Regionalism – Interregionalism: an Asian perspective seen from the EU

Botschafter
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Comparative perspectives on regional integration: Can the EU model be "copied" to the Americas, in Africa or Asia?
We witness attempts by **South East Asia nations**, with ASEAN at the centre, to deepen cooperation and integration – for example in the form of ASEAN+3, the East Asian Summit (EAS), and various free trade agreements (FTAs) – in order to prevent ASEAN from loosing control over developments in the region and from becoming the playground of international politics.

The **ASEAN Charter**¹, which was adopted in 2007 and ratified by all ASEAN members in 2008, attempts to create greater internal cohesion and seeks to compensate for a lack of institutionalisation. While the EU certainly served as a role model, the Charter is neither an adaptation nor a copy of the European approach which has resulted in the pooling of sovereignty (supra-nationalism) and the creation of distinct EU institutions. The strengthening of the ASEAN Secretariat and the introduction of a human rights mechanism as well as elements for dispute settlement reflect a move towards light institutionalisation of a traditionally rather informal and sector-driven process.

Despite these encouraging developments, the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member states remains a pillar of ASEAN which is likely to weaken rather than to strengthen the Association in the long run. The most prominent example is Myanmar. Criticism of its government because of the annulment of elections and the house arrest of Nobel Prize Aung San Suu Kyi marred for years the EU-ASEAN relationship and delayed Myanmar's joining ASEM.

However, some change seems to be in the air:

The statement at the 2010 ASEM 8 Summit in Brussels by ASEM leaders, which includes all ASEAN leaders, to encourage "the government of Myanmar to take the necessary measures to ensure that these elections would be free, fair and inclusive, and would mark a step towards a legitimate, constitutional, civilian system of government. The timely release of those under detention would contribute to these elections to be more inclusive, participatory and transparent." and to touch "upon the issue of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi" although counterbalanced by their commitment "to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Myanmar"² was a remarkable move in softening the mentioned long held principle of non-interference in domestic matters. Similarly ASEAN leaders spoke out at their summit in Hanoi on October 28, 2010 exhorting the government of Myanmar to accelerate progress "in the implementation of the Roadmap for national reconciliation and democracy including the preparation for the upcoming general elections leading to a constitutional government in Myanmar" and to hold "general election in a free, fair, and inclusive manner, thus contributing to Myanmar’s long lasting stability and development"³. This change of attitude within ASEAN, championed by the Philippines and Thailand, is a consequence of the above mentioned ASEAN Charter reflecting a slowly changing political environment in East Asia. The release of *Aung San Suu Kyi* in November 2010 from house arrest after irregular elections could be a timid step in the right direction; but this might change again abruptly if the regime of the colonels feels threatened after its conversion into a pseudo-civil set-up.

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³ Chairman's statement of the 17th ASEAN Summit (2010), Han Noi, October 28 at [http://www.aseansec.org/25452.htm](http://www.aseansec.org/25452.htm)
Moreover, despite 'ASEANness' rhetoric some relationships between ASEAN members remain fragile as highlighted by the re-occurrence of tensions between them. Tensions regularly erupt between Thailand and Cambodia over unresolved territorial disputes, like presently at the Ta Krabei Temple near the UNESCO protected Preah Vihear Temple.

ASEAN partners also have conflicting territorial claims among themselves and with China in the South China Sea (e.g. Spratly and Paracel Islands) which is straining their relationship and drawing also the US more into the conflict. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indirectly supported ASEAN at the 2010 ARF meeting in Hanoi. It came therefore as no surprise that her offer to mediate between China and Japan at the ASEAN Plus Three meeting in October 2010 was declined by China. Nevertheless, ASEAN states regards the US as a balancer in the region, a role the EU can hardly aspire to perform despite economic might but due to the lack of the ability to project (hard) power.

Nevertheless, the EU attempts to strengthen the interregional cooperation and regional cooperation is gaining momentum also in Asia: Even China is reverting to multilateral instruments and set up the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, hosts the Six Party Talks with North Korea and engages more in North-East Asia as evidenced by the 2010 summit of China, South Korea and Japan which dealt with North Korea's nuclear program as well as environmental protection and climate change. As Robert Kaplan points out, China seems to pursue a grand design in developing its military forces. While China becomes part of the international and regional political systems, it attempts to influence the rules of the game from within, a strategy which allows avoiding direct (military) confrontation. Supporting the regime in North Korea in order to avoid a reunification of the Korean Peninsula under the lead of South Korea and thereby US influence is part of this strategy.

In addition to these intra-regional activities the Asia-Europe inter-regional forum, ASEM, deploys efforts to develop its dialogue role in enlarging in 2010 to 45 members. As the EU presently limits membership in the European group to EU member states, a third category – a 'temporary' one had to be created to accommodate Russia, Australia and New Zealand as ASEM members at the 2010 Brussels Summit. Given the variety on the Asian side, this limitation to EU-membership on the European side, will be difficult to maintain. In 2011 Norway and Switzerland started to pursue their interest in joining more vigorously.

ASEM enlargement leads to a higher degree of soft institutionalisation: ASEM Foreign ministers had set up at the 'ASEM 8 Coordinating Office' on an ad-hoc and temporary basis "to coordinate and support the ASEM 8 Summit". The Summit confirmed this in lending the

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6 http://www.sectsco.org/EN
leaders support to a "light, cost-effective technical support that would enhance the efficiency, coherence, continuity and visibility of the work of ASEM." Without procedural and institutional improvements ASEM's cohesion and efficiency would be further strained; it may well lead in due course to a higher degree of institutionalisation in form of a secretariat, taking away some of the cherished informality of the process but meeting one of the requirements for regional integration building mentioned by Schmitter11.

As I had showed earlier12, ASEM contributed to the identity building particularly in East-Asia through the system of coordinators: while the EU-Commission is the permanent coordinator on the EU side, supported by the changing presidencies, the Asian side has to coordinate twice: first within the two sub-regional groups, namely ASEAN and the North-East Asians (Japan, South Korea, China) which turned into the 'Plus Three'. Once these sub-groups had come up with an opinion they had to forge a common East-Asia position. Having acted as the Commission coordinator for some time, I could physically feel sometimes the uneasiness when f.ex. Vietnam had to present a view on behalf of ASEAN which was not entirely in line the one expressed by China, on behalf of the North-East Asians. It is therefore understandable that the third temporary group (Australia, New Zealand, Russia) is demanding a coordinator in its own right.

Thus, the genie is out of the bottle; a Charter for an East Asian Community – either building on ASEAN+3 or the East Asian Summit – although still a long shot - is already being discussed within academic circles13.

The then newly elected former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama who had broken the Liberal Democratic Party's grip on power14 proposed the setting up an "East Asian Community" under the slogan of 'yu-ai' (fraternity). As he explained in Singapore "The central idea of my "East Asian community" initiative is based upon reconciliation and cooperation in Europe.15 This concept was based on open regional cooperation, prosperity, 'Green Asia', protection of human lives, building a 'sea of fraternity', the strive for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, cultural exchanges, social security as well as urban issues. Political cooperation is mentioned as a possible future goal. This initiative was of interest because of two reasons: It replaced the larger notion of the 'Arch of Freedom and Prosperity'16 stretching from Asia to Europe as developed by the then Foreign Minister Aso; in addition the more ideological and Bush-like element of the 'fight for freedom' was replaced by suggestions for concrete cooperation. Furthermore, this project of an Asian Community although inspired by the EU model signified a recalibration of Japanese politics on East Asia in order to meet the challenge posed by China's regional foreign policy. However, as the East Asia Summit17 is

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11 Philippe C Schmitter. "The experience of European integration and the potential for regional integration elsewhere". (Xeroxed)
17 At the first Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, December 14, 2005, Leaders declared "that the East Asia Summit will be an open, inclusive, transparent and outward-looking forum in which we strive to strengthen global norms
an ASEAN driven project there is a potential clash of interest with the ASEAN Community which was on the one hand attempting to preserve its institution building drive while on the other hand had to recognise its own limits in agenda setting because of lack of effective internal cooperation. With the departure of PM Hatoyama this concept seems to have been dropped from the Japanese foreign policy agenda.

Taking the EU as a reference point, there are a few important issues underlining the uniqueness of the European integration compared to Asia:

- The holistic, legalistic, treaty based approach with judicial dispute resolution, pooling sovereignty as opposed to a pragmatic, sector and issue specific cooperation approach;

- The common purpose – delivering the public good of stability, peace, democracy and the rule of law, as enshrined in Art. 3 of the TL and made the guiding line for the EU’s foreign policy18 (Art. 21 TL) as opposed to the above mentioned sectoral à la carte approach;

- The EU has its own financial means, "operational funds" (Art. 201 TL) at its disposal to at least partly finance its policies19, a tool missing in this form for any other integration project.

- The policy projection capability of the EU in form of common policies, in form of the external dimension of internal policies plus Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). The economic capability part of the EC, is used to "assert economic interests against other major players" and attempts are made "to reshape international economic affairs (and thus the international system itself) according to its own [EU] standards", examples being genetically modified foods, privacy rights, competitiveness (anti-trust) policy, intellectual property rights…20. Other tools are provided by development aid, humanitarian aid, trade policy instruments (conditionality), military and policing capabilities… The EU’s foreign policy should be supported and complemented by the foreign policy of its members, while it is one of the (herculean) tasks of the double hatted HR/VP to assure its overall 'coherence'21.

- According to Smith, the EU structures "its most important foreign policies into broad based dialogues or framework agreements, which involve economic, political, and even security dimensions. These cooperation agreements are made with regions … or individual countries…Trade agreements often form the centrepiece of these dialogues, and this incentive encourages non-EU states to accept other political goals important to Europe, particularly democracy, respect for the rule of law, and human rights….The capacity to 'package' all EU external policies towards an important outside actor into single comprehensive deals may be far more important for the EU's global power than

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20 Ibid., p. 182.
the implementation of any single policy area alone, although the EU has yet to fully exploit the capability”²² – thus the challenged posed for the HR/VP.

²² Smith (2011); pp. 185-186.