

# Chapter 16

## Everyday Political Knowledge and the Construction of Regional Identity: The East Asian Experience

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**Abstract** East Asian is at the crossroads of economic realignments. Exponential growth of cross-border mobility of goods and capital since the 1990s has been accompanied by booming economic multilateralism, exemplified by the spurring number of free trade agreements and regional economic and financial architectures. Regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states have sought to promote a regional identity through successive community building endeavors. This, however, has failed to gain traction. In large part, advances in economic integration are shadowed by economic pragmatism that defines the relationality between the region's economies. This manifests in the persistence of interstate power plays and the lack of institutional deepening at the regional level. Moreover, the extant identity-building initiatives backed by the regional groups originally top-down, detaching from civil society groups would be critical to building up a regional identity. As such, the national recognitions persist even though the region has experienced dramatic economic transformations on every front.

**Keywords** Political knowledge • East Asia • ASEAN • Regionalism • Regional identity

### 16.1 Introduction

While the history of East Asian regionalism can be traced back to the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, how such a geo-economic process has been accompanied by the emergence of an everyday political knowledge has largely been missing from the literature. By 'everyday political knowledge,' this chapter refers to the norms, values, and expectations of political

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'others.' It is acquired through everyday political interaction and facilitates cooperation. Everyday political knowledge creates a geography of identity in that it creates a new relationality between members who share a common set of political languages and expectations.

How everyday political knowledge has been developed amidst the historical-political trajectory of the integration of East Asia is the focus of this chapter. East Asia is at the crossroads of an economic realignment. In the last two dozen years, the established regional political economic order, crafted by the USA and perpetuated by the region's states authorities in the Cold War era, has been challenged. Since the 1990s, economic reforms and the opening of China and other regional economies have unleashed exponential growth in cross-border mobility of goods and capital. This has also been accompanied by a booming economic multilateralism—exemplified by the number of free trade agreements and regional economic architectures like the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organization. Simultaneously, the region has witnessed identity-building endeavors championed by regional organizations and governments, notably the efforts led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states.

I argue that economic pragmatism has contributed to the emergence of a set of everyday political knowledge which in turn has laid the foundation for various endeavors to build East Asia regional identity. Because of the primacy of such everyday political knowledge, although economic integration has prompted successive identity-building initiatives, there is still a long way to go before an East Asia-wide identity can be formed and consolidated. In large part, power plays have persisted among the region's economies as they have reaped the gains from economic integration. This has been compounded by surging nationalist sentiments in key powers like China and Japan and a lack of institutional depth and inclusiveness to the regional institutional platforms. As a result, instead of a strengthening East Asian regional identity, national identities and recognitions continue to loom large in the region.

First is a brief review of the key trends in the regional economy during the Cold War era. This provides a context to understand the turn toward economic multilateralism and financial regionalism from the 1990s onward. An analysis of the regional identity and community building endeavors of regional groups and governments follows. Finally, a critical examination of the prospects of these elite-driven initiatives is given together with a discussion of the implications of the connections between everyday political knowledge and the formation of a geography of identity.

## **16.2 The Regional Economy in the Cold War**

An account of economic integration of East Asia is incomplete without reference to Japan and the underlying preferential treatment by the USA during the Cold War era. This not only made possible the emergence of post-war Japan as the world's

economic powerhouse; it also transformed the development of the entire region from the 1990s onward.

The San Francisco system, codified in the treaty process of 1950–1951 between the USA and its Pacific allies, created a system of trade bilateralism that was enmeshed with the hub-and-spoke security arrangements across the Pacific Rim (Calder 2004). In order to ensure that Japan would recover economically after the war, Japan was given precedence in the regional economy—evidenced mainly by the preferential treatment it enjoyed when exporting to the US market. This fundamentally shifted the economic pattern of the region from one with extensive intra-regional trade before the war to one with asymmetrical trade interdependence with the US economy from the 1950s onward. The USA not only provided the security guarantee to Japan in the form of heavy military presence on its soil; it also constituted the leading export market for Japan's manufactured goods.

As Japan became the leading driver of regional economic takeoff, other Asian states benefited from the export-oriented industrialization growth of Japan. Through extensive networks of trading firms and subsidiaries, Japan drove much of its capital investment to other Asian economies as its manufacturing sector at home matured with better technology and rising labor costs. This prompted the relocation of production activities offshore to the then Newly Industrializing Economies (NIE), which included Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, bringing massive investment and technologies to bear in a regional process of catch-up industrialization. As these economies grew, another round of 'succession' followed, with capital and technologies spreading to less developed ASEAN states, like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. This pattern of development, with Japan and the NIEs at the head of a hierarchy of regional production, has been described as the 'flying geese' model—with Japan being the leading goose guiding the development of the NIEs and others in turn (Kaur 2014).

On the domestic front, the NIE governments also played critical roles in enabling the post-war economic takeoff. They were characterized by a meritocratic and coherent bureaucracy, of which members were linked closely with each other through informal networks. This maintained a high level of autonomy from the short-term interests of the private sector while embedding the bureaucracy in the market context (Evans 1992, p. 153). Such 'embedded autonomy' was crucial to soliciting cooperation from private firms and shifting the economies to a more outward-looking path while at the same time preventing the states from becoming the captives of private interests (Evans 1992, 1995). This was best manifested in some of the economic decision-making bodies of the NIE group that were largely insulated from political and economic pressure groups – like the Ministry of International Trade and Industry of Japan and the Economic Planning Board in Korea.

Beyond these regional and national political bases of growth, regional economic connectedness was contributed to by the ethnic Chinese network that introduced an enormous amount of trade and investment to the region. Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in particular invested substantially in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and the domestic economies. When China initiated the economic reforms of

the late 1970s, Taiwan and Hong Kong companies became major sources of FDI in China – bringing in capital and technology and supporting the employment of hundreds of thousands in coastal cities (Olds and Yeung 1999; Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996).

These market players operated alongside one another, forming an interweaving web of trade, production, and investment within and without the region, and transformed the entire political economic terrain of East Asia – laying the base for the multilateral endeavors that emerged in the post-Cold War era.

### 16.3 Booming Economic Multilateralism

As the Cold War ended and China opened wide for investment and integrated with the global economy in the 1990s, the whole of East Asia experienced dramatic growth. China recorded double-digit growth rates for eight consecutive years in the decade, surpassing Japan as the world's second largest economy in 2011. Other economies remained strong thanks to the seemingly endless inflows of capital investment and export demands. This was best evidenced by the volume of intra-regional trade. Although growing at a slower pace than inter-regional trade flows (i.e., between East Asia to North America or Europe), the growth was faster than similar metrics showed among NAFTA states (Canada, the USA, and Mexico) and European Union members.

Intra-ASEAN trade as a percentage of the total of international trade went up from 17.0 to 24.6 % between 1990 and 2012. In the same period, trade shares increased from 28.6 to 38.0 % between ASEAN, China, Japan, and South Korea. On a global scale, Asia's contribution to global trade was significant. In 2012, the region made US\$5,240 of exports and US\$4,839 billion of imports. This made up for around one-third of the global trade in goods and services, more than the USA and the EU alone (Asia Regional Integration Center *n.d.*). In terms of FDI inflows, from the mid-1980s Asia was an attractive destination for foreign capital. Region-wide the figure jumped exponentially from less than US\$10 billion to over US\$219 billion in 2013—nearly a quarter of global total FDI inflows. But no country could match China and Hong Kong as the top FDI destination. They accounted for more than 12 % of the global total in 2012. Increasingly, the region was also becoming an 'exporter' of capital. It exported more than US\$293 billion of outbound FDI in 2013, up from around US\$120 billion in 2006 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2013, 2014).

The extensive regional economic relations, especially the dense trade and investment ties, were driven both by market forces and state actors. Besides the 'spaghetti bowl' of free trade agreements (FTAs) contracted between governments, regional organizations like APEC were founded to promote trade and investment liberalization and capital mobility.

As the threat of superpower rivalry receded in the late 1980s, the region's leaders recognized the increasing importance of economic affairs to maintain their long-

term competitiveness. In January 1989, Australian Prime Minister Hawke suggested a meeting of Asia-Pacific states to discuss the future economic relations in the region. This found support from leaders of ASEAN-6 (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand), New Zealand, the USA, Canada, Japan, and South Korea. They convened the inaugural ministerial meeting in Canberra and agreed to establish the APEC as a platform for regional economic integration.

In APEC's third ministerial meeting in 1991, 15 economies, including China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, released the Seoul Declaration, which delineated the group's mandates, structure, and operation. APEC was formed to 'sustain the growth and development of the region' and 'strengthen the open multilateral trading system in the interest of Asia-Pacific and all other economies [through reducing] barriers to trade in goods and services and investment among participants in a manner consistent with GATT principles' (Ravenhill 2001, pp. 1–2). This was followed by the 1994 APEC Economic Leaders' Declaration of Common Resolve, also known as the Bogor Declaration, which spelt out a specific timeframe for achieving regional trade liberalization. Industrialized economies were slated to achieve the goal of free trade and investment by 2010 and developing economies were given another decade to attain the goals. Since 2006, APEC has also backed the idea of a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) that would significantly expand the scope and depth of previous commitments.

Notwithstanding APEC's steering role in driving regional economic integration, it has been under constant challenge. The early days saw competing regionalist outlooks between founding members. While Australia pushed for a more inclusive platform, Malaysia preferred to keep the group largely exclusively confined to East Asian economies and attempted to sidetrack APEC with a proposed East Asian Economic Caucus that would exclude all Western powers. With strong opposition from Japan and the US, the idea was discredited and APEC was brought a higher political standing after the first APEC Economic Leader's Meeting was convened in 1993 (Krauss 2000). APEC grew and, as of the time of writing, has 21 member economies along the Pacific Rim, which together represent 40 % of the global population and 54 % of the world's GDP.

In addition to its expansive membership, and like other regional groups such as ASEAN, APEC has adhered to a soft approach of institutional development. It was deliberately structured to be short of the formal and institutionalized qualities common in Europe-wide institutions. These included the emphases on consensus building and dialogue-based interactions and an aversion to binding decisions that might impose obligations on its members. Further, APEC was only administered by a small secretariat in Singapore, with most of its agenda and operations carried out by member states (Ravenhill 2001).

This deprived APEC of the 'institutional teeth' to ensure compliance and implementation. APEC has been faulted for failing to deliver its ambitious trade and investment liberalizations promises. The diversity of member economies also complicated consensus building, meaning what measures were agreed and made public often reflected a lowest common denominator. Many member economies were not fully committed to meeting the goals of the Bogor Declaration and were driven by

domestic policy priorities like industry competitiveness at home and abroad. As a result, despite its inclusiveness of regional economies, there has recently been a sense of diminishing relevance, as the organization faces challenges and competition from other regional groups that seek to promote economic integration at a smaller scale (Ravenhill 2001).

An important facet of such development featured the proliferation of FTAs between economies. These bilateral or plurilateral (i.e., between a limited number of parties) agreements did not necessitate involving all regional economies on platforms like APEC. As a result, they were well-received by leaders with limited economic goals in mind and found economic complementarities with other economies. In 1990, there were very few FTAs among East Asian economies. By 2004, 15 had been initiated and 6 concluded; in 2008, 19 had been initiated and 15 concluded. Across the Pacific Rim, the growth of FTAs was even more remarkable, with 68 FTA negotiations initiated and 31 concluded in 2004 and 86 proposals negotiated and 60 concluded in 2008. The cross-cutting network of FTAs, often with overlapping memberships, further connected the Asian economies with their Western counterparts like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA.

In fact, the initial attempts at FTA building in the 1990s were largely confined to North America and selected economies in East Asia. These included the Mexico-Japan and Mexico-Singapore FTAs. Within East Asia, ASEAN took the lead in building FTA connections within Southeast Asia and with neighboring economies from the 1990s onward as a concrete measure to foster intra-ASEAN economic cooperation and maintain regional competitiveness (Nesadurai 2003; Stubb 2000). In 1992, ASEAN-6 states formed the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) that reduced tariffs to between 0 and 5 % by 2002 and entirely phased out all trade barriers by 2010. The less developed nations of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV), who joined ASEAN in the 1990s, were brought into the agreement and given the leeway to achieve the AFTA goals by 2015. These efforts paved the way for the Bali Concord of 2003, in which ASEAN states strived to construct an ASEAN Economic Community with a single market and production base for Southeast Asia by 2020, alongside an ASEAN Security and Socio-Cultural Community (Nesadurai 2003). From the 2000s onward, ASEAN also extended its outreach to China, Japan, South Korea, and India and concluded several FTAs, including the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (signed in 2008 April), the ASEAN-Korea FTA, and the ASEAN-China FTA (in effect since 2010 January). These extensive connections resulted in what some analysts have called a 'spaghetti bowl' of FTAs in the region (Baldwin 2008). Between 2010 and the time of writing, there were 170 bilateral and 51 plurilateral treaties in various stages of negotiation.

Among these agreements, the ASEAN-China FTA was especially notable and took 8 years of negotiations to conclude from its inception in 2002. Its conclusion not only marked the success of ASEAN in creating the world's largest free trade zone in population terms; it also signified an important turn by the Chinese authorities who began to attend to foreign economic interests through FTA building. By making concessions to smaller ASEAN economies—like reducing tariffs on

domestically important sectors like agriculture—China was able to ensure that negotiations proceeded as smoothly as possible and win the reputation and credibility of a rising power in the region (Chin and Stubb 2011). Tariffs between the ASEAN states and China were reduced gradually in the early stages of implementation and were followed by investment facilitation arrangements. And, just as with AFTA, schedules for market openings were made flexible for each ASEAN state in their trade with China. This resulted in significant increases of trade volume—from US\$113 billion to US\$350 billion between 2005 and 2013—making the region the third largest trading zone behind the European Union (EU) and NAFTA states.

Apart from the economic gains, China also emerged as an active player in building a regional and global FTA network. As of 2014, it had 29 FTAs in various stages of negotiation, outranked only by Singapore and South Korea. After 2011, it has also backed the East Asia-wide Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) involving only the ASEAN+3 states, Australia, India, and New Zealand. This potentially sets it at odds with the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative in which China has not signaled an intent to participate. The competition for members among different FTA proposals was even more evident in the 2014 Beijing APEC Summit, where China pushed for accelerating the FTAAP process in order to counteract the US TPP.

In addition to this politics behind FTA negotiations and regional institutions like APEC and ASEAN, the region's economic integration was also contributed to by several sub-regional economic networks and agreements. Often they appeared as 'clusters' within the larger region, forming growth triangles across neighboring economies, and were situated within the border regional framework. These included the Greater Mekong Subregion and the overland trade corridor between Guangxi/Yunnan and north Vietnam/Hanoi, both sponsored by ASEAN and China as integral parts of the regional economic network.

## 16.4 Financial Regionalism at the Century's Turn

Aside from the extensive trade and networks of FTAs, East Asia witnessed a breakthrough in regional financial integration from the late 1990s. A large part, however, came into existence with the traumatic lessons of the Asian financial crisis that brought havoc to many economies (Krueger 2014). Early efforts, like the Japanese proposal to create an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) in 1997, met strong resistance from the USA, who were concerned about its challenge to US predominance and that it would enable a sidestepping of the rescue efforts of the International Monetary Fund afforded to crisis-afflicted economies. The Chinese officials also suspected that Japan was seeking regional financial dominance through crafting its own institution (Lipsy 2003). While the precocious AMF proposal was shelved, it provided some basis to the deliberations of post-crisis regional financial cooperation.

Two years after the crisis started, the leaders of ASEAN states China, Japan, and South Korea, the ASEAN+3 states as they would be called, met at the Manila

Summit of November 1999. In the Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation, the leaders agreed to enhance 'self-help and support mechanisms in East Asia' in economic, financial, and monetary areas by consolidating the ASEAN+3 framework.

One immediate measure addressed the liquidity problems that had resulted in extensive capital flight and financial volatility during the crisis. Finance ministers from ASEAN+3 states met in May 2000 and agreed to create the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), a regional network of bilateral swap agreements (BSA). Through contributions made by ASEAN+3 states, the CMI would provide short-term capital (less than 90 days) to economies experiencing shortfalls as a result of currency speculation and balance-of-payment problems. To foster local financial market development, they also introduced the Asian Bond Markets Initiative (ABMI) in 2003, which encouraged companies to borrow money in the local markets. The Executives' Meeting of East Asia-Pacific Central Banks (EMEAP), the central bankers' group, founded a similar Asian Bond Fund to complement the ABMI. Moreover, a policy coordination mechanism, ASEAN Surveillance Process, was put in place, so that states might share timely market and policy information and build up concerted responses in the event of another crisis. Discussion about a regional currency and forms of monetary cooperation also emerged, led by think tanks and the Asian Development Bank Institute (Grimes 2014).

All of this proved critical to ensuring regional financial stability during the 2008 global financial crisis. The CMI, for example, served as an important source of capital supports to affected economies. Japan expanded the amount of BSA with South Korea from US\$3 billion to US\$20 billion; similarly, China signed with US\$28 billion BSA with South Korea in December 2008, supplementing the previous agreement with access to 4 billion yuan for up to 3 years.

Shortly after the crisis, ASEAN+3 states agreed to 'multilateralize' the CMI with a pool of funds under a single regional agreement. Instead of multiple swap arrangements between two parties, a multilateral CMI would truly offer a pool of funds available to any contracting parties. The resulting Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization Agreement (CMIM) was concluded in December 2009 and came into effect in March 2010. The 15th ASEAN+3 finance ministers meeting in 2012 doubled the fund to US\$240 billion, making it one of the largest multilateral currency swaps in the world.

## **16.5 Elites' Quests for a Regional Identity in the 1990s**

The remarkable advances in regional economic and financial integration and their associated institutional development heightened hopes among East Asian leaders that the region was set to mirror the European experience of the birth of a pan-European identity which followed the expanding scope of economic integration among European economies. A quest for such a regional identity harkens back to the 1960s, when the founding ASEAN states sought to transform the region into a zone of peace and prosperity during the peak of the confrontation between



superpowers in the region. The 'long peace' the region subsequently experienced arguably attests to their success and, as a result, the conclusion of the Cold War has brought a shared sense of euphoria among the region's elites.

A prominent example of such was the idea that the Pacific Century was in the making – with the region, especially East Asian states, due to become the leading engine of global economic growth. This sentiment was marked by the fanfare given to the 'East Asian miracle,' a term made popular by a 1993 World Bank report (World Bank 1993). This stirred extensive debate about the distinctive sources that had driven the region's high-speed economic growth for decades. States like Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, and Taiwan stood out as the poster children of economic growth – in defiance of the economic orthodoxy prescribed by Western economists and financial institutions for developing economies. One school of thought at the time argued that the region's unique cultural and social contexts, including so-called 'Asian values,' were what underlay the spectacular growth. Specifically, the 'Asian values' stressed notions of collectivism (which places community's interests and the social and economic well-being of groups ahead of individual freedoms and rights), respect for authority, and the overarching quest for a harmonious, stable social order and harmony.

This appealed to some Asian ruling elites, who were eager to define themselves differently from the West and help legitimize their somewhat illiberal practices at home. Former Prime Ministers Lee Kwan-Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia both ascribed Asian values to the success of East Asian economy and well-maintained social orders. Their defense of 'Asian values' was instrumental to countering Western critics of the region's lag in implementing political reforms along the lines of liberal democratic traditions and institutions, which were grossly incompatible with the region in their view. The rhetoric helped promote political unity between the region's authoritarian regimes, large and small, and was considered a cohesive force for regional integration. Mahathir's proposal for an East Asian Economic Caucus, for example, was advanced in the early 1990s as an Asian-only bloc in reaction to the inclusive and open economic regional architecture of APEC discussed earlier. Even though Mahathir had high hopes that Japan might assume a leading role in his initiative, because it was opposed by Western powers, Japan reacted coolly and the idea never took off in the 1990s.

Other than the political complications of crafting an exclusive body, the intellectual basis of 'Asian values' was also untenable. Political economy specialists challenged the idea of a cultural foundation of Asian growth, contending that it simply provides a loose account and ignores the many inherently complex factors at work, including strong bureaucracies and the business-government relations underlying the developmental states (Evans 1995; Wade 2004). Critics also pointed out that the region's diversity could not be overlooked. The sheer historical and cultural differences between states implied that the substance of 'Asian values' was inherently arbitrary, was based on selective and partial interpretations of the regions' history, and had been manipulated by its advocates' with very pragmatic political motivations to keep the 'imagined community of developmental dictatorships' alive (Subramaniam 2000; Thompson 2004). Indeed, it did not take too long for the

'Asian values' rhetoric to lose sway. The Asian financial crisis brutally exposed the shaky foundations of the economic miracle and many of the institutional deficits of the regimes. Their haphazard responses also invited Western pressure to reform, making room for alternative rhetoric like 'good governance' in the region (MacIntyre et al. 2008; Thompson 2004).

## 16.6 From the ASEAN Community to East Asian Community

Notwithstanding the loss of legitimacy and currency to 'Asian values' after the financial crisis wrecked the region in the late 1990s, efforts to define the region and impart it with a distinctive identity were reinvigorated in the post-crisis context (Thompson 2004). ASEAN took up that mission and assimilated ingredients of the previous discussion into its region-building projects that would eventually extend beyond Southeast Asia.

Ruling elites and policymakers began to frequently speak of the 'Asia-Pacific Way,' the 'ASEAN Way,' or the 'ASEAN Norm,' all of which were built on the assumption that certain values, norms, or practices are characteristic to East Asia (or Asia-Pacific) (Archaya 1997; Smith and Jones 1997). When former Indonesian Vice-President, Jusuf Kalla, for example, related the idea of 'East Asian values' to the proposed East Asian Free Trade Agreement and East Asia Community, it was still a loose idea but gained much political attention following the first East Asia Summit of the ASEAN+3 states and other regional powers in December 2005. It echoed the sentiment of analysts like Wu Jianmin (2005), President of China Foreign Affairs University, who wrote that 'the East Asian cooperation has lasted for years on, and its identity is coming into being. There appear to be common values in the developing process of the cooperation among the East Asian nations.' In his view, the regional 'common values' included consultation, consensus, cooperation and comfort level, closeness, and openness.

This line of reasoning fell squarely within the identity and constructivist perspective of international relations, which provided much of the intellectual justification for policymakers' quests for a regional identity. Simply put, it conceived the process of regional community building to be not dissimilar from socialization in schooling contexts. As states interacted economically through trade and politically through regional platforms, some shared perceptions and understandings of issues, and a sense of 'togetherness' and 'self-other distinction' would gradually emerge (Tereda 2003). This would help define states as parts of a group different from the wider world. With repeated interactions, a higher level of economic and social integration would result, which would not only improve relationships between states but also contribute to long-term and enduring expectations of peace and stability within the group.

For example, Acharya (1997, 2013, 2014) argues that the Javanese/Malay community traditions influenced the way the regional organization was formed, designed, and operated in Southeast Asia and that these, in turn, shaped the trajectory of East Asian institutional development. In particular, the region (and its elites) displayed a strong preference to informality, stuck to consensus-building/seeking practices in decision making, and was disinclined to accept the level of institutionalization and legalization associated with the European experience—the so-called ASEAN Way. This suggests that ASEAN and its offspring, like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the regional security dialogue platform spearheaded by ASEAN in 1994, ASEAN+3, and East Asian Summit have come to share a set of common features, with designs and practices underpinned by the ASEAN norms and values (ibid; Nabers 2003; Terada 2003). Haccke (2003) also traces how the ASEAN ‘diplomatic and security culture’ significantly shaped the ways member states managed their relations and contributed to the ‘long peace’ or the absence of interstate war experienced by its members since ASEAN’s creation. Katsumata (2006) similarly contends that ASEAN norms have subtly shaped the behavior of bigger powers, most importantly the USA and China, in the region. In his view, the ARF is in effect a ‘norm brewery’ for the entire Asia-Pacific. Some, like Caballero-Anthony (2005), have even gone so far as to argue that they had taken root in East Asian societies, forming the normative foundation of common identity and community building.

These promising portrayals of the region’s future, however, have met challenges from both the conceptual and empirical fronts. Researchers with a focus on national interests and power plays have countered what they see as the unduly optimistic assessment of the role of ASEAN platforms in regional norm and identity building. In the same vein as the early analyses of Leifer (1996), who unequivocally saw the creation of ARF by small Southeast Asian states motivated exclusively by self-survival and having their voices heard by the great powers, Kawasaki (2006) has pointed to the self-serving nature of the institution building endeavor and that the various regional platforms had been created by ASEAN in order to ensure that the bigger powers would be committed to maintaining regional peace and stability. Heller (2005) saw a convergence of interests among the external big powers as the fundamental cause for the apparent success of ASEAN regional platforms, whereas Terada (2006) has described the continuing competition between China and Japan in the ASEAN+3—each trying to project its influence and shape the agenda and course of regional platforms in its own favor.

Besides the competing rivalrous interpretations that appear to be a matter of theoretical controversy, the real world track record of community building an East Asian identity has also raised skepticism as to the relevance of ASEAN-led institutions and the possible end states of their regionalist quests. In large part, the emphasis on ASEAN norms, especially the seemingly inviolable noninterference doctrine, enabled the ruling elites to keep the institutional status quo intact and eased pressure on some states with regard to politically sensitive issues like human rights (Hund 2002). The insistence on consensus decision making also rendered the much-needed cooperation on transboundary issues ineffective and precluded the meaningful

participation of civil society groups in regional affairs. This was most evident in the regional responses to periodic regional hazes and long-range air pollution, when affected states like Singapore often could not come to terms with Indonesia regarding enforcement, let-alone sanction, and mechanisms; local communities also had very limited inputs into the regional environmental governance (Elliott 2012; Narine 2002).

Similarly, despite the extensive outreach of the much-touted ARF, its seemingly perfect scorecard in managing security challenges belied the many instances in which challenges were ‘bypassed’ to other diplomatic venues or deliberately frozen and delayed. The former included the North Korean nuclear crisis and the latter included the maritime territorial disputes over islands in the South China Sea involving China and multiple ASEAN claimants (Fravel 2008). In an ostensible effort to prevent the divisive issue from compromising the political unity of ASEAN states and their ties with China, the ARF and ASEAN+3 refrained from taking up any role in dispute resolution between claimants other than issuing repeated calls for peaceful resolution of the disputes, leaving options open for claimants to diffuse the tension through bilateral channels or to seek support from Western powers.

While such ‘evasive’ approaches ensured the apparent cohesion of Asian regional institutions, the extent they drove the region toward a mature community is increasingly questioned. Indeed, as ASEAN avoided controversial issues for the sake of adhering to its norms and values, it ran the risk of losing relevance in important regional matters and creating fault lines among member states. Jones (2008) astutely observed that the aversion of Asia regional platforms to take bold and concrete actions in political security affairs, including an explicit commitment to the development of rule governance between and within states, would only draw non-democratic ASEAN states closer to the political embrace of China and alienate Japan and other democracies.

Already such tension had surfaced between the ASEAN+3 and East Asia Summit within their articulations of the roadmaps of future regional integration. China, Malaysia, and less developed ASEAN states have tended to favor ASEAN+3 to assume the leading role, whereas Japan, Singapore, Thailand, and Western powers that are involved only in the summit process expect otherwise. This ironically undermines the identity-building efforts initiated by ASEAN as divergent perceptions of the regional future take root.

## **16.7 Enduring Challenges of Regional Identity and Community Building**

In addition to the power play and superficial successes of ASEAN platforms earlier examined, its regional identity and building projects suffered from the inherent organizational deficits that led to a failure to address the social pressure, inputs, and persistence of nationalist sentiments in the region.

First and foremost, the advances in regional community building in East Asia were introduced top-down by the ruling elites. In large part they remained state-driven initiatives with government officials setting the agendas and defining the terms of integration, a critical constraint hampering integration among societies (Caballero-Anthony 2014). Indeed, despite the optimism of some analysts that the diffusion of information and telecommunication technologies would help foster a stronger regional identity and bring closer the regional sociocultural community envisioned by ASEAN (Lallana 2012), states like China and Singapore formed strong partnerships with media conglomerates for mediating and filtering information; others also stepped up their controls over mass media, while online social spaces proliferated (Atkins 2003; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). Even the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community and ASEAN People's Forum (APF), the 'people-oriented' ventures of ASEAN, were led by the regional body and complicated by the surges of local nationalist sentiments together with the deficit in legitimacy and a lack of capacity to respond to pressures from the nations' societies.

As previously noted, the adherence to a sovereign non-intervention doctrine precluded the possibility of prying open the ASEAN platforms and engaging civil society organizations and their involvement in regional social cultural affairs. Recent attempts to bring the activists and NGOs under the ASEAN platform through the APF yielded mixed outcomes. Other than the dialogue and networking opportunities with their counterparts and officials, they were neither able to put forward any new agenda nor bring about any substantive changes in the ASEAN system. In fact, some member states were hesitant to go beyond the state-centered institutions and tended to shun activists' involvements as they were not deemed to be acting in the best interest of the region (Nesadurai 2012). Their calls for human rights protections, for example, repeatedly irritated Myanmar and were consequently downplayed. ASEAN continued to tolerate human right violations in some of its members despite the organization's apparent commitments and promulgation of the ASEAN Charter of 2007, which strove to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms and enhance good governance (Dosch 2008). As Narine (2012) and Davis (2013) have argued, such an 'action gap' simply reflected the organization's efforts to resuscitate its international reputation and underlay its resistance to bringing about value change in the interest of its people.

On the other hand, growing economic interconnectedness did not do away with nationalist sentiments. National economic growth fueled 'techno-nationalism' in Japan and China; the latter even manipulated a sense of patriotism and national pride within China to consolidate its reign at home and advance its foreign policy interests (Segal 2005; Weiss 2014). The expanding overseas reach of Korean popular culture also spurred the 'pop nationalism' among the nation's younger generation (Joo 2011). Even among the most vocal protagonists of regional integration, like Malaysia and Indonesia, rhetoric of common regional identity does very little to dilute the national and ethnicity-based political identities forged by regimes over decades (Reid 2010). Moreover, the two leading powers, China and Japan, jostled in the cultural sphere, flexing their soft power by exporting their cultural goods and

industries in order to shape the ideational terrain and win the hearts and minds of the region's public (Heng 2010; Katsumata 2012; Otmazgin 2008).

The failure to engage civil society actors in the ASEAN platforms, the anchor of most regionalist projects in East Asia, and the contesting ideational terrain divided by national tensions does not portend well for a more inclusive and participatory form of wider regionalism (Collins 2014; Nesadurai 2012). With the lack of similar initiatives from other regional bodies like APEC, the status quo is simply perpetuated. Discourses about regional identities remain integral to the elites' rhetoric, while nationalist sentiments stay strong among the public and national authorities.

## 16.8 Conclusion

To conclude, it has been argued that economic pragmatism has become an everyday political knowledge in facilitating the community building of East Asia. I have suggested that the region's rapid economic takeoff since WWII has dramatically transformed the fates of every man and woman in the region. The forces of economic globalization—whether in the form of export-oriented growth, multinational production, and capital investment—had governments of the whole East Asia and Asia-Pacific mindful of the importance of development at home. The post-Cold War years saw booming multilateralism in regional trade and finance that drew the regional economies closer than ever. This happened alongside with the integration of China into the regional and global economy.

Together with the community building initiatives of regional groups like ASEAN, these economic dynamics appear to have made East Asia a fertile soil for the emergence of a regional identity. Yet, as the foregoing discussion demonstrates, much of reality has defied their expectations. First, integration on the economic front has not been accompanied by a corresponding institutional development at the regional level that might facilitate the construction of an East Asia-based identity. The regional platforms driving the progress lack the much-needed capacities to ensure compliance from member economies and keep track of the pace of integration the multilateral groups have promised. While such deficit might be a political expediency to hold members together, this has ironically meant that national interests and considerations have continued to prevail even in face of the regional identity-building initiatives.

Second, as these ventures have been initiated and backed by the regional groups and governments, invariably they have become detached from the civil society groups whose involvements might have been critical to building up a regional identity recognized by the region's public and not simply remaining the rhetoric of the region's elites. Finally, there was a surging nationalist sentiment mobilized to consolidate the respective political regimes of East Asia even as the region's very regimes were buoyed by the economic forces at play.

Hence East Asia remains a perennial puzzle—while open regionalism has opened up the space of the economic terrain, the same resurgence in consumer forces has

also made its citizens increasingly more demanding and often given to comparing one developed state with another. Governments unable to live up to the expectations of this demanding citizenry more often than not resort to nationalism to keep the public mobilized and agitated. Taken together with the shallow regional mechanisms and the national interest calculus of the region's decision makers, these factors countervail the identity-building initiatives the elites have promoted and suggest a rather gloomy outlook for an East Asia-wide identity in the future.

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