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**Foundations of Collective Action in  
Asia: Theory and Practice of  
Regional Cooperation**

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**Abstract**

This paper argues that the collective action in Asia by its regional organizations has historically suffered from a “capability–legitimacy gap”: a disjuncture between the capability (in terms of material resources) of major Asian powers to lead regional cooperation on the one hand and their political legitimacy and will as regional leaders on the other. Successful collective action requires leadership with both capability (as suggested by rationalist theories) and legitimacy (as suggested by constructivist approaches). A central point of the paper is that the putative or aspiring leaders of Asian regionalism throughout the post-war period never had both. Actors who were materially capable of providing leadership and direction (the United States [US]<sup>1</sup> and Japan) have lacked the necessary legitimacy, while those who have possessed legitimacy (India and the People’s Republic of China [PRC])<sup>2</sup> in the 1940s and 1950s, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since 1967, and Indonesia in the context of Asia as a whole) have lacked the necessary resources. The result has been that while the ASEAN-led Asian institutions have made a significant normative contribution to regional order, they have not proved to be effective instruments of regional problem solving. But the capability-legitimacy gap has both costs and benefits. While Asian regional institutions remain weakly institutionalized and attract criticism as “talk-shops,” they have helped to ensure that Asia does not degenerate into a hegemonic order or a concert of power. It remains to be seen whether regionalism in an era of a rising PRC and India could bridge this gap. It is theoretically possible that the PRC and India could develop and possess both the resources and political will and standing to provide collective goods and lead Asian regionalism, but their mutual rivalry might prevent this.

**JEL Classification:** F50, F51, F53, F54, F55, F59

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<sup>1</sup> Although the US is not an Asian country, it can be regarded as a resident Asian power and a player in Asian regionalism.

<sup>2</sup> The PRC was known as China before 1949.

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## 1. TWO CONCEPTS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

In its conventional understanding, collective action is defined as the “ability to refrain from individually profitable actions for the sake of the common good” (Bandiera, Barankay, and Rasul 2005). This understanding of collective action is rationalist, focusing on material incentives, strategic interaction, cost-benefit calculations, logic of consequences, relative gains, and individualist rationality, in the provision of public goods. The foundation work on this notion is Mancur Olson’s book *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Olson 1965). The notion of collective action permeates the neo-liberal institutional (or contractual) approach to international institutions. A key element of Olson’s theory is the problem of exploitation of the strong by the weak, or free riding. The problem of collective action can only be resolved by a hegemon, because only a hegemon can provide all states with public goods while accepting sacrifices, thereby willingly nurturing free riders. Yet, since the hegemon can do this informally or bilaterally, there is little scope for multilateralism. From this perspective, collective action by large groups led by weak states can be ruled out.

A different and newer understanding of collective action may be derived from the constructivist school of international relations. Here, collective action assumes that actors may be guided by the “logic of appropriateness”, rather than simply by the “logic of consequences”. It is rooted in a communitarian, rather than individualist rationality. While the first concept of collective action stresses capability, the second stresses legitimacy. Unlike the first, the second concept does not assume that hegemony is essential to the realization of collective action or cooperation. Cooperation and collective action can take place even through institutions not dominated by one (unipolarity) or more great powers (concert). Non-hegemonic institutions, or institutions in which weak powers attempt to provide leadership and direction, can also lead to outcomes serving common interests and to the realization of common security and economic benefits by relying on socialization and normative pressure. Moreover, while the rationalist position holds that only a hegemon can address the problem of free riding, from the constructivist position, free riding is not necessarily an obstacle to collective action. Instead, free riding can be part of a normative bargain where the strong power/s can satisfy their legitimacy needs by offering public goods and accepting the norms that are championed by the weaker states.

The rationalist approach leads us to expect that only small groups will be successful in providing collective action. As Olson puts it, “In general, social pressure and social incentives operate only in groups of smaller size, in the groups so small that the members can have face-to-face contact with one another” (Olson 1965: 62). Moreover, “In a smaller group, one person makes up a larger percentage of the resources of that group, so the addition or subtraction of a single member to that organization can determine the success of the group. There are also social pressures that work much better on the “small” than on the “large” (Moffat).

The constructivist view, which focuses on socialization, and its micro-processes such as persuasion, teaching, mimicking, social influence, and argumentation, are not stymied by group size. Indeed it may be argued that some of these processes work better in larger groups. The greater the number of actors within a group, the stronger would be the pressure on each member (including new, skeptical, and non-cooperating members) to conform to the norms of the group. The costs and benefits of multilateralism are seen not in terms of free riding or efficiency (although this may be present), but group identity, the quality of regional existence, and the appeal of a certain normative purpose.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this concept of collective action takes

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<sup>3</sup> Olson considers normative or “moral incentives” behind collective action, but dismisses them as “selective incentives.” Olson (1965), p.61 (footnote 17).

note of the possibility that actors, including great powers, would be guided by consideration of whether the benefits of socialization exceeds its costs, or whether the risks of not being socialized (isolation, loss of leadership, material gains like market access and opportunity to increase their domestic welfare from foreign investment and transnational production, and allocation of more welfare-diverting resources to the defense sector) would outweigh the costs of being socialized (free riding by weaker states). The problem of free riding does not disappear, but is offset by the fact that incentive for a leading power or powers to provide public goods, (or lead in the collective provision of such goods) is based on communitarian rather than individualist thinking. Accepting a certain amount of free riding becomes key to legitimacy, and hence to justifying the inequities of power distribution. Thus, the stronger and more resource-rich actors voluntarily accept, or even encourage free riding.

In short, the possibility of collective action is contingent upon capability as well as legitimacy. Neither is sufficient by itself. Capability rests on material forces, legitimacy on normative considerations. As this paper is concerned with Asian regional institutions, I argue that the type of collective action that has been foundational to Asian regional institutions today (as well as historically) is based largely on the second concept. But the usefulness of this second concept lies in its highlighting what I call the “capability-legitimacy gap” in institution building, or the mismatch between capability and legitimacy, of putative leaders of Asian regional institutions. The Asia-Pacific’s strongest powers, the United States (US) in both economic and military terms, and Japan in economic terms, could not build viable regional institutions, even if they have the capabilities—economic and military—to do so. And those powers that might have had legitimacy, at least initially, to lead regional institutions, lacked the capability to provide collective good. In this category we might include the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and India, the early leaders of Asian regionalism in the post-World War II period. But subsequently, they also lost their legitimacy as regional leaders.

This might explain a major historical puzzle of Asian international relations. Asia has no shortage of great powers. But the PRC, Japan, India, as well as the US have not been able, either singly or jointly (for example, Japan–US), to create and shape a lasting regional organization. As a result, Asian regionalism continues to be led by its weaker states, especially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Why so? The concept of collective action may be useful here in explaining why Asia’s regional institutions have continued to be led by weak states and why the contribution of such a regional order is not to be dismissed. As a consequence, the task of shaping and leading Asian regional institutions have been left in an anomalous way to a coalition of Asia’s weaker states, a coalition which has greater legitimacy, but little capability. Instead, this group has relied on normative suasion. The problem of free riding, while pervasive, and which rationalists may regard as a major obstacle to cooperation, has been managed because the legitimacy deficit and needs of the stronger powers. They have been willing to trade capability for legitimacy.

I illustrate this argument with the help of a brief analysis of three different phases of Asian regionalism. I show that in each phase, the region’s principal powers suffered from a legitimacy deficit that prevented them from organizing regional cooperation in a sustainable manner, despite having the material capabilities to do so. This included not only the two powers who were obviously capable of providing collective goods while accepting sacrifices, namely the US and Japan, but also countries such as the PRC and India who were politically quite influential at least during the early post-war period. One outcome of the mismatch between capability and legitimacy—or what I would call the capability–legitimacy gap, is that Asian regionalism today remains “led” by a coalition of the region’s weaker states. While many scholars and analysts ponder whether the rise of the PRC and India can change this equation, I argue that this is

unlikely until and unless these two Asian powers acquire both legitimacy and capability. Neither is sufficient to ensure their ability to create and lead viable regional groupings.

## **2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ASIAN REGIONALISM<sup>4</sup>**

A simple approach to historicizing Asian regionalism would be to divide it into three broad phases, with each having sub-phases or moments that capture important initiatives and developments. This schema starts from the end of the Second World War, although it might be argued that regional concepts and regionalist movements did exist before the war (Acharya 2010).

### **2.1 Phase I: The First Asian Relations Conference (1947) to the Creation of ASEAN (1967)**

This period saw a contest between two concepts of regionalism. The first was represented in the very first Asian (broadly defined to include West and Central Asia, with Australia invited as well) conferences, convened by India in 1947 and 1949. Called the Asian Relations Conferences, their primary goal was to create political pressure for decolonization (although none took on a militant anti-colonial character), and to give a collective voice or identity to the nationalist aspirations and newly independent countries of Asia. The high point of this phase was the Asia–Africa conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, which, despite its name, was conceived and dominated by Asian actors. Here, the purpose shifted beyond decolonization to developing rules of conduct in international affairs and exploring ideas and avenues for economic (including energy) cooperation. While the Asian Relations gatherings were convened by India, with the PRC (under Nationalist rule) showing a strong interest in hosting and offering leadership as well, the Bandung Conference, was led by a coalition of five states: India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Ceylon, and Burma.<sup>5</sup> The PRC, by now under communist rule, was offered a major platform to break out of its isolation by reassuring its suspicious neighbors. Both the first Asian Relations Conference and the Bandung Conference discussed political security as well as economic matters, but the sentiment of the day was economic nationalism, rather than economic liberalism as understood in developed countries in terms of advancing free trade.

A parallel approach to regionalism during this period, which became prominent in the 1950s, might be called regionalism within “great power orbit”. This was represented at first in the efforts of the US, backed by the United Kingdom (UK), to create a regional collective defense organization. Established in 1954, the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was geared to meet the perceived threat of subversion from the PRC. It also envisaged economic assistance to vulnerable countries.

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<sup>4</sup> This section draws heavily from Acharya (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Ceylon was renamed Sri Lanka in 1972. Burma became known as Myanmar in 1989.

**Table 1: Evolution of Asian Regionalism**

Features	1947–1955	1956–1989	1990–2009
Geographic Scope	Pan–Asia, Afro–Asia (both inclusive of West Asia, but not Central Asia)	Microregional political cooperation Macroregional economic cooperation (Pacific Community Concept)	Mainly Asia–Pacific, East Asia
Key Drivers	Nationalism Decolonization  Superpower rivalry	Economic development, regime security, conflict mitigation, free trade	Economic interdependence, superpower retrenchment, rise of the PRC and India, transnational threats
Leadership	India, Indonesia, Myanmar	Indonesia (post-Sukarno); Japan; ASEAN as a group; Australia, Japanese scholars, think tanks, and leaders	ASEAN as a group, PRC (?)
Intergovernmental Institutions	Asian Relations Organization, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization	ASA, MAPHILINDO, ASPAC, ASEAN, SAARC;	APEC, ARF, APT, EAS, ASEM, SCO
Institutional design	Inclusive, deliberative, consensus, organizational avoidance	Exclusive, deliberative, ASEAN Way (consensus, non-legalistic, organizational minimalism); Open deliberative as well as integrative regionalism	Inclusive, deliberative, ASEAN Way Plus (flexible engagement), incremental institutionalization
Military cooperation	Intra-mural: None Extra-mural: Bilateral (US treaties) and multilateral (SEATO)	Intra-mural: Bilateral (ASEAN) Extra-mural: Bilateral (US treaties) multilateral (FPDA, SEATO till 1970s)	Intra-mural: Bilateral (ASEAN) Extra-mural: Bilateral (US treaties) multilateral (FPDA, SEATO till 1970s)
Economic purpose and form	Bandung Economic Committee: collective self-reliance, commodity price increase, raw material cartel, increased shipping rates	Developmental regionalism (ASEAN PTA), market-led, transnational production networks	Trade liberalization (ASEAN FTA, AEC, ASEAN–PRC FTA) Financial cooperation (after 1997: APT, Chiang Mai Initiative)
Conflict management role	Intra-mural: None Extra-mural: Indochina (Colombo Powers); Taipei, China (Bandung Conference)	Intra-mural: Sabah dispute (ASEAN) Extra-mural: Cambodia (ASEAN)	Intra-mural: None Extra-mural: Spratly Islands (PRC)
Civil society participation and	Epistemic communities: Institute of Pacific Studies	Epistemic communities: ASEAN–ISIS, PBEC,	Epistemic communities:



Features	1947–1955	1956–1989	1990–2009
forums	Nonofficial forums: Calcutta Conference; New Delhi Socialist Conference (1955)	PECC  Nonofficial forums: Forum Asia	CSCAP, NEAT  Nonofficial forums: ALTSEAN, APA, Focus on Global South, SAPA
Cultural flows	Chinese and Indian cultural diffusion in Southeast Asia	Japanese cultural products American culture	Movies from India and Hong Kong, China; songs from Taipei, China; Chinese cuisine; TV dramas from Korea; cultural products from Japan; new tourism

AEC = ASEAN Economic Community; ALTSEAN = Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma; APA = ASEAN People's Assembly; APEC = Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation; APT = ASEAN Plus Three; ARF = ASEAN Regional Forum; ASA = Association of Southeast Asia; ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; ASEM = Asia-Europe Meeting; ASPAC = Asia and Pacific Council; CSCAP = Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific; EAS = East Asian Summit; FPDA = Five Power Defence Arrangements; FTA = free trade agreement; ISIS = Institutes for Strategic and International Studies; MAPHILINDO = Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia; NEAT = Network of East Asian Think Tanks; OPTAD = Organization for Pacific Trade and Development; PAFTAD = Pacific Trade and Development; PBEC = Pacific Basin Economic Council; PECC = Pacific Economic Cooperation Council; PRC = People's Republic of China; PTA = Preferential Trading Arrangements; SAARC = South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation; SCO = Shanghai Cooperation Organization; SEATO = South East Asia Treaty Organization; SAPA = Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy; US = United States.

Note: This table incorporates four dimensions of Asian regionalism: Regionalization, Regional Institutions, Regional Identity, Semiofficial (Second Track Dialogues), and Nonofficial Regionalism (Regional Civil Society Networks).

Source: Author's compilation.

But neither of these two frameworks of regionalism could take roots in Asia. Simply put, neither succeeded in creating viable regional bodies. This outcome can be explained in terms of the aforementioned capability–legitimacy gap. The leaders of the New Delhi and Bandung conferences had more legitimacy than capabilities (although they too suffered from some legitimacy deficit), while the powers behind SEATO had more capabilities than legitimacy.

To elaborate, while India, as the leader of the Asian Relations Conferences was able to provide some material assistance to nationalist forces fighting the Dutch in Indonesia, the same assistance was not provided to Ho Chi Minh. Part of the reason was political; India's then Prime Minister Nehru, mindful of resentment against the role of Indian troops in supporting British colonial era wars throughout Asia and other continents, and not wanting to want to complicate the political situation in Indochina with foreign (Indian) intervention, was very cautious in offering material help to nationalists in Asia. But his reluctance also stemmed on limited Indian resources that was still reeling from the effects of partition and struggling to find its economic feet after centuries of colonial rule. A further constraint on the prospects for pan-Asian regionalism had to do with suspicions of both India and the PRC in the minds of the region's lesser powers. One statement by a Burmese participant returning from the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi is revealing: "It was terrible to be ruled by a Western power, but it was even more so to be ruled by an Asian power" (Henderson 1955).

At the Bandung conference, Nehru's role in championing the cause of communist the PRC (represented by then Premier Zhou En-Lai), along with the alleged arrogant manner in which Nehru treated hosts Indonesia and other delegates, created misgivings on the part of the other countries about Indian leadership. The economic outcome of the Bandung conference included "an increased readiness to undertake development, by self-help and mutual aid, in the economic field" (Cable 1955). There were calls for collective action to stabilize "prices of, and demand for, primary commodities," and for concerted action "to induce the shipping companies to adopt a more reasonable attitude", "for more raw materials to be processed before export", "for the encouragement of the establishment of national and regional banks and insurance

companies,” “for the exchange of information on matters relating to oil,” and “for consultations between the Bandoeng countries before the international meetings” (Gilchrist 1955). These proposals, especially for exchange of information on oil prices, might have foreshadowed the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cartel, and the demand for collective bargaining to raise commodity prices, was something ASEAN would pursue later. Moreover, neither India nor the PRC were able to offer the kind of resources to start a regional economic arrangement comparable to the British Commonwealth-sponsored Colombo Plan, and Japan, despite taking an active interest on economic issues at Bandung, was not in a political position to provide any leadership at this stage.

In contrast to the New Delhi and Bandung meetings, the problems facing SEATO had much more to do with legitimacy than resources. Although SEATO was neither the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nor the Marshal Plan for Southeast Asia, the amount of US economic aid that went with it was not insubstantial. In 1957, for example, the SEATO area received over US\$600 million in US economic aid (Time 1958), a level of aid that would continue into the 1960s, as will be discussed shortly. Neither was SEATO without military power.<sup>6</sup> There is evidence that the US took the prospect of intervention by the PRC in Indochina very seriously and developed contingency plans for collective action; plans that included the possible use of nuclear weapons<sup>7</sup> (Buszynski 1983; Gravel 1971; Herring and Immerman 1984). SEATO’s difficulties in ensuring its credibility and eventually survival had more to do with legitimacy (especially lack of Asian representation) than military power. SEATO ran into a headlong contest with the regionalist sentiments found in the Asian Relations Conferences and at the Bandung Conference. Its legitimacy as a group representing the interests of Southeast Asia was questioned because only two Southeast Asian countries—Thailand and the Philippines—were represented in the alliance. And several influential newly independent countries, including India, Indonesia, Burma, and Ceylon, questioned the very legitimacy of a Cold War defense pact because it was created and dominated by a foreign superpower. Some Asian leaders like Nehru saw such collective defense pacts as a new form of foreign dominance. For Nehru, “the majority of Asian countries [and the] overwhelming majority of Asian peoples will not be participants in the organization. Some it may be anticipated would even be strongly opposed to it, thus rendering South East Asia a potentially explosive theater of the Cold War” (UK Foreign Office 1954a). Myanmar turned down the invitation to attend the Manila conference that saw the creation of SEATO on the ground that “an alliance with a big power immediately means domination by that power. It means the loss of independence” (Nu 1955). The Indonesian government argued that SEATO would undermine its “independent foreign policy” (UK Foreign Office 1954b). The fate of SEATO seemed to have been sealed by its failure to attract any new Asian members beyond the original three—Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand.

The weakness of SEATO is not the only example of US failure to organize a regional association in Southeast Asia and Asia more generally. One might also look at the Johnson administration’s blueprint from the mid-1960s for a Southeast Asia Development Association (SEADA). The “major political purposes” behind this initiative included the US desire “to dramatize the seriousness of our long-term commitment to Asian development in forms which enlarge the role of Asian leadership and which strengthen Asian unity” (US Department of State 2000a). As such the grouping was intended to “bring together the peoples and governments of Southeast Asia in a constructive association for economic development action, in cooperation

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<sup>6</sup> I have discussed this extensively in Acharya (2009), Chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> According to the Pentagon Papers, “In the event of a massive Chinese troop intervention...it is quite possible that the US would have retaliated with strategic nuclear weapons against targets in China” (Buszynski 1983).

with each other and with the advanced nations; to build regional political unit and reduce tensions; to commit the advanced countries and the United Nations to a deeper interest in the development and, indirectly, the security of this vulnerable region..." (US Department of State 2000b).

Membership of SEADA was to include both developed country donors and a broadest number of regional countries, with the possible exception of North Viet Nam. US officials even contemplated the direct or indirect involvement of North Korea and the Soviet Union. In creating this grouping, the US was prepared to organize an aid program that would have amounted to "at least US\$1 billion per year in all forms of foreign economic assistance for development, plus at least US\$200 million annually in foreign private investment." The US was ready to provide half of the amount. At this stage, US economic aid to the potential membership of the Southeast Asia Development Association was running "at about US\$385 million per year", while its military assistance programs in the prospective member countries totaled US\$330 million (US Department of State 2000b). A different official estimate put the combined total of US economic and military aid to Southeast Asia at a higher level: with economic aid "of the rough order of magnitude of US\$530 million", and military aid expenditures at US\$310 million for financial year 1964 (US Department of State 2000a).

Overall, US officials estimated that supporting such a regional grouping would require "a figure of US\$6.4 billion for a ten year period would represent a 20% increase over present levels". If military aid was included, the figure would have been US\$8 billion over 10 years (US Department of State 2000a).

But the SEADA idea failed to take off, despite the US willingness to commit substantial resources. Part of the reason had to do with the distraction and difficulties caused by the ongoing war in Viet Nam, which proved enormously costly for the Johnson administration both in economic and domestic political terms, and made it difficult to mobilize support and resources. But there is also little evidence that Southeast Asian countries endorsed the idea with any degree of enthusiasm. Instead, by this time, there had emerged indigenous interest and approaches to regionalism in Southeast Asia, represented by the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) in 1960 and MAPHILINDO (Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia) in 1963. Although both were short-lived (ASA because it did not include Indonesia, and MAPHILINDO because of Indonesian President Sukarno's aggressive policy of *konfrontasi*—literally confrontation against Malaysia), these tentative efforts were subsumed by the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967—a formal intergovernmental organization.<sup>8</sup> ASEAN gave Indonesia the legitimacy, based on an implicit normative bargain whereby Indonesia (under the new regime of Suharto) undertook a policy of restraint (nonintervention and nonaggression) towards its smaller neighbors (such as Malaysia and Singapore—targets of its earlier *konfrontasi*), while its neighbors accepted Indonesia's legitimacy as a regional elder, if not leader per se. In effect, this put Indonesia within a "golden cage"<sup>9</sup>, a normative formula that neither India in relation to South Asia nor the PRC in relation to Southeast Asia, was able to enjoy. ASEAN reflected a shared concern with regime security against communist insurgencies in all its member states, as well as a rejection of outside influence and meddling in Southeast Asian affairs, a limited attempt to prevent Southeast Asia being dominated by outside powers and insulate it from the effects of the Cold War. As such, ASEAN repudiated the SEATO approach to hegemonic regionalism, and focused on conflict resolution among its members, as

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<sup>8</sup> In a way, these two short-lived experiments in Southeast Asian regionalism—ASA and MAPHILINDO—showed the importance of regional legitimacy on the part of Indonesia, the main regional actor.

<sup>9</sup> "Golden cage" is a metaphor to describe Indonesia's predicament in being recognized as the de facto leader of ASEAN in exchange for not accepting a commitment to exercise restraint toward its smaller neighbors and not to threaten or coerce them.

well as creating a regional space where great power intervention might be discouraged, if not entirely avoided. Economic cooperation was not seriously considered at the beginning, but the first tentative steps would be taken in the 1970s.

The fate of SEATO and SEADA illustrates that hegemony cannot resolve the collective action problem through provision of collective goods through multilateral institutions unless they enjoy a degree of legitimacy before the weaker actors in the collectivity. Overall, the evolution of regionalism in Asia during this period was hardly a fit with the rationalist theory of collective action. It shows overwhelmingly that regionalism was used by newly independent states to bolster their legitimacy as actors and agents of international relations. There was little emphasis on developing free trade areas or collective defense arrangements. The idea of hegemonic leadership was resisted, not just in the case of the US and UK sponsorship of SEATO, but also possible dominance by the PRC and India of an Asian regional grouping. Hence, the Asian Relations Organization set up by India in 1947 did not find much support and withered away. Before its communist takeover, the PRC's bid to host a second Asian Relations Conference was viewed with similar suspicion. And at Bandung while there was "acceptance of the principle of multilateral trade," and demand for "collective action stabilizing prices of, and demand for, primary commodities", but this was "not intended to form a regional bloc" (Gilchrist 1955).

## 2.2 Phase II: ASEAN's Formation to the Pacific Community Idea

While the most powerful actor that sought to shape and create regionalism in Asia during the first phase was the US, during the second phase, the role could be said to belong to Japan. Unlike the US that sought to create both security and economic regionalism, Japan's interest was mainly economic, with security being an indirect goal, a by-product of economic cooperation.

In 1966, a new regional organization in Asia emerged: the Asia and Pacific Council (ASPAC). ASPAC suggested a more activist role by the region's middle powers—Japan and Australia—in encouraging regionalism, but it never took off, thanks to lukewarm response from the ASEAN members, some of which, like Indonesia saw ASPAC (in which Australia and Japan were active members) as a Western enterprise geared to their Cold War agenda. Neither Australia nor Japan enjoyed the legitimacy within ASPAC that Indonesia enjoyed with ASEAN. To quote a secret British memo on ASPAC, "excessive Australian zeal" and Japan's disproportionate economic power within ASPAC were two important reasons that might produce the "collapse" of the grouping. It characterized the atmosphere surrounding ASPAC as "unreal" due to "the presence of these two countries which, though professing Asian sympathies and loyalties, are in fact much closer to the US or to Western Europe in their way of looking at the area's problems" (British Embassy 1968). This assessment of Japan's role is important, since according to some observers, Tokyo was so "preoccupied" with ASPAC and the Ministerial Conference on Economic Development in Southeast Asia (MCSDEA)—also started in 1966—that it "did not take ASEAN seriously," when the grouping came into being in 1967 (Yamakage 1997). Another British assessment in 1972 noted that, "ASPAC's effective development as an instrument of regional collaboration has suffered from the hostility of some of its South East Asian members to anything implying Japanese leadership" (ASPAC 1972). Yet another British memo blamed Japan's "half-baked statements about new groupings" on the awareness of the Japanese government "of the continuing resentment in South East Asia against them arising from the War, and also from current Japanese economic domination" (British Embassy 1973). It is noteworthy that while ASPAC (1966) and ASEAN (1967) were set up within a year of each other, they reflected very different normative settings, and ASEAN was to outlive ASPAC that folded in 1975. Japan's subsequent emphasis on network-style regionalism might have been the result of

its realization that an intergovernmental regional organization led by Japan would not be acceptable to most Asians.

A more promising development with a longer-lasting impact during this period was the emergence of the Pacific Community idea. This coincided with Japan's reemergence as an economic powerhouse. Much of it was the result of proposals by individual leaders (Japanese prime ministers) and scholars (such as Kiyoshi Kojima) in the 1960s and 1970s. In the beginning these proposals were confined to the advanced industrial countries of the Pacific, Japan, Australia, the US, Canada, but concerns about legitimacy and viability saw the gradual extension to include the ASEAN countries, which came to feature more centrally in these frameworks. This Pacific Community movement progressed almost exclusively without formal institution building, through discussions and elaborations within epistemic communities—such as the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC)—and other Track-II forums<sup>10</sup> (Table 2). They attracted a great deal of academic debate over the merits of open and consultative regionalism, versus closed and integrative type, before settling decisively in favor of the former. As economic linkages in Asia and the Pacific grew, there was growing momentum toward the establishment of a formal regional organization, which occurred with the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989.

Japan's role in Asian regionalism at this stage came to the fore and deserves special notice. Although initially uninterested in ASEAN (it focused more on ASPAC and MCSDSEA) Japan came to value ASEAN as a vehicle initially for regional stability and subsequently for its economic objectives. Not only were ASEAN members a source of raw materials for Japan's industrialization, but also a market for Japanese products and more importantly, as a final link in the Japan-centered regional production network that rapidly emerged following the 1985 revaluation of the yen. Initially, Japan's economic role in support of ASEAN took the form of official development assistance. Between 1975 and 1987, 65% of Japan's foreign aid went to Asia, with ASEAN's share ranging from 32% and 44.7% (Akrasanee and Prasert 2003). Later, Japan's economic role in support of ASEAN also involved massive foreign direct investment (FDI). As capital-rich Japanese companies headed southwards in the post Plaza Accord period, Japan's FDI in ASEAN from 1988 to 1993 amounted to US\$22 billion. (The Plaza Accord of 1985 resulted in an upward valuation of the yen). According to some estimates, from 1990 to 2000, Japan had invested 20% of all net foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia, a figure that was as much as US\$52 billion from 1990 to 1998 (Akrasanee and Prasert 2003).

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<sup>10</sup> Nonofficial meetings in which government officials may participate in their private capacity.

**Table 2: Epistemic Communities and the Pacific Community Idea: 1960–1980**

Idea	Source of Idea	Impact/Outcome
Asian Marshall Plan (1960)	Morinosuke Kajima, Japanese businessman and MP	Influenced by growing pan-European cooperation idea
Economic Cooperation in the Pacific Area (1963)	Japan Economic Research Centre (JERC)	JERC emerged as key Japanese institution for research and dissemination on Pacific cooperation concept
Economic Cooperation for Development and Trade in the Pacific (1964)	Conference organized by the East-West Center, Honolulu, US	Stirred Japanese academic Kiyoshi Kojima's interest in Pacific free trade
Pacific Economic Community (PEC) (1965)	Kiyoshi Kojima's landmark paper to a JERC Conference proposed a Pacific Free Trade Area	Attracted the interest of Japanese Foreign Minister Takeo Miki, who sent Kojima to travel through the Pacific in early 1967 to ascertain interest in the PEC idea.
Pacific Basin Economic Council (1967)	Australia-Japan Business Cooperation Committee	Separate group but supportive of Pacific Community concept
Pacific Trade and Development Conference (PAFTAD) (1968)	Convened by Kojima with support from Japanese Foreign Minister Takeo Miki under the auspices of JERC.	PAFTAD became a major platform for promoting the Pacific Community concept and precursor to the OPTAD idea.
Pacific Basin Cooperation Study Group (March 1979)	Proposed by Japanese Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira and chaired by Saburo Okita who became foreign minister in November 1979.	First mention of "open regional cooperation" concept that became "open regionalism": the mantra of Pacific economic cooperation.
Organization for Pacific Trade and Development (OPTAD) (July 1979)	Study for the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Peter Drysdale (Australia) and Hugh Patrick (US).	Abandoned the idea of a free trade area of the advanced Pacific nations only in favor of an OECD-type informal and consultative and information providing association.
Pacific Community Seminar, Canberra (15-17 September 1980)	Mooted by Prime Ministers Ohira of Japan and Malcolm Fraser of Australia, this government sponsored meeting had tripartite (official, business, and academic) representation.	Established a standing committee, which later came to be known as the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) to undertake information exchanges and research on regional economic cooperation; stimulated national committees of Pacific Economic Cooperation in Japan, US, Republic of Korea, Thailand, and Canada, as well as ASEAN Pacific Cooperation Committee. Played pivotal role in the formation of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the intergovernmental economic cooperation grouping of the Asia-Pacific.

Source: Acharya (2009).

Yet, at no stage was Japan considered as a sponsor or leader of ASEAN. This had much to do with continuing misgivings about Japan's wartime role in Southeast Asia, compounded by perceptions of economic exploitation by Japanese corporations of Southeast Asian countries. Anti-Japanese actions in Southeast Asia included Thailand's boycott of Japanese goods in 1972, Malaysia's complaint against Japanese synthetic rubber, anti-Japanese demonstrations at universities, and riots in Indonesia during the visit by Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka in January 1973 (Akrasane and Prasert 2003).

Japanese leadership understood these sentiments, as underscored by the Fukuda Doctrine of 1977, where Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda reaffirmed Japan's commitment to anti-militarism, and pledged to strengthen Japan's economic and political relationship with Southeast Asian countries on the basis of mutual trust and equality. Japan's role in Asian regionalism continued

to focus on the economic domain and exercised through epistemic communities and Track II forums, rather than formal intergovernmental organizations with a political-security focus.

In the meantime, ASEAN not only survived initial crises challenging its survival, especially the dispute between Malaysia and Philippines over Sabah, and tensions in Singapore-Indonesia relations, but also went from strength to strength as a political organization. A new stage in ASEAN's evolution would start with the US withdrawal from Viet Nam in 1975. Thereafter, ASEAN would seek to develop more overt political-security cooperation, but no multilateral military ties. Following Viet Nam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia that began in December 1979, ASEAN developed a more formal diplomatic and political role—its highpoint as a diplomatic community—with respect to the Cambodia conflict. ASEAN strictly disavowed European Economic Community (EEC) style economic integration, and gave birth to the type of informal, consensus-oriented regional interactions with an avoidance of legalization and bureaucratic centralism that came to be known as the ASEAN Way.

During this period, ASEAN countries, along with, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Taipei, China, continued to enjoy close economic and security relations with the US. The US continued to provide two crucial public goods: (i) an extended security umbrella that would be credited by some (for example, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore) for providing the non-communist governments of Asia a cushion to focus on their economic development; and (ii) access to US markets, even at the cost of incurring significant trade deficits. The US implicitly backed ASEAN, but was careful not to openly advertise it. ASEAN members—then consisting of only Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, and from 1994, Brunei Darussalam—maintained an officially non-aligned or “autonomous” posture, partly to avoid provoking the Soviet Union, the PRC, and Viet Nam. The fact was that despite providing public goods, the US had lost SEATO and had little to do with the origins and functions of ASEAN. This suggests the importance of legitimacy over capability in building regional institutions and illustrates my earlier claim that the problem of free riding need not obstruct efforts at collective action through regional groups if it is part of a normative bargain whereby the actor providing the collective good sees free riding as a way to satisfy its legitimacy deficit.

Among other Asian powers, the PRC and India were pretty much out of the picture when it came to the development of Asian regionalism in this phase. Defeat in the 1962 border war with the PRC had led to a considerable erosion of Indian influence in Southeast Asia. India, with a growing domestic instability and after the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan, became more preoccupied with domestic and South Asian affairs. While New Delhi showed some interest in joining ASEAN in the 1970s, ASEAN was reluctant to let India in, partly out of concerns of Indian dominance, and for getting embroiled in the India–Pakistan and India–PRC rivalries. The PRC, despite Zhou En-Lai's impressive show at the Bandung Conference, failed to gain much legitimacy in the region as a result of its policy of supporting communist movements in Southeast Asia. And with the Cultural Revolution, the PRC too became more internally preoccupied. This left the space for ASEAN to develop Asian regionalism in its own way.

Overall, the development of Asian regionalism during this phase marked the beginnings of interest in trade liberalization. The chief reason for this interest was the need to manage the growing economic interdependence in the Asia and Pacific region, fuelled by trans Pacific trade and Japanese investment in East Asia. The search for a Pacific Community or a Pacific trade institution was aimed at reducing transaction costs, prevent unilateralism, and manage conflicts over issues such as trade deficits and protectionism. Outwardly, this conformed to the rationalist concept of collective action. But the pursuit of a free trade agenda through a regional organization of the Asia-Pacific was secondary to the reality of trans Pacific economic relations prevailing at this time, which was driven by a non-institutionalized, market-driven or “open regionalism” in which a number of Asian economies, including the newly industrializing

economies (Hong Kong, China; Republic of Korea; Taipei, China; and Singapore) relied heavily on access to the US market and protection from its security umbrella to boost their economic prospects and regime survival. To the extent that this dependence on the US was largely through bilateral understandings and alliances, we cannot accurately include it under the purview of collective action under multilateral institutions. The impetus for a Pacific Community came from Track-II or epistemic communities, such as the Pacific Trade and Development (PAFTAD), the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC), and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC). These were led mainly by protagonists from the middle powers such as Japan and Australia. The US remained indifferent to the prospect for a Pacific trade organization and hostile to a Pacific security organization. While the original plan for a Pacific regional trade organization resembling the OECD (mooted in Japan and Australia) encompassed only the developed economies of the Pacific, it was not long before the need for including the ASEAN countries was recognized as critical to the legitimacy and viability of any such grouping. Hence, it was not the model of a regional institution under hegemonic leadership with a small number of countries that came to dominate the thinking and approach of Asian and Pacific regionalists during this period, but rather the alternative model focusing on the issue of group identity, inclusive regional socialization and the normative elements of open regionalism and cooperative security.

### **2.3 Phase III: The Post-Cold War Period**

The foregoing discussion shows that neither the US nor Japan, despite their strong support for regional collective action in Asia (US in the military and economic arena, Japan mainly in the economic arena), could create and shape a regional institution on their own. ASEAN remained the main platform for Asian regionalism. Asian regionalism went through some major changes in the post-Cold War period. Aside from APEC's beginning in Canberra in 1989, ASEAN at its first post-Cold War summit in Singapore adopted a new vision and direction, which would mean increasing security cooperation, an ASEAN Free Trade Area, and greater participation in Asia-Pacific multilateral security cooperation. The major breakthrough for the latter was the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 in Bangkok. ARF became Asia's first multilateral security organization, albeit security defined not in military or collective defense (alliance) terms, but as cooperative security measures aimed at building confidence and avoiding conflict.

ARF marked the beginning of the extension of the ASEAN model of regionalism to the wider Asia and Pacific region. The ARF itself was ASEAN-led, and anchored on ASEAN's normative framework, which meant it was not a fundamental break from the mold of Asian regionalism that had developed during the Cold War period. Sovereignty, non-interference and the avoidance of leadership by great powers (or a concert of power model) were affirmed. ASEAN itself made little shift from the principle of non-interference in dealing with human rights questions and resisted US and European sanctions against its new member, Myanmar.

A parallel development at this stage was the proposal in 1990 by the then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's idea of an East Asia Economic Grouping (EAEG, later modified to East Asian Economic Caucus, or EAEC). Mahathir's proposal came as a result of the breakdown of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Uruguay Round Talks and the growing fear of the break of the multilateral trading system into regional blocs, a fear fuelled by the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the advent of the European Single Market. Mahathir clearly sought Japanese leadership of his proposed East Asian bloc. But Japan was reluctant, partly due to fierce US opposition to it, and partly due to its own nervousness about taking on a leadership role in Asia while there were unresolved concerns about Japan's wartime past. Even Singapore's then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who greatly



adored Japan's economic achievements, would say that allowing Japan to send peacekeeping troops abroad would be "like giving chocolate liqueur to an alcoholic" (Japan and the World 2008; Kaufman 2008).

The Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 was a turning point in Asian regionalism. In response to the crisis, and criticism of the failure of existing Asian regional institutions, including APEC, ARF, and ASEAN to come up with an effective response, pressures grew for redefining the ASEAN way, diluting the principle of non-interference, engaging in new forms of cooperation that had been neglected or avoided in the past (including financial cooperation). As a result, the idea of an East Asian community drew support, as broader Asia Pacific groupings such as APEC and ARF looked ineffectual. The ASEAN+3 mechanism and eventually the East Asian Summit (EAS), were the outcome of this process of regional redefinition, carried out ostensibly because an East Asia identity seemed more natural and attainable than an Asia-Pacific identity.

By the late 1990s, the PRC's spectacular rise has created the possibility of Beijing assuming a leadership role in regional institutions, although few expected it to supplant Japan. During the Asian financial crisis, in December 1997, Japan announced a special yen loan facility of 600 billion yen to help Asian countries affected by the crisis. And less than a year later, under the New Miyazawa Initiative announced in October 1998, Japan offered US\$430 billion in aid to assist the recovery of ASEAN countries (Akrasanee and Prasert 2003). But after Japan's crisis-induced proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) in 1997, backed by its own substantial financial resources (which it used to bail out countries like Malaysia) fell through (again due to US pressure), the PRC could be seen as an alternative to Japanese and ASEAN leadership of Asian regionalism. But the PRC was not acceptable as a leader of pan-Asian regional institutions (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a smaller subregional body is different), as subsequent events have shown. The PRC's desire to keep the membership of the East Asian Summit to the ASEAN+3 countries has been frustrated with the inclusion—at the insistence of ASEAN members such as Indonesia and Singapore—first of Australia, New Zealand, and India when the EAS first convened in 2005, and with the admission of the US and Russia in 2010. In the end East Asia would itself be given a functional as opposed to geographic meaning, as the rise of the PRC created concerns of a PRC takeover of strictly East Asian regional groupings. What is clear is that while Asian regionalism would be meaningless without participation from the PRC, they would not be politically acceptable with PRC dominance. While the participation of these countries gives the EAS more weight in dealing with regional security issues—the presumed focus of the EAS—the dream of an East Asian Community, mimicking the European Union (EU), once proposed by Japan's Hatoyama government as a counter to the idea of a more comprehensive Asia Pacific Community proposed by Australia in 2008 (by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd) has been displaced. The failure of the Hatoyama and Rudd initiatives also underscores the problems of legitimacy that Japan and Australia face, in regional institution-building.

The evolution of the EAS also attests to the importance of the capability–legitimacy gap in shaping Asian regionalism. Japan–PRC competition ensures that the two Asian powers, despite the immense resources each can bring to regionalist endeavors, will not come together to jointly set the terms of the fledgling regional grouping. Each will contest the legitimacy of the other as regional leader, while ASEAN will not take comfortably to a PRC–Japan condominium because of its misgivings about either of them as great powers (more so towards the PRC than a relatively stagnant Japan these days) This is in sharp contrast to the deep-rooted Franco-German rapprochement after World War II, which paved the way for the emergence and consolidation of regionalism that is the European Union today.

Asian regional institutions have performed unevenly since the 1997 crisis. A growing concern with transnational dangers, exemplified by the 2001 and 2002 Bali terrorist bombings, the 2003

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami saw concerted action, featuring those countries most directly involved and those who were in a position to provide support. These were generally positive developments attesting to the importance and relevance of regional collective action. They also helped to redefine the role of ARF, reorienting it more towards humanitarian and transnational issues. But collective action in the economic arena fared less well. The progress of the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) of establishing bilateral currency swaps and eventually a multilateral arrangement was noteworthy, but thanks to its small size, its efficacy remains to be tested. The CMI has also been criticized for lacking autonomy from global regulatory authorities like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but this need not be a serious obstacle, as the concerted approach by the IMF and the EU in bailing out Greece attests. On a more disappointing note, APEC continued to decline as bilateral trade arrangements took center stage, its once paradigmatic vision of creating a multilateral free trade zone for the Pacific all but abandoned in favor of the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

A key issue facing Asian regionalism today is the question of leadership. Through the above crises, and now with the flaring up of the South China Sea disputes, the role of ASEAN as occupying the “driver’s seat” in Asian regional institutions, such as ARF and EAS, has come under increasing scrutiny. But despite this, no major change seems likely to the principle of “ASEAN centrality”, which has now been recognized by all other players, including the US.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In understanding the problem of collective action in Asian regionalism, it is not enough to apply the pathway outlined by rationalist theories like Olson’s. Such a task requires taking stock of the normative, social, and functional determinants of Asian regionalism that have shaped its historical trajectory and continue to influence its direction despite the recent shocks of crisis.

A major obstacle to collective action in Asian regionalism is not the problem of free riding in a large group of actors, as specified by rationalist theory, but the capability–legitimacy gap that a constructivist approach, as employed in this paper, would identify. In other words, through history in Asian regionalist efforts, we have seen too often that those who were materially capable of providing leadership and direction have lacked the necessary legitimacy, while those who have possessed legitimacy have lacked the necessary resources. In the former category we include the US and Japan, while in the latter category belong India and the PRC in the 1940s and 1950s, and ASEAN since its formation. Never have the two attributes really coincided. As a result, while the ASEAN-led Asian institutions have made a significant normative contribution to regional order, they have not proved to be effective instruments of problem solving or collective action.

Yet, the persistence of a capability–legitimacy gap in Asian regionalism is not without benefits. While this means Asian regional institutions will not become like the EU, this does not mean they do not make other kinds of contributions. Among other things, it has ensured that Asia does not degenerate into a hegemonic order or a concert of power. It ensures that the PRC does not become a regional hegemon.

Can a rising Asia overcome this capability–legitimacy gap? Might we expect the PRC and India to one day acquire both the resources needed for organizing regional collective action and the legitimacy required for making it effective and lasting? But even in the case of the PRC, while it increasingly acquires the material resources for regional leadership, it is still a long way from possessing the ideational and the soft power required for organizing the region. A key mechanism of collective action tolerance or encouragement of free riding in return for the

legitimacy is yet to be found in the case of the PRC. Until now, the PRC has been seen as the target to be socialized and co-opted into regional institutions. This is in keeping with the PRC's own policy "not to lead". But this has to change and may be already changing. The question of a more proactive PRC providing both leadership and resources to regional institutions has not been addressed yet. The key policy challenge for the region is to encourage the emergence of the PRC as a genuine provider of regional public goods while discouraging it from succumbing to the temptations of unilateralism and bilateralism. Part of the process of fostering this development would depend upon the PRC's own domestic developments, including the emergence of a more transparent and open domestic political system, and learning by the PRC's policymakers of the benefits of constructive regional leadership. The other part requires collective social bargaining by others in the region with the PRC over the terms of its leadership. The PRC's role as a substantial provider of regional public goods will be vital to the success of Asia's regional institutions and the security and prosperity of the region. Some of the key questions facing the future of collective action in Asian regionalism are what the PRC leadership might mean in institutional terms, the full economic and strategic implications of a new type of Asian regionalism with the PRC as its leader, and the role of other Asian powers such as the US, Japan, India, and Russia in such an order.

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