

A slow road to regionalism

Bertrand Fort and Douglas Webber. 2006. *Regional Integration in East Asia and Europe: Convergence or Divergence*. London: Routledge, 334 pages, ISBN 0 415 36747 6

Mark Beeson

One of the most striking and paradoxical qualities of 'globalisation' – however we define it – is its regional accent. While the intensification of trans-border economic interactions have become familiar and commonplace, it is clear that such flows have a strong regional bias. In other words, far from being universal, contemporary processes of international integration are realised in very different ways on an increasingly regionalised basis.

In some ways, of course, this is not surprising: intuitively we would expect that sheer proximity would make neighbours more likely to establish high levels of economic interaction. Yet while this has clearly been the case in western Europe, economic links within East Asia have been less intense. Indeed, the entire East Asian developmental experience would arguably not have occurred with anything like the rapidity it did without critical extra-regional ties – especially to the all-important consumer markets of North America.

However, not only is the nature of East Asia's intra- and inter-regional economic integration different from western Europe, but so, too, are its political connections. The European Union has

famously pushed the process of intra-regional political integration much further than anywhere else. The recent failure of the Netherlands and France to ratify the EU constitution notwithstanding,¹ the EU remains, rightly or wrongly, the benchmark against which other regional initiatives are measured.

EU mould for East Asia?

Given the growing importance of regionalism, and the noteworthy differences in style and extent that distinguish such processes in regions like western Europe and East Asia, we might expect a great deal of interest in comparing their distinct historical experiences. With a few noteworthy exceptions this has generally not been the case, which makes the volume by Fort and Webber all the more welcome and important.

One explanation for the relative dearth of such volumes is the sheer difficulty of mounting comparative exercises; few individuals have the requisite expertise to attempt them.² The alternative is the one adopted here: assemble a team of scholars with expertise in a region and organise their analyses around broadly similar themes. These sorts of volumes have some fairly well-known advantages and disadvantages – all of which are on display here.

On the positive side, the individual analyses by area specialists contain informed and judicious discussion. The disadvantage of this approach is that discussions occur in isolation, often leaving the reader to connect the dots. Of the 16 chapters, only about a quarter could be considered genuinely comparative. The rest are divided into groups of thematic analyses, with broadly similar topics being considered separately in Europe and Asia. Consequently, there are sections on regional leadership and power, economic and monetary co-operation, institutional reform and post-cold war enlargement as well as security and regional crisis management.

This sort of approach works quite well, although there is the difficulty of comparing like with like. For example, while there is a useful chapter on the relationship between France and Germany, there is no similar, chapter-length discussion of Sino-Japanese relations – a notable omission given their importance in both the region and the wider international system. Nevertheless, the comparative pairings generally work well and provide a useful and much needed starting point for students of regional integration.

A number of the chapters explicitly adopt a comparative approach and are

thus, arguably, the most important. Richard Higgott is one of a handful of scholars to have undertaken comparative analyses of Europe and Asia, and he provides an introduction to the theory and practice of regionalism that emphasises its relationship to globalisation. He also makes the point that East Asia is a 'region of economic experimentation' and that we should not expect it to replicate the European experience.

The other major comparative chapter is provided by one of the editors – Douglas Webber – and attempts to place regional integration in Europe and Asia in historical context. This sort of comparative historical analysis of regional development is less common than we might like and thus all the more valuable. Webber's principal conclusion is that the conditions that underpinned Europe's uniquely high levels of integration were so specific that it is 'very unlikely' that they will be replicated elsewhere. Indeed, Webber argues that the particular balance of intra-regional forces that permits effective integration to occur are 'quite restrictive', and it is not even clear whether the EU will be able to maintain the degree of integration it has already achieved.

Mould? What mould?

The trajectory of regional development will depend in large part on the position of regional hegemony, Webber argues – a contention with implications for East Asia and the apparently inexorable rise of China. My own feeling is that the course of regional development may have as much to do with the actions of the world's only global hegemon as with any exclusively regional conditions.³ This is something that is touched on but not considered as extensively as it might have been, given the central importance of the United States in the formation (and lack of integration, in East Asia's case) and contemporary evolution of both regions.

Amitav Acharya's brief concluding chapter is upbeat about the capacity of East Asia's 'practical and productive' regionalism to meet some of the formidable challenges it currently faces. If East Asia is to rise to such challenges, it may need to replicate at least one aspect of the European experience: the dominant position the EU has enjoyed as the institutionalised expression of the regional impulse. East Asia, by contrast, still suffers from something of an identity crisis and a bewildering array of often overlapping initiatives in which

the very definition of regional identity is uncertain and contentious. Until there is a consolidation of institutional fora in East Asia, the co-ordination of collective actions at the regional level will remain problematic.

One of the great virtues of this valuable collection is its highlighting of the different institutional capacities that exist in Asia and Europe and the very different historical circumstances that have shaped them. Given such different starting points it is unsurprising that the two regions have developed differently; this volume helps us to understand the forces that will shape their future trajectories. A major point confirmed in this collection is that there is no reason to suppose that the EU represents the ultimate end-point of all regionally based cooperative endeavours. Indeed, the setbacks that have recently afflicted the European project suggest that it is not even certain whether the EU will fulfil what had at one time seemed to be its inevitable destiny. But while there may be some debate about the depth and extent of regional processes, one thing that this book makes clear is that regional processes are set to remain defining parts of the contemporary era, and that we need more analyses of this sort if we are going to understand them. <


Notes

1. The papers in this volume resulted from a conference in mid-2003, and a number of key events, like the rejection of the EU constitution and the East Asia Summit of 2005, are not considered.
2. For an important exception – albeit one that rather underplays the importance of China – see Katzenstein, Peter J. 2005. *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
3. See, Beeson, Mark. 2005. 'Re-thinking Regionalism: Europe and East Asia in Comparative Historical Perspective'. *Journal of European Public Policy* 12 (6): 969-985.

Mark Beeson

School of Political Science & International Studies, University of Queensland
M.Beeson@uq.edu.au

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