A slow road to regionalism


Mark Beeson

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

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

However, not only is the nature of East Asia’s intra- and inter-regional economic integration different from western Europe, but so, too, are its political connections. The European Union famously pushed the process of intra-regional political integration much further than anywhere else. The recent failure of the Netherlands and France to ratify the EU constitution notwithstanding, the EU remains, rightly or wrongly, the benchmark against which other regional initiatives are measured.

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

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

A number of the chapters explicitly adopt a comparative approach and are thus, arguably, the most important. Richard Higgott is one of a handful of scholars to have undertaken compara- tive analysis of regional hegemons and, in so doing, provides an introduction to the theory and practice of regionalism that empha- sizes its relationship to globalisation. He also makes the point that East Asia is a ‘region of economic experimentation’ and that we should not expect it to replicate the European experience. The other major comparative chapter is provided by one of the editors – Doug- las Webber – and attempts to place regional integration in Europe and Asia in historical context. This sort of com- parative historical analysis of regional development is less common than we might like and thus all the more valua- ble. Webber’s principal conclusion is that the conditions that underpinned Europe’s uniquely high levels of inte- gration were so specific that it is ‘very unlikely’ that they will be replicated elsewhere. Indeed, Webber argues that the particular balance of intra-regional forces that permits effective integration to occur are ‘quite restrictive’, and it is not even clear whether the EU will be able to maintain the degree of integra- tion it has already achieved.

Mould? What mould?

The trajectory of regional development will depend in large part on the position of regional hegemons. Webber argues – a contention with implications for East Asia and the apparently inexorable rise of China. My own view is that the course of regional development may have as much to do with the actions of the world’s only global hegemon as with any exclusively regional conditions.

This is something that is touched on but not considered as extensively as it might have been, given the central importance of the United States in the formation (and lack of integration, in East Asia’s case) and contemporary evolution of both regions.

Amitav Acharya’s brief concluding chapter is upbeat about the capacity of East Asia’s ‘practical and productive’ regionalism to meet some of the for- midable challenges it currently faces. If East Asia is to rise to such challenges, it may need to replicate at least one aspect of the European experience: the dominant position the EU has enjoyed as the institutionalised expression of the regional impulsion. East Asia, by con- trast, still suffers from something of an identity crisis and a bewildering array of often overlapping initiatives in which the very definition of regional identity is uncertain and contentious. Until there is a consolidation of institutional fora in East Asia, the co-ordination of collective actions at the regional level will remain problematic.

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

Notes

1. The papers in this volume resulted from a conference in mid-2003, and a number of key events, like the rejection of the EU constitution and the East Asia Summit of 2005, are not considered.


Mark Beeson
School of Political Science & International Studies, University of Queensland

M Beeson@uq.edu.au