

# Observing the Challenges of Regionalism in Northeast Asia from Comparative Perspectives

Two conflicting trends will determine the future of regionalism in Northeast Asia. One is the growing acknowledgment of the need for regional integration. The other is the rise of nationalism. Aware of the geopolitical uncertainties that make any roadmap for Northeast Asian regionalism tenuous at best, but also adhering to the belief that integration is crucial to the region's resilience, the "Mega-Asia Research Group" of Seoul National University Asia Center and the Institute of International Studies at Seoul National University co-hosted a conference entitled "Asian Regionalism from Comparative Perspectives." Held in the autumn of 2024, the event brought together Korean researchers of Asia's six different regions to discuss the current state of regionalism in each region, with the ultimate goal of gaining insights into the future of Northeast Asian regionalism.

The contributions to this issue of News from Northeast Asia were authored by the participants of this conference. A review of regionalism in the region is first presented by Chang Joon Ok of the Academy of Korean Studies in "Historical Development of Regionalism in Northeast Asia." This is followed by the proposal of a new region, and therefore the possibility of a new regionalism, by Jeong Yoon Yang of the National Security Research Institute and Beom Shik Shin of Seoul National University in "'Mega-Asia' and a New Regionalism: 'North Asia.'" The reality of regionalism in South Asia, West Asia, and

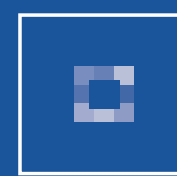
Central Asia is discussed, respectively, by Yoon Jung Choi of Sejong Institute ("South Asia at a Crossroads: Navigating Regionalism Amid Historical, Structural, and Geopolitical Challenges"), So Yeon Ahn of Seoul National University Asia Center ("Traditional and New Forms of Regionalism in West Asia"), and Song Ha Joo of Kookmin University ("Emerging Regionalism in Central Asia"). Finally, ASEAN is often regarded as a viable and successful example of regionalism, but in "Regionalism in Southeast Asia: ASEAN's Potential and Challenges," Kyong Jun Choi of Konkuk University brings to our attention

the limitations that must be overcome if Southeast Asia's regionalism is to advance to a higher level. These contributions illustrate the diverse forms of regionalism practiced in the Asian world. This, in turn, allows us to go beyond the fatalistic pessimism surrounding the topic of North Asian regionalism and to anticipate the emergence of a new form of regional integration in Northeast Asia.

Ilhong KO,  
HK Assistant Professor,  
Seoul National University Asia Center.  
Email: mahari95@snu.ac.kr

## SNUAC

Seoul National University Asia Center



The Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) is a research and international exchange institute based in Seoul, South Korea. The SNUAC's most distinctive feature is its cooperative approach in fostering research projects and international exchange program through close interactions between regional and thematic research programs about Asia and the world. To pursue its mission to become a hub of Asian Studies, SNUAC research teams are divided by different regions and themes. Research centers and programs are closely integrated, providing a solid foundation for deeper analysis of Asian society.

## Historical Development of Regionalism in Northeast Asia

Chang Joon OK

The geographical definition of Northeast Asia includes six countries: the two Koreas, Japan, China, Taiwan, Russia, and Mongolia. However, if we define Northeast Asia "regionally," taking the dynamics of international politics into account, the United States can also be included. The United States' strengthening of its identity as an East Asian country is evidenced by the East Asia Summit, the Six-Party Talks, and the Pivot to Asia policy; therefore, it can be regarded as a part of Northeast Asia. Indeed, discussing the situation in Northeast Asia without considering US policy is impossible.

The situation in Northeast Asia is unique in that while the number of countries in the region is relatively small, the region includes many of the world's major powers: the United States, Russia, China, and Japan. Due to this reason, geopolitical competition between the major powers still remains strong in Northeast Asia, but compared to

the other regions of Asia, regionalism in institutional terms is very underdeveloped. "Polarity," a key concept in international politics, can be used to examine the historical development of regionalism in Northeast Asia, the trajectory of which can be divided into bipolar, unipolar, and post-unipolar periods.

The bipolar order of the United States and the Soviet Union emerged immediately after World War II. In Northeast Asia, the civil war in China and the Korean War led to the collapse of the post-World War II US-Soviet "Grand Alliance." With the signing of the San Francisco Treaty (1951), China embraced the policy of leaning to the Soviet side while Japan embraced the United States. With China and Japan aligned with the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively, there was little room for Northeast Asian regionalism to be discussed.

Next came the unipolar order, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the establishment of US hegemony. Even before

the unipolar order was established, the United States was already adjusting the San Francisco system that had excluded China and engaging with China through the normalization of US-China relations. During the US unipolar order, the regional concept of "Asia-Pacific," which was centered on economic cooperation, gained prominence. If, in the previous bipolar period, South Korea and Japan had played a central role in developing the concept of the Pacific as a means of attracting the United States, in this period, the United States also came to define itself as a member of Asia amidst the growth of East Asian countries such as the "Four Asian Dragons."

Lastly, there is the post-unipolar order. As US hegemony declines and China's rise continues, the unipolar order centered on the United States has begun to falter, ushering in the interregnum period, in which no new authority is created. The United States has put forward another regional concept, "the Indo-Pacific," to contain or blockade China. This new regional concept is aimed at strengthening cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India, facilitating the creation of a new bloc centered on countries with shared values. China, on the other hand, is trying to overcome containment through the "Belt and Road Initiative," which encompasses the Eurasian continent and the Indian Ocean.

Currently, South Korea has been active in improving relations with Japan while cooperating with the American-led Indo-

Pacific strategy, while North Korea has chosen to stay close to Russia, sending troops to Russia in the wake of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Under these circumstances, it is very difficult for the countries of Northeast Asia to construct a shared identity. Indeed, the geopolitics of the United States, China, and Russia have come to accelerate the formation of blocs rather than foster regionalism.

There are several important variables that will come to determine the future of regionalism in Northeast Asia. The first is the direction and extent of U.S.-China competition at the global level. The second is regional competition between China and Japan. The third is the degree to which North and South Korea will play an active role as partners in that competition. Finally, the fourth is the degree to which Mongolia and Russia will be interested in regionalism as passive actors. While the order remains in flux, and regionalism in Northeast Asia may come to be swept up in great power geopolitics, the flip side is that the direction in which regionalism in Northeast Asia unfolds may determine the fluid shape of the post-unipolar order. This is why the changes and developments in Northeast Asia regionalism remain greatly important.

Chang Joon OK, Assistant Professor,  
Department of Political Science,  
The Academy of Korean Studies.  
Email: okchangjoon@aks.ac.kr