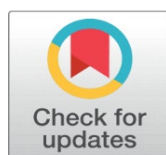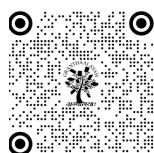# INFLUENCE OF HISTORY AND CULTURE ON REGIONALISM: A CASE STUDY OF ASEAN

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ABSTRACT

In the modern age, regionalism represents an important aspect of global politics, marked by the establishment and expansion of regional organizations that has reconstituted international relations. Regional cooperative frameworks have especially gained momentum in the post-Cold War era; that is a response to globalization, shift in the balance of power, and regional security concerns (Fawcett & Hurrell, 1995). These institutions-from the supranational to the local-became platforms of economic cooperation, political dialogue, and security collaboration-the building blocks of stability and development in the regions of the countries involved.

Keywords: Culture, Regionalism, Global Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern age, regionalism represents an important aspect of global politics, marked by the establishment and expansion of regional organizations that has reconstituted international relations. Regional cooperative frameworks have especially gained momentum in the post-Cold War era; that is a response to globalization, shift in the balance of power, and regional security concerns (Fawcett & Hurrell, 1995). These institutions-from the supranational to the local-became platforms of economic cooperation, political dialogue, and security collaboration-the building blocks of stability and development in the regions of the countries involved.

Regionalism, however, is not a monolithic phenomenon because it differs from place to place. This difference is originally delineated and defined through different historical, cultural, and political contexts. The regionalisms thus take on distinct features grounded within the realities of particular regions. Regionalism, therefore, sometimes suffers from theories and models derived from the European experience, especially the European Union (EU). These Eurocentric perspectives tend to ignore and homogenize diversity and complexity in regionalism as it occurs in non-Western regions, thus requiring a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to the study of regional cooperation and integration (Beeson, 2007).

Therefore, in this article various historical and cultural contexts that have shaped the trajectory in the evolution of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are explored. Alongside explanation of peculiar historical and cultural conditions that have shaped ASEAN, this article challenges the Eurocentric bias of other integration that have been specifically developed in the context of European Union and, therefore, argues for the analysis of different historical and cultural scenario in the study of regionalism. (Acharya, 2012; Narine, 2002)

The main argument of paper is that evolution of ASEAN regionalism cannot be comprehensively understood without analyzing the historical and cultural conditions that makes it different from other regional organisations, specifically European regionalism. By involving contextual understanding of historical and cultural factors this article contributes to broader understanding of regionalism that is bypasses the limitation of Eurocentric theoretical models and provides for different ways of establishment and practice of regionalism across the world. (Acharya, 2001).

2. THEORIES OF REGIONALISM

There are variety of theories that have been developed that explains the emergence and evolution of the regional organisations in the international relations. For explanation of European integration, Neofunctionalism, developed by Haas, emphasizes the role of economic integration causing political integration ultimately resulting in Supranational Institutions (Haas, 1961). To put it in other words Neofunctionalism explains integration as a phenomenon that starts with sectoral economic cooperation that ultimately leads to political cooperation due to spillover effects.

Whereas on the other hand realism focuses on the power balancing while explaining regionalism. For them regionalism is an outcome of anarchic nature of international system where state in order to gain security cooperate in regional frameworks (Walt, 1987). Rather than focusing on regionalism as framework for deeper cooperation, realists emphasizes instrumental role of regionalism where it serves in power balancing and management of security threats.

Another important and different in approaching phenomena of regionalism is constructivism. Constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, identity and social constructs in shaping regional cooperation (Borzel, 2016). As compare to other their analyses provides insights beyond material factors in the establishment of regionalism. Shared beliefs and collective interests are more important factors for them in explanation of regionalism.

However theories mentioned above contributes and enriches the theoretical field of regionalism. But when these theoretical insights are applied to explain regionalism in non-western regionalism it is difficult for them to get rid of Eurocentric bias. Overemphasis on European integration's trajectory from economic to political regionalism leads to distorted understanding of regionalism that lies beyond Europe (Acharya, 2004). This article maintains that while theories mentioned above are important in understanding the insights of regionalism yet at the same time they must be flexible to account for the explanation of diverse historical and cultural context that influences the trajectories of regionalism in Southeast Asia.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ASEAN'S FORMATION

Understanding regionalism more comprehensively demands the inclusion of historical and cultural factors in its analysis. History plays an important part in influencing the trajectory of regionalism, as it is evident from analysis of regionalism all over the world. Similary, Cold War and factor of colonialism played a pivotal part that has shaped the trajectory of regionalism Southeast Asia and shaped the evolution of its political and economic structures in the region (Beeson, 2007). Cultural norms including shared values and social practices of the regionalism also affected the establishment and practice of regionalism in the region (Acharya, 2009).

As regionalism is not a homogenous entity and its structure differs all over the world, therefore, cultural and historical factors become inevitable for the understanding and analysis of regionalism. Thus this approach challenges the assumptions and universal applicability of EU-centric lenses in the study of regionalism (Fawcett, 2012). Thus historical and cultural factors that shape the trajectory of its evolution make it different from EU regionalism.

4. COLONIAL LEGACY AND POST-COLONIAL STATE FORMATION

Legacy of colonialism and various challenges of post colonial state formation in front of newly independent states of Southeast Asia prove to be a crucial factor that influences the ASEAN's approach to regionalism. Deep imprints that

the early colonial period had left on the political boundaries, economic structures, and national identities of the region continue to influence how the currents of regional cooperation flow (Acharya, 2001).

Imposition of artificial boundaries by colonial powers such as, Britain, France, Netherlands without consideration of ethnic, linguistic and cultural continuities led to the establishment of diverse and divided post-colonial state in the region. Significant challenges that decolonization process posed were nation building, ethnic and religious diversity management and preservation of newly gained statehood with nation-state building for political stability (Acharya, 2001). Consequently these challenges shaped the trajectory of regionalism as it shifted the focus of Southeast Asian states towards preservation of sovereignty and internal stability than deep regional integration.

Emergence of new national identity among post colonial Southeast Asian states led to the strong emphasis on principles of non-interference and respect for national independence as regionalism served as a tool to protect and preserve their sovereignty (Acharya, 2001). Therefore post colonial legacy influenced regionalism in ASEAN to a great extent and still continues to influence it, whereas, on the other hand regionalism in Western Europe was driven by a desire to bypass nationalism and for the establishment of a supranational polity.

5. COLD WAR DYNAMICS AND ASEAN'S CREATION

Southeast Asian region became an important strategic battleground during cold war between USA and USSR and this factor became an important catalyst for the establishment of ASEAN. Ideological rivalry between two superpowers and moreover geopolitical importance of Southeast Asia, generated a greater degree of insecurity among new independent and fragile post-colonial states of this region (Narine, 2002).

In the midst of looming security concerns, ASEAN was established in 1967 to tackle these security challenges by preventing the spread of communism and for the promotion of regional stability. Founding members- Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand sought to establish a regional framework that could enable them to tackle security challenges cohesively and at the same time preserve their newly found independence and sovereignty (Narine, 2002). Whereas Economic factors dominated the establishment of regionalism in Western Europe, ASEAN was a byproduct of political and security challenges that penetrated the region in 1960s that underscores specific endogenous drivers for its establishment.

ASEAN's emphasis on keeping a neutral position in cold war period reflects the influence of cold war politics on its early regional policies. In other words it is known as 'ASEAN Way' where member states focuses on informal diplomacy, consensus building in regional decisions and a strong adherence to principles of non-interference with respect to sovereignty of members (Acharya, 2001). 'ASEAN Way' style of regionalism has influenced and shaped the trajectory of ASEAN's evolution as a regional framework that in turn makes it different from other regional organisation where deeper forms of regional integration is sought.

6. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The problem to organize southeast Asia was accelerated by the cultural and religious heterogeneity, as it is rightly mentioned by the Charles Fisher that "for many, Southeast Asia is culturally so diverse and politically subdivided as to raise doubts in some minds as to whether it constitutes a meaningful entity in any positive sense at all" (Ba, 2009) The major reason behind this heterogeneity in the Southeast Asia was that, historically, this region has been subjected to the four different waves which Kishor Mahbubani (2015), aptly described as "Chinese, Hindu, Muslim and European waves" that diversified the region in the different social, economic and political spheres. One of the major influences on the diversity of Southeast Asian region was its colonial experience. "Different Imperial powers occupied States of Southeast Asia; therefore Southeast Asia was subjected to the different philosophies of governance and for that reason subjugation to the colonial powers produced a more diversified region resulting in a region with variety of ethnicities, languages, religions and tradition. Such kind of diversity involves both positive and negative connotations. On the positive dimension richness and variety of culture offers variety of innovations, perspectives and practices that offers flexibility and vibrancy in the region where on the negative side region riddled with such diversity makes it difficult to balance interest and identities of various communities in a single framework. (Reid, 2015).

Cultural diversity among member states shaped its approach to regionalism where it laid emphasis on consensus building, informality and flexibility whereas on the other side EU has a highly institutionalized structure with legally binding decision on members. ASEAN's approach has been developed in tandem with political, economic and cultural differences and accommodates all the member states in regional framework (Acharya, 2009). Despite having deep cultural divides, ASEAN works efficaciously and owes it efficacy to its unique approach to regionalism that, if not been followed, could otherwise result in fragmentation of the region.

Various regional initiatives like ASEAN socio-cultural community (ASCC) reflects ASEAN's efforts in fostering sense of community and a shared identity. ASCC through its various programs, like, cultural exchange, education and social development empowers and fosters sense of belongingness among people of Southeast Asia (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). Thus, ASEAN's policy of inclusiveness and respect for its member state's distinct cultural heritage has resulted in the recognition and celebration of its rich tapestry of cultural diversity.

7. THE "ASEAN WAY": NORMS AND VALUES

ASEAN approach to regionalism consists of unique set of principles and norms that are considered as 'ASEAN Way' approach to regionalism. 'ASEAN way' include the principles of non-interference in the sovereignty of members, decision making based on consensus building, and diplomatic interactions based on informality. All of the principles of 'ASEAN Way' reflects the cultural and historical heritage of the region (Mahbubani, 2015).

ASEAN'S acknowledgement of Principles of non-interference in its working has historical bearing that lies in the experiences of the colonial past and emphasis of its members on sovereignty and national independence in post colonial era. To avoid confrontation, members states preferred to find solutions of regional problems through dialogue and consensus. Policy of non-interference, despite having deep political, economical, cultural divides, has provided ASEAN to maintain unity and stability in the region.

Decision making based on the consensus building represents the other element of ASEAN Way approach. Consensus building reflects the culture of harmony and mutual respect among members. Unlike EU, all the decisions in the ASEAN are arrived at through the principles of consultation and consensus. However, some criticizes ASEAN's approach of consensus building for its indecisiveness and sluggishness but this approach has proved its instrumentality in preserving cohesion and keeping conflicts at bay.

Another key feature of ASEAN Way is its informal diplomacy which provides flexibility in the changing circumstances. Informality in diplomatic maneuvers consist of behind the scenes negotiations, personal relationship among leadership and this personal and informal diplomacy has resolved sensitive issues and fostered trust among member and their leaders (Mahbubani, 2015). However this diplomatic approach has also been criticized but it has been instrumental for ASEAN to deal with international events in rapidly evolving international relations.

8. INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Bangkok Declaration of 1967 which established ASEAN as regional organisation has provided a very loose structural arrangement for it thus reflecting cultural and historical legacies of the region. However, over time ASEAN has become more institutionalized and formalized that culminated in the adoption of ASEAN charter in 2008 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). Even though ASEAN has culminated into a more formalized and institutionalized structure still it does not mirror the approach followed by European Model. This differentiation can be depicted in ASEAN's more pragmatic, flexible approach to institutionalization that is based on non-binding agreements and its emphasis on cooperation in functional sectors (Acharya, 2012) whereas EU has pursued a programme of deeper political and economic integration. Therefore this approach place evolution of ASEAN regionalism according to its historical and cultural contexts.

Many exogenous factors, like Cold War and rise of China also shaped the trajectory of regional integration in the region. These exogenous factors have reinforced the historical legacy of ASEAN where ASEAN's strong emphasis on its autonomy and avoidance of alignment with major powers in turn shaped its policy on regional security and diplomacy (Narine, 2002). Consequently, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has been established for trust building among member states and different powers in the region through dialogue and at the same time maintaining ASEAN's central position in the affairs of the region (Ba, 2009).

Achievements and Challenges

Historical and cultural influence can also be traced through various achievements of ASEAN as a regional organisation. Establishment of ASEAN free trade Area (AFTA) in 1992 reflects the impact of historical and cultural specificities in the region. AFTA was established to reduce trade barriers among member and to promote intra-regional trade. Slow and gradual implementation of AFTA reflects the consensus based approach that represents avoidance of conflict and management of differences, a principle rooted in culture of ASEAN member states. Moreover it reflects the pragmatism of ASEAN member state to strengthen economic cooperation and to remain competitive economy in the era of globalisation. (Ba, 2009).

Another achievement can be cited as establishment of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. Mechanism for confidence building in ARF represents cultural context specific approach for the promotion peace and trust among members (Ba, 2009). However, ARF has also been criticized on the difficulty of arriving at consensus on the matters related to South China Sea disputes, which challenges the ASEAN's ability to remain united and coherent in the face of exogenous pressures (Mahbubani, 2015).

Various challenges has also tested the waters of ASEAN regional cooperation. Asian Financial Crisis that put forth the vulnerabilities of its economies and underscores the need for stronger regional mechanism for dealing with such crisis in future. The crisis led to the establishment of Chiang Mai Initiative that provides a framework for strengthening financial stability and preventing any such crises in future (Ba, 2009). Therefore developments like these outlines and explain that how economic volatility of 1997 led to the future institutionalization in the region.

9. CONCLUSION

The case study of ASEAN underscores the importance of involving historical and cultural context into the theoretical field of regionalism. Undoubtedly, theories such neofunctionalism and constructivism offers useful observations but at the same time they fail in taking cognizance of regional historical and cultural factors that influences the trajectory of regionalism in different parts of the world. Therefore, by studying ASEAN through its historical and cultural lenses, this article contends for an eclectic and context sensitive approach to study regional organisation. On the other hand this approach also highlights the inapplicability of EU-centric theories of regionalism and challenges their claims of universality. In this case study, historical experiences of colonialism, cold war and demands of state building in post colonial era as well as cultural norms of non-interference, consensus and informality have been central to the developments of regionalism in ASEAN. Therefore, recognizing and giving due analysis to these factors proves to be very important for comprehensive study of any given region. Thus this article imparts important lessons for regionalism outside western world or in other words regionalism in global south. Rather than simply following EU as a model of regionalism, there is a need to develop approaches that is more context oriented and thus can accommodate specific challenges and opportunities that different region faces. Another lesson can also be imparted for other regional organisations is that to study how ASEAN's approach of 'ASEAN Way' has allowed it to remain united and coherent while playing an important role in global and regional affairs.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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