

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

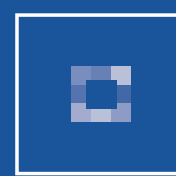
Central Asia is discussed, respectively, by Yoon Jung Choi of Sejong Institute ("South Asia at a Crossroads: Navigating Regionalism Amid Historical, Structural, and Geopolitical Challenges"), So Yeon Ahn of Seoul National University Asia Center ("Traditional and New Forms of Regionalism in West Asia"), 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 Asian regionalism remain greatly important.

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

“Mega-Asia” and a New Regionalism: “North Asia”

Jeong Yoon YANG and Beom Shik SHIN

The concept of “Mega-Asia” has emerged as a framework to capture the rising Asia of the 21st century. Asia is generally regarded as being comprised of the regions of West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia. But what about the northern boundary of Asia? As we believe that this northern boundary also needs to be recognized and defined, we have given it a name – “North Asia” – and established the Ural Mountains as its western boundary. This means that some parts of Russia fall under “North Asia.”

But then can we say that Russia is part of the “North Asian” region of Asia? Regions are processual outcomes that are shaped by various actors and are constructed through political processes. A region attains “regionhood” through discursive practices, undergoing the process of regionification. By acquiring regionhood, the “regionness” (the degree of internal interaction and cohesion as a unit) of a region is enhanced through political practices and interactions. Bearing in mind these material and ideological conditions for defining a region, it is therefore necessary to examine whether the “North Asian” region has the potential to acquire “regionhood” and “regionness” and thus become regionalized.

The term “North Asia” may be unfamiliar to many, but it does exist as a geographical region. In general, Russia is divided by the Ural Mountains, with Europe to the west and Asia to the east. Straddling the vast expanses of Europe and Asia, Russia has historically constructed its own regional identity in the space between Asia and Europe. The perception of whether it is a European or Asian country has shifted depending on where it has looked for its identity and models of national development.

In order to examine whether the North Asian region in Russia has been acquiring an Asian regionality through inter-regionalism or supra-regionalism, we need to analyze the changes that are being shaped and driven by spontaneous and bottom-up dynamics at the sub-regional level, the expanding connectivity of North Asia arising from the expansion of networks, and the process of North Asianization driven by national strategies. When economic and people-to-people exchanges in border regions are activated, resulting in more

enhanced networks and greater subregional cooperation, the likelihood of regionalization and therefore the growth of the concept of “North Asia” may increase (the bottom-up method). The formation of the Northern Sea Route transportation network can also drive the formation of a “North Asian” region (middle method). Finally, the likelihood of a “North Asia” region is likely to increase when strong national interests in the formation of such a region emerge (top-down method).

Russia and East Asia are distant neighbors in terms of civilization, and from the perspective of identity and Russia as a whole, it is unlikely that Russia will integrate with Asia. However, if the Russo-Ukrainian war comes to an end and transnational networks are reactivated through people-to-people exchanges with Asian neighbors, such as the countries of the Far East, this may become a major mechanism for regional integration.

“Mega-Asia” and “North Asia” were established as new regional frameworks in the hopes that they could act as channels for resolving conflicts and contradictions within East Asia in the era of strategic competition between the United States and China. Within East Asia’s current regional order, there are clear limitations in resolving issues such as the territorial conflicts inherent in East Asia, the North Korean nuclear issue, and the issue of US-China rivalry. In addition, a regional approach to “North Asia” provides the framework that has the potential to incorporate North Korea, an isolated authoritarian regime, into the region.

The regionalization of Asia through informal and open networks can enhance regional stability and mitigate conflicts in the region, as it can help to address regional security issues by forging ties between countries. Within the conceptual dynamics of “Mega Asia,” the strategic value of the development of North Asian regionalization becomes clear.

Jeong Yoon YANG,
Senior Researcher, National Security
Research Institute (NSR).
Email: jyyangrok@nsr.re.kr

Beom Shik SHIN, Professor, Faculty
of Political Science and International
Relations, Seoul National University.
Email: sbsrus@snu.ac.kr



Fig. 1: The Europe-Asia boundary within Russia. (Photo courtesy of Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.)

South Asia at a Crossroads: Navigating Regionalism Amid Historical, Structural, and Geopolitical Challenges

Yoon Jung CHOI

South Asia remains a region that has received relatively little global attention. Most countries in the region endured prolonged British colonial rule and are still grappling with nation-building and internal challenges decades after independence. Ongoing territorial and religious conflicts, particularly over Kashmir, have drained political and economic resources, further hindering regional progress. Economically, much of South Asia remains trapped in poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment. India stands out as an exception, having rapidly emerged as the world’s fifth-largest economy. Meanwhile, external powers such as China and the United States have become increasingly influential, shaping South Asia’s regional dynamics and cross-border cooperation.

Regionalism in South Asia is losing steam, weakened by historical and structural challenges. The idea of South Asia as a unified geographic and cultural entity, rooted in shared experiences like British colonialism, cricket, and Bollywood, has struggled to translate into effective regional cooperation. Structural barriers and geopolitical tensions have held back the vision of regional integration.

The creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 marked a significant step toward regional integration, but its progress has been hampered. Challenges such as the principle of unanimity, India’s dominant position, and China’s growing influence have rendered SAARC largely ineffective. Unlike ASEAN, the regional bloc of neighboring Southeast Asia, SAARC has delivered little tangible benefit to its members. Intra-regional trade accounts for just five percent of South Asia’s total trade, a stark indicator of limited economic integration. Political frictions exacerbate this fragmentation: India’s branding of Pakistan as a terrorist state, Pakistan’s ban on Indian media, and declining people-to-people exchanges (including student mobility) have

further eroded regional connectivity. India’s closer strategic alignment with the United States has added another layer to the region’s complexity, turning South Asia into a theater for US-China competition. While this shift has expanded South Asia’s global relevance, it has come at the cost of regional cohesion.

The trajectory of South Asian regionalism will hinge on several critical factors: India’s aspirations for greater global influence, the smaller states’ deepening alignment with China, and the capacity of individual nations to drive functional initiatives amid intensifying geopolitical rivalries. Should security tensions rise and economic competition sharpen – particularly under the second Trump administration – functional regionalism may gain traction as states seek pragmatic alternatives to the status quo. This shift could represent a watershed moment for the region, moving beyond the constraints of essentialist regionalism, which relies on geographic proximity and cultural homogeneity, toward a more dynamic functional regionalism rooted in practical cooperation and shared objectives.

Groupings such as BIMSTEC and BBIN exemplify the “South Asia +/- x” model, reflecting the rise of new functionalist regional frameworks that break away from traditional notions of regionalism. These arrangements, along with emerging sub-regional groupings centered on India or Pakistan and composed of “like-minded” or “interest-aligned” nations, are gaining momentum. Though still in their infancy, these evolving forms of regionalism offer a glimpse into how South Asia might address the void left by the decline of multilateralism and conventional regional integration. They suggest a potential path forward for a fragmented region, seeking to redefine its role in an increasingly fluid and competitive geopolitical landscape.

Yoon Jung CHOI,
Vice President, Sejong Institute.
Email: yoonyung2012@gmail.com



Fig. 1: BIMSTEC, BBIN and SAARC Groupings.



Traditional and New Forms of Regionalism in West Asia

So Yeon AHN

West Asia is a key strategic region, where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a potential trigger for great international crises – is taking place and where several oil-producing nations crucial to global energy security are concentrated. West Asia is also a region of great civilizational significance, home to the holy sites of the major religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, West Asia experienced the domination of European powers and began to call for decolonization. The ideological platform used at the time to challenge and rally against Western colonization was pan-Arabism.

The Arab League, based on Arab ethnic identity, was formed to advocate for regional solidarity in West Asia. However, the diversity of political and economic structures and lack of institutional cohesion among member states hindered the Arab League's role as a regional organization. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – formed in response to the common security crisis of the Iranian threat following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and featuring member states with common political, historical, and economic backgrounds – is considered to have had success in regional integration, but the organization was short-lived.

The Arab Spring, comprising a wave of anti-government protests that marked a historic turning point for the entire region in 2010, was a defining event that demonstrated the futility of regional cooperation in the face of individual state survival. In particular, the US strategic contraction in the Middle East and the escalation of the US-China conflict, which coincided with the Arab Spring, set the stage for countries in West Asia, led by the GCC, to pursue their respective paths for survival. The GCC's break with Qatar signaled the end of GCC-led regional cooperation in West Asia. Then, the unconventional 2020 normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states confirmed the collapse of

the ideological basis that had supported West Asian regionalism. The Israeli-Hamas war that erupted in October 2023 also saw West Asian states unite in condemning both Israel and Hamas simultaneously, but without the regional cohesion that had been evident in the past. Instead, it has been the non-state armed groups backed by Iran that have demonstrated strong cohesion in opposing Israel.

Today, a new form of regional cooperation, known as “minilateralism,” is emerging in the West Asian region, in which small-scale cooperation is occurring between states with common interests in pursuing their national interests across factional and geographic borders. Compared to other regions, West Asia, with its longstanding cultural and historical commonalities, has been expected to demonstrate a cohesive regionalism. However, amidst the ongoing crisis of state survival, regional cooperation has yet to find its footing. Rather, West Asian regionalism is now breaking the mold of traditional regionalism by expanding its scope beyond common ideological or geographical borders, as states pursue their strategies for survival.

So Yeon AHN,
Co-Research Fellow, West Asia Center,
Seoul National University Asia Center.
Email: soyeonahn727@gmail.com

Fig. 1: Emblem featured on the flag of the Arab League and map of the member countries. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Raffanumber24 and reprinted under Creative Commons license.



Emerging Regionalism in Central Asia

Song Ha JOO

The five states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have continued to make efforts toward regional integration since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite this, Central Asian regionalism and cooperation remain stagnant, with regionalism in Central Asia being deemed a failure by researchers and the media alike. However, since the death of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov and the inauguration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016, the beginnings of a change in Central Asian regionalism have been observed.

Recent developments in the region since 2016 suggest that regionalization is on the rise. On the political front, there have been improvements in bilateral relations, including the demarcation of borders between Central Asian countries and the expansion of economic cooperation. Above all, the “Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian Heads of State,” held annually since 2018, has come to serve as an informal platform for dialogue, thereby promoting cooperation between the countries. Notably, all the countries in the region have continued to participate, including Turkmenistan, which had previously pursued a policy of isolation. Economically, trade between the Central Asian countries remains insignificant compared to trade with Russia, China, and Europe, but it is clearly on the rise. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have resumed energy trade, and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are seeking industrial cooperation along their border. In terms of people-to-people exchange, the countries

in Central Asia are moving toward visa-free agreements and more open border policies.

Despite these changes, however, the limitations that hindered regionalism and regionalization in Central Asia in the past continue into the present day. First, the Central Asian states remain highly conscious of external actors such as China and Russia and have continued with active attempts to make connections with these external actors. Since the “Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian Heads of State” also allows the Central Asian states to meet and connect with a variety of external actors, such as Russia, China, the EU, the Gulf states, and Turkey, it may in fact function as a centrifugal rather than centripetal force in terms of Central Asian regionalism. Furthermore, the “Consultative Meeting” remains limited in that it is an informal platform for dialogue and not an institutionalized formal regional organization. Second, economic interaction within the region is still limited compared to other countries and is unlikely to increase in the future. While the absolute volume of trade between the Central Asian countries has increased since 2016, it is still small compared to the volume of trade between the respective countries and China or Russia. The similar nature of the economic structures of the Central Asian countries means that the potential for greater intra-regional trade is low. Despite these limitations, changes in regionalism and regionalization in Central Asia have come to be observed in recent years, indicating that this phenomenon cannot be ignored. In Central Asia, informal dialogue platforms, such as the “Consultative Meeting,” have been more successful than pre-existing institutionalized regionalist bodies of a binding nature in contributing to regionalism and regionalization. This suggests that different forms of regional institutions can play a more effective role in regionalism depending on the specific context of the region.

Song Ha JOO,
Assistant Professor, Department
of Political Science and International
Relations, Kookmin University.
Email: songhajoo@kookmin.ac.kr

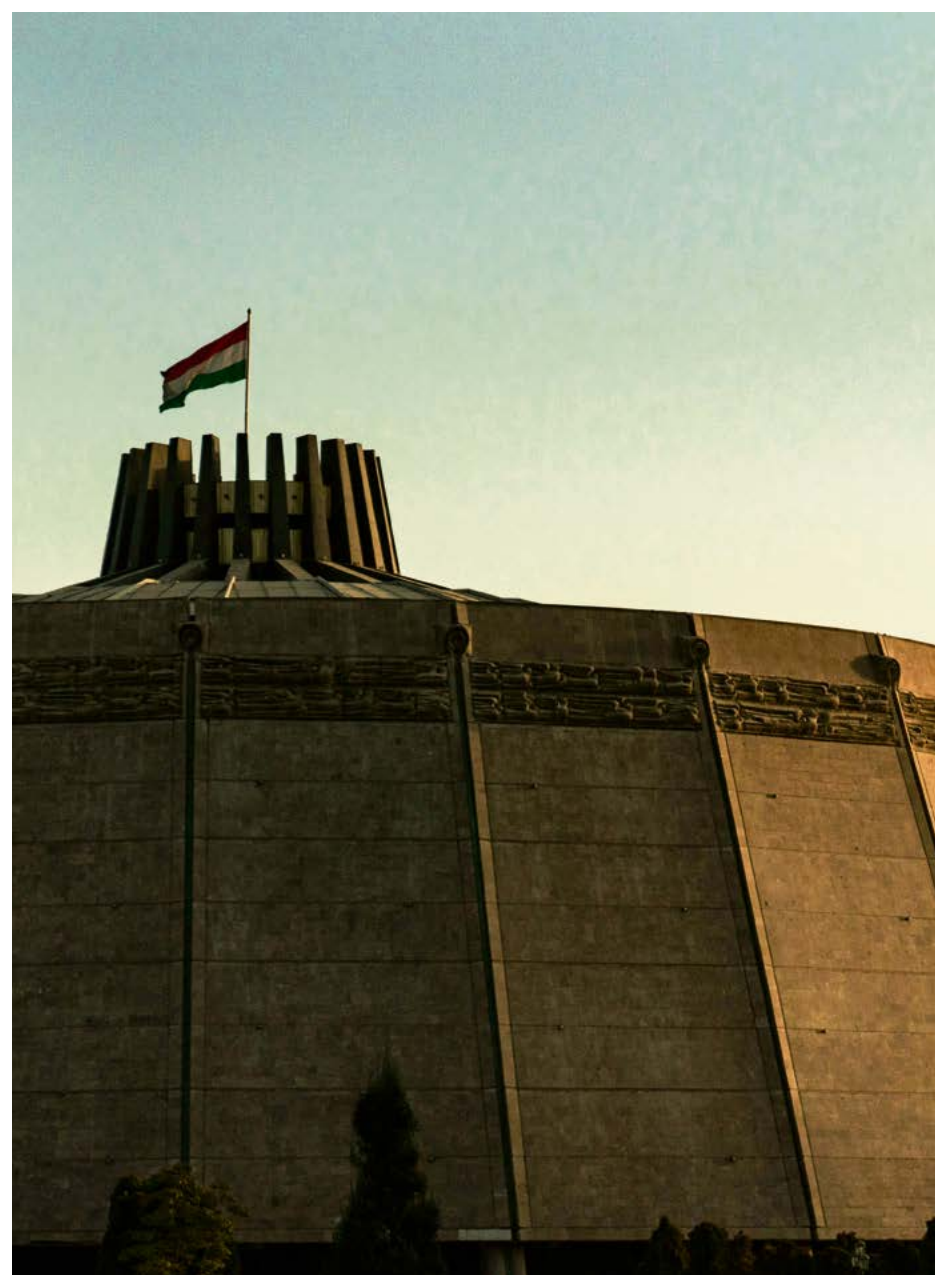


Fig. 1 (below left) Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Photo by Anton Rybakov on [Unsplash](#).

Fig. 2 (below): Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan. Photo by Григорий Захарьян on [Unsplash](#).

Fig. 3 (bottom): Baiterek Tower, Astana Kazakhstan. Photo by Travel With on [Unsplash](#).



Regionalism in Southeast Asia: ASEAN’s Potential and Challenges

Kyong Jun CHOI

Southeast Asia, in contrast to the other regions of Asia, has actively pursued regional integration through the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although its institutional nature is different from that of the EU and the level of integration is not as high, most of the countries in the region (10 countries) are members of ASEAN, and the organization has provided the basis for joint cooperation with countries outside the region. The evolution of ASEAN shows how a group of newly independent and relatively weak states that value their sovereignty have endeavored towards regionalism against the backdrop of internal and external security, economic, and regime-related crises and conflicts.

ASEAN was formed as a security response to the spread of communism during the Cold War and evolved by adopting the strategy of leveraging offshore powers while promoting regional cooperation to address the internal and external security and economic challenges of its member states. ASEAN has continued to promote regional cooperation and expand its membership amidst globalization, the China threat, the East Asian financial crisis, and the US-China conflict. In this process, ASEAN has succeeded in promoting both internal integration and external expansion by maintaining the internal principle of respecting the sovereignty of regional states while at the same time asserting ASEAN-centrality. ASEAN is not a highly politically integrated organization with some ceded sovereignty like the EU; rather, ASEAN features a unique decision-making process based on consensus among sovereign states, emphasizing the rights of sovereign states. But this emphasis on the principle of sovereignty has resulted in institutional inefficiencies. Along with growing conflicts and security threats among offshore powers and weak economic cohesion and external dependence among regional states, these have acted to constrain ASEAN’s ability to fulfill its role as a unified actor in the international community and to further advance regional integration in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN has demonstrated limitations and challenges in maintaining and applying its principles and methods, particularly in terms of security, economics, and human rights. There are rifts in the organization’s response to security issues, epitomized by the South China Sea dispute, and the issue of security conflicts among ASEAN countries remains. ASEAN does not want any offshore power to organize or lead multilateral security arrangements in Southeast Asia. However, it has yet to pursue a specific and unified foreign strategy toward these offshore powers, with member states adopting diplomatic strategies such as individual hedging instead. Despite the growing economic importance of Southeast Asia and the pursuit of regional economic cooperation through the signing of free trade agreements, the fragmentation of economic structures among the region’s countries persists. Differences in political systems, ranging from democracy to authoritarianism, and disagreements over how to approach human rights issues, coupled with the ongoing US-China conflict, have also exposed the problem of regional fragmentation. These factors have come to constrain regional stability and integration, making it difficult for ASEAN to effectively engage with external actors, and they have also contributed to internal divisions. Such limitations must be overcome if Southeast Asia’s regionalism, led by ASEAN, is to advance to a higher level.

Kyong Jun CHOI, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Konkuk University.
Email: kjpol@konkuk.ac.kr

Fig. 1 (above): Map showing the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). (Figure courtesy of [Wikipedia Commons](#) user Hariboneagle927, public domain)