

REGIONALISM

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Summary

The ending of the Cold War order signaled the break down of the bipolar structure of the international system. This implied the wind down of the confrontation between two alternative ways of organizing political, economic and social life as well as the end to ideological rivalry. What is emerging to replace the Cold War international order remains unclear. What is clear, however, is how the reconfiguration of space on different spatial scales is an important key for understanding this period of transition in the restructuring of the international order.

This reconfiguration is occurring on three dominant spatial scales through the emergence of regionalist projects as well as the dynamic growth of regionalization processes. The highest level of spatial reconfiguration is the regional level. This level is dominated by the big powers in the international system. It is represented by the supranational European Union.

The middle level is the subregional level. This level is dominated by the weaker states in the international system, which have responded to the regionalist initiatives of the big powers. It is represented by the Central European Free Trade Association. The lowest level is the microregional level. Unlike the other two levels of regionalism, this level does not include the integration of a state into a reconfigured spatial scale, but rather the development and integration of cross national links amongst subnational parts of different states. It is represented by subnational political authorities in Japan seeking to develop economic zones of cooperation with the Korean peninsula and the coastal provinces of China. This text argues that, in order to understand the emerging global

order, these levels of regionalism need to be taken into account in terms of the actors and the dimensions of activities in which the reconfiguration of space is taking place.

1. Introduction

The ending of the Cold War has brought to the forefront of scholarly concern in international relations (IR) and international political economy (IPE), the nature of the emerging global order. During the Cold War era, which despite the static metaphor of “cold” embraced intermittent periods of both warming and freezing as an integral part of the dynamic process of East–West competition, the overarching structure of the international order was bipolar confrontation between two different modes of organizing political, economic, and social life: democratic, free-market capitalism, on the one hand, and authoritarian, planned-economy socialism, on the other. This confrontation was manifest most saliently in the military rivalry between the East and the West, which contained within its structural dynamics the frightening possibility that the arms race between the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) could end in nuclear holocaust. In periods of freezing, the international system was quintessentially bipolar, with the allies of the two champions of these alternative ways of life being bound tightly to the American or Soviet poles; in times of warming, bipolarism was loosened by the winter thaw and the international system moved towards greater multipolarity, with the allies of these twin giants and other states being able to exercise a greater degree of freedom in pursuit of their own international relations.

As actors in an international system topped by two nuclear superpowers, states sought to chart their own course, buffeted by the demands of North–South as well as East–West issues. Some did so by attempting to find a “third way,” not bound to the poles of either camp, as witnessed by the birth of the non-aligned movement at the Bandung Conference of 1955. Others did so by taking regional initiatives, which at times served to consolidate the East–West divide, as in the 1957 creation of the European Economic Community (EEC). Others did so by bowing to the exigencies of Cold Warism, as in the launch in 1966 of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which at the outset excluded from its membership the People’s Republic of China (PRC). And still others sought to do so by challenging the very structure of the international system, as seen in the creation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which emerged in the 1970s as an organization seeking to gain control of the production and pricing of crude oil. Whether in respect of states from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East or elsewhere, therefore, the bipolar Cold War structure of the international system did not preclude a wide range of initiatives from being taken on the regional level.

This division into two of the international systems nevertheless did mean that, whether the issues of international concern were North–South questions of economic development or East–West questions of political and military rivalry, the answers offered were formulated overwhelmingly in terms of the East–West divide. In other words, the world’s economic, political and military division went hand in hand with an ideological division at the national, regional and global levels. As a consequence, states forged their international relations not so much on the basis of geographical propinquity, regional space, but rather in terms of ideological compatibility; that is,

ideology was a governing feature of their international relations, with bilateral links being strengthened within the same bloc, irrespective of geographical location. It was thus that, although geographically a part of the Asian “East,” Japan and other regional states locked into the US ideological orbit were regarded as and, indeed, regarded themselves as, part of the “West.” Of course, ideological and geographical closeness is not mutually exclusive, as seen in the case of the membership of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO). Cold War ideological compatibility was, however, overriding, as is illustrated by the physical as well as ideological division of Germany into two, East and West, and the continuing US resistance even in the post-Cold War era to forging any kind of links with Cuba, geographically located just off the Florida coast.

2. Transition in the International System

The ending of the Cold War signalled the break down of this bipolar international structure; the wind down of the confrontation between these two alternative ways of organizing political, economic and social life; and the drawing to a close of the Cold War ideological rivalry between the East and the West, albeit without embracing within some form of free-market capitalism all socialist planned economies, as seen in the continuing commitment to this alternative by North Korea and other countries. What is emerging to replace the bipolar international order of those years, however, also remains unclear. A number of alternative views have been aired. Three are particularly salient.

First, the predominant realist school of IR remains focussed on the perennial nature of the international system as anarchic and conflictual, with no final arbiter able to resolve issues arising between states, which remain firmly set on realizing their own national interests—hence, as a last resort, they may appeal to the force of arms. As in the Cold War era, power–political calculations will continue to hold sway in the post-Cold War era, too, as states remain wedded to protecting and enhancing their own national interests, irrespective of the structure of the international system. Given the unchanging nature of international political life, the balance of power system, under which weak states band together in order to balance the strong, thus can be expected to remain an efficacious tool of foreign policy. In other words, if we ask the realist school why states cooperate at the regional level, given the anarchic, conflictual nature of the international system and the power–political calculations of individual states, then one answer it will give is in order to balance a stronger state, i.e., states cooperate at the regional level for purely self-interested motives, such as their own national security (see *Realism*).

Second, Samuel Huntington suggested that, rather than the international system remaining as an anarchic clash of billiard-ball states in pursuit of their own national interests, as in the Cold War era, the present post-Cold War era might emerge as a “clash of civilizations” (1993). This approach highlights the commonality of interests between and amongst states as a result of them being part of the same civilizational space, where the interests shared by the members of one civilizational group clash with those belonging to another. For Huntington, the world’s dominant civilizations include the Christian, Islamic, Sinic, Japanese and other civilizations. As with the realist school, this view of international relations as perennially conflictual draws our attention to the way that, with the ending of the Cold War, fragmentation based on ethnic or wider civilizational differences and conflict has risen in international salience, as seen in the

break away of states from Yugoslavia and the “ethnic cleansing” and 1999 war in Kosova.

Finally, Francis Fukuyama sought to capture the quintessential nature of the Cold War’s ending by reference to the victory of the democratic, free-market capitalist mode of organizing political, economic and social life over the socialist alternative (1992). For Fukuyama, the end of the Cold War signalled the “end of history” in the sense that the mighty challenge mounted in 1917 by the socialist alternative to capitalism finally has been routed, the future is America’s. Fundamentally, as the artificial division of the world between two rival ways of organizing life has been overcome, democracy and capitalism will be able to spread around the globe, spurred on by the power of globalization processes. It is in this sense a view of the world where the American globalist project, no longer challenged by the socialist alternative, will become *the* way of life-hence, the “end of history.”

3. Regionalism, Regionalization and Region

The three views introduced above usefully serve to highlight key features of the emerging global order. We learn from the realist approach of the continuing need to pay attention to the state and the strategies used by the weaker states in the international system to protect their interests in any stand-off with the strong, as with the balance of power. What remains puzzling about the emerging order from this perspective, however, is that the deepening and widening of the European regionalist project, as seen in the greater regional cooperation represented by the creation of the European Union (EU) and the launch of the euro, surged forward not as a means to balance the Soviet Union, the strong state at the core of the alternative to democracy and free-market capitalism during the Cold War, but precisely after the collapse of the state purportedly being balanced. Again, while Huntington’s approach usefully serves to highlight the growing importance of trans-state civilizational groupings and their possible link with the clash of civilizations, conflict and political fragmentation, it is less helpful in explaining another contemporary trend in international relations, namely, that towards closer regional cooperation and integration, as seen in the strengthening of existing and the growth of new regional groupings and institutions. In this case, however, the membership is not being shaped by civilizational interests, with states cooperating across a vast expanse of geographic space through membership in the same civilizational grouping, as illustrated by the ideological pull from one side of the world to the other side during the Cold War era. Rather, as witnessed in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), a regionalist project can and does embrace Christian (US and Australia), Muslim (Indonesia and Malaysia), Sinic (China and Taiwan), Japanese (Japan) and other states belonging to civilizations said to be set on a possible collision course in the twenty-first century. Finally, Fukuyama tellingly alerts us to the universalistic appeal of democracy and free-market capitalism, as seen by its adoption, with varying degrees of success, in state after state after the collapse of the Cold War world. But will this mode of life prevail, simply because one alternative, the socialist, no longer appears viable at the cusp of the post-Cold War era? Such an a historical view is challenged by the existence, shaken but not yet shattered by the 1997–1998 Asian crises, of the so-called “Asian model” of democracy and capitalism. This can be seen, for instance, in the 1991 call made by Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad to

pursue an “Asian only” regionalist project, the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). In this sense, the end of the Cold War was not the end of history, but rather the start of an era of transition, where contradictions both within and between different forms of democracy and capitalism are generating dialectic processes, out of which new forms of organizing political, economic and social life can be expected to emerge on the national, regional and other levels.

The nascent post-Cold War order is thus complex and inchoate. Different aspects of it are illuminated by all three of these approaches, but regionalism, as a salient trend in the emerging order, remains in need of further elucidation. To start with, regionalism should be distinguished from regionalization. Regionalism refers to a political project, pushed forward by purposive actors, especially states, intent on realizing a region at the sub-global level. Whether that sub-global level is a “region” or “not” is a subjective and contested question, not an objective measurement of activity in geographic space. Regionalization, on the other hand, is a dynamic process of interactions set in motion by non-purposive actors, such as multi-national corporations (MNCs), in this case intent on realizing a profit not a region. As a process, regionalization refers to an increase in particularly economic, social and other interactions and interconnections within a sub-global, circumscribed geographic space. This twofold difference—regionalism as a political project promoted by purposive actors and regionalization as a dynamic process set in motion by non-purposive actors—points to the intertwined relationship between regionalization, regionalism and regions. In short, regionalization gives substance to both regionalism and regions, the first as a political project and the second as an identity.

What this means is that, in the process of a state seeking to realize a regionalist project and an MNC seeking to realize a profit, the former can seek to impute space with regional meaning by using ingredients provided by the latter. This can be seen, for instance, in the use of regional statistics, whether in Europe, the Americas, Asia or elsewhere. Trade flows, investment patterns, trans-border production systems, and so on, become “regional” indices through the intervention of actors, who give concrete shape to the regionalist project and identity by inscribing them in geographic space. For regions do not exist in any objective sense, as primordial spatial entities, but are realized as part of a contested socio-political process. Which space, which actor, and which process and indices are embraced within a region is the outcome of a struggle over the demarcation of boundaries and their subjective representation. The subjective representation of a region is part of this contested process of giving life to a regional identity. Depending on the motivations of the purposive actors involved and the nature of the economic and other processes set in motion by the non-purposive actors, certain geographic space will be included, excluded or left on the periphery, with the boundaries of the region often “fraying” around the edges. In some cases, a regional organization with formal membership can act as a lightning rod for the creation of a regional identity based on economic and other indices, as in the case of APEC and the emerging identity of “Asia Pacific”; in others, it can be based on the legacy of history, as in the case of “Southeast Asia,” an identity created in the Second World War; and, in still others, it can be related to different aspects of regional identity, such as norms, as seen in the case of “East Asia,” where the cultural sphere influenced by Confucianism is considered by some East Asian policymakers to form a “region”.

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Biographical Sketch

Glenn D. Hook is Chair of Japanese Studies, previously Head of Department, and since 1995, Director of the Graduate School of East Asian Studies, the University of Sheffield, UK. He has published numerous articles and chapters and is the author of *Militarization and Demilitarization in Contemporary Japan* (1996); *Subregionalism and World Order* (co-editor, 1999), *Microregionalism and World Order* (coeditor 2002), *Japan's International Relations: politics, economics and security* (coauthor 2005). He is presently working on a study of the East Asian regional order in the post-Cold War era.