, states actively "construct" and define regions in a strategic manner, utilizing concepts that reflect their identities, ambitions on the international stage, and the accompanying fears of outside threats or rivals. The agreement and consent among powerful states can significantly bolster the phenomenon of regionalism, propelling it in various directions and potentially leading to specific outcomes or shifts in the geopolitical landscape. This dynamic, as previously argued, may well be a result of historical experiences and interactions that shape and redefine regional contexts continuously.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Tourism posters often showcase breathtaking landscapes, ancient temples, and gorgeous beaches in Asia that attract visitors from all around the globe. However, these alluring images typically overlook an uneven historical landscape, profoundly shaped by wars, genocide, refugee crises, proxy conflicts, assassinations, and ongoing nuclear threats that have at times gripped the region. Therefore, an exploration of Asia's rich and diverse regional architecture should also focus on the various wars and conflicts that have played critical roles in driving the regional balance of power throughout history (Mamasoliev2024). At the pre-colonial level, numerous polities within the region formed intricate alliances, extensive confederations, and thriving trade networks that spanned across multiple cultural or religious borders. Notably, the tributary system of pre-modern China had then established a unique polar status, with various orders and hierarchies influencing regional dynamics for nearly two millennia, weaving a complex tapestry of interaction and conflict that defined the area's past.

Polities throughout the region had their destinies intertwined, and the end of colonialism transformed intra-regional relationships. Simultaneously, colonialism implanted anachronistic injustices that have kept Asian regions at odds in the post-colonial period, during the era of the United Nations. The struggle of many colonies began around the 1920s to develop regional organizations to prove to the international community their capability of self-government. The organization of various ethno-linguistic and cultural spheres into larger multi-faith, multi-national entities has brought a long-lasting impact. While these artificial multilateral entities appeared to have had no choice but to become political

units, the ethnic and sectarian nationalisms and atrocities reawakened by the bureaucratic violence of imperialism have continued to divide them. It was therefore the strategy of the intervening socialist regimes to foster these very conflicts, debilitating Southeast Asia to this day. Their exit was, of course, an end to the proxy wars, which cunningly left the region with decade-long counterinsurgency conflicts (Koldunova2022).

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Era

The formation of a regional organization presupposes the existence and characteristics of a region, which invariably takes us back to an extensive discussion of the regional dynamics that thrived prior to the significant arrival of European powers in Asia. Before the advent of colonization, this region was already characterized by a rich tapestry of existing traditional political frameworks and intricate trade networks. Several competing political entities existed within the Asia-Pacific area, each exhibiting differing levels of authority over varying scales of population, territory, and cultural identity, which carries important implications for our contemporary understanding of Asia-Pacific regionalism. It is crucial to note that pre-colonial regional politics were primarily defined by a complex interplay of cooperation, conflict, and diplomacy among the diverse states or political systems of varying scales, not only within the confines of the Asian land masses but also across vast and strategic sea zones (Akpan & Iseyen, 2022). When the Europeans eventually arrived, they undertook a radical transformation of the pre-existing political configurations and caused significant disruption to the established economic systems that had been in place. The political landscape of Southeast Asia, for instance, differed remarkably from that of South Asia, highlighting the diverse paths each region had taken. The existing political dynamics, which showcased power, accommodation, and trade interactions in South Asia between various states and other influential cultural and political entities, also remain profoundly relevant for contemporary understanding of this complex region (Stuart-Fox, 2021). India, for example, provides a critical case study that illustrates many of the central themes that have been thoroughly discussed concerning both pre-colonial and post-colonial regional economies, alongside the intricate and evolving relationships between the various states and political entities that characterize the area.

European colonization undermined pre-existing identity and governance systems by overlaying the region with new borders and

fiat currencies, and imposing foreign languages. Some local societies were less affected than others. Finally, local cultures resisted the influence and aggressively fought against European and other important powers. Imperial Japan was able to expand its influence in the region, for a time, in the context of the Pacific War. The date of departure of the colonists from Asia and the former empires of Asiatic island colonies provides the initial starting point for exploring the emergence and, as we will see, the development of regionalism as evidenced by the birth of and the role played by old and new regional associations, organizations, and fora, which contributed to their creation and the historical context. Decolonization was a longer process in many of the cheap commodity producer countries of Asia where a disappointed and alienated failure ultimately led to independence and later to forms of regional association and cooperation (Assa, 2022). Asia's priority was not so much ideology, though it of course played a role, but forced independence on these colonies of Western-dominated metropolises interested in their own colonization and the fecund soils, and the raw materials that it provided, not an association with groups of reliable producers, which was the European-based concept of economic integration.

CONTEMPORARY REGIONAL DYNAMICS

The strong drive for cooperation that manifested in the form of regionalism from the 1960s to the 1990s was deeply intertwined with the broader constraints and opportunities generated by the complex geopolitics of the Cold War era, which influenced nations and alliances in significant ways. This period marked a pivotal moment in the development of regional entities as various countries sought to navigate and adapt to the shifting power dynamics and the overarching ideological confrontations between rival blocs (Orford, 2021). Post-Cold War regional structures and practices, however, are accompanied by unique dynamics that are equally important to understand and analyze in the context of today's global landscape.

At present, regional inter-state dynamics are characterized by a dual narrative of integration and cooperation tempered by the strategic motivations driven by national interests. The bulwark of Southeast Asian regional statesmen for the Great Powers' strategic interests has consistently provided regional impetus for the gelatinous unity of ASEAN, a collective that has evolved over the decades yet remains vulnerable to external pressures. Currently, multiple strategic and political forces shape contemporary regional

cooperation in Asia, reflecting a complex interplay of historical legacies and emergent realities. At its base, the deepening interdependence among nations, alongside the increasing realization of economies of scale that were unleashed by successive waves of economic liberalization, have led states to pool resources together, with the aim of promoting regional development and ensuring sustainable progress. Security-wise, albeit more debatably, the legacy of the collapse of institutional structures initiated by the end of the Cold War raised the specter of unresolved national challenges that typified a solid rift between nation-states, exemplified starkly by the situation in Myanmar during the 1990s and beyond (Chen et al., 2023). With the post-9/11 climate and the upheaval following the Iraq War, a commonality of new security challenges emerged, and the subsequent global injunctions played out in the greater need for economic investment aimed at mitigating potential forms of conflict, subversion, and terrorism. In this intricate environment, external powers could walk a tightrope in maintaining favored geopolitical and economic positions while relegating conflict prevention to the limitless capitals of Asia. Unfortunately, former Asia scholars failed to grapple adequately with the transformation of Asia's new political economy to make these contentions credible and actionable. Internal poverty combined with the lack of equitable power-sharing in Sri Lanka was compounded by variations in the Indian approaches to regional security, further complicating the landscape. This multifaceted scenario invites further scrutiny and engagement from stakeholders both within the region and outside, as they navigate the evolving challenges and opportunities that characterize this dynamic part of the world (Börzel & Zürn, 2021).

ASEAN and Southeast Asia

ASEAN stands as the singular regional organization in Asia that boasts a notable and continuous history spanning forty remarkable years. This distinction places it among a select few regional organizations on a global scale that have not only survived but thrived to witness their first significant enlargement. Moreover, this organization has embarked on an ambitious and strategic process of both deepening and widening its scope of influence and cooperation at the same time. In contemporary discourse, it has become almost unimaginable to engage in any discussion regarding Asia without highlighting ASEAN's pivotal role or analyzing its intricate interactions with both Northeast and South

Asia. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that ASEAN does not represent a recent development in the realm of relations among Southeast Asian nations (Honrada and Bokeriya2023). Instead, it has its roots firmly planted in earlier efforts and initiatives aimed at fostering greater collaboration on a variety of critical issues that concern the region.

The model of regional organization presented by ASEAN is unique. Its statements, principles, and goals have always placed greater emphasis on cooperation among Southeast Asian countries, even when the insertion of their collective voice at the level of the United Nations was emphasized. Therefore, in attempting to secure the region and their sovereignty, ASEAN's primary goal has been the establishment of an environment in which member states coexist peacefully, seeking and undertaking areas of cooperation that may bind them together. Its principles of action have always centered on consensus, informality, and a non-legalistic approach. Its achievements can be assessed in terms of whether its member states have learned to cooperate and thus resolve their differences. The association has faced crises time and again, either because of internal problems or its relations with non-member states. In a region where boundaries are nebulous and the sensitivities of states are only too well known, the Association has also had the unique capacity to mediate between its member states and between its member and non-member states, bringing about some kind of dialogue and peaceful resolution (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). It has also seen a profound effect on regional trade contacts, as well as increased cultural contacts, tourist interchange, and student mobility. Since ASEAN has been the model for several regional initiatives in Asia and elsewhere, to understand ASEAN is to understand the context in Southeast Asia and the broader perspective of regionalism here and how the rest of Asia perceives this quest for peace and stability.

The comfort level that exists because of ASEAN, however, is not only because the principles are fixed at a consultative forum and have largely worked. The larger geographical knot in Southeast Asia expected a political order that the new states could bilaterally ignore. These and the individual relationships within the frameworks have worked to secure territorial integrity in a troubled region. ASEAN thus re-integrated states and cultures that for the last few centuries had to face constant incursions from Western imperialism. For these states, ASEAN was an organization that allowed them to overcome their fear of the Other. Not the US or

the USSR, but the Asian Other, which after two world wars in the twentieth century had been Asia. ASEAN was more importantly an Asian alternative to the security framework based on other historical alliances (Sundram, 2024). For Southeast Asia, which is on the margins of a global world, ASEAN's focus on non-interference and dialogue, and regions beyond capital and technology has given a different twist to development as well as an identity. Moreover, the framework has served as a reminder to the world that it is not only economics that bring peace, but shared ideas and ideals.

ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE AND SECURITY

This paper delves deeply into the intricate connection that exists between economic interdependence and security specifically within the diverse context of Asia. The overwhelming opinion prevailing in the academic literature is that cooperation within the economic sphere significantly enhances the possibilities of fostering cooperation in the security sphere, thus contributing to the establishment of more peaceful relations among various states. The concept of economic interdependence, which refers to the mutual reliance on trade, investment, and other economic ties, is thoroughly infused with a vast body of literature indicating that states engaging in extensive trade with one another, whether in goods or services, are notably less likely to resort to war. This notion serves as the main critical assumption underpinning commercial liberalism, which posits that foreign trade has the substantial potential to engender a greater sense of affinity and connection among states. This is facilitated through various mechanisms, for example, the enhanced flow of innovative ideas, the establishment of mutual dependency, co-production initiatives, and numerous benefits that arise, such as the gradual creation of a solid foundation of trust among the involved nations (Khan & Emon, 2024). Moreover, this interconnectedness can lead to deeper diplomatic ties and a more stable geopolitical landscape in the region.

Economic relations do not only prevent war, however. Trade relationships can also prevent conflict, leading to more stable regional orders. Much of the economic interdependence/security literature operates at the global level, but the above findings and assumptions increasingly inform discussions of the dynamics of stability in East and Southeast Asia as well as Central Asia (Kendall-Taylor & Fontaine, 2024). This paper seeks to offer an overview of the dimension of the 'economic regionalism' part of

what is often described as the 'economic security complex' of Asia. This represents a vast space of conceptual and empirical analysis, and as such can only be mentioned and discussed in very preliminary ways here. Even so, this chapter seeks to articulate the range and complexity of the concepts at play. The connection between economic strategies in the region and security is lent further weight if we look at the makeup and functioning of regional organizations that are collectively aimed at developing security among the region's states. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to describe how trade and aid may be considered security issues prior to discussing the potential barriers to the economic interdependence-centered quest for stability in the region. The absence of trust described by circumscribed markets is an essential part of such discussion (Debre, 2021).

It must be stressed that we do not imagine that there is a direct line between capitalism and peace. The size of stakes generated by economic ties also means that such relations underpin a high degree of fear of what might happen in the case of disagreements or conflict. This is greatly the case in an era of increased economic globalization and the partaking in international behavior by smaller states as well as by Asia's market giants. To this extent, trade flows and joint policies among the ecosystem of these states must not be misunderstood as providing the only foundation of economic security in the region (Bown2024). While trade relationships bring about trust and stability, so too does the success in economic relations contribute therein, meaning that the development in the politics of the region has notable implications for the nature of intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral political mobilities. The 'stability' that is supposed to be brought about by enhanced economic relationships is often challenged by intra-regional diplomacy.

Trade and Investment

Trade and investment serve as vital engines driving integration and ensuring regional stability. Beyond their commercial and financial dimensions, interregional trade aims not only to create but also to fully harness and benefit from a robust sphere of economic interdependence. This approach is essential for fostering a comprehensive framework of lasting peace, while simultaneously capitalizing on positive outcomes. These benefits can manifest in enhanced bargaining power that results from carefully negotiated bilateral and multilateral trade agreements. Furthermore, the establishment of a zone characterized by economic

interdependence with regional trading partners is crucial for any nation aspiring to cultivate long-term peaceful relations, characterized prominently by partnership rather than unhealthy rivalry (Asche, 2021). This perspective extends from commercial concerns like trade protection all the way to broader systemic issues concerning war and peace. It illustrates the understanding that both the international trade regime and regional free trade agreements can serve as effective strategic tools. These tools promote the expansion of global trade, which in turn fosters a harmonious and deeply integrated form of regionalism, ultimately contributing to stability and mutual prosperity across the region.

Asia has extensive free trade negotiations with various groups of countries. For example, China-ASEAN and countries in Japan and ASEAN; Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and other trading arrangements. Intra- and extra-FTA preferences, confidence in multilateralism, and AFT cooperation may be the cornerstone of such an emerging system, pragmatic geopolitical foundations of economic solutions to security dilemmas, providing mutual, cooperative, indivisible adjustment costs. The creation of trade relations between neighboring countries may help to prevent conflict or prevent the use of benefits from armed conflict, promoting prosperity and economic interdependence rather than confrontation among the concerned states. These security values of the trading framework have a dual role in important cases. Such a value between neighbors may be so mutually important that it is very low for the mutual security and stability of the relevant region if it were absent (Walter et al.2021). The best example is the determination of the security values of a trading relationship when trade failure or cessation breaks its cost or damages. The Free Trade Area of the agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico and the European Union can serve as examples of coordinated and temporary binding solutions that have values as a force for security reaching beyond trade norms.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are, however, a number of compelling reasons why the obstacles to regional cooperation may prove to be far too difficult and complex to overcome entirely. Nationalism, for example, remains a potent and influential force, both within domestic politics and in the broader context of international relations. Many regional leaders tend to view national identity as a far more potent mobilizing force than traditional bread-and-butter issues, such as various economic interests that typically drive cooperation.

Furthermore, the increasing level of interconnectedness among nations is making regional cleavages much more pronounced and obvious, thus harder for leaders to ignore. Hard borders can effectively mask domestic divisions while simultaneously facilitating the closure of essential economic linkages that could otherwise foster cooperation (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021). No less important are the deep and significant civilizational cleavages that exist across the vast expanse of Asia, along with the mounting tensions and intense competition among the great powers that inhabit the region. Oftentimes, the underlying logic of competition at the regional level is simply too strong to be easily reversed, particularly when historical animosities and grievances loom large in the background of inter-state relations (Karim, 2024).

There are, of course, considerable opportunities for regional collaboration. For instance, Asian economies have an increasingly common investment in an open trading environment. There is also an interest in those countries from the main East Asian economies in securing stable access to the energy supplies of the Middle East. Fundamentally, in an age when few threats to national security come from territorial encroachment, improved economic prosperity through a measure of economic regionalism will be most likely to stabilize Asian security (Javed & Ismail, 2021). Thus, long-term security in both Northeast and Southeast Asia is most likely to result from indigenously developed and supported regional institutions to offset the security dilemma. The key to this vision of improving security and stability in Asia lies in determining the balance between cooperative stability and competitive balance of power. Such a process is a multifaceted and layered one, and can only be fully appreciated through a sustained analysis of regional initiatives.

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES AND NATIONALISM

In Asia, there exist numerous territorial disputes that can trace their historical origins back to the complex interplay of imperial expansion, colonial division, and the rise of irredentist nationalisms. A closer examination of individual cases reveals that the motivations behind many of these disputes are not only multifaceted but are also shaped by a web of alliances and confrontations that, at first glance, may appear to have little connection to the original grievances. The enduring presence of irredentist nationalisms in the public culture and communication across all countries involved in these disputes continues to exert a profound influence, often driving the policies that these nations

adopt in relation to their rivals. While the Chinese government manages to maintain a degree of control over local irredentist nationalist movements in regions such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, it is also engaging in a perilous strategy (Gillard, 2023). This strategy includes stoking the flames of sentimental irredentism, which serves to position Western adversaries as antagonists in the eyes of the public, thus reinforcing the Communist Party's narrative as the sole source of legitimacy in the face of foreign opposition.

The disputes over the Kuril Islands between Japan and Russia, or between Russia and the European Union over the Baltics' new Eastern front, are further examples that territorial questions are always part of the history of regional interactions and the formalization of the abstract 'Westphalian state' does not ignore the past. In Asia, the memory of unequal accords and of the myriad bitter historical experiences with foreigners have not disappeared in the collective consciousness of numerous professional diplomats, popular journalists, and academic experts in International Relations. Nationalist sentiments within both the jetsam of decolonization and the victors have impeded international cooperation and any effective strategy for mutual security beyond occasional summits among state governments. As much clearer in this analysis, the default contradiction between and within states has increased the risk of conflict. Such confrontation may remain local in nature but can spread to hurt the world's economy (Carlisle, 2023). The general lesson is that frontier issues are generally local, premises of the one-time martial power of one country. Nevertheless, since violent power can no longer act, today's statecraft must appeal to the will of law, wisdom, and dialogue. This portion will explore both the main indications and the chapter's typology in the subsequent analytical section of the interrelated variables.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The recent developments and improvements in regionalism are notable. The spiraling tensions have underlined the need for early appropriate advocacy for peace, stability, security, and prosperity in Asia on a common platform by the major regional powers. Nonetheless, the inability of Asian policymakers to agree upon the common regional agenda has also been apparent. Two principal scenarios with different intensity, function, and geographical reach may highlight future trends in fostering pan-Asian engagement (Wirth & Jenne, 2022). The general delineation between these

futures would predominantly be shaped by the impacts of globalization and the geopolitical shifts it has generated. The central plank of the social, economic, political, and security synergies in globalizing Asia would be enhancing intra-regional economic collaboration into a more structured and sustainable behavior (Yoshimatsu, 2023). The likelihood of tapping this cooperation northwestward is evident in the multiplication of agreements in trade, investment, and regional sub-groupings in broad domains of regional security.

At the bottom line, the essential tools through which the increasingly diversified entities will be cohesively brought under the comprehensive belt of regionalism are of absolutely vital interest. Accordingly, it may be of paramount importance that, first and foremost, the positive deeds that correspond to the genuine integration of the nations and territories are actively endorsed in the context of southern Asia. Such confidence-building measures that pertain to effective border management as well as trans-border cooperation that focuses on trade and ecology, in both the eastern and western peripheries of the greater subcontinent in Asia, are widely supported as significant steps forward to build mutual trust among the nations involved. Finally, the prospective economic and ecological cooperation among the eastern and western portions of the subcontinent would pave the essential way to provide a singular approach aimed at leveraging comprehensive pan-Asian initiatives. In that given context, the increasing need for promoting and enhancing the role of regional organizations stands out as yet another crucial and useful tool to effectively improve and strengthen regional dialogue among all parties.

Enhancing Regional Cooperation

In a large and vastly diverse region where many countries were often mutually suspicious of each other's intentions, the pressing question was raised about how regional cooperation and meaningful dialogue could be initiated effectively. This could entail a number of constructive actions and ideas. One possibility would be the convening of a series of meetings, dialogues, and symposia between the different Southeast Asian countries so they could engage in discussions regarding various regional issues and challenges. This could also involve regular meetings taking place at the track two level, which would include security officials, academics, and experts from multiple Asian countries collaborating on relevant topics. Another possibility could be the establishment of a regional foundation dedicated to working on the

creation of a comprehensive network of "regional think tanks" that could subsequently take on regularly sponsored initiatives in collaboration with regional governments (Agastia, 2021). However, participants did emphasize and stress the crucial point that the main impetus for these vital initiatives would need to come from the countries of Southeast Asia itself, as local ownership of these processes is key to their success and sustainability.

Crime and terrorism had to be addressed in an integrated manner when looking at Asia and Southeast Asia as well as the rest of the world. Only selective and case study-focused discussions could be had, given the time constraints, dealing with drug trafficking from Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Central Asia through Asian states, specifically China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian Republics (Malik, 2022). Whereas several security partnerships had been created in the region, there had been a deadlock in the development of Pan-Asian security partnerships. Consequently, building blocks such as economic cooperation had to be found to create confidence and improve regional cooperation. There were various regions in Asia that were moving toward enhanced regional cooperation: the ASEAN Free Trade Area, ASEAN's dialogue with China, Japan, and South Korea (Ehteshami et al.2023). These were examples that indicated the fear of "encirclement" by some of their neighbors was not the only response of other states with respect to China maybe becoming too big for its boots. The area of culture and intercultural exchanges might offer a chance to alleviate regional tensions. ASEAN already provided a model with its program for cultural and information exchanges (Ocón, 2021). Trade was vital to regional cooperation. Progress had to be made on non-security issues like information technology, copyright, patents, and trademarks to encourage Asian states that the region was open for all kinds of commerce. Technology could lessen the need for infrastructure and equipment such as hard copy newspapers and mailing services. With particular reference to arms control and non-proliferation, technology in the realms of network-centric warfare, biotechnology, and energy security should also draw attention. In conclusion, trust had to be built and issues addressed in order to reduce regional tensions and fears that could ultimately contribute to stability in the long run.

CONCLUSION

In light of the complex and multifaceted geopolitical landscape of Asia, the pursuit of regionalism remains a central strategy for fostering a stable regional order. As highlighted, the interconnected nature of Asia is shaped by its historical, cultural, and economic ties, making regional collaboration not just a choice but a necessity. The economic and human networks that define the region continue to serve as critical elements in shaping its political and social dynamics, even as they are challenged by the historical grievances and geopolitical rivalries that persist among nations. Regionalism allows states to engage constructively with these realities, providing a framework to reconcile differences and align interests. However, as this essay underscores, the journey towards a cohesive and stable Asia-Pacific is far from linear. Doubts, legacies of conflict, and competing priorities continue to cast shadows on regional cooperation efforts. The metaphor of "sleeping with the elephant" aptly illustrates the challenges smaller nations face when navigating relationships with larger powers in the region. Despite these complexities, regional endeavors remain one of the most promising tools for addressing economic, environmental, and security challenges in Asia, offering a pathway toward a more interconnected and mutually beneficial future.

The interplay of economic, technological, environmental, and ideological factors makes the Asian regional order both dynamic and precarious. Policymakers must recognize that regional collaboration ties economic and security interests together, creating mutual confidence and shared stakes in stability. While historical disputes and unresolved tensions continue to hinder cooperation, enhanced dialogue and inclusive regionalism are crucial to overcoming these divides. In particular, the urgency of addressing shared challenges such as pandemics, climate change, and fintech innovation calls for a renewed collective goal among Asian nations. The essay also highlights the need for scholars to broaden their understanding of security beyond traditional military concerns to encompass socioeconomic and technological dimensions that influence behavioral norms in the region. By doing so, they can better communicate actionable insights for achieving regional stability. Ultimately, the precarious equilibrium of Asia's regional dynamics underscores the importance of overcoming the legacies of past conflicts without relying on rigid international alliance blocs. Future policymakers and researchers must remain attuned to the historical and ideological contexts of the region while seeking innovative solutions to its challenges. The

prospects for a stable, multipolar Asia lie in fostering a renewed sense of regional solidarity, where inclusive collaboration replaces competition and collective interests take precedence over individual ambitions. Only then can Asia fully realize its potential as a cornerstone of global stability and prosperity.

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