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Essays on Global Regionalism II

Will Regions Save the World?



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Essay 1: Introduction to *Essays on Global Regionalism (Vol. II)*: Will Regions Save the World?



Amitav Acharya, Philippe De Lombaerde, Beatrix Futák-Campbell,
Lynda Chinenye Iroulo, and Juliana Peixoto Batista

A Brief History of an Idea

The literature – both academic and policy – on regionalism is vast and growing. Indeed, scholarly writings on regionalism – which first emerged in the 1950s if not earlier – are perhaps one of the most extensive and developed subfields of IR. Moreover, the field has undergone important conceptual shifts (see e.g. De Lombaerde & Söderbaum, 2013a). While the early literature was heavily Eurocentric, in the sense that its theories, often collectively known as *regional integration theories*, drew mainly upon Western European and transatlantic interactions, the field has slowly but discernibly broadened with the addition of newer frameworks that are variously labelled as *New Regionalism* and *Comparative Regionalism*. Yet, as this two-volume publication shows, important gaps still remain in how we study regionalism broadly defined – what constitutes a region, regional interdependence, institutions, and identities, among others. The literature on regionalism is yet to capture fully the range of phenomena that occur within and between regions on a global scale, especially in light of a fast-changing world order. This project – which develops the concept

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of Global Regionalism – hopes to make a contribution to advancing the literature on regionalism and addressing this gap.

The project of Global Regionalism responds to a major and persistent contradiction in the study of regionalism, which is that while the practice of regionalism has been *global* from its inception, the theoretical literature on regionalism has until now been rather parochial or EU-centric. This disjuncture between theory and reality needs elaboration. Admittedly, some of the early ideas and institutions of regionalism were developed in Europe, a prominent example being the Concert of Europe after 1814–15, or when looking ideationally, early ideas of unified Christendom. Even the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 was and remained essentially a regional arrangement, before it *went global* as a result of decolonisation from European imperial rule, first in Latin America and then in the rest of the world from the mid-twentieth century. Equally impressive, however, are the different types of regionalism that emerged outside Europe, in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial worlds. Pre-colonial civilisations often engaged in regional interactions and influence, as well as de facto regionalism, in the form of imperiums or otherwise. In colonial times, regional administrative structures were often imposed by imperial powers. In post-colonial times, ideas and movements emerged that sought to transcend these artificial boundaries and unite people based on shared cultural, linguistic, and historical ties, such as pan-Americanism,¹ pan-Africanism,² pan-Arabism,³ pan-Slavism,⁴ pan-Asianism (O'Loughlin & van der Wusten, 1990) and, more recently, pan-Turkism. These ideological movements would later underpin the creation of formal institutions, including the Pan-American Union established in 1890, the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 1948 (at the 9th International Conference of American States in Bogotá), the League of Arab States in 1945, the Asian Relations Conferences of 1947 and 1949, the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 (which became African Union in 2000), the Pan-Slavic Congress originally convened in 1848 (and precursor to the International Slavic Council in 1955), and the Young Turks movement in 1889 and the Committee of Union and Progress (both can be seen as the intellectual foundations the Organisation of Turkic States established in 2009). In South America, the

¹ Even before Pan-Americanism (which emerged in the late nineteenth century), there were movements promoting regional thought and identity in Latin America and the Caribbean as early as the early nineteenth century, such as *Antillanism* or the idea of a *Patria Grande* (Great Homeland), which played important roles in the independence struggles and decolonisation processes.

² The Pan-African movement emerged in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries as a response to slavery, colonialism, and racial oppression. Thinkers like Edward Blyden, Marcus Garvey, and W.E.B. Du Bois articulated visions of African unity and self-determination that would later inspire post-independence leaders.

³ Pan-Arabism is a nationalist ideology advocating for the unity of all Arab peoples in a single political entity. Emerging in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries as a response to Ottoman rule and European colonialism, Pan-Arabism sought to unite Arabs based on shared language, culture, and history as a foundation for self-determination and independence.

⁴ Pan-Slavism is a 19th-century political and cultural movement that advocates for the unity of all Slavic peoples, based on shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties. Emerging as a response to German and Ottoman domination, Pan-Slavism sought to unite diverse Slavic groups – including Russians, Poles, Czechs, Serbs, and others – through cultural cooperation or political federation.

establishment of sub-regional arrangements, including customs unions, was already actively discussed in the late 19th and early twentieth century. By comparison, the European Coal and Steel Community, generally regarded as the precursor to the European Union, was not established until 1951. The timeline highlights an important point: while the Western European regional institutions have often been viewed in the literature as more *advanced* or *effective*, characterised by abundant resources and greater institutionalisation, they do not represent the sole model or origin of regionalism as a phenomenon in world politics.

Despite this historical precedence, as it is well established and acknowledged now, the theorisation of regionalism – covering key issues such as how to define it, how it emerges and evolves, what constitutes its end products, and what determines effectiveness and failure – has been overwhelmingly shaped by developments in Western Europe and the North Transatlantic areas. This was epitomised in the *regional integration* theories that held sway from the late-1950s to mid-1970s period, with the publication of *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area*, a joint work of Karl Deutsch and his associates, published in 1957; and Ernst B. Haas' single authored volume, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950–1957*, published a year later. These two became the foundations of what would come to be known as the transactionalist and neo-functionalist approaches, two of the most influential theories of regional integration, and in opposition to the federalist idea of European unity.

Much has been written on regional integration theories, so repetition is unwarranted here. Having said that, while neo-functionalism aspired to generate a more general theory and some scholars did attempt to study regionalism beyond Western Europe, such work remained sparse and failed to gain the same scholarly attention or legitimacy bestowed on Western-centric studies. Moreover, these limited efforts typically focused on explaining the perceived limitations and failures of global forms of regionalism by applying criteria and analytical frameworks derived from Western European and North Atlantic experiences.

Partial exceptions existed, for example, Joseph S. Nye's *Peace in Parts: Integration and Conflict in Regional Organisation*, published in 1971. Significantly, rather than applying neo-functionalism or transactionalism – the two dominant strands of regional integration theory – to study non-European regional organisations, Nye developed his own approach, *regionalist doctrines of peace*. This framework drew on broader ideas and approaches to regional cooperation that had emerged earlier, especially during the debate over regionalism versus universalism during and after the drafting of the UN Charter in 1945. In this debate, regionalism was viewed by advocates as an essential foundation or *stepping stone* of the UN's global mandate in peace, a view opposed by those who preferred a single universal system of collective security.

The dominance of European regional integration theories was challenged by the literature on *New Regionalism* in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it did not completely disappear (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003). On the contrary, bolstered by the growing financial resources and institutional capacity of the European Community (established in 1993) and its successor, the European

Union (established in 2009), the study of New Regionalism has remained dominated by scholars and institutions of Western nations, particularly EU member states, despite the global rise in regionalism scholarship. A notable development of the 2000s and 2010s period was the emergence of *Comparative Regionalism*, which self-consciously acknowledged and attempted to redress the EU-centrism of the field, but this has remained a work-in-progress (Laursen, 2003; Laursen, 2010; Acharya & Johnston, 2007; De Lombaerde et al., 2010; De Lombaerde, 2011; De Lombaerde & Söderbaum, 2013b; Futák-Campbell, 2021).

It is a dynamic field though and it has been argued that over the last decade three *silent transformations* of the field have been taking place: a conceptual transformation (whereby unpacking or disaggregating regionalism has allowed for new, relevant and more diverse comparisons); a theoretical transformation (whereby more general social science theories have gained importance); and a methodological transformation (whereby new datasets have become available and more rigorous empirical methods have been used) (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025). These authors interpret this combination of three transformations as a *mainstreaming* of Comparative Regionalism.

At the same time, Lenz and Söderbaum (2025) are conscious that there is still a way to go for Comparative Regionalism on the path to becoming Global Regionalism and that the mainstreaming of Comparative Regionalism, as they perceive it, comes at a price. Despite committing to studying the ideas and structures of regional interactions worldwide, beyond EU-centric theoretical frameworks, and acknowledging *silent transformations*, Comparative Regionalism indeed continues to face methodological constraints and tendencies toward Western theoretical templates (De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Futák-Campbell, 2021), even if EU-centrism might come in less overt forms (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025, pp. 14–15). The scope and case selections in Comparative Regionalism (as with New Regionalism) approaches remain uneven. They tend to be weighted in favour of studies that compare European institutions with non-European ones – for example, the EU and the African Union, or the EU and ASEAN – with fewer works that compare institutions outside of Europe, for instance, between the Middle East and Asia, or Asian and African institutions. While rightfully rejecting the EU as a *model* for other regionalisms, Comparative Regionalism approaches often tend to focus more on differences than on similarities among regional groups, whether between the EU and those in other parts of the world or between non-West European institutions. Moreover, some regions have received less attention, such as the Pacific Islands, the Global East, and Central Asia. Also neglected in the available corpus of Comparative Regionalism studies are some distinctive forms of cross-border interactions that operate outside the scope of formal institutions; the wider, formal, and intergovernmental institutions still receive greater attention. These de facto ontological biases may reflect the de facto “sociological characteristics of the research field” (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025, p. 15), in turn reflecting unequal access to academic resources. In addition, the mainstreaming of Comparative Regionalism, if it is happening, carries the risk that a price is also paid in terms of conceptual and theoretical pluralism (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025, p. 15).

Last but not least, there is a need for Comparative Regionalism to fully engage with the question of how the varieties of regionalism across the world shape the world order, especially at a time when the established world order – the liberal international order – is rapidly unravelling.

Features of Global Regionalism

It is against this backdrop that the present volumes on Global Regionalism assume significance.

Global Regionalism is defined as a phenomenon encompassing multiple, simultaneous, and interconnected processes by which communities organise themselves into regional arrangements that operate beyond individual nation-states but below the global level. Global Regionalism transcends physical boundaries and encompasses a wide range of regional projects, organising principles, and developmental paths that have emerged across various periods, cultural contexts, and geographical regions throughout history.

Global Regionalism is not an attempt to erase earlier approaches to regionalism but to draw upon them while challenging them to be less Eurocentric and develop frameworks that recognise and reflect the varieties of regionalisms around the world, while finding commonalities and differences to realise their goals and contribute, in a normative sense, to global stability and well-being. New Regionalism – Comparative Regionalism – Global Regionalism should be seen as a continuum. In this respect, Global Regionalism is consistent with the idea of Global IR (Acharya & Buzan, 2007; Acharya, 2014a), which strives to make IR a more pluralistic, inclusive field by challenging Western- and Euro-centrism, while not denying space to preexisting IR theories such as post-colonialism or realism, as long as they embrace a commitment to studying IR in all its diversity and richness. In a sense, Global Regionalism is an attempt to bridge the aforementioned disjuncture between the global reality or roots of regionalism and its narrow West European-North Atlantic theoretical foundations.

Building on this foundation, it is necessary to highlight three key features of Global Regionalism.

First, Global Regionalism, which builds on the New Regionalism and Comparative Regionalism research programs and is inspired by the emerging perspective of Global International Relations (Global IR), holds that regions and their institutions are constructed through economic, political, and cultural interactions rather than being based purely on geographic, ethnic, or linguistic commonalities. Global Regionalism is not a static idea, but a dynamic one; it accepts that the definition of what constitutes a region may vary, depending on changing material linkages and ideational movements among regions. While this perspective is well-established in recent regionalism scholarship, it bears emphasising here as it represents a central assumption of the Global Regionalism project.

Second, mindful that there has been a fair amount of discussion (some of it rather repetitive) on what is *global* in IR or history, among other fields, Global Regionalism

does not see the world itself as a seamless whole akin to the idea of a *global village*, but one that recognises and respects the diversity and autonomy of its constituents. Global Regionalism does not take *global* for granted as a fixed geographic or geo-cultural term, but as something that is socially constructed. The purpose of Global Regionalism is to reconcile regional autonomy with global interdependence. The units or constituent regions of Global Regionalism are neither wholly autonomous nor self-reliant, nor are their cultural, economic, and political boundaries erased beyond recognition. Rather, Global Regionalism seeks to investigate how these boundaries are formed, managed, and blurred, if not eliminated.

Third, Global Regionalism recognises that the categories *West* and *non-West* are terms of convenience, rather than fixed categories. Outside forces influence regionalism anywhere in the world, and there are a number of supposedly regional institutions in the *non-Western* world – such as ASEAN – that accept and welcome *Western* nations as significant partners, if not full-fledged members. Hence, just as Global IR rejected *essentialising* West and non-West from the very outset (Acharya, 2014a), notwithstanding recent debates over a possible *essentialism trap* (Barnett & Zarakol, 2023; Eun et al., 2025, pp. 6–7), Global Regionalism seeks to subvert this divide, while not forgetting the distinctive cultural or colonial identities of many nations and regionalisms around the world. Neither does Global Regionalism accept any innate, fixed, or unchanging qualities in regionalist ideas and interactions.

In short, Global Regionalism refers to (the study of) the interactions within and among regions, driven by material (economic, strategic) and ideational (political, ideological, and cultural) linkages within and between them, with a view to reconciling regional autonomy with global interconnectedness.

A Toolkit for Advancing Global Regionalism Research

Hopefully, this discussion will revive research proposals already made by scholars and push the Global Regionalism agenda beyond this volume (Blaney & Tickner, 2017; Futák-Campbell, 2021; Iroulo & Lenz, 2022; Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025). Global Regionalism offers a comprehensive and necessarily eclectic analytical framework that recognises the inherent plurality of regional arrangements worldwide. This approach acknowledges that numerous forms of regionalism operate simultaneously across different contexts, each emerging from distinct origins, purposes, and organisational logics, and has historically done so. Rather than treating regionalism as variations of a single phenomenon, these volumes position all regional projects—from the Concert of Europe to Pan-Africanism to arrangements like ASEAN—as equally valid expressions of human organisation.

The framework challenges hierarchical approaches that rank regionalisms by institutional sophistication or economic integration levels, while at the same time recognising that some instances of regionalism have a greater impact on the lives of citizens than others and that typologies can serve specific analytical purposes.

Pan-Arabism, pan-Slavism, and pan-Turkism's emphasis on cultural unity represents a different regional logic than the EU's supranational institutions, not a less advanced one. Similarly, the concept of autonomy—as one of the deepest and most meaningful aspects of self-determination—and its role in building regional integration and a legal approach to multilateralism in Latin America reflects dissatisfaction with the *status quo* and a search for opportunities to reshape existing rules and reduce external pressures (Deciancio & Tussie, 2020), rather than representing a less committed version of regionalism or regional thought. This non-hierarchical perspective enables researchers to analyse diverse regional projects on their own terms rather than against a single normative standard.

Historical analysis within these volumes emphasises simultaneity over linear progression. While European regional ideas have deep roots, non-European projects like Pan-Americanism, Pan-Africanism, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), and the Arab League, among others, emerged independently, reflecting distinct regional needs rather than responses to European models. This temporal reframing reveals parallel developments that traditional approaches often obscure.

The relational dimension of actors acknowledges that regional projects coexist in a dynamic relationship with one another, characterised by competition, complementarity, and overlap (Qin, 2016). States participate in multiple regional arrangements simultaneously, while regional projects influence each other across geographical boundaries through learning, adaptation, and strategic interaction. This comparative and pluralist lens reveals how regional diversity and interconnectedness together constitute the global phenomenon of regionalism. Global Regionalism, therefore, also speaks to existing concepts such as overlapping regionalisms, policy diffusion, and interregionalism.

Global Regionalism, like New Regionalism, focuses on ongoing regionalisation rather than fixed institutional outcomes. These volumes propose the study of formal institutionalisation alongside informal regionalisation, identity formation, and evolving governance practices. Regions are continually created and remade through social, economic, political, and cultural interactions, necessitating dynamic rather than static analytical approaches. Functional diversity acknowledges that different regionalisms serve varied primary purposes, including economic integration, cultural preservation, security cooperation, and anti-imperial solidarity. This plurality reflects the diverse contexts and needs that generate regional projects, requiring analytical flexibility rather than uniform theoretical frameworks.

Epistemologically, Global Regionalism also draws on postcolonial and decolonial theories to recognise that different regions *know* themselves through distinct concepts of space, community, and belonging. European territorial sovereignty coexists with pan-Africanism, Islamic ummah, or indigenous relationality. Postcolonial scholarship, popularised in the 1970s by scholars from formerly colonised states (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988), examined the interactions between European nations and colonised peoples, addressing the material and socio-economic factors that shaped these relationships. Decolonial scholarship extends this analysis by challenging Western-centric categorisation and theorisation in academic research (Amin, 1976; Diop, 1987; Quijano, 2000). Critical approaches, including Critical Race Theory,

Third World Approaches to International Law, and Feminist Theory, investigate how power, racialised, and gendered relations are perpetuated within global structures (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Gathii, 2022; Sawyer et al., 2023).

These theoretical frameworks are essential to Global Regionalism because they reveal how colonial legacies, power imbalances, race, and gender continue to shape regional dynamics. They enable researchers to understand regional projects through locally grounded conceptual frameworks, rather than imposing external analytical models. For instance, these critical approaches illuminate how different regions have responded to crises in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others. Moreover, they uncover how indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western forms of alternative regional arrangements challenge and transform conventional state-centric models of cooperation.

These volumes present Global Regionalism as a comprehensive study of regionalisation processes and regionalism in all its forms—plural, dynamic, and foundational to understanding contemporary international relations beyond state-centric paradigms. It provides researchers with analytical tools to advance Comparative Regionalism while avoiding Western- and Eurocentric assumptions and embracing the full diversity of regional experiences worldwide.

Structure of This Volume

This volume complements Volume I on the past, present, and future of regionalism studies. Volume II is centred around the question “Will regions save the world?” and assumes particular importance in view of the rapidly unfolding crisis and decline of the hitherto West and US-dominated world order. While some scholars and pundits refer to the emerging world order as a multipolar order, the kind of regionalism multipolarity might permit remains contested. One plausible outcome of multipolarity is a world divided into spheres of influence, which might be construed as a form of *hegemonic regionalism*. This is not a new idea, but rather, it harks back to European and colonial spheres of influence created and dominated by a handful of great powers. Under multipolarity, the place and agency of weaker and smaller states are thoroughly marginalised. The polarisation of the world order into US, Chinese, and EU-dominated areas is widely discussed and debated today.

An alternative idea of world order is a decentered one, which has been variously labelled as polycentric, multi-ordered, multiplex, or pluriverse. Yet, polycentric or multi-ordered, while both stressing a pluralistic framework, also remind us of a world of relatively autonomous regional centres, without conveying how these centres relate to each other. Are these centres or orders autarchic or interdependent? Who are the actors? The idea of *multiplex* leaves no doubt that they remain interactive and interdependent, despite the *weaponisation* and erosion of economic interdependence. A multiplex world is a world without a single or a handful of dominant powers, which is culturally and politically diverse but economically and functionally interdependent, where the makers and breakers of peace and well-being are not just

great powers or states, but also non-state actors (corporations, social movements, and extremist groups, etc.) interacting at global, regional, and local levels (Acharya, 2014b). Whereas a pluriverse world order stresses the coexistence of multiple world-views, systems of knowledge, and ways of living, as well as the connectedness or relationality of these views. The essays in this volume have much to say about what a future world order might look like, whether it is closer to a multipolar, polycentric, multi-ordered, or multiplex or pluriverse, and they can provide clues to the question of whether regionalism in different forms can be a saviour or a further destabilising force.

The volume is organised into three parts. Part I takes a global perspective and looks at how regions could/should relate to the multilateral level, and what the global governance potential is of regional organisations. Part II focuses on the future of interregionalism: how could/should regions and their institutionalised expressions (regional organisations, coalitions, or more informal arrangements) interact effectively? Finally, Part III explores the future role of regions and regional organisations in specific regions worldwide and examines the need for regional cooperation, in different forms, to face the governance challenges that need to be addressed for humanity and the planet.

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Global Perspectives

Essay 2: Are You NUTS? A United Nations of Regions



Luk Van Langenhove and Chiara Peters

Introduction

In his famous Zürich speech, Churchill (1946) advocated for separate regional security councils for Europe, Asia, and the Americas under the common roof of the United Nations (UN). He envisioned that each council would be responsible for the maintenance of peace in its respective region. In fact, Churchill even argued that the UN could only survive if it were structured around broad regional groupings rather than states (Graham & Felício, 2006, p. 282). As apparent in the current UN institutional framework, Churchill's suggestion for regional security councils has not been implemented. But the idea to involve regions in global governance has not disappeared. UNU-CRIS has, ever since its creation, been involved in academic studies and policy practices related to the interactions between the UN and regional organisations (see, for instance, Van Langenhove, 2004; Tavares, 2009; Graham & Felício, 2006; De Lombaerde et al., 2012, 2023). This is, among others, inspired by Churchill's thinking on how to recreate a European family in the immediate post-World War II period.

About seven decades after Churchill's Zürich speech, we are in the middle of intensifying geopolitical turmoil exacerbated by actors like China and Russia that actively attempt to change the current multilateral order. Inspired by Churchill's Zürich speech, this essay therefore proposes to open up the UN System to establish a formal level for regional organisations in order to develop them as the building blocks of global multilateralism. This could allow for channelling and delegating regional interests and representation. Moreover, a formalised level of regional organisations can act as a source of identity for people beyond sovereign states. This could, in turn, give a new dynamism to the multilateral world order and deal with the maintenance of peace and security in a way reminiscent of Churchill's thinking.

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The key issue in reforming the UN system is that a reform proposal has to strike a balance between the UN's responsibilities and representation of all peoples, that is to say, between the UN's mandate, while ensuring that all peoples feel represented. Such a complex balance cannot be found if reform proposals solely focus on reforming the undergirding state framework of the UN or if reform proposals keep considering solely states as the building blocks of the UN system.

Instead, reform proposals have to be based on multi-level governance, meaning on a complex level of governance in which states have to adjust to a world where other units of governance from the local to the global level also have statehood properties. Two key questions evolving from this premise for UN reform proposals are:

1. What should be tackled at the global level and what should be left to regional organisations?
2. What kind of interactions are needed between the actors?

Answering these questions will allow us to strike a balance between national and regional security, market efficiency, and social justice. Moreover, it will allow for the preservation of the core attributes of globalisation, namely those that facilitate economic openness and exchange, while adjusting to the cross-border threats that the international community is faced with today.

The Current Crisis of Multilateralism

The core pillars of the current multilateral institutional architecture were established in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to prevent future global conflicts, foster economic cooperation, and rebuild war-torn economies. To illustrate, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was premised on the idea that free trade eases conflictual relations between countries and leads to more cooperative relations (Consortio Law Firm, 2019). Similarly, the United Nations was established to maintain peace and security in the world (United Nations, 1945, *Charter*, art. 1, para. 1). Although the Bretton Woods institutions have largely achieved their goal of maintaining peace and fostering cooperation between states, nowadays the international community sees itself confronted by a different kind of threats – threats that cannot be solved by single states or small groups of states, like environmental degradation, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, great power rivalry, and de-globalisation effects on labour and trade. The post-Second World War institutions were unaware of, let alone designed to address, these kinds of threats. To put it bluntly, the 20th-century institutional consensus has passed, and it is unable to deal with the problems of the twenty-first century. Hence, the multilateral order as we know it is in crisis.

Only renewed normative and international thinking about how to reform the system will help secure a renewed age of multilateral cooperative decision-making based on the core existential issues of our time.

Any rethink of the prospects for multilateral decision-making will indeed need to be underwritten by an acceptable moral metanarrative of cooperation. It is people who

created the initial set of multilateral institutions. Indeed, humanity has not been totally bereft of the ability to engage in practical cooperation beyond the level of the local and the national community. Thinking in global terms should not be a cosmopolitan fantasy. While legal citizenship is country-defined, there is, in theory, no reason, or at least there should be no reason, why individuals cannot hold subnational, national, transnational, and supranational identities and attachments at the same time. But we do not, and there is no global leadership pushing for it. Rather, the metanarrative of the community of origin, especially in the hands of populist politicians reinforced by sentiments of uniqueness, ethnicity, faith, and naked nativism, is a much stronger motivating idea than a less tangible narrative of a community of destiny. For many, solidarity in a community of destiny beyond the state is a chimera.

Towards a Regional Architecture in the UN

As already hinted at, the UN could have looked entirely different in its composition. At the moment of its crafting at the San Francisco Conference (1945), there were two organisational models discussed – one with regional architecture and one with global architecture. Although the choice was made for a global security council, something remained from the global/regional debate, namely Chapter VIII of the UN Charter (1945). Chapter VIII (art. 52–54) foresees the establishment of partnerships between the UN and regional organisations and provides the constitutional basis for regional organisations (United Nations, 1945, *Charter*, art. 52–54).

Article 52 authorises regional organisations to become involved in the maintenance of international peace and security and in pacific settlements. Article 53 allows regional organisations to take enforcement action when authorised by the Security Council. In turn, this means that Art. 53 offers the Security Council the possibility to mandate regional organisations to implement its enforcement measures. Article 54 introduces another control mechanism for the Security Council, namely that regional organisations must report their activities to the Security Council (United Nations, 1945, *Charter*, art. 52–52). Regional Organisations that have Chapter VIII status are, for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union (AU), and the EU (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2023).

Global and Regional Governance

Today, it is hard to imagine a different form of world governance, as none of the P5 members would voluntarily give up their permanent seats in the UNSC. Yet, the history of humanity shows that change has always been possible. For that to happen, the first thing needed is wild ideas. Next comes the circumstances that force a rethinking of the present situation. Finally, there has to be political support to think the unthinkable.

Opening up the UN to Regional Organisations

The concept of region has a fuzzy meaning as it refers to units of governance that can be found below, above, or across the borders of a state. That is why Van Langenhove (2020, pp. 31–32) argues that any unit of governance that is not a state but has some statehood properties can be called a region. From this follows that regions can act as *if* they are a state, can act as a source of identity to persons and as potential building blocks for global multilateralism (Van Langenhove, 2020, p. 32; Van Langenhove, 2011, p. 64). In Van Langenhove (2004), it is advocated that the UN system becomes “a forum in which world regions engage in interregional dialogue” and regional actors like the European Union (EU) become “the building stones” of the UN (pp. 4–5). In a later article, van Langenhove (2020, pp. 31–32) conceptualised *a region* as a linguistic device that is used to refer to geographical spaces that are not states yet have some statehood properties like borders, parliaments, governments, constitutional courts, flags, and actorness within the UN (see statehood theory of regions). Thus, regions are discursively defined against states as every geographical entity can be a region, except a state (Van Langenhove, 2011, pp. 65–66).

Importantly, Van Langenhove (2011, p. 64) understands *a region* as a socially constructed artefact constructed through conversations between actors. Hence, regions exist because they are talked about. This allows seeing a region as more than just a geographical space, and rather as a linguistic device that allows people to talk about something that is not a state but that resembles a state. Following this conceptualisation, regions could look very different. For instance, a unit within a state (subnational) can be called a region as well as a supranational *regional* organisation or a cross-border *region* (pp. 65–66).

A United Nations of Regions?

Today, only states can be members of the UN. However, not only are the differences between states and non-states becoming fuzzier, but states are also no longer able to solve current global threats like environmental degradation. In light of that development, one could think of a continuum between local governance and global governance where the state is seen as level 0 and where you have three levels upwards and downwards. Actually, there already exists a classification for sub-national governance in Europe, namely the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS), which will be outlined hereinafter (Gouardères, 2024). Inspired by that Nomenclature, three levels upwards (i.e., for supra-national governance) will be developed.

Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS)

The NUTS classification was set up by Eurostat in the 1970s and legally adopted by the EU in 2003 to ease statistical and comparative analysis as well as decisions about the eligibility of cohesion funds among EU member states' subregions (Eurostat, n.d.).

The classification divides every member state into three hierarchical sub-national units called *territorial units*. A territorial unit is understood as an already existing administrative unit in the country, meaning that this area has an “administrative authority empowered to take administrative or strategic decisions” (Gouardères, 2024). Importantly, these territorial units are comparable in terms of population as well as political, administrative, and institutional responsibility among member states (Gouardères, 2024).

Accordingly, the following three levels are identified:

1. NUTS 1: Major socio-economic regions
2. NUTS 2: Basic regions (for regional policies)
3. NUTS 3: Small regions (for specific diagnoses) (Eurostat, n.d.).

To illustrate, Belgium is classified into:

1. NUTS 1: Gewesten/Régions
2. NUTS 2: Provincies/Provinces
3. NUTS 3: Arrondissementen/Arrondissements (Eurostat, n.d.).

Classifying the Supra-National Level: Current Proposals on Improving Regional Representation in the UN

One proposal to advance regional representation in the United Nations system was put forward by Schwartzberg (2012). He suggests classifying the world into twelve regions based on demographic and economic weight. This results in four single nations (the US, Japan, India, China) and eight multinational regions (the Westminster League [composed of Canada, Australia, New Zealand], Russia and neighbouring republics, Latin America and Caribbean, Europe, Arab League, Africa south of the Sahara, West Asia, East Asia and Pacific). Evidently, the regions broadly overlap with existing regional organisations such as the EU or ASEAN. He proposes that each region get one seat in the Security Council. The representative, who would be chosen by an intra-regionally agreed voting procedure, then casts a weighted vote adjusted for the region's population and total contributions to the UN budget (pp. 73–74).

Schwartzberg (2012, pp. 74, 77) makes two important qualifications, namely, that vetoes are not admissible and that dual membership in two regions is possible, yet the voting weight would be divided between the two regions so that it counts as if the country were just part of one region.

Schwartzberg (2012, p. 74) believes that countries would agree to his proposal despite the general reluctance of the P5 concerning UNSC reforms because the

population counterweight privileges populous but relatively poor nations such as China or India. Further advantages of this proposal are that there is a near equal balance between the five developed regions – the *Global North*, namely Europe, the US, Japan, Russia, and the Westminster League – that would have a combined weight of 46.11% and the seven remaining regions of the *Global South* (53.89%) (p. 75). Additionally, since the formula is based on paid contributions and not rates of assessment, countries would be encouraged to pay their contributions, as the failure thereof would reduce a region's weighted vote (p. 74).

In contrast to Schwartzberg, who uses an objective mathematical equation, Graham and Felício (2006) take a security angle. Specifically, they propose to identify security regions that are responsible for the maintenance of peace and security in that region based on geography, culture, including ethnic and linguistic factors and geostrategic political considerations (p. 281). Geostrategic considerations are important to consider, as, for instance, North African Arab States, which, despite geographically belonging to Africa, are *geostrategically* closer to West Asia than to sub-Saharan Africa (pp. 282–286). Based on these three criteria, Graham and Felício (pp. 287–288) identify nine security regions: sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa-West Asia, Europe, Central Asia-Caucasia, South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and America.

As a second step, the authors propose to identify a regional organisation called *Chapter VIII Regional Agency* for each of the security regions, which would be responsible for the enforcement of maintaining peace and security in that region and which would, in turn, get a seat in the Security Council. To identify these Chapter VIII regional agencies, they propose membership, mandate, focal area, and the operational relationship already developed with the UN as criteria (Graham & Felício, 2006, pp. 288, 291). A detailed application of these criteria to each security region to identify the Chapter VIII Regional Agencies can be found on pp. 293–304. The regional organisations Graham and Felício (pp. 293–296) identify are: (1) African Union for the sub-Saharan security region; (2) League of Arab States for North Africa-West Asia; (3) Commonwealth of Independent States for Central Asia-Caucasia; (4) ASEAN for Southeast Asia; (5) Pacific Islands Forum for the Pacific; and (6) Organisation of American States for the Americas.

They argue that for East Asia, a regional agency still needs to be formed, and for South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has the potential to become the Chapter VIII Regional Agency, provided it still adopts a security function (Graham & Felício, 2006, pp. 296–297). They see Europe as the most complex case as whereas the Council of Europe would still need to adopt a pacific dispute settlement mechanism to become a Chapter VIII Regional agency, the EU has stated that it sees itself as *sui generis* and not as a Chapter VIII Regional agency (pp. 298, 304).

Similarly to Schwartzberg, Graham and Felício (2006, pp. 304–305) also allow for dual membership. Yet, instead of splitting the vote, they propose that a country's decision-making rights are limited to merely offering guidance in one agency.

Although the two proposals allow for regional representation in the UNSC, both proposals are insufficient to establish regional organisations as a building block for

global multilateralism. Merely adding seats to the UNSC for regional organisations will not improve regional representation because their voices would easily become overshadowed by the continuously state-centred world order. Moreover, regional organisations would continue to be driven by national state interests.

What is needed, therefore, is to establish several administrative units - namely, sub-regional units - similar to sub-national administrative units. Hereinafter, a more holistic approach will be proposed by mirroring the NUTS classification for the subnational level to the supranational level. Extending the state structure as identified in the NUTS classification to the supranational level formally establishes regional organisations as building blocks of the international order by allowing for the ample organisation of regional organisations by providing regional deliberation channels and options for delegation of tasks and duties. In addition, establishing several organisational levels for regional organisations allows for a more tangible identity source.

Specifically, it is proposed that at Level 1, a parliamentary channel for organisational purposes of regional organisations is established. This should be based on Regional Parliaments (like the European Parliament or the Pan-African Parliament) to bring in the people's ideas, as parliaments are the closest to their constituency. At Level 2, a Regional Council for advisory purposes will be established in the UN system in which Regional Organisations (in UN language Political Groups) like the EU or the AU have a seat. As Level 3, it is proposed that not these Political Groups but the current Regional Groups at the UN (Western European and Others Group, Latin American and Caribbean Group, Eastern European Group, Asia-Pacific Group, African Group) will get a seat at the UNSC. This would result in the following classification of supra-state regional administrative units:

1. Level 0: Sovereign States
2. Level 1: Regional Organisation Channels (Parliaments of Regional Organisations/ Level of a Regional Organisation closest to the people)
 - a. Seat at the UN Parliament
3. Level 2: Regional Organisations (e.g., EU Commission, AU Commission)
 - a. Seat at Regional Council
4. Level 3: UN Regional Groups (e.g., Western European and Others Group, Asia-Pacific Group)
 - a. Seat at UNSC

This proposal allows for the development of regional organisations as building blocks for global multilateralism. Establishing several deliberative channels/ administrative units (as it is in the state structure) allows regional organisations to channel and delegate regional interests and thus, representation. Additionally, the reappearance of regional organisations at several (lower) levels instead of just at the *last resort level* – the UNSC – allows regional organisations to act as a source of identity to people from different nationalities.

Conclusion

Not reforming the UN is undoubtedly not an option. How to do it is a political question, but the answers must be backed by scientific thinking. Recent work at UNU-CRIS and other parts of UNU continues to fuel the debates (De Lombaerde, 2023). One can only hope that UNU-CRIS's work inspires policymakers to take seriously the regionalisation of the UN as part of a re-thinking of multilateralism. We need a new San Francisco and Bretton Woods.

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Essay 3: United Nations Law and Global Regionalism



Anja Matwijkiw

Introduction

This essay explores the law-making effort of the United Nations in the public international law domain, where the top part of the norm hierarchy concerns peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*). Despite the superiority of these *compelling* (cf. the meaning of *jus cogens* translation) norms, which capture the most fundamental values of the community of states and their peoples, and which encompass aggression and mass atrocities like crimes against humanity, they are coupled with challenges and obstacles that can be summarised in a statement about evolutionary procrastination. Peremptory norms lag behind as a category tied to the law on international responsibility, and the situation has spillovers for emerging norms too, such as ecocide and grand corruption. This creates a dilemma on behalf of the United Nations as an organisation that endeavours to promote its higher value (law) agenda as a global aspiration: respect for those rules that are intended to function as mandatory and, in principle, absolute limits on conduct because of the importance of the common interests involved, in the final analysis, the avoidance of threats to survival. Peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*) are defined as non-derogable rules for the same reason. But their special status does not necessarily translate into legal recognition and/or protection equivalent. That said, there is a path forward.

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The main argument of this essay is that the United Nations stands to win from a nexus approach that is receptive to context-specific and regional developments *if and when* the developments serve to advance the above-mentioned agenda and aspiration. Certainly, in the case of the European Union, the relationship between United Nations law and global regionalism can arguably be strengthened by such intermediation and, consequently, a concession in favour of deemphasising the origin of norm-givers and instead focus on the outcome, that is, the difference that *they* can make – through provisions, measures and tools for the norms themselves, is warranted. On United Nations law premises, such a concession is also required by considerations having to do with value consistency. The point is that global regionalism is a way to enhance frameworks and improve methodologies while proceeding on the assumption that some norms (*rather than* some norm-givers) are more authoritative. The focus on preexisting and emerging norms does not exempt the United Nations from criticism, but the task of problematising the norms' legitimate claim to consideration goes beyond the notion of global regionalism that is espoused here.

The structure of the essay is designed with an interdisciplinary objective in mind. As the reader will see, peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*) are linked with ethics, and this aspect is accommodated in the analysis of legal doctrine. While formalists wish to separate law and ethics, an integrative approach may be an advantage in circumstances where the United Nations considers the relevant norms to be universally applicable (see section on *Serious Breaches*). Irrespective of this, global regionalism cannot be cynically stigmatised as an oxymoron if progress is measured on the basis of European Union initiatives, as compared with United Nations responses to ecocide and grand corruption. What matters most for the overarching issue of divergence and convergence, as the author of this essay attempts to show, is any discrepancy between commonly shared values and the legal norms that embody them, and their effective enforcement. Prior to the comparison, the author dedicates several sections to an account of peremptory norms of general international law in the context of the United Nations. Finally, a conclusion highlights findings central to the main argument and the guiding questions.

The Globalisation Predicament

Under the auspices of the United Nations, peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*) not only constitute a pro-globalisation category with a special status, it is also a paradigm that can be traced back to the constitutional pillars of the organisation, first and foremost the 1945 Charter of the United Nations (Charter). This aims for a balance between “respect for the sovereign equality” of states and “respect for human rights,” thereby mixing stakes in self-determination and the avoidance of aggression with interests in basic humanitarian rules and the prohibition of serious crimes that result in the deprivation of dignity on the basis of humanity, e.g., crimes against humanity, genocide, and apartheid. The 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT) expressly and formally incorporates examples of the paradigm (in

terms of peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*)) and adds provisions for protective measures whereby states cannot use internal law as a justification for failing to perform a treaty.

In and of itself, the paradigm signals the end of competing types of regionalism that affect the most fundamental values and interests of the international community (cf. comparative regionalism). At the same time, the paradigm relies on the relationship between law and politics and in the absence of sufficient support for multilateralism in cases that would otherwise have led to post-VCLT progress. The 2001 Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA) is evidence of this. Hence, law-making on universally applicable norms may or may not contribute to a push for global regionalism. This assessment depends, of course, on the weight attached to diplomatic negotiations with a view to codification in a convention, which is the so-called hard law outcome the effort was meant to accomplish. For example, the 2012 Declaration of the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels (Rule of Law Declaration) is consistent with multilateralism as a virtue, but it also contains a broader and legally soft set of standards that entails “equitable relations between States” (thereby exceeding the business-as-usual balance of power), “inclusive, sustainable and equitable development” (rather than a literal reading of the principle of mutual benefit), and “just, fair and equitable laws” (United Nations, 2012, paras. 2 and 8). On scrutiny, the standards function to correct wrongdoing from, among other things, colonial domination as a violation of the sovereign equality of all member states while at the same time respecting the rights and freedoms “of all members of the human family” (United Nations, 1948, Preamble), meaning that the interests of states are seen to integrate rather than compete with dignity. A meta-responsibility *not* to jeopardise solidarity, in effect, *ethicise* law-making follows, and with liberal democracy as the system that secures good governance. If the key insight is transferred to the ARSIWA, the emphasis on peace and security *through justice* in international relations is predicated on law as an instrument for the promotion of collective interests and reciprocal stakes in pragmatically non-precarious arrangements (cf. effective measures). *In extremis*, the internationally wrongful act of one state poses an existential threat to the whole order of building blocks, i.e., *all states* and *all peoples*. This is also why United Nations law is intended as an antidote to realpolitik. Notwithstanding, the *packaging* of an instrument may pull in opposite directions. Ethically compelling standards do not necessarily become elevated to positive international law. The impact on global regionalism is weakened accordingly.

The echo of a missed opportunity can be heard as a critical message about sincerity. The AWSIWA *could have been* established as an evolutionary outgrowth of the VCLT, with the legal certainty, legally binding obligations in the strict sense, and maximised effectiveness through consistency in rule application that explains why noted publicists gravitate toward international treaty law (cf. positive or hard law). M. Cherif Bassiouni accentuates the preference in connection with *jus cogens* norms *cum* core international crimes (Bassiouni, 2010, p. 575) and despite his doctrinal affiliation with natural law theory. The international law predicament consists of a

wide schism between the recognition and protection of norms and their underpinning humanistic values. This creates an advantage for impunity over accountability. Instead of paving the path for the recommendation mandate set forth in Article 23 of the 1947 Statute of the International Law Commission (ILC) and pursuant to Article 13 of the Charter, to convoke a conference of the plenipotentiaries for the purpose of co-operation in favour of ratifying the instrument “as the root of the international order” (Arcari, 2022, p. 3), the ARSIWA was relegated to a crystallisation process in customary international law. The risks associated with this, such as legal imperialism and the duality of direct effect of international law, have led experts to complain of foundational problems. Admittedly, if Giuliana Ziccardi Capaldo is correct that it is the powerful states which are, realistically speaking, the community’s guiding force (Ziccardi Capaldo, 2001, p. 119), the *alleged* morality of customary international law is destined to result in the same subtractions from global regionalism as the frequent practice of examining Western legal systems to derive general principles of international criminal law (cf. legal imperialism). Thus, the setbacks to peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*) may rival those from failed treaty law-making efforts.

Serious Breaches

One obstacle for the instrument’s format concerned “serious breaches” – as defined in Article 40 of the ARSIWA – in terms of violations of obligations *erga omnes* which (i) derive from peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*) and which (ii) involve a gross or systematic failure by the responsible state. While it is correct that the ILC exerted considerable performative force by extending the effects of *jus cogens* to the law on state responsibility, it is equally correct that *both* non-Western *and* Western governments argued that the obligations that fall into the higher value category were contentious. The United States presented a two-fold argument: (1) the regime of the International Criminal Court (ICC) seemed better suited to address the violations that “the Commission interprets as rising to the level of *serious breaches*” and that, generally, (2) the task of dealing with this category is “better left” (United Nations, 2001b, p. 69) to the Security Council, thereby *both* limiting the ARSIWA to other (ordinary) breaches *and* keeping the upper hand when it comes to control of the prohibitions that regulate international relations. The point is: states wanted to preclude peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*) to obstruct equitable relations.

The subtle remark made by the ILC’s 1997–2001 special rapporteur, that “the controversy can also be overstated” (Crawford, 2002, p. 889), is *ex post facto*. However, it captures one pertinent observation: that the instrument is not merely about secondary rules, about norm-protection, i.e., legal consequences from breaches of obligations and accountability modalities, including, in certain circumstances, countermeasures against a state “not in conformity” (ARSIWA, Article 12). Norm-recognition entered the ARSIWA equation, too. By extension, the United States was

against the ILC's 2015 decision to consider *jus cogens* as a separate topic. Since international responsibility covers, according to Article 1 of the ARSIWA, "all international obligations of the State and not only those owed to other States," including human rights which the United States added to the "no consensus" (United Nations, 2001b, p. 86) areas, it can be difficult to understand the opposition to seek further clarification (... besides politics). Be that as it may, the ILC adopted the Draft Conclusions on Identification and Legal Consequences (CILC) in 2022. This instrument consolidates the ARSIWA-VCLT constellation while stipulating, in Conclusion 7, a majoritarian *jus cogens* norm-recognition procedure and, in Conclusion 23, referring to a "non-exclusive list" (United Nations, 2022, p. 16) with prohibitions of aggression, genocide, crimes against humanity, racial discrimination, apartheid, slavery, and torture, as well as the basic rules of international humanitarian law and the right of self-determination.

The list *recycles the legacy* dating back to the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. Therefore, peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*) confirm the so-called historical coherence thesis whereby norms tend to reproduce the *status quo*. The thesis also leaves its footprints in the axiom that "international crimes are confined to certain violations of civil and political rights to the exclusion of their socioeconomic and cultural counterparts" (Vidlička, 2021, p. 159). In other words, international law can be construed as a conservative ideology. At the same time, the CILC reinforces the point that fundamental values and interests "are not mutually exclusive and they indicate the important normative and moral background of the norm[s] in question" (United Nations, 2022, p. 22); just as the instrument repeats the connection to the VCLT's Article 53 and Article 64 for the purpose of cementing the bottom-line: that the norms on the list are hierarchically superior to other rules, universally applicable, and recognised by the international community of states as a whole as norms from which no derogation is permitted. As the compelling law, *jus cogens* has been translated into "higher ethical norms" (O'Connell, 2012, p. 78) which bind all subjects of international law and, in the case of states, *irrespective of* status as United Nations members and/or express consent. This idea(l) of global imperatives is also at work behind Ziccardi Capaldo's *uti universi* policy for important public stakes. Unlike O'Connell's Legal Process Theory, however, Ziccardi Capaldo does *not* equate respect for *jus cogens* with a narrow outlook for norm-recognition. To the contrary, she rebuts the premise that *only non-interference* "merits peremptory treatment" (O'Connell, 2012, p. 98) by invoking a conceptualisation from Stakeholder Jurisprudence whereby peace, security and justice operate as dual-aspect values that integrate – here citing from paragraph 6 of the 2012 Rule of Law Declaration – "all human rights." Stakeholder Jurisprudence provides corrective tools for the analysis that erroneously leads Legal Process Theory to reserve *jus cogens* for "negative rights" (O'Connell, 2012, p. 80), whereas Ziccardi Capaldo highlights post-Westphalian guarantees consistent with no-impunity initiatives *outside of* the Charter's Chapter VII framework. Such global constitutionalism matches global regionalism as based on the primacy of ethics.

A deemphasis on formalism can also be confirmed by international instruments. Like the ARSIWA, the CILC treats *jus cogens* norms as "substantive rules of conduct

that prohibit what has come to be seen as intolerable because of the threat it presents to the survival of States and their peoples and the most basic human values” (United Nations, 2001a, p. 112). The statement that [i]t is not the form of a general rule of international law but the particular nature of the subject-matter with which it deals that may [...] give it the character of *jus cogens*” (Bianchi, 2008, p. 493) launches *jus cogens* as a constitutionally living notion. If so, new norm-recognition responses may serve as placeholders *instead of* the “different materials to illustrate methodological approaches in practice” (United Nations, 2022, p. 17) which merely concern what has *routinely* been identified for the non-exhaustive list the ARSIWA Drafters allowed for. The mainstream outlook is about norm-trailers rather than, *per* Crawford’s terminology, ought-tractors, something that leaves little or no room for (r)evolutionary progress or dynamic development, however decisive for negative survival (non-interference) or positive subsistence (socio-economic need provision).

Emerging Norms

The debate about ecocide and grand corruption as emerging norms reflects a similar narrow/broad tension and an underlying controversy about the (negative/positive) nature and scope of basic human values. While the ARSIWA drafters note that “the articles do not purport to specify the content of the primary rules of international law, or of the obligations thereby created for particular States” (United Nations, 2001a, p. 54), the myth of value-neutrality is easily dispelled. Both substantively and procedurally, the ARSIWA articles endorse the standard *lex superior* as something that relies on the distinction between the international responsibility of states and state criminal responsibility to make it hold that “States themselves do not commit crimes.” The ILC also mentions obligations “of essential importance for the safeguarding and preservation of the human environment, such as those prohibiting massive pollution of the atmosphere or of the seas” (United Nations, 2001a, p. 113). However, this anthropocentric stake does *not* challenge the sources of law from the International Court of Justice, the body which was meant to clarify *which norms* have reached *jus cogens* status together with *the method for their identification*, but which has proven reluctant to do so. Meanwhile, a stalemate for ecocide as the Fifth Crime for inclusion in the international core crime catalogue of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is the reality. Concerning corruption, the United Nations can be credited with the only specialised convention at the international level, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), although its provisions address petty or ordinary corruption, while grand corruption is left out of the regulation. Unless covered by applicable international law, the rudimentary realisation of “the negative effects on society in general” from Article 30 of the 2000 United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) cannot be developed in the way that is required to explain the need for a macro approach in the 2003 UNCAC, which *officially complements* the UNTOC. Legally as well as ethically, the UNCAC ought to incorporate norm-recognition of structurally determined types of (grand) corruption

to accommodate the most serious and widespread socioeconomic harms as the rule of law threatens *broadly construed* to inclusive, sustainable and equitable development, all human rights, and democracy. If international treaty law under the auspices of the United Nations were to be more closely aligned with soft law documents like the 2012 Rule of Law Declaration, the United Nations could perhaps escape its own dilemma. So far, the organisation has not achieved this, though.

In the remainder of this section, the stranded norms will be analysed in an account that also considers the European Union. Recent policies from this forum are discussed against the backdrop of United Nations responses. Global regionalism may be better served, so the hypothesis is that the issues of common values and consistency concerning their promotion are opened to comparison.

United Nations Anniversaries Without Amendments

In 2022, the twentieth anniversary of the ICC was marked by a conference that mooted *jus cogens cum* core international crimes in terms of higher ethical norms. As a speaker, Phoebe Okowa was for an ecocide amendment, but also prepared the grounds for compromise. Crimes are consigned to “the graveyard” *unless* they have a “narrow subject-matter... to maximise political support” (Okowa, 2022). Apparently, multilateralism will fail in the presence of an ethics-infused relationship between law and politics, even if backed by an implied social contract on values. Okowa’s attraction to the 2021 proposal of the Independent Expert Panel for the Legal Definition of Ecocide was mediated by its repetition of the standard crime elements in *unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts*. She remarked that the Global South-Global North conflict would still result in political pushback because of the spillovers from past inequities.

On the premises of the ICC’s framework, Bassiouni’s examples of “the dumping of nuclear and hazardous waste” and “the use of biological substances by individuals and armed groups” (Bassiouni, 2010, p. 590) qualify as a norm-expansion reform that conforms to the prevailing legal ideology since the Rome Statute can absorb the impact. Article 8(2)(b)(iv) provides for ecocide through war crimes, whereas an application in *times of peace* requires crimes against humanity status (cf. Article 7(1)). More progressively, though, ecocide may be freed from *mens rea* to address the effects of capitalism. The link between ecocide and climate change may also be accommodated, as illustrated by Polly Higgins’ 2012 proposal on diminished enjoyment of ecosystems, whether by human agency or by other causes. This would end the appeal to negative survival (non-interference), as well as the individualisation of responsibility. That said, a broader jurisdictional mandate was backed by an ICC Policy Paper on Case Selection and Prioritization, in which a non-separation of social, economic and environmental damage for the purpose of prosecuting crimes “that are committed by means of, or that result in the destruction of the environment, the illegal exploitation of natural resources or the illegal dispossession of land” (ICC

Office of the Prosecutor, 2016) signalled increased value-integration. At the same time, initiatives to consider accountability on behalf of states for climate-induced health risks compete against mainstream experts, who *continue to dismiss* positive rights violations for subsumption under the ICC's residual notion of other inhumane acts (cf. Article 7(1)k). Such acts "*must* be interpreted conservatively and *must not* be used to expand uncritically the scope of crimes against humanity" (Ackermann, 2020). Clearly, global regionalism is at risk of setbacks *unless* developments in case law and legal doctrine are scrutinised in the context of pertinent findings, such as the assumption that qualitative challenges affecting the substantive aspect can be circumvented by the quantitative impact of judicial decisions. These do not deconstruct the value "fragmentation," as also pointed out by ARSIWA scholars (Arcari, 2022, p. 9).

Following Legal Process Theory, narrowness is the appropriate judicial strategy to halt "the trend in bold claims" (O'Connell, 2012, p. 92), e.g., the right to a healthy environment. If ecocide is recognised, this must be *without* obligations to protect the environment because *jus cogens* "cannot mandate" (O'Connell, 2012, p. 97) positive norms. Critically, global regionalism needs tools against such dogmatism. The prevailing legal ideology is geared towards liberal responses on behalf of the higher value category of peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*). All international instruments testify to this, be it the Rome Statute or the ARSIWA. Setbacks will also be inflicted in a *jus cogens* context for grand corruption. This crime is concerned with systematic weaknesses, which translate into objectively avoidable socio-economic harms that affect basic human needs. The ARSIWA's survival criterion has *just as much pull* in the case of grand corruption as in ecocide. The toolbox of global regionalism must resort to ethics to appeal to best practices on the basis of the nature of the subject matter. The typical scenario is a kleptocracy, but the methodology whereby the good of the majority may be sacrificed for a privileged in-group covers the spectrum from consolidated authoritarianism to hybrid regimes with liberal features, apart from the resource redistribution that a concession calls for. Transparency International's ongoing attempt to remedy the legal gap happens amid statements that impunity is the elephant in the room of lawmaking. The 2023 twentieth anniversary of the UNCAC, which highlighted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has not realised the Leave No One Behind pledge, with the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions, healthy lives, and equitable education. Experts point to an *implosion risk* for the rule of law because grand corruption cannot be separated from the system that should combat it. Nevertheless, the UNCAC, like the ARSIWA, is haunted by the fear of too radical interpretations of state-sponsored terrorism. Since marginalisation and discrimination have been exacerbated by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, the linkages between grand corruption and ecocide necessitate a structurally analogous transformation to be consistent with the non-determinism endorsed in the United Nations slogan, *Inequality Is Not Inevitable*. Global regionalism could potentially develop this philosophical framework to combat the effects of liberal capitalism, thereby helping to pave the ethical path for ecocide and grand corruption.

The European Union as an Epicentre for Change

Under the auspices of the United Nations, the first step is pending, namely, crime definitions. Meanwhile, the European Union has criminalised cases comparable to ecocide, an event that unfolded in 2023 and which put the spotlight on health and transnational organised crime. Again, in 2023, the European Parliament called for the establishment of an International Anti-Corruption Court (IACC). Furthermore, the European Union is proactively supporting a modernisation of the anti-corruption framework, inter alia, by adequately accommodating grand corruption. Descriptions of corruption as a euro-crime, “a particularly serious crime with a cross-border dimension” according to Article 83 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union and calls for *de jure* norm-harmonisation may be read as purely regional signals. Nevertheless, a Union-led approach is consistent with globalisation outcomes. e.g., the foreign policy entitled Global Europe takes account of the European Union as a global partner of the United Nations in its conceptualisation of crimes of common interest that are *generalised at the international level* and for which (i) “the global context for action is the pursuit of a rules-based and values-based global order, with multilateralism as its key principle and the UN at its core” (European Union, 2021, p. 3); and which (ii) depend upon, for pre-accession assistance, a willingness to ii) progressively align to Union rules, standards, policies and practices (cf. *acquis*) with a view to future membership. The underlying notion of common values cuts across the United Nations, 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, albeit *certain aspects* having to do with human rights ought to conform with “European values” (European Union, 2021, p. 70) like the 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights. Therefore, the European Union can assist the United Nations in overcoming challenges having to do with equal recognition and protection of all human rights.

A push towards “[s]haping the global agenda and support initiatives on the integration of a strong pillar on equity and social justice” (European Union, 2021, p. 70) summarises a leadership *cum* trend-setter vision. “Where applicable, resources and intervention priorities shall be laid down for participation in global initiatives,” according to Article 15 of Global Europe, thereby advancing a performance model that uses *our* European perspective as a *driver* for global regionalism. Global Europe presupposes that the transition from comparative regionalism to global regionalism is *not* a question of value-replacement, of divergence. Rather, global regionalism is a way to *enhance* frameworks and methodologies while proceeding on the assumption that some norms (*rather than* some norm-givers) are more authoritative. The global relevance of ecocide and grand corruption as anchored in moral intrinsicness points to this statement by V.M. Varun (2020): “[t]ransnational crime violates core human rights with a *jus cogens* status, and hence the offence of transnational crime is a *jus cogens* crime” (p. 156). It is the coupling of the human rights-based approach and state responsibility, through the responsibility to provide reasonable measures to prevent and the right to react *uti universi*, that can secure the eradication of the global menace.

Doctrinally, it is unclear if Varun welcomes socialised *jus cogens* effects or agrees with Legal Process Theory that obligations that “require Governments of States to find or to expend resources” (O’Connell, 2012, p. 80) are precluded. On United Nations premises, Article 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is inconsistent with the step of using resources as a method of voiding norms. However, legal doctrine may still promote criteria that *disregard law* in favour of politicising the relationship between rights-recognition and rights-protection, with credentials-checking that *uncritically* apply the means for the latter as criteria for the former. In the context of European Union law, the prospect of a paradigm shift may be weakened by claiming that more is owed internally than externally, a view that entails a relativisation down to that European Union member state. If so, obligations will be compelling solidarity with *our own* citizens first. Cordula Dröge (2003) even writes that “[o]nly if positive obligations do *not* exceed the possibilities and resources of states will they be a last normative category accepted by all states” (p. 380). This, too, may cause global regionalism to reverse back to a convergence/divergence theory, as Ought implies. Can reasoning and *realpolitik* be used as trumps? To avoid this risk, the European Union has to accept a humanity-centric philosophy for the basic human values that the United Nations promotes in connection with survival.

Conclusion

Together with the Charter and the VCLT, the ARSIWA is viewed as the “third structuring pillar” (Arcari, 2022, p. 3) of the United Nations. This is enough to make the ARSIWA the centrepiece of the contemporary globalisation effort. After all, the implied global constitutionalism may introduce a more robust type of global regionalism, at least if the United Nations can transcend its current norm inertia. This is why the guiding questions for this essay, “What is the role/ambition of theorising in regionalism studies?” and “How relevant is comparative research on regionalism?” are crucial. Without the influence of the European Union, the United Nations may have its body of norms *frozen in time*. A conservative estimate suggests that cross-border threats like ecocide in a narrow sense and (currently) ordinary breaches like cybercrime are top candidates for a *jus cogens* transition, provided Bassiouni’s scholarship, as cited by the ARSIWA drafters, will function as the filter (source) for norm-recognition. If so, *jus cogens* developments will be unresponsive to *shooting star* effects. Crimes and the basic rights of the human person that emerge/d out of general principles of international law will be tested against the traditional and liberal values of life, liberty, and physical/psychological security. Bassiouni’s doctrine does *not* translate into arguments for *jus cogens* elevation on behalf of economic and social human rights; however, it is *basic*. Therefore, *both* the United Nations *and* the European Union must pay close(r) attention to legal doctrine to secure something as fundamental as the principle of interdependency for human rights. If it takes learning lessons from the European Union to make progress, the United Nations should embrace such a push forward. At the same time, the United Nations must

rescue ecocide and grand corruption from any relativity as regards European Union perceptions of social justice. Finally, the United Nations must have safeguards against any value-incompatibility between welfare and freedom – a realistic threat from European Union welfare state ideology. The toolbox of global regionalism must be equipped to tackle this as a spillover from the nexus approach, a task that entails a comprehensive value discourse. The United Nations is a global organisation that is uniquely positioned to implement global regionalism, but the time is ripe for ethical advancements on behalf of universally applicable norms.

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Essay 4: United Regions: Exploring the Impact of Regionalism in a Multipolar World



Max Hernandez Chaname

Introduction

In an increasingly multipolar world, regionalism has emerged as a transformative force, fundamentally reconfiguring the international order. Far from simply being a strategy to address common challenges, contemporary regionalism redistributes global power, generating new dynamics of cooperation and competition that challenge traditional structures of global governance. This essay argues that in the context of the current global order transition, regionalism will not *save* the world in a messianic sense, but rather redefines patterns of hegemony, balance of power, and legitimacy in the international arena.

Emerging multipolarity represents the consolidation of complex networks of regional influence that transform both relations between states and global governance mechanisms. Through the rise of regional powers, the proliferation of integration agreements, and the intensification of interactions between regional blocs, a more decentralised yet interconnected international architecture is being constructed. However, this process is not without contradictions. On the one hand, regionalism offers spaces for greater autonomy and representation of previously marginalised actors in the international system. On the other hand, it can reproduce power asymmetries at the regional level and generate new forms of geopolitical competition. As a result, a world order that is not necessarily more just or stable is taking shape, one that is fundamentally different, characterised by multiple layers of authority and legitimacy.

Through an analysis of emblematic cases and emerging trends, this essay explores how regionalism is reconfiguring the global balance of power and evaluates its implications for the future of international politics.

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The Emergence of Regional Powers: A Reconfiguration of Global Power

The rise of regional powers has been one of the most visible manifestations of regionalism's impact on the international order. This phenomenon has challenged the traditional hegemony of superpowers and contributed to the formation of a more complex and multipolar international system. However, the emergence of these regional powers does not necessarily imply a peaceful transition to a new world order but rather introduces new dynamics of cooperation and conflict at both regional and global levels.

China: Regional Power Projection with Global Ambitions

China's rise as a dominant regional power has drastically reconfigured the Asian and global geopolitical landscape. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, represents an ambitious attempt to project China's economic and political power on a continental and transcontinental scale. As Foot (2020) points out, the BRI is not simply an economic project, but the manifestation of China's vision of a new regional and global order that challenges the Western-led international architecture.

The multidimensional nature of the BRI reveals how regional power can manifest simultaneously in multiple domains. In the economic sphere, China has deployed enormous financial resources to develop infrastructure in more than 70 countries. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), established in 2016 with an initial capital of USD 100 billion, represents an institutionalisation of this economic influence and a challenge to traditional financial institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

Similarly, China has sought to consolidate its regional influence through institutional mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The RCEP, one of the world's largest free trade agreements, was signed in 2020 and reflects China's growing economic influence in the Asia-Pacific. This agreement, which notably excludes the United States, represents a significant shift in regional economic architecture and exemplifies how competition between major powers manifests through the formation of regional blocs.

In the South China Sea, China's territorial claims invoking historical rights and its military assertiveness have generated tensions with neighbours like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, as well as with extra-regional powers like the United States. This dynamic illustrates how the rise of a regional power can destabilise the existing regional balance and generate new configurations of alliances and counterbalances. The formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, and more recently the AUKUS security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, represent

attempts to counter China's growing influence in the region, demonstrating how regionalism can generate extra-regional responses.

China's trajectory illustrates a fundamental aspect of contemporary regionalism: regional powers do not simply seek to dominate their immediate regions, but to project their influence across multiple domains and on a global scale, directly challenging the existing international order. This projection of power destabilises traditional hierarchies and generates new dynamics of alignment and competition that transcend regional boundaries.

Brazil: Regional Ambitions and Domestic Limitations

Brazil's trajectory as a regional power illustrates the complexities and contradictions of regional leadership in the context of domestic political and economic instability. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, under Lula da Silva's governments, Brazil assumed a proactive role in regional integration, leading initiatives such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and expanding its global influence through alliances like BRICS.

Brazil's leadership was instrumental in creating the South American Defence Council in 2008, an initiative that primarily sought to promote cooperation in security and defence in the region, consolidate South America as a zone of peace, and reduce dependence on other regional blocs.

However, the subsequent political and economic crisis, marked by Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and Jair Bolsonaro's controversial presidency, significantly undermined Brazil's capacity to exercise effective regional leadership. Brazil's withdrawal from UNASUR in 2019 and its more isolationist approach under Bolsonaro illustrate how internal instability can drastically affect regional power projection. Brazil's ability to lead regional initiatives and maintain its influence in international forums was directly affected by these changes in its domestic politics.

This fluctuation in Brazil's regional leadership reveals a crucial aspect of contemporary regionalism: the deep interconnection between domestic politics and regional power projection. Unlike China, where a centrally controlled political system has facilitated relatively coherent and sustained regional power projection, Brazil's experience demonstrates how internal political volatility can severely compromise regional ambitions.

The Brazilian case also illustrates the inherent tensions in building regional leadership. During Lula's first era, Brazil tried to project itself as a *benign leader*, promoting regional integration without hegemonic impositions. However, this strategy faced significant resistance, particularly from Argentina. Disagreements over development policies that conflicted with Brazil's interests weakened Mercosur. With ALBA countries, such as Venezuela, relations were complex. Despite Lula's push for cooperation and multilateralism, ideological differences with Hugo Chávez's government generated significant tensions.

The comparison between China and Brazil's trajectories as regional powers reveals significant patterns about the nature of contemporary regionalism. While China has managed to translate its economic might into lasting geopolitical and institutional influence, Brazil has faced greater obstacles in consolidating its regional leadership due to internal structural vulnerabilities and external resistance. These cases demonstrate that the emergence of regional powers does not follow a uniform pattern but is deeply conditioned by factors such as internal political cohesion, economic base, and capacity to generate regional consensus.

More broadly, these examples illustrate how regionalism is reconfiguring the global balance of power not through a simple displacement of hegemonies, but through the creation of new power centres with diverse characteristics and capabilities.

Proliferation of Regional Agreements: Between Integration and Fragmentation

The multiplication of regional agreements has created a dense network of cooperation that transcends national borders, fundamentally altering the architecture of global governance. However, this phenomenon has also generated what Bhagwati (1995) termed the *spaghetti bowl* of overlapping trade agreements, posing significant challenges to the coherence of the global trading system.

The European Union: Deep Integration and Existential Tensions

The European Union represents the most advanced example of regional integration, but also vividly illustrates the inherent tensions between supranational integration and national sovereignty. The European project has evolved from its origins as an economic community toward an increasingly deep political union, with supranational institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Court of Justice exercising authority over a broad spectrum of public policies.

Nevertheless, Brexit exposed the deep underlying fractures in the European project. This historic event can be understood as a manifestation of what Hooghe and Marks (2019) call the *representation gap* in the EU, where economic integration has advanced more rapidly than political integration and the formation of a shared European identity. The Brexit referendum revealed fundamental divisions in British society over sovereignty, national identity, and the perceived benefits of EU membership, reflecting similar tensions present in other member states.

The euro crisis (2010–2012) is another revealing example of the contradictions of European integration. The monetary union, established without a corresponding fiscal union, created structural imbalances that dramatically manifested during the crisis. The response to the crisis, led by Germany, emphasised fiscal austerity and budgetary discipline, generating significant tensions between northern and southern member states. These tensions revealed the limits of European solidarity and the power asymmetries within the union.

Despite this, the EU has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation in the face of these existential crises. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted an unprecedented response in the form of the NextGenerationEU fund of EUR 750 billion, which included for the first time a large-scale issuance of common debt. This institutional innovation suggests that crises can act as catalysts for greater integration, contradicting predictions of imminent disintegration.

The European experience illustrates a fundamental pattern of contemporary regionalism: the permanent tension between the forces of integration and fragmentation. While economic pressures and transnational challenges push toward greater integration, concerns about sovereignty, identity, and democratic legitimacy generate significant counterpressures. This dynamic does not lead to a stable equilibrium, but to a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation of the terms of integration.

The African Continental Free Trade Area: Transformative Ambitions and Structural Challenges

At the other end of the regional integration spectrum, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2019, seeks to overcome Africa's economic fragmentation. With 54 signatory countries, it has the potential to become the world's largest free trade area by number of participants, encompassing a market of 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of USD 3.4 trillion. However, its implementation faces significant challenges, such as economic disparities between countries, deficient infrastructure, and non-tariff barriers. According to the UN, in 2020, intra-African trade represented only 18% of the total, compared to more than 60% in Europe and Asia, reflecting physical and political obstacles.

Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, exemplifies these complexities. Initially, it resisted signing the agreement for fear of impacts on its local industry and loss of tariff revenues. Although it was finally signed in 2019, its decision to close land borders that same year to combat smuggling underscores the tension between regional commitments and national priorities.

Despite these challenges, the AfCFTA represents a potential turning point in Africa's development trajectory. A 2022 World Bank publication indicates that the agreement could increase continental GDP by USD 450 billion by 2035 and lift 50 million people out of extreme poverty. Beyond these economic benefits, the AfCFTA

has profound geopolitical implications, potentially strengthening Africa's negotiating position in the global trading system and reducing its historical dependence on external markets.

The contrast between the EU and the AfCFTA reveals different models and stages of regional integration. While the EU represents a model of deep integration that has evolved over more than six decades, the AfCFTA exemplifies a more recent approach initially centred on trade integration but with aspirations for gradual deepening. Both cases, however, reflect a common dynamic: the tension between transformative ambitions and structural limitations, between supranational visions and national political realities.

These contrasting examples also illustrate how the proliferation of regional agreements is reconfiguring the international economic order. Far from a uniform global economic system dominated by multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), we are witnessing the emergence of a more fragmented but also more diverse economic order, where regional blocs play an increasingly central role in economic governance. This transformation does not necessarily represent a normative improvement of the international economic order, but a significant redistribution of authority and influence that reflects and reinforces emerging multipolarity.

Cooperation, Competition, and the Future of Regionalism

The interaction between regional blocs has emerged as a new dimension of international politics, characterised by a complex mix of cooperation and competition. In an increasingly multipolar world, these interregional interactions are generating new forms of global governance that transcend both traditional multilateralism and closed regionalism.

Interregional Interactions: Towards a New Multilateralism

The relationship between the European Union and the United States illustrates the complexity of contemporary interregional dynamics. The attempt to negotiate the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) represented an ambitious effort to deepen economic integration between these two blocs. However, as De Ville and Siles-Brügge (2016) argue, TTIP was not simply a trade agreement, but an attempt to establish global regulatory standards in an increasingly multipolar world.

The controversies surrounding TTIP negotiations, from food safety concerns to debates about data protection, illustrate how economic interconnections have become a terrain for geopolitical competition. Both the EU and the United States attempted to use TTIP to project their regulatory preferences on a global scale, recognising the power conferred by control over standards in a globalised economy. The failure of TTIP negotiations, especially after Donald Trump's election in 2016, revealed the

limitations of this *Western* approach to standard-setting in a world where economic power is increasingly distributed.

Relations between regional blocs in the Global South offer another revealing example of emerging interregional dynamics. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000, has evolved to become a central mechanism for cooperation between China and African nations. At the 2018 FOCAC summit, China announced a USD 60 billion financing package for Africa, reflecting the growing economic importance of this interregional relationship. This mechanism represents a model in which a state actor with greater economic and political capacity establishes collective links with a region, which helps transform traditional relationships between developed and developing countries.

Simultaneously, initiatives such as the EU-Africa Summit, relaunched in 2017, reflect European attempts to restructure their relations with Africa beyond colonial legacies toward a *partnership of equals*. Competition between these different interregional initiatives has given African countries greater diplomatic room for manoeuvre, allowing them to diversify their external relations and negotiate better terms of cooperation. This dynamic illustrates how interregional interactions can both reproduce existing power relations and create spaces for greater autonomy for previously marginalised actors.

In Asia, the East Asia Summit (EAS) has emerged as a crucial forum for interregional diplomacy, bringing together the ten ASEAN members with Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the United States. This forum reflects the geopolitical centrality of East Asia and the overlapping of regional spheres of influence. The inclusion of both China and the United States in this forum underscores how regional institutions can serve as spaces to manage competition between major powers, albeit with limited success, as demonstrated by the growing rivalry in the South China Sea.

These diverse forms of interregional interaction are giving rise to a phenomenon in which global cooperation is increasingly structured through links between regional blocs, rather than relying exclusively on traditional multilateral institutions. This emerging pattern represents neither a return to post-war UN-centred multilateralism nor a complete fragmentation into closed regional blocs, but a more complex and polycentric architecture of global governance.

Emerging Trends: Interconnected and Functional Regionalism

Looking to the future, regionalism is at a critical crossroads. First, it has the potential to evolve toward what Acharya (2018) has called a *multiplex world*, characterised by multiple layers of governance and a diversity of actors. In this scenario, regional blocs could act as effective intermediaries between national and global levels, facilitating

cooperation on critical issues such as climate change, cybersecurity, and pandemic management.

Alternatively, a potential development is the emergence of regional blocs that establish deeper links with each other, creating a global network of interregional cooperation as a structural response to globalisation, allowing regions to collectively manage the challenges of interdependence. This trend is manifested in the form of *region-to-region* agreements, such as the proposed free trade agreement between the EU and MERCOSUR.

Another possible scenario is evolution toward *functional regionalism*, where cooperation is organised less around geographic proximity and more around shared interests and challenges. Authors like Peter Katzenstein suggest that regions are not fixed geographic entities but social constructs that can be organised around various principles. This trend could lead to the formation of thematic coalitions that transcend traditional regional boundaries, as already observed in initiatives such as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the context of climate change negotiations.

However, there is also a risk that regionalism could lead to greater fragmentation of the international system, exacerbating tensions between different power blocs. As Mearsheimer (2019) warns, competition between major powers could intensify as regional blocs seek to maximise their influence in a multipolar world. This scenario could manifest in the formation of competitive trade and technology blocs, rival regional military alliances, and a general erosion of global norms and institutions.

The future trajectory of regionalism will largely depend on how the tension between cooperation and competition is managed. If regional integration is promoted as a step toward greater global openness, it could facilitate a more cooperative international order. Conversely, if the focus is primarily oriented toward regional autonomy and competition for power, it could accelerate the fragmentation of the international system. This balance will determine whether regionalism becomes a force that strengthens global governance or one that deepens geopolitical divisions.

Conclusion: Will Regions Save the World?

Contemporary regionalism does not represent a panacea for global challenges nor an existential threat to the international order, but a transformative force that is fundamentally reconfiguring how power is organised and exercised in the world arena. It is not *saving* the world in a teleological sense but redistributing global power in ways that create both opportunities and challenges for international governance. This redistribution of power does not follow a uniform or necessarily progressive pattern. As the cases of China and Brazil demonstrate, emerging regional powers can promote both multilateral cooperation and hegemonic competition, depending on internal factors and specific regional contexts.

The proliferation of regional agreements, such as the European Union and the African Continental Free Trade Area, is generating new architectures of cooperation that transcend national borders. Nevertheless, these integration processes face

tensions between supranational ambitions and national political realities, as well as between transformative visions and structural limitations. The result is not a single model of regional integration, but the coexistence of multiple forms of regionalism that reflect different historical contexts, institutional capacities, and diverse political preferences.

The interaction between regional blocs is creating new forms of multilateralism that complement, and sometimes compete with, traditional global institutions. This responds to the growing complexity of global governance in a world where power is more dispersed and challenges are more interconnected. However, this evolution also carries the risk of fragmentation and competition between rival regional blocs.

In the future, emerging trends toward interconnected or functional regionalism suggest possible paths for regionalism to contribute more effectively to global governance. Yet, its success will depend on political decisions about how regions are constructed and related. A regionalism oriented toward openness, inclusion, and cooperation could strengthen collective capacity to address transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and economic insecurity. Conversely, a regionalism centred on competition for power and exclusionary autonomy could exacerbate geopolitical tensions and hinder collective action.

The main challenge is not whether regionalism will be the definitive solution, but how it can be structured to contribute to a more stable, just, and effective international order. This will require developing new institutional and normative frameworks that recognise diversity while fostering global cooperation. Some key strategies include:

1. Strengthening interregional coordination mechanisms to address global challenges, possibly through *coalitions of regions* focused on specific problems.
2. Promoting regionalism that fosters integration among its members without losing openness to external actors, avoiding the formation of isolated and competitive blocs.
3. Developing shared governance principles that respect the diversity of regional models and promote common values of transparency, inclusion, and sustainability.

These strategies will not guarantee that regionalism solves all global problems, but they could help channel its transformative potential toward more cooperative and equitable outcomes. Regionalism is neither inherently progressive nor regressive; its impact depends on how it is politically configured.

The vision that emerges from this analysis is not of a world hierarchically ordered under global institutions, nor of self-sufficient regional blocs competing for power, but of a world order characterised by multiple layers of authority, diverse forms of regional interconnection, and shared principles that allow both regional differentiation and global cooperation. In this scenario, regions could contribute to building a more resilient and representative international order, capable of managing the complex challenges of our interdependent era without sacrificing the diversity and autonomy that characterise a truly multipolar system.

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Essay 5: Can Regionalism Save the World? Geopolitical Challenges and Regionalism



Ken Masujima

Introduction

The world today faces multiple challenges at all levels: societal, national, regional, transnational, and international. The problem is that all these challenges are closely interrelated. Deepening of domestic division parallels that of international politics, and they in turn have repercussions on regional, transnational, and international relations. Regionalism, understood as “the policies, ideas, and practices of institutionalised cooperation between states (and non-state actors) within a geographically-defined region” (Fawcett, 2020), is in this sense at the intersection of national political development and international political development. It is no wonder then that regionalism is facing existential challenges as a political movement to increase cooperation at the macro-regional level. It is argued indeed that in the age of nationalism (understood as the unilateral pursuit of national interest), promoting regionalism is dangerous since cooperation is increasingly locked in geopolitical rivalries at the global and regional level. Even without going so far, is regionalism destined to decline in today’s increasing nationalism around the world? Can regionalism save the world by increasing cooperation? More precisely, is regionalism a stepping stone or a stumbling block for a peaceful world?

Geopolitical Challenges

It is first necessary to try to identify what the common geopolitical challenges are in today’s world. The liberal international order established after the Cold War, with the US at the top, is being challenged on two fronts.

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The first challenge is the relative decline of the US and the rise of China. China, led by the Communist Party, sits uncomfortably among liberal democracies and favours non-democratic countries, and the Sino-American conflict is therefore not simply a struggle for military or technological hegemony, but a confrontation in terms of the political system. As such, there is an aspect of resonance with Russia and other authoritarian countries.

The second challenge is the change in the relative economic power of developed and developing countries of the West. Today, the GDP of developing countries, led by China and other developing countries, exceeds that of the OECD countries combined. China remains a developing country according to the World Bank's classification based on per capita income levels. Developing countries have been able to match their own economic and political influence in the international political arena, and the term *Global South* is the political backdrop of the economic rise of developing countries and is used actively, especially by countries like South Africa.

The meaning and function of regionalism have been changing in the context of these tectonic shifts in international politics. Complicating matters is the fact that China, which is leading the first change, is still an advocate of developing countries in the second change.

Geopolitics and Regionalism

Can regionalism survive this rise of geopolitical nationalism in today's world? Can regionalism *save the world*? That is, can regionalism attenuate rather than reinforce the rising tension of the international system?

A hint to answer these questions can be gained from comparison with another era of geopolitical polarisation, the Cold War. Under the conditions of tight geopolitical competition of the Cold War, regionalism *flourished*, with the advance of European integration, which was conceived as a bulwark against the Eastern bloc. European integration was thus marked by the Cold War logic of blocs. In other parts of the world as well, the Cold War had its impact, especially on Southeast Asia, where ASEAN was born out of fear of the spread of communist insurgencies in the region. The *hot* confrontation with the communist countries in Southeast Asia, as typified by the Indochina War, dictated regionalist designs during the period. Other, more directly military regional alliances, SEATO and ANZUS, were also created (and then disappeared). Therefore, regionalism continued despite global polarisation along East–West lines. However, polarisation along the global East–West confrontation heavily impacted how regionalism developed during the Cold War period. Various recent scholarships on *regional Cold Wars* (Lüthi, 2015) show in greater detail than we had known before the nuances and specificities of regional aspects of the global Cold War. Further historical studies should bring new insights into the regional politics of regionalism during the Cold War.

Then what can we say about the current polarisation on the global scale, most often referred to as the US–Sino rivalry? There is a clear tendency for polarisation,

as evidenced by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the countermove by the West of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and related strategic moves such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). Although started as *the new Silk Road*, linking China with its biggest market, Europe, the BRI has now the global reach and competition has become world-wide, from the Pacific Island countries, Northeast and Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Europe (especially Eastern Europe), and Africa, to the Caribbean Island countries, and Central and South America. However, this global competition stopped short of reaching the degree of polarisation seen during the Cold War period (Masujima, 2021). Clearly, the systemic pressure from the global geopolitical competition today is not as strong as during the Cold War. Why is this the case? It is related to the characteristics of the competitors, especially China. First, China is the single biggest beneficiary of the current world trade system and is implicated in the status quo, at least in the economic sphere. It is no mystery that, despite its domestic economy being heavily controlled and subsidised by the state, China pretends to be the champion of free trade. Secondly, China does not possess strategic *parity* in terms of nuclear arsenal as the Soviet Union did during the latter stage of the Cold War. Thirdly, even if China, especially under Xi Jinping, strives to undermine democracy and promote authoritarianism in other countries, communism as a system does not command a global audience any more as it did during the Cold War. Fourthly, many in the Global South refuse to be drawn into an all-out confrontation between the US and China, as the internal feud within BRICS shows.

Possibilities of Regionalism

If regionalism in the present period *survives* the current global polarisation, what form does regionalism take? As many scholars assert, diverse layers of regionalism are observed today. For example, Daniel C. Bach lists five such *threads*: colonial and imperial legacies, regionalism as sovereignty or regime enhancement, the EU as a model of holistic and developmental integration, regionalisation through defragmentation and connectivity, and regionalisation without region-building (Bach, 2024). For my part, I would like to point to the following possibilities for regionalism in view of the geopolitical challenges I enumerated.

The first format is related to what is left of globalisation. It must be stressed that economic globalisation continues unabated. Although some talk about *deglobalisation*, it is nonetheless not to be forgotten that after the pandemic, the global trade in terms of GDP started again to increase. FTAs around the world take hold despite the coming into power of leftist or hostile governments in member countries and the paralysis at the WTO negotiations. Regionalisation, as observed in trade in goods and services in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa, continues to advance. In addition, climate change and migratory challenges call for cooperation, especially among regional countries. The question, therefore, is whether this regionalisation reinforces regional cooperation or increases antagonism among regional countries.

The second format is the pursuit by regional core countries of what can be called *hegemonic regionalism*. It is, of course, true that this form of regionalism existed before, but today it is more pronounced given the receding trend of regional cooperation in general. South Africa is using regional organisations in Africa to pursue its national interest as a leader of the African continent. Nigeria is deeply involved in ECOWAS, as recent ECOWAS reactions to the military takeover of power in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso show. In South America, Brazil is using its new regional influence, after the return to power of Lula, who had shown more regionalist inclination than his predecessor, Bolsonaro, to foster cooperation in MERCOSUR and revitalise UNASUR. These and other regional core countries find it in their interest to promote regional cooperation to consolidate their regional power base (Hurrell, 2005). The interesting question to ask when thinking about the prospect of regionalism is whether these regionalist policies, driven by regional core states, are resented or accepted by other (weaker) countries.

The third format is the contestation of Western-led regionalism. As is well-known, the creation of the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) in 2014 was an initiative by China to challenge the current Western-led world economic order dominated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In this regard, the pursuit of regionalism by non-liberal states such as China and Russia existed prior to this, and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Community (EASC), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) merit more attention from a comparative regionalism study perspective, as forerunners of today's authoritarian assertiveness (Libman & Obydenkova, 2018).

The most intriguing question to ask regarding this format of regionalism is about BRI and BRICS. On the one hand, China's BRI is rather difficult to characterise as *regionalism* for two reasons. First, since its inception, BRI is a Chinese policy rather than a grouping. China, as the donor, speaks, and participating countries, as recipients, listen (and sometimes ask questions) to China, and they do not talk to each other among the recipients. Secondly, although it started as a new Silk Road linking China to Europe through Central Asia and Southeast Asia, BRI has in recent years lost its initial geographical definition and become synonymous with China's hallmark global strategy. On the other hand, BRICS has become the focus of an alternative route to non-Western regrouping and constitutes today a sort of regionalism of the Global South. BRICS has expanded to include Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, UAE, and Saudi Arabia, while Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Malaysia are now applying for membership. It should be seen whether BRICS turns into something of an explicitly anti-Western grouping along the authoritarian axes of China and Russia.

Can Regionalism Save the World?

If regionalism under diverse forms continues to flourish, can regionalism save the world? More concretely, can regions be building blocks for stabilising the global geopolitical system? If regionalism is simply a result of the actions of nation-states,

then there is little prospect of regionalism playing an independent role. Regions will then resemble more like a battleground among competing countries for domination or influence. While it is true that regionalism largely results from state policies and actions, there are some elements of an independent role that regionalism could and should play. I would like to point out two such independent roles that regionalism can play: the restraining role of existing regional organisations and the potential role of dormant or inactive regional arrangements.

Firstly, contestation of regional organisations with liberal values has largely been *contained*. In the EU, after Brexit, contestation of the EU by some of its member states (Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia) has been at the stage of *voice*, and not that of *exit*. In Latin America, changes of government, both leftist and conservative, have indeed affected regionalism, but there was a certain resilience of existing regional organisations despite these internal political changes. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN, which includes communist and other authoritarian regimes (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) as members, has been dealing with the military takeover of power in Myanmar in an extremely cautious manner. Whereas in Africa, the recent takeover of power by military juntas in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso led to the announcement of the withdrawal of these three West African states from ECOWAS. The coup leaders cut ties with Western countries and turned to Russia. This is an important challenge for ECOWAS, which is committed to democracy and good governance, and has implications for the global geopolitical contest between authoritarianism and democracy. The three Sahel countries effectively exited from ECOWAS and formed their own new regional organisation, the Alliance of the Sahel. However, ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) remain committed to their democratic principles. This resilience of existing regional organisations should serve as a built-in stabiliser for the region, even as some member countries voice opposition and exit.

Secondly, I would like to emphasise the importance of the *hangover* of dormant regional groupings and organisations. In Latin America, new regional organisations and groupings come into existence, while older ones continue to exist, often by name only, such as the Andean Community.

More to the point, dormant regional organisations have potential value in future regional designs in offering a venue for meetings, for example. In East Asia, where strategic geopolitical rivalry is acute, vigilance against Chinese hegemony is strong, and any step forward on the proclaimed East Asian Community is out of sight. However, the trilateral forum of the East Asian Trilateral Summit involving China, Korea, and Japan has regularly been held since 2008. The lesser-known entity born out of this trilateral summit is the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS). Despite its small size, the fact that the three countries, through their Foreign Ministries, invest some resources in this permanent cooperation mechanism speaks to a potent possibility of trilateral regional cooperation in the future. There may be a value in this kind of residual regional cooperation entity for the future development of cooperation in East Asia. This kind of *hangover* or dormant regional forums and groupings could and should be referred to when a formal channel remains deadlocked for furthering regional cooperation.

Conclusion

Compared with the period of the end of the Cold War, when the EU expanded and deepened, and various new regional organisations came into existence, such as MERCOSUR and NAFTA, the present period of increasing geopolitical tensions and polarisation of rivalries sees the decline of regionalism. It is rightly observed that regionalism is in tough times today. However, as I tried to show, history shows that regionalism is compatible with global rivalry and tensions. In today's world as well, if we take up hegemonic and counter-Western models of regionalism along with existing regional organisations, there are multiple examples of regionalism playing central roles in security, political, economic, social, and cultural domains. The question is whether regionalism can stabilise geopolitical tensions of today's world and save the world from falling into a World War II-like competition of regional blocs. The answers are necessarily open and depend on how things will play out in different regions of the world. One encouraging, albeit unexpected, sign is the increasing awareness and recognition among different regions of the world that the *America First* stance of the US under the Trump administration necessitates more and not less regional cooperation. This is already evident in one of the tensest regions of the world, East Asia, where China attenuates (tactically) hardline policies regarding its neighbours. It will be seen whether these overtures can help lessen the increasing geopolitical tensions.

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Essay 6: Can Regions Stabilise the Global Geopolitical System? Balancing Local Initiatives and Global Challenges



Muhammad Reza Suleiman

Introduction

In contemporary geopolitics, regions are pivotal in shaping the global landscape, characterised not just by geographic boundaries but also by shared cultural, economic, and political interests that influence interactions within the broader international community. These interactions span from cooperative ventures to conflicts and competitions, establishing regions as significant actors in the global geopolitical arena.

The current global geopolitical system confronts a myriad of challenges and instabilities with profound implications. These include the resurgence of great power competition, shifts in economic dynamics, technological advancements, environmental crises, and the rise of influential non-state actors. These factors contribute to a volatile global environment where traditional alliances are tested, new rivalries emerge, and power dynamics evolve continually.

Amidst these complexities, regions play a dual role in both contributing to and potentially stabilising the global geopolitical system. Regional conflicts and tensions can escalate into broader international crises, impacting global security and stability. Conversely, initiatives such as economic alliances and security frameworks fostered through regional integration can enhance cooperation, mitigate conflicts, and bolster stability both within and across regions.

Understanding how regions interact within the global geopolitical system is essential for policymakers and scholars alike. Analysis of regional behaviours, alliances, and conflicts provides insights into broader global trends and pathways towards stability. Moreover, regions play a crucial role in shaping global governance structures, norms, and institutions, often serving as laboratories for innovative forms of cooperation and conflict resolution.

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Key questions emerge: How do regional dynamics heighten global geopolitical tensions? In what ways do specific regions contribute to global stability amidst ongoing challenges? What are the impacts of regional conflicts on international stability and cooperation? Addressing these questions through detailed analysis and empirical case studies will identify opportunities within regional interactions to foster greater global stability.

Understanding Regional Dynamics

A region is defined by shared geographical, cultural, political, and economic traits that distinguish it from neighbouring areas (Schmitt-Egner, 2002). De Lombaerde and Schulz (2009) argue that a region's identity is shaped by an interplay of these factors, not just physical boundaries. Geopolitically, regions are often characterised by proximity, common historical experiences, cultural affinities, and economic interdependencies, contributing to a cohesive identity and sense of belonging among states (Hartono, 2022). Regions vary in size and scope, ranging from localised areas to large transcontinental zones like the EU or the AU (Paasi & Metzger, 2016).

Regions are significant in geopolitics due to their influence on international relations, economic cooperation, and security dynamics. Hurrell (2007) highlights regions as containers of diversity, where states, despite their differences, cooperate to form a community. This cooperation allows regions to act as counterweights to global powers or advance global capitalism. Regions also serve as governance levels within a broader multilevel global system. The EU, as Hurrell (2007) suggests, is a model of economic, political, and social cohesion that has become an influential agent in global politics.

Regional identities are critical in shaping political behaviour and decision-making. These identities often serve as the foundation for collective action to address common challenges (Thompson, 1973). For instance, the EU has cultivated a distinct supranational identity based on shared values such as democracy, human rights, and economic integration. This identity has strengthened cooperation among EU member states and contributed to successful policy outcomes. Regional interests—economic, security, and developmental priorities—are key drivers of regional cooperation. As Graham (2008) suggests, the alignment of these interests can lead to the formation of trade blocs like ASEAN and COMESA or regional unions like the EU, ECOWAS, and Mercosur, which promote economic growth, stability, and security.

The EU, originally formed to foster peace and prosperity after World War II, has evolved into a complex regional union (Makinen, 2019). Its role has expanded beyond economic cooperation to include areas such as trade, environmental policy, and foreign affairs (Lelieveldt & Princen, 2023; McSweeney, 1999). The EU's success in fostering integration underscores the importance of shared values and institutions in overcoming historical divisions and promoting stability across Europe.

The AU plays a critical role in addressing challenges like conflict resolution, economic development, and governance reform across its 55 member states (Majinge,

2011). The AU aims to strengthen political and economic cooperation through initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and the African Economic Community (AEC), enhancing regional solidarity and resilience (Shumba, 2023). Similarly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, has focused on fostering economic cooperation (Lee, 2022) and promoting political dialogue (Zhang, 2023) among its ten member states. ASEAN has facilitated economic growth through initiatives like the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and promoted regional security through forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Garofano, 2002).

These regional entities—EU, ASEAN, and AU—illustrate the complexities of regional integration and cooperation. They demonstrate how regional collaboration can drive economic development, political stability, and conflict resolution. By addressing shared challenges, these organisations highlight how aligning regional interests can lead to successful cooperation, despite varying national priorities. Examining their efforts provides valuable insights into the potential for regions to shape global governance, offer stability, and meet the demands of an interconnected world.

Regional Stability and Conflict Mitigation

Regional stability is a crucial aspect of global geopolitics, influencing peace, economic prosperity, and societal well-being within specific geographic areas. Regions contribute to stability through various mechanisms, including economic integration, political dialogue, and cultural exchanges, which collectively mitigate conflicts and promote cooperative frameworks.

Economic integration among states within a region fosters mutual interdependence and reduces incentives for conflict (Mitrany, 1966; Shah, 2020). This idea remains relevant but has been expanded by later scholars of regional integration. For example, Hettne (2005) argues that regional integration plays a crucial role in fostering peace by reducing the likelihood of conflict through economic cooperation, shared governance, and institutionalised diplomacy. Similarly, Acharya (2015) emphasises that economic interdependence through regional organisations can mitigate security concerns by fostering collective action and collaboration across states, which makes conflicts more costly and less likely.

The EU is a prime example, where initiatives like the single market and the common currency have contributed to decades of stability and prosperity, illustrating how economic integration can reduce conflict. Other regional organisations, such as ASEAN and Mercosur, further support this view, demonstrating how common trade agreements and infrastructure projects foster peaceful relations by aligning economic interests. Therefore, while Mitrany's view remains foundational, it has been enriched by contemporary scholarship on regional integration, which highlights the broader role of economic and institutional cooperation in promoting regional stability and peace.

The AfCFTA seeks to promote peace and stability in Africa by promoting economic integration and cooperation among member states through the elimination of tariffs on intra-African trade and the facilitation of the movement of goods, services, and people. By fostering economic interdependence, it is expected that economic disparities between member states will be reduced, the root causes of conflict will be addressed, diplomatic relations will be enhanced, and political stability will be promoted. Furthermore, the AfCFTA encourages collaboration in infrastructure development and industrialisation, which will contribute to regional stability and prosperity, ultimately establishing a foundation for sustained peace and development across the continent.

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN has promoted economic cooperation through initiatives like the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), enhancing trade liberalisation and economic growth among member states. These efforts have increased intra-regional trade and investment, creating interconnected economies dependent on peaceful relations for prosperity. By fostering interdependence and mutual benefit, ASEAN has mitigated historical tensions and enhanced regional stability. Economic interdependence has incentivised diplomatic dialogue and conflict resolution within ASEAN, reinforcing that economic integration and peace are mutually reinforcing. Similarly, AfCFTA in Africa aims to emulate these successes by fostering economic ties that promote peaceful coexistence and shared prosperity among diverse member countries.

Political Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Regions employ political dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms to address disputes peacefully and build trust among member states. Regional organisations serve as platforms for diplomatic negotiations, mediation efforts, and peacekeeping operations, providing frameworks for dialogue, consensus-building, and the implementation of conflict prevention strategies (Boutin, 2011). For instance, during the 2009 Honduran constitutional crisis, the Organisation of American States (OAS) employed political dialogue to mediate between conflicting parties. Through diplomatic efforts led by Secretary General José Miguel Insulza, the OAS facilitated the San José Agreement, which ultimately restored democratic governance and resolved the political turmoil in Honduras (Legler, 2012).

Another notable instance where regional organisations have contributed to peace is during the Darfur conflict. The AU employed political dialogue to address the conflict in Sudan, mediating negotiations between the Sudanese government and rebel groups, culminating in the Darfur Peace Agreement of 2006. This agreement aimed to establish a framework for peace through power-sharing arrangements and security provisions, highlighting the AU's role in using diplomatic dialogue to resolve complex conflicts on the African continent (Mohamed, 2009). Similarly, in 2017, ECOWAS used political dialogue to resolve the political crisis in The Gambia. Following a disputed presidential election, ECOWAS initiated diplomatic efforts

and engaged in dialogue with former President Yahya Jammeh to peacefully transfer power to the democratically elected leader, Adama Barrow. Through sustained mediation and diplomatic pressure, ECOWAS successfully facilitated Jammeh's peaceful exit from office, ensuring stability and democratic continuity in The Gambia without resorting to military intervention (Hartmann, 2017).

The EU played a central role in addressing the Northern Ireland conflict, or the Troubles, by facilitating mediation and supporting the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Hayward, 2006). This agreement addressed key issues such as power-sharing, human rights protections, and paramilitary disarmament, establishing a framework for peace. Lagana and McLoughlin (2023) highlight the often-overlooked role of the European Parliament (EP), noting a gap in existing studies of the EU's influence in Northern Ireland. Their work underscores John Hume's efforts in shaping EU engagement and promoting its role in peacebuilding. While local political developments were crucial, Hume's initiatives from the 1970s laid the groundwork for EU involvement.

Cultural and Social Exchanges Fostering Understanding

Cultural and social exchanges are vital for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among diverse regional populations. By promoting cultural diplomacy, regions build shared identities and values that transcend national boundaries (Suleiman & Slighoua, 2024). Programs such as language learning, student exchanges, and cultural festivals enhance social cohesion and reduce prejudices that can fuel conflicts. For example, ASEAN promotes cultural exchanges through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, which strengthens ties and mutual respect among member states (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). The Erasmus + program in Europe also fosters cross-cultural understanding by providing opportunities for students, educators, and young people to engage in exchanges across borders (European Community, 1987).

On the African continent, the Charter for African Renaissance promotes principles of good governance, human rights, and sustainable development, aiming to foster integration and political stability (African Union, 2006). This focus on cooperation and peaceful dispute resolution helps mitigate tensions and build trust among African nations. Regional stability and conflict mitigation are achieved through a multifaceted approach that integrates economic cooperation, political dialogue, and cultural exchanges. Economic integration reduces disparities, while political dialogue resolves disputes peacefully, and cultural exchanges promote shared identity and mutual understanding.

Challenges to Regional Stability

Internal Conflicts and Divisions

Regional organisations such as the AU, EU, and ASEAN grapple with internal conflicts and divisions despite their aims of promoting peace and integration. The AU contends with civil wars in South Sudan and Somalia, along with political instability in countries like Ethiopia and Libya (Abass, 2014). Within the EU, disagreements over migration policies, economic disparities among member states (Niemann & Zaun, 2023), and the ramifications of Brexit have strained unity (Kyriazi et al., 2023). ASEAN faces ethnic tensions and insurgencies in Myanmar and Thailand (Zha, 2017). These internal challenges underscore the complexities regional organisations face in achieving collective security and solidarity while managing diverse political, economic, and social dynamics within their member states. Regions plagued by internal conflicts often struggle with governance challenges, weak institutions, and the breakdown of law and order, further complicating efforts to achieve stability and economic development.

External Interference and Geopolitical Rivalries

External interference and geopolitical rivalries challenge regional stability (Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2024). Powerful states or non-state actors may manipulate political dynamics to advance their strategic interests, using military interventions, proxy wars, or economic coercion, undermining regional cooperation. In the Asia-Pacific, major power rivalries have escalated tensions, contributing to military build-ups and territorial disputes, destabilising the region (Yoshimatsu, 2023). In West Africa, France, the US, and Russia's geopolitical interests have led Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso to leave ECOWAS and form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These nations' strategic resources and locations have attracted international powers, creating competing agendas that hinder integration within ECOWAS. Similar patterns of external interference can be seen in regions like Asia and Latin America, further complicating efforts toward regional stability.

Economic Disparities and Development Gaps

Economic disparities and development gaps contribute to social unrest, migration pressures, and political instability (Okafor, 2017). Disparities in income, access to services, and economic opportunities can fuel resentment and inequality, leading to social fragmentation. Regions that fail to address these gaps risk perpetuating poverty and hindering long-term stability. In the EU, economic disparities between northern

and southern countries have strained relations. Southern states like Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, facing high debt and unemployment after the global financial crisis, often seek financial support from wealthier northern members like Germany and the Netherlands. This has led to debates over fiscal policies, damaging EU solidarity (Hacker, 2021). Addressing regional stability requires internal conflict resolution, reducing external interference, and addressing economic disparities. Inclusive governance, dialogue, and investments in sustainable development can help regions resist destabilising influences, fostering peace and cooperation.

Case Studies Illustrating Successful Regional Stabilisation Efforts

The AU and ECOWAS

ECOWAS has been vital in addressing regional conflicts and promoting stability across West Africa, especially in the 1990s when it played a key role in resolving civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone by deploying the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) (Inegbedion, 1994) and mediated various peace agreements in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, and Guinea. Similarly, the AU has mediated conflicts in South Sudan, Libya, and Madagascar. In South Sudan, AU efforts focused on achieving a ceasefire and fostering political dialogue (Abass, 2014). In Libya, the AU advocated for inclusive dialogue post-civil war, while in Madagascar, AU mediation led to a transitional government and constitutional order (Murithi, 2012). The AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) plays a key role in coordinating regional conflict responses and promoting collective security (Williams, 2009). Both the AU and ECOWAS demonstrate how regional organisations, by leveraging local knowledge, can implement effective peacebuilding strategies, promote dialogue, and enhance stability, contributing to sustainable development.

Stability Efforts in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe faced significant political and economic challenges, prompting regional stabilisation efforts (Tsarandidis, 2011). The EU's enlargement policy has been central to promoting stability and democracy, though outcomes remain debated (Veleva-Eftimova, 2019). Countries like Poland, Hungary, and the Baltics implemented reforms for EU membership, resulting in economic support, infrastructure investment, and access to the single market (Palkova, 2024). Despite progress, EU influence is constrained by geopolitical factors, particularly Russia's actions. Moldova, while making progress toward European integration, faces challenges such as the unresolved Transnistria

issue and widespread poverty, limiting EU engagement (German, 2024). In contrast, many Eastern Partnership countries, like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine, face political instability, internal conflicts, or open warfare (de Waal et al., 2024). The Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009, has had a limited impact due to ongoing conflicts and insufficient EU commitment (Sydoruk & Tyshchenko, 2018).

ASEAN's Role in Southeast Asia

ASEAN has been instrumental in mitigating conflicts among its member states through dialogue and diplomacy (Thompson & Chong, 2020). The ASEAN Way, characterised by consensus-building and non-interference in internal affairs, has helped prevent escalations and maintain regional peace. ASEAN has fostered economic cooperation through initiatives such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (Sukegawa, 2021). These initiatives have reduced trade barriers, promoted investment flows, and enhanced regional economic resilience, contributing to stability and prosperity. ASEAN demonstrates regional cooperation, trust-building, and resilience through economic integration, conflict resolution, inclusive development, and strengthened institutional frameworks for peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

The Limitations of Regionalism

Regionalism, praised for fostering cooperation and economic integration, has limitations that reduce its effectiveness. One key issue is its inability to address transnational threats like climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and cyber threats, which require global strategies. Regional organisations often lack the authority, resources, or mandate to tackle these challenges on a broader scale. Additionally, regionalism can escalate global tensions by fostering rivalries within regional blocs. Economic competition, territorial disputes, and geopolitical ambitions among regional powers can destabilise both the region and international peace. The South China Sea disputes, involving ASEAN member states and China, show how regional tensions can have far-reaching global implications, complicating unified conflict resolution (Wardhana, 2021). Regionalism also impacts national sovereignty, potentially provoking nationalist backlash (Börzel, 2024). Integration often requires states to relinquish aspects of sovereignty to supranational institutions or adopt common policies, which can lead to resistance from nationalist movements fearing loss of national identity and autonomy. Brexit exemplifies this, as the UK's departure from the EU stemmed from concerns over sovereignty, immigration, and EU-imposed regulations (Jones, 2021).

Conclusion

Regions play a critical role in stabilising geopolitical systems through cooperation, economic integration, and conflict resolution within defined areas. Regional organisations such as the AU, ASEAN, and EU are pivotal in advancing peace, security, and sustainable development by addressing localised challenges and fostering economic growth. These organisations demonstrate the efficacy of regional cooperation in conflict mitigation and the establishment of governance frameworks that transcend national borders.

However, achieving sustained regional stability requires robust cooperation among member states and continuous investment in regional integration. While regions excel in managing intra-regional conflicts and promoting economic development, their success is contingent upon strategic engagement and coordination. By capitalising on regional strengths and fostering cohesive efforts, regions can contribute significantly to peace and prosperity. Continued emphasis on regional cooperation and integration is crucial for addressing emerging geopolitical challenges and ensuring long-term stability within regions. Such efforts are essential for navigating complex regional dynamics and fostering resilient, interconnected political and economic environments.

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Essay 7: Regionalism in Global International Relations: Promoting an Ethical and Intercultural Global Agenda



Rafael Gustavo Miranda Delgado

Introduction

The Global North, specifically the United States, has held a hegemonic position in international relations and its study. The discipline of International Relations (IR) developed under the expansion of the European state system and American material and intellectual hegemony, with its scientific foundations, systematisation, and theoretical framework established after World War II in the United States. As a result, authors like Hoffmann (1977) asserted that International Relations is an American social science, and Waltz (1979) argued that it would be ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Costa Rica or Malaysia.

These phenomena of dominance in international relations and their study have been mutually reinforcing, defining what is and is not the object of study in IR and shaping the global agenda. Consequently, the focus of IR and the global agenda has been centred on topics of particular interest to the North Atlantic countries, such as interstate conflict, the balance of power among major powers, and the conception of power as domination and hegemony.

Additionally, their analytical and categorical theoretical frameworks are pertinent for understanding the actions of world powers but insufficient for explaining the complex phenomena of the contemporary world, including their dynamics of cooperation. This necessitates a pluralisation of the global agenda, the object of study in IR, and the geopolitical perspectives of analysis.

Therefore, the objective of this essay is to analyse the importance of regionalisms and their study in promoting an ethical and intercultural global agenda. The argument will be made in two analytical spaces. First, it will be deconstructive, critiquing IR

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and its narrow object of study from the perspective of regionalisms, considering regionalisms as both a form of governance and a field of study. Second, it will be constructive, arguing for the importance of an ethical and intercultural global agenda for the regions.

Deconstructive Moment

The object of study in IR partly constitutes the global agenda. Thus, a critique, as intended in this section, is necessary not only to enrich the discipline internally but also to make it useful and contribute to the development of a more just world. An ethical approach to Global IR differentiates itself by not separating theory from practice, making evident the manifest injustices, such as the under-representation of the majority of the world population's interests in global affairs, and enhancing the transformative capacity of the contemporary global order. A critical Global IR points out that the mainstream object of study in IR and the global agenda have been unilaterally defined by previous hegemony and argues that they should reflect inter-subjective notions of ethics that must be publicly reasoned with critical consciousness. Therefore, the plurality of issues in the global agenda, geopolitical diversity, and methodological forms is the first critical moment of Global IR.

IR, like most social sciences in its scientific aspiration, postulates the separation of the object of study from the analyst. This hinders the constitution of a discipline committed to expanding the object of study and the global agenda, where the interests of a significant portion of humanity from the Global South regions are marginalised, and these interests possess a significant ethical component. A Global IR that seeks to construct a more just world must move away from this position that naturalises apparent injustices and take an argumentative stance for contemporary ethical objectives.

The social sciences have also sought the universal but have understood universalisation from a parochial point of view, normalising the experiences of the North Atlantic without considering historical and contemporary phenomena outside it, while here, the universal is understood from the intercultural dialogue of diverse realities. As Cox (1986) warns, theory is always for someone and for some purpose. The difference with mainstream IR is that these objectives are presented as natural or neutral, whereas an ethical Global IR exposes these assumptions in pursuit of a more just world for all.

The contemporary era is a privileged moment for carrying out this initiative. Regions and their relationships are a fundamental element of the contemporary global order. Especially since the 1990s, relationships and cooperation among different regions of the world, particularly among the Global South, have increased. This cooperation has been characterised not only by a plurality of issues but also by its basic principles of horizontal relationships and co-learning.

The idea of liberal order hegemony left no room for the analysis of regionalism and its influence on the global order, and the agenda of international relations and

its study has been centred on territoriality, war, anarchy, and the balance of power. As Qin (2020) warns, even key IR concepts such as security, state, or sovereignty have different interpretations depending on their geo-cultural space, but the North Atlantic interpretations have been taken as the norm. Therefore, Smith and Tickner (2020) conclude that the delimitation and control over what is the object of study in IR and the scientific way of approaching it have denied the plurality of issues in the global agenda, geographical diversity, and methodological forms.

Global IR with regional perspectives can change its fundamental categories, including ethical elements particularly pressing for the construction of a more just world, such as development, democracy, and cooperation. Regional studies allow for the expansion of the field of study in Global IR by incorporating ethical elements that are of particular importance to weaker actors and, due to their dynamics, warrant analysis at different scales, such as poverty reduction and inequality. Regionalism, by providing a plurality of visions and scales, also contributes to re-signifying traditional IR categories, such as moving from a conception of security that attends to state interests to one of human security that focuses on people.

Regionalism has also been a privileged space for studying the specificities of each region, its agendas and priorities, and its integration and cooperation mechanisms. Additionally, studying regions not only allows us to understand a particular region but also provides analytical and categorical tools to understand other regions. For example, when facing similar challenges, such as the need to increase states' capacity for internal order and services, studying a Global South region has greater potential for understanding another's reality.

Historically, the regional precedes the global. The global is fundamentally constituted by the regional. Since the establishment of the contemporary political order with the expansion of the state system, newly decolonised states were not merely passive actors adapting to Westphalian principles but were characterised by local adaptations (Hurrell, 2010). Thus, contemporary regionalisation processes and their study are framed as a re-empowerment of the regions.

Current processes of regionalisation and inter-regionalisation are fundamental for creating cooperative conditions within agreements and for positioning with greater negotiation capacity in global order institutions. Analysing these levels is also crucial because their open character promotes trans-interregionalism, allowing more effective participation by weaker Global South countries. At this scale, weaker actors have greater agency capacity, are better acquainted with their neighbours' realities, and provide a privileged space for creating international norms.

The contemporary world has been defined by Acharya (2018) as multi-complex. It is characterised by more evident political and cultural diversity, where actors are more deeply interconnected and interdependent, different actors and levels of government overlap, and decentralised power is articulated in the sense that, despite existing asymmetries and hierarchies, there is no global hegemony. Actors such as international institutions, non-governmental organisations, and transnational networks have greater influence, the global agenda is pluralised, and all actors' agency capacity is increased.

One of the fundamental elements of this contemporary world is the greater importance of regionalism and regional order. Regionalism is understood as a dynamic configuration of social and political identity and has been the greatest force for change in the contemporary global order. Regions organise their economic, political, and social affairs internally but also contribute to global governance. Therefore, it is crucial to redefine regional studies from a global and comparative perspective, understanding how they overlap and configure global governance. Thus, the study of the global and the regional becomes fluid and is understood as a continuum (Acharya, 2014a, 2014b).

However, although there is a plurality of actors in this contemporary global order where regions and Global South countries increasingly play leading roles, this is not reflected in an equal weighting in the object of study in IR, the global agenda, and even less so in a plurality of IR sources. Contemporary global order institutions do not represent the plurality and diversity of contemporary powers. Emerging powers have sought to influence global governance to better represent their interests. But even this is not enough to construct an ethical and truly global agenda; if framed this way, it could become another elite agenda, now one of the South, which also leaves out the interests of a large portion of the world's population. Therefore, values and ideas that are ethically constructed and interculturally socialised are fundamental to shifting towards a more just global order.

Regionalisation also results from global institutions' inability to respond to pressing situations. It is not about valuing whether regional or global institutions are more apt, but about them working together and recognising which should be predominant in each issue or context. This has generated fragmentation in global governance.

This dynamic of the relationship between global governance and the regional in both directions allows for the incorporation of regional needs into the global agenda. Their potential to incorporate demands depends on their institutional and strategic articulation capacity with other regions and actors. As Deciancio and Tussie (2020) warn, the dynamic of regionalism is a fundamental element of global governance, not merely reflecting global preferences but as a space for adapting these preferences.

Global governance is understood as collective efforts to identify, understand, and address global problems and processes that, due to their complexity, must be addressed by various global actors. This includes values, ideas, formal and informal norms, practices, procedures, and institutions seeking diverse objectives in various areas of global order (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2019).

The mainstream view of IR understands the relationship between global governance and regions and regionalisms as top-down, where regions accept or are uncritical parts of the hegemonic order constructed by the world powers. When these relationships are approached with a double causality analysis, a discipline with greater intercultural character and ethical potential is promoted, including demands from Global South regions such as global poverty reduction. Additionally, this is a more credible view of contemporary dynamics.

Global governance creates norms and legitimising mechanisms, so regionalisation in its constitutive dynamic of this global governance has the potential to contribute

to a change in the global order by modifying the configuration of power, institutional arrangements, and normative structures. Global governance, as a deliberative space, is strategically the best resource weaker actors have for their interests and needs to receive appropriate attention on the global agenda. Indeed, the constitution of an ethical and intercultural agenda is the main strategy towards global governance that contributes to a more just global order.

Constructive Moment

Intercultural dialogue has the capacity to construct a shared set of categories and ideas that give meaning to global governance and constitute a global agenda. Intercultural dialogue promotes understanding of the links between global governance and regional governance. The relationship from the global to the regional allows for a cosmopolitan view of regional issues and subjects naturalised values to critique. And the relationship from the regional to the global allows for the pluralisation of the global agenda and better weighting of humanity's most pressing needs as a community.

Additionally, this intercultural dialogue must be accompanied by mechanisms that allow the decisions of these argued, free, and inclusive deliberations to be binding and to constitute the basis of global governance. This is a necessary condition for intercultural dialogue to have a greater impact on global governance and express regional interests. However, strategically, it is convenient to start by constructing an ethical and intercultural global agenda since the deliberative space, compared to others like the military or economic, has the greatest democratic and democratising potential.

Intercultural philosophy begins by dignifying contexts as places that give position to the world as cultural places with life practices. Intercultural philosophy posits that it is in the dialogue of cultures with their memories and traditions where humanity meets to tell their stories, generating a value of radicalising the pluralisation of history. Intercultural dialogue is a dialogue between histories and cultural times that validates substantial contributions from communities. This dialogue also aids in a true, plural, dialogic, and articulated universality in an anthropological-pedagogical practice. It is not just a philosophy that reflects on interculturality but especially an intercultural reconstruction of philosophy, with substantial elements and evidence that articulate thought and action since antiquity (Fornet-Betancourt, 2001).

The way culture and its influence on international relations are understood from this intercultural philosophy diverges from the mainstream of IR. For example, for Bull (2002), an international society or a society of states, which for this author is equivalent, exists when a group of states is aware that they have common interests and perhaps certain common values. These international societies, the author continues, are formed on the basis of a common culture or civilisation, which has enabled mutual respect and the limited use of force.

The concept of intercultural dialogue diverges from this approach. It understands culture not as something given but as a permanent construction. It values the diversity of ethics and history and posits the willingness to dialogue as the main source of a common global agenda of interests, not as a selfish element but as a joint ethical expression. This intercultural dialogue is based on solidarity, empathy, and a sense of community, not just the sum of individual interests.

Interculturality is a social knowledge activity, a horizontal, non-hierarchical dialogue process, a political and ethical moment of recognition of the other and their dignity, aiming at an epistemic, political, social, and ethical project of social construct. This intercultural dialogue is the foundation of empathy and cooperation, which in turn is the basis for achieving an ethical global agenda. In Todorov's (1988) words, culture can only evolve from intercultural contacts.

Social relationships, including international ones, are linguistic and strategic. Discourses in their communicative action allow for mutual understanding and reflection on their interests, structuring and coordinating actions. In fact, global-scale discourse has a greater capacity for incidence than national-scale discourse because, in the former, sources of formal authority are weaker. Global discourse has the potential to be the foundation of the global sphere with the capacity to influence international relations and their discipline. However, for this potential to be effective, communication needs to generate reflection, and the particular experience of an individual, country, or region connects with the global scale or an ethical principle (Dryzek, 2006).

An ethical and intercultural agenda is the foundation of a universal human identity, plural in linguistic and religious terms, but with a vocation to constantly build meeting points of a global community with common goals. Therefore, intercultural dialogue at the regional scale and its articulation of equivalences between different partial projects will allow for mutual intelligibility between diverse available and potential experiences.

Regionalism, as both a form of governance and a field of study, plays a crucial role in shaping global ethics by promoting intercultural dialogue, fostering mutual understanding, and encouraging cooperation among different regions. Regionalism improves dialogue and collaboration between diverse cultures, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for addressing global issues. Regionalism enhances global solidarity by promoting connections between different regions. By emphasising the importance of local and regional issues, regionalism promotes a more inclusive and participatory global agenda. This inclusivity ensures that global policies are informed by the diverse realities and needs of different regions, making them more relevant and effective. By working together, regions can pool resources, share knowledge, and develop innovative solutions to common problems. This collective approach creates a sense of shared responsibility and commitment.

Intercultural dialogue has the capacity to construct a regional and global narrative and offer an alternative geography. Geography is a space constructed by material and discursive elements that can be re-articulated at multiple scales, constituting supports for multiple senses of belonging. This conception promotes the incorporation of geo-cultural narratives that have been marginalised in the mainstream of IR. As Sousa

Santos (2006) indicates, thinking from the regions of the South implies a diatopic hermeneutics based on the idea that all cultures are incomplete and can be enriched by dialogue with other cultures.

This can construct a discourse with the capacity to mobilise resources for achieving the objectives of an ethical global agenda, understanding the global not only by its scale but by its ethical universality.

For example, one of the most pressing demands globally is the reduction of poverty and inequality worldwide. While there are still variables to improve, such as protections and subsidies for national agricultural sectors by North Atlantic countries, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda has placed the most pressing ethical demands at the centre of global issues. Additionally, it has a perspective that empowers people in poverty and vulnerability by considering them not as passive recipients of policies and the object of study but as active protagonists in overcoming their state. It also differs from previous agendas by not being a decalogue of objectives that Global South regions must fulfil, but a commitment as humanity to the objectives of global interest.

This intercultural dialogue also contributes to enriching the discipline of Global IR. Discourse is not geo-culturally neutral, as all discourse expresses an accumulation of historical experience, so intercultural dialogue denaturalises the object of study in Global IR and the predominant global agenda. Intercultural dialogue also allows not only for the expansion of the object of study but also the way of approaching it. This plurality of study interests, methodologies, and sources of theoretical and analytical bases is not proposed as a disciplinary fragmentation but as an organisation capable of constructing knowledge with greater capacity to travel. Finally, understanding the dialogue of the different geo-cultural regions that make up the global order allows for a discipline with greater perspective and interpretive capacity and a truly global agenda.

As Eun (2020) suggests, this dialogue should not only be understood as a process of rational deliberation but also include a plurality of ways of dialoguing, such as emotional. An ethical agenda must be sensitive to the diverse forms of expression and demands of communities, which also fosters epistemological plurality.

Regions and their actors in intercultural dialogue are not merely idea-takers. On the contrary, in this dialogue, they socialise their ideas, demands, and ways of understanding justice, while also adapting and questioning global and other regions' expressions. Recognising the plurality of sources of thought in Global IR is fundamental for enriching the discipline and allows us to understand that all regions, including the Global South, are also creators of ideas, and in their role as idea-takers, they are not passive but have reconfigured ideas from other geographic spaces. This dynamic does not propose a relativisation of all positions but a true co-construction of the ethical. These discursive exercises have also been the foundations of global policies.

For example, the IBSA Forum (India, Brazil, and South Africa) is an expression of regionalisation formed with countries not belonging to the same region but understanding themselves materially and discursively as intermediate powers and regional leaders, building a community of interests and contributing to regional and global

governance. The emergence of these powers and their aspirations to be considered global powers through their regional leadership is an important incentive for them to contribute to promoting an ethical agenda that includes the interests of the weakest actors in their respective regions. However, for this potential to be effective, it is necessary for these middle powers to commit to the most pressing objectives of an ethical global agenda in their regions to position themselves as leaders and strengthen state and regional capacities in cooperation processes.

Thus, the ethical and intercultural formulation of the global agenda and its disciplinary reflection allows for recognising the plurality of actors and visions of a just world – this is an intrinsic value. It also has strategic value in that it is the first step towards a more just global order. This dynamic is the best opportunity for regional voices to be heard globally.

Understanding that morality is contingent and its agreements must be subjected to public deliberation at the global and regional scale, an ethical and intercultural agenda is properly the normative public sphere of Global IR and of regional studies.

Conclusion

Regionalism as a field of study, due to its specificity of object of study and methodological diversity, has the capacity to enrich Global IR, opening a new and flexible field that is truly global in its objective of studies and ways of approaching reality.

Regionalism and its study contribute to making the contributions and demands of the Global South visible in the research agenda of Global IR and the global agenda of issues. Regions are a privileged space for actors with relatively lesser agency capacity to demand their needs and interests, and regions are increasingly important in global governance. These two phenomena are fundamental for democratising the global issues agenda and expanding the object of study in Global IR.

Being aware of the geo-cultural point of enunciation is a premise of critical thinking where the regional plays a leading role. The grand narratives of the contemporary global order are regional. However, in an ethical and intercultural dialogue, regions are in a dynamic and permeable regionalisation process, so the aim is not to fragment global and regional issues but to mutually constitute them, seeking deliberatively to represent the interests of humanity as a community.

Intercultural dialogue of diverse intellectual traditions allows for the constitution of a community with plural analytical and practical tools to operationalise an ethical global agenda. This inclusive process has fundamental ethical value, as any agenda with global pretensions must include humanity's highest objectives. It also holds technical value for its pluralistic strategy in addressing global problems.

A reflection centred on an ethical and intercultural global agenda is the first strategic step to constructing useful Global IR studies with the capacity to build a more just global order.

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Essay 8: Rethinking Regionalism as a Force for Global Cooperation, not Fragmentation



Kazi Arif Uz Zaman

Introduction

The 21st-century global system is interlaced with threads of collaboration and competition. For centuries, the nation-state has been the dominating political unit. It still plays an important role today. However, the complex challenges that define our time – climate change, pandemics, cyber threats, and economic systemic insecurity – cross national borders. These concerns require a response that exceeds the capabilities of individual states, which are frequently constrained by national interests and limited resources (Bowles, 2000). In this setting, regionalism emerges as a powerful force, suggesting a possible way to pave a more cooperative and effective global order. Regionalism is the process by which geographical regions strengthen their political, economic, and social policies. This trend has gained steam in recent years as countries understand the value of regional collaboration in addressing widespread global concerns (Hurrell, 2018). However, this vision is contingent on a critical caveat: regionalism must be inclusive, encouraging conversation and collaboration rather than division and competition.

To understand the multifaceted contexts and stages of progression, this essay begins with the historical backdrop and theoretical frameworks of regionalism. This approach explores the benefits of regional cooperation, emphasising how regional organisations can use combined resources, knowledge, and a unified front to address complicated issues against the limitations of the nation-state system in addressing global-scale challenges. However, the essay recognises the dangers of closed regionalism, in which exclusive blocs can aggravate global competition and stifle progress. Next, the essay presents a framework for balancing regionalism and global collaboration, highlighting the necessity of open regionalism, focusing on shared concerns, and encouraging interregional discussion. Real-world examples throughout the text demonstrate both the possibilities and limitations of regionalism in action. Finally,

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the essay illustrates regionalism's future trajectories, emphasising its importance in promoting a more cooperative and effective global order.

Historical Contexts

The Rise of Nation-States

The Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe in 1648, gave rise to the modern nation-state structure. This convention established the ideals of sovereign equality and territorial integrity, which served as the foundation for today's international order (Zreik, 2021). The establishment of nation-states was reinforced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the disintegration of empires and the expansion of the concept of self-determination. The two World Wars and the following decolonisation movements resulted in the emergence of nation-states, each with its particular territory, government, and national identity (Hansen, 2022).

Despite the evolution of global politics, the essence of the nation-state has remained strong. Its ability to adapt to changes, such as the challenges encountered due to the complex globalisation phenomena and the rapid integration of digitalisation, demonstrates its long-term sustainability and significance. Thereby, nation-states remain the fundamental actors in international relations, holding significant influence over global governance, economic policies, and security issues (Therborn, 2021).

Evolution of Regionalism: From Loose Alliances to Integrated Blocs

Regionalism is not a novel notion. Throughout history, states have forged alliances and collaborative frameworks based on geographical proximity, common cultural legacy, or economic interests. However, the current idea of regionalism is a product of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Söderbaum, 2016). Early examples of regionalism include the Concert of Europe, a series of conferences conducted by European powers in the nineteenth century to maintain a balance of power and avoid conflict. Similarly, Pan-American conferences organised in the early twentieth century aimed to promote cooperation and trade between Western Hemisphere nations (Dykman, 2022).

Following World War II, there was a spike in regional integration activities. The wreckage of the conflict sparked a yearning for regional security and economic cooperation. The formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the forerunner of the EU, in 1951 typifies this trend (Gnatiuk, 2022). Similarly, organisations such as the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the League

of Arab States (LAS) arose during this time. Besides, regional trade agreements developed significantly in the late twentieth century, owing to globalisation and the prospect of economic gains from increased trade (Berend, 2016). For instance, regional trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Andean Community, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Free Trade Area (AFTA) were highlighted at this stage.

While economic integration remains a key motivator in the twenty-first century, regional organisations are increasingly focusing on larger issues such as environmental sustainability, social development, and regional security (Fanta et al., 2016). The African Union's Agenda 2063, which envisions a *prosperous and united Africa*, epitomises this expanding agenda. Besides traditional geopolitical regionalism, new forms of regional cooperation centred on mutual interests have emerged. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), for instance, exemplifies this trend by uniting emerging economies to deliberate on global economic governance (Raman, 2022).

Theoretical Framework of Regionalism

The theoretical basis of regionalism lies in international relations and political science under the following perspectives:

Realist Perspective

From a realist standpoint, regionalism is motivated by states' strategic interests in maximising their power and security in an anarchistic international order. Realists say that regional organisations can boost member states' power by allowing them to combine their resources and capacities to combat common dangers (Davis, 2020). NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) is an example of a regional security alliance that has used collective defence to keep the North Atlantic region peaceful and stable. NATO's mutual defence principle deters foreign attack while also instilling a sense of security among member states, demonstrating how regionalism may foster their strength and security.

Liberal Perspective

In contrast, liberal ideologies emphasise the importance of institutions and collaboration in international affairs. From a liberal viewpoint, regionalism is viewed as a strategy of encouraging economic interdependence, political cooperation, and social

integration among states (Moravcsik, 2020). Regional organisations facilitate conversation, conflict resolution, and collective action on issues that cross national borders. The European Union (EU) demonstrates this strategy by encouraging economic integration, political cooperation, and social cohesion among its members. The European Union's single market, customs union, and common currency have considerably improved economic stability and growth, illustrating the value of regional collaboration.

Constructivist Perspective

Constructivist theories examine how identities, norms, and ideas influence the urge for regionalism. From a constructivist perspective, regionalism is driven by the social construction of shared identities, values, norms, and practices between the states (Grant, 2022). ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), for example, promotes consensus and non-interference norms to reflect its member states' different political and cultural backgrounds. ASEAN's approach to regionalism promotes regional unity and mutual respect, emphasising the value of common identities and standards in regional collaboration (Rattanaseeve, 2023).

The Power of Regional Collaboration: A Multi-Faceted Approach

Regional organisations provide a compelling alternative to the constraints of the nation-state system in the following areas:

Economic Integration

Economic integration is a key benefit of regionalism, as it leads to wider markets, higher trade, and investment flows. The EU's single market, which allows for the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, has considerably increased economic growth and prosperity in its member countries (Bauer et al., 2024). This integration has not only increased regional wealth, but it has also acted as a model for other regions, including the NAFTA and South America's Southern Common Market (Mercosur). Similarly, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) seeks to establish a unified market for products and services across Africa, fostering economic development and lowering trade obstacles. Economic integration through regionalism also increases member nations' competitiveness by encouraging innovation, specialisation, and economies of scale. For example, the ASEAN Economic

Community (AEC) aspires to turn ASEAN into a unified market and production base, increasing investor appeal and global competitiveness (Sujadmiko et al., 2023).

Unified Front on Global Issues

Regional blocs can present a united front on global concerns, giving them a stronger bargaining position in international discussions. For example, the African Union (AU) has played an important role in ensuring peace and security across the continent by deploying peacekeeping missions and mediating crises. The AU's combined voice can be more successful at advocating for African issues on a global scale (Lala, 2020).

Addressing Transnational Issues

Regional collaboration is critical for solving transnational concerns like climate change, migration, and pandemics. The EU's collective climate initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, seek to make Europe the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050 (Bäckstrand, 2022). Similarly, the African Union's efforts to address health difficulties, such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, highlight the value of regional collaboration in dealing with pandemics and public health emergencies.

Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building

Regional organisations can promote information sharing and capacity building among member states. The Andean Community of Nations (CAN) encourages collaboration in areas such as agriculture, education, and healthcare, encouraging member states to share information and best practices (Citaristi, 2022).

Promoting Regional Stability and Security

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has made major contributions to strengthening regional peace and security in Europe through conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-war reconstruction. The EU's integration efforts have promoted political stability, social solidarity, and economic success, resulting in a more stable and peaceful Europe (Jäger & Roithner, 2020). Similarly, the African Union's peacekeeping missions and conflict resolution institutions have played critical roles in resolving conflicts and maintaining stability across the continent.

Beyond Economics: A Broader Agenda

While economic integration is frequently a driving force in regionalism, effective regional organisations also prioritise larger goals such as social, cultural, and political collaboration. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) encourages collaboration on social and cultural issues to build a feeling of common identity in the region (Novati, 2020).

The Pitfalls of Closed Regionalism: A Cautious Approach

However, if embraced with narrow self-interest, regionalism can also become a source of division. Exclusive regional blocs motivated solely by economic gain or political supremacy can intensify global rivalry and stymie progress. The emergence of regional hegemony may undermine collaboration by prioritising individual interests and diminishing the region's collective voice. This is seen in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where China's influence is dominating, possibly hindering other member states from pursuing autonomous foreign policy (Perskaya et al., 2023).

Regional military alliances formed largely for security considerations might foster distrust and competition among neighbouring regions. Russia, for example, sees NATO's eastward expansion as a danger, which has contributed to increased regional tensions (Marten, 2023). Besides, regional organisations with opaque decision-making processes and little public accountability may confront legitimacy issues. Concerns about democratic inadequacies in the EU, for example, have encouraged populist forces that challenge the bloc's authority.

Regional trade agreements, although fostering internal integration, can also result in protectionist blocs that impede global trade. Concerns have been voiced that NAFTA may redirect trade away from other regions, resulting in a closed economic bloc that hinders free trade on a global scale (Rubio, 2021).

Balancing Regionalism with Global Cooperation: Fostering Inclusivity

The key to realising regionalism's full potential is to cultivate inclusivity and promote interregional dialogue. Regional organisations should be willing to collaborate with external entities, including other regions and global agencies like the United Nations. This can lead to a more inclusive global order in which localised solutions help to advance global progress. The EU's free trade agreements with several countries outside the bloc underscore the significance of open regionalism (Romanchyshyna, 2020).

Regional collaboration should prioritise addressing shared and global concerns, such as climate change and pandemics. Regional groups can serve as stepping stones to greater global cooperation. Regional organisations can help develop consensus and momentum for global solutions by encouraging collaboration and creating shared understandings within their respective blocs. This collaborative approach can pave the way for the creation of new global norms and frameworks. Regional environmental agreements, for example, can contribute to broader international environmental treaties.

Fostering dialogue and collaboration among regional organisations is also pivotal. Platforms for information sharing and collaborative efforts can address issues that cross regional boundaries. For example, the BRICS grouping, despite internal disputes, has facilitated dialogue on global economic governance, offering valuable insights into emerging economies' perspectives (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022). Besides, effective regional governance necessitates fostering transparency, accountability, and democratic engagement within regional organisations. This can help address legitimacy concerns and ensure that regional policies reflect the different interests of member nations.

Challenges Towards Inclusivity

One of the major obstacles to inclusivity in regionalism is the sovereignty dilemma, i.e., balancing national sovereignty with regional commitments. Nation-states are often reluctant to cede authority to regional bodies, fearing losing command over their internal matters. This tension between national sovereignty and regional integration is apparent in the EU, where member states have disputed the scope of EU control (Brack et al., 2020). Brexit, the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, illustrates the sovereignty challenges that can undermine regional cooperation. Regionalism's long-term viability depends on ensuring that member states maintain a sense of control and autonomy while supporting closer integration. ASEAN's principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states reflects the tension between national sovereignty and regional integration (Seah, 2023). This principle of non-interference has been criticised for impeding ASEAN's ability to address critical regional matters such as human rights violations and political turmoil.

Regional organisations often encounter asymmetrical power dynamics, in which more powerful member nations have disproportionate influence over decision-making processes. Germany and France, for example, hold substantial power in the EU (Krotz & Schild, 2021), whereas Nigeria and South Africa wield considerable influence in the AU (Bischoff, 2021). This can result in unequal benefits and power distribution within regional organisations, potentially undermining the notions of equity and inclusivity.

Economic disparities among member states might also have an impact on inclusivity in regionalism. While economic integration necessitates the pooling of resources and capabilities among countries, significant differences in economic

strengths might impede the success of regional cooperation. For instance, the European Union (EU) has encountered issues arising from economic disparities between its northern and southern member states, exacerbated by the eurozone crisis (Frieden & Walter, 2017). The crisis exposed the eurozone's structural flaws, such as a lack of fiscal unification and uneven economic competitiveness across member countries. Criticism has been directed at the EU's measures to handle the crisis, citing austerity measures and financial assistance programs as factors intensifying economic gaps and social unrest (Mongelli & Camba-Mendez, 2018). Similarly, ASEAN's economic integration has been hampered by economic differences among its members. While Singapore and Malaysia have made significant economic progress, other ASEAN members, such as Cambodia and Myanmar, remain impoverished. These discrepancies impede the execution of regional economic policies and initiatives, such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (Menon & Melendez, 2017). Differences in political systems, cultures, and economic development levels among member states could hinder regional cooperation. The AU faces challenges due to diverse political contexts and economic disparities among its member states.

To bridge these gaps and explore common ground for collaboration requires new techniques and adaptable frameworks, taking into account each member state's specific context and capabilities. Endorsing mutual understanding and acceptance of diversity is critical to establishing successful regional collaboration.

Navigating Power Dynamics: Hegemonic Powers and Regional Cooperation

Disparities in power must be addressed for the effective functioning of regionalism. Mechanisms that promote consensus-based decision-making, transparency, and equitable representation of all members are central to this process. The African Union's policy of *respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states* is an example of how the regional bloc may attempt to fortify the balance of power (Makubalo et al., 2020).

Navigating the inherent conflict between regional cooperation and competitiveness is an ongoing challenge. Encouraging dialogue and creating avenues for collaboration across regional blocs might help to mitigate potential conflicts and promote a multipolar global order. The BRICS's collaboration with other regional organisations, such as the African Union, is a notable positive step in this direction.

Moreover, promoting complementarity between regional and global governance entails encouraging collaboration and coordination among regional and global institutions. This includes harmonising regional policies with global frameworks, sharing best practices, and fostering more collaboration on transnational concerns.

The Future of Regionalism and Its Impact on the Global Order

Despite limitations, regionalism remains an important pathway to a more cooperative and successful global system in future, especially in the following areas:

Climate Change

Climate change is a global issue that necessitates regional collaboration to confront and mitigate its consequences. Regional groups can help promote climate action and coordinate efforts to minimise greenhouse gas emissions. The EU's Green Deal, aiming to transform Europe into the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, entails measures to reduce emissions, enhance energy efficiency, and facilitate a shift to a sustainable economic model (Bäckstrand, 2022). The African Union's Agenda 2063 includes goals and targets for environmental sustainability and climatic resilience (Nwozor et al., 2021).

Pandemics

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that regional organisations can play an important role in coordinating pandemic responses, exchanging information and resources, and assisting member governments in their attempts to limit and reduce the spread of infectious diseases. The European Union (EU) has coordinated its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including joint procurement of vaccines, mutual recognition of vaccination certificates, and support for research and development (Deters & Zardo, 2023).

Cybersecurity

Regional organisations can play an important role in strengthening cybersecurity cooperation, sharing information and best practices, and assisting member governments in protecting vital infrastructure and combating cyberattacks. The EU's Network and Information Security (NIS) Directive outlines steps to improve network and information system security while also facilitating member states' collaboration and information sharing. Meanwhile, in Asia, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has launched programs such as workshops and training programs to help member nations strengthen their capacity to respond to cybersecurity challenges.

Conclusion

While the nation-state remains the central actor in international affairs, regionalism presents a pivotal avenue for promoting a more cooperative and effective global order. Key dimensions of regionalism- economic integration, political collaboration, social and cultural integration, and security cooperation- enhance its strength in tackling multifaceted global challenges. Despite the obstacles and criticisms, regionalism can supplement global multilateralism and can strengthen countries' capacity to respond to transnational issues. However, it also encounters obstacles such as regional fragmentation, economic disparities, and the conflict between national sovereignty and regional integration. These challenges can be overcome through efficient governance with inclusive policies and a pledge to collaboration and solidarity. The future of regionalism and its influence on the global order will be determined by regional organisations' ability to adapt to evolving global dynamics and address transnational challenges. Issues like climate change, pandemics, and cybersecurity require collective regional actions. By fostering cooperation and addressing regional concerns, regional organisations can boost global multilateralism and contribute to the stability and effectiveness of the global order.

In summary, this essay highlights how regionalism offers itself as the best framework for dealing with shared issues because it achieves a crucial balance between diversity and connectedness. This equilibrium is essential for building confidence between various stakeholders, which will result in the creation of solutions that are more customised to the specific needs of different communities in the region. Regional frameworks naturally encourage and facilitate collaborative endeavours aimed at addressing transnational challenges, in contrast to national agendas, which often emphasise unilateral interests and rarely take into account the larger ramifications of their actions. Regionalism is a significant step toward a more cooperative and effective global system. Regionalism strengthens countries' abilities to promote global peace and prosperity by encouraging economic, political, social, and security cooperation. As the world grows more interconnected, regionalism will play an increasingly important role in determining the future of international relations and the global order.

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Essay 9: The World Needs a Radical Regionalism



Densua Mumford

Introduction

To answer the central question – *Will regions save the world?* – this essay offers a decolonial reading of the present condition of African regionalism as practised by the African Union (AU) and the numerous regional economic communities (RECs) such as ECOWAS, COMESA, and SADC. African regionalism historically aimed to transform the world order from one of colonial domination to one of justice for all peoples (Getachew, 2019; Nkrumah, 1963a). An important condition of that vision was to economically develop the African continent and foster its independence via the cooperation of African states in regional organisations. However, these aims have largely failed to materialise, with intra-regional trade as low today as it was in the 1960s, the continent remaining the poorest in the world with significant dependence on remittances and foreign aid, and the continent's natural resources still exploited to serve Euro-American peoples above African peoples. Despite its explicit promises to save the world, regionalism has thus far failed to realise a good life for African peoples, and this essay provides an answer to this puzzle.

In sum, I argue that regionalism in Africa today cannot save the world because it is a complex reproduction of coloniality.¹ Regionalism has failed to address the fundamental causes of injustice because it is practised using colonial knowledges and colonial tools. For regionalism to save the world, it will need to be transformed into a radical regionalism: a regionalism that centres the marginalised peoples of Africa and their indigenous knowledges and tools, rather than elites and states, and acts as a mode for them to realise a good life in conditions of justice.

¹ Coloniality represents the “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243).

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To make my argument, I first provide an explanation for *why* the colonised reproduce coloniality. I draw on Sylvia Wynter's *longue durée* account of how Western bourgeois *Man* became a globalised ideal, thus making it difficult for the colonised to imagine indigenous paths to a good life that transcend coloniality. I draw on Frantz Fanon to specify how, at the individual level, the psychology of Blackness further reinforces this impetus of the colonised, especially their elites, to reproduce coloniality by approximating Western bourgeois *Man*. Second, I provide examples of *how* the reproduction of coloniality manifests in the context of African regionalism through practices of capitalism, liberal democracy, and dependence on foreign funding. I conclude with suggestions for what practitioners and scholars of African regionalism can do to disrupt such reproductions and foster a radical regionalism that can help *save the world*. While I argue with specific reference to African regionalism and make no claims to universality, I hope these arguments contribute to a pluralistic global dialogue about the role of regionalism in the world.

Why Does Regionalism Reproduce Coloniality?

In this section, I lay out the theoretical grounding for the argument that regionalism in Africa cannot save the world because it is a complex reproduction of coloniality. Specifically, I theorise why the colonised reproduce colonialism and, therefore, why African regionalism reproduces coloniality. Using Sylvia Wynter and Frantz Fanon, I point to a *longue durée*, global dynamic, on the one hand, and the psychological effects for the colonised, on the other hand, that facilitate the reproduction of coloniality.

The first reason that regionalism reproduces coloniality is that regionalism is embedded in a global, *longue durée* dynamic of coloniality that naturalises racial hierarchies. This means successive generations internalise powerful ontological assumptions about who is a valuable human being and who is not, and whose cultures are worth learning from and whose are not. The main effect of this *longue durée* dynamic is that it naturalises coloniality, that is, it makes the superiority of Whiteness and the racial hierarchy seem primordial and inevitable, thereby making it difficult for newer generations to imagine indigenous, non-colonial ways of life.

Wynter argues that various forms of oppression are essentially rooted in a struggle between “ethnaclass Man vs Human” (Wynter, 2003, pp. 260–261), that is, a White supremacist ideal of the human vs all of actual humanity. White supremacy conceives of the European *Man* as *the* representation of humanity, while his binary opposite, *Other* (the colonised), is *non-Man* and therefore excluded from the category of human. The ethnaclass concept of *Man* has undergone changes in definition over time, and with it have come changes in the definition of the *Other*. Prior to the Enlightenment, *Man* was understood in the Christian sense as humans being sinful by nature. The *Other* included those who did not or could not reach salvation, including pagans and Jews. Power under this system was afforded to the Christian religious order. The Enlightenment instituted a radical new secular understanding of humanity, thus

shifting power to a new elite of secular thinkers (Wynter, 2003, pp. 263, 265–266). The new Western secular definition of *Man* is necessarily understood as rational *Man*, namely, the White, bourgeois male, because of the Enlightenment's rooting in the culture of White, bourgeois men in Europe. *Man* is also modern: he is not just a product of modernity, but its very embodiment – at once individualistic, following an inevitable linear *progress*, supposedly in the position of universal objectivity, and always constructed as civilised in opposition to the backwards and primitive *Other* (Baudrillard, 1987; Quijano, 2007, pp. 171–174).

White, bourgeois men of the Enlightenment imagined themselves to be the pinnacle of humanity and thus equated themselves and their subjectivities with all of humanity. They universalised a highly culturally specific understanding of what it means to be human. Indeed, this conceptualisation did not include women and, through processes of cultural and legal contestation (Wynter, 2003, pp. 291–300), it became guaranteed that this conception would exclude the non-White. The origins of *Man* represent the origins of White supremacy in that it created a stratification of humanity along racial lines, with the White bourgeois male at the apex and Black people at the base representing the ultimate *Other*. Below Black people, there were only animals. This racialised social order would enable material domination, that is, the colonial exploitation of the racialised majority of human beings for profit. An important corollary of the racial hierarchisation of humanity and the proximity of those further down the hierarchy to animals is that the non-White strives to define themselves as close to Whiteness (*Man*/human) as possible and as far removed from Blackness (animal) as possible (Wynter, 2003, pp. 261–262). Wynter demonstrates the reproduction of the colonial dominance of *Man* across centuries of seismic ontological, cultural, and material changes. The implication that I draw is that generations of the colonised who are born into this global, *longue durée* dynamic experience this racial hierarchy as natural and struggle to imagine that an indigenous, non-colonial world is possible. Rather than challenging this hierarchy, their aim becomes joining the European ethnoclass *Man* by reproducing it; thus, it becomes more and more natural to reproduce Euro-American cultures and less and less natural to foster indigenous cultures.

The second reason why regionalism reproduces coloniality is the impact of this *longue durée* racial hierarchy on the psychology of the colonised. Fanon identifies important psychological traumas that compel the colonised to reproduce colonial domination. He theorises from the positionality of the Antillean man whose country is ultimately France, but who only encounters France when he first leaves the Antilles for Paris. A Black child raised by their Black family in the Antilles is socialised not to think of themselves as constituting the nadir of a racial hierarchy. Rather, they conceive of themselves as human beings equal to any White person. To the point that, when reading White literature recounting colonial exploits, the Black child will unthinkingly associate themselves with the White coloniser in the protagonist role rather than the colonised, who are represented as uncivilised and backwards (Fanon, 2021, p. 126). Upon entering White society in France, however, this confidence in their humanity is fundamentally shaken. The Black adult experiences a rejection of their very self once entering White society because White society will teach them

that they, in fact, represent the antithesis of *Man* (Fanon, 2021, pp. 127–128). As a result, the Black adult experiences a chronic split in their sense of self. The split is essentially that they are human (in their formative understanding of themselves) and simultaneously the backward antithesis of humanity (according to the now learned White supremacist reading of the Black body) (Fanon, 2021, p. 78). A White individual in Europe raised by a White family experiences no such split: they are raised to understand themselves as a human possessing value and enter White society to be reaffirmed as human (Fanon, 2021, pp. 120–121). The split, or dissonance, inculcates in the Black individual a chronic insecurity and a need to escape the designation of *Other*. The result is a futile search for validation by rejecting the self and escaping their Otherness, that is, escaping their Blackness.

From the moment the black man accepts the split imposed by the Europeans, there is no longer any respite; and “from that moment on, isn’t it understandable that he will try to elevate himself to the white man’s level? To elevate himself into the range of colours to which he has attributed a kind of hierarchy?” (Fanon, 2021, p. 63).

However, for Fanon, the dilemma of “whiten or perish” is impossible to resolve by rejecting the self and futilely scrambling up the racial hierarchy. Rather, Black people must dismantle the racial hierarchy itself (Fanon, 2021, p. 80).

Although Fanon only superficially integrates class into this aspect of his analysis (for a richer treatment of class, see Fanon, 2001), I argue that it plays an important role when considering African regionalism, for it is the African bourgeoisie who control regionalism. Fanon acknowledges that a physician’s experience of this split is “essentially different” from that of a construction worker. For the bourgeois physician, it is an intellectual alienation as “he takes European culture as a means of detaching himself from his own race” (Fanon, 2021, pp. 198–199). For the lower-class construction worker, this alienation occurs because of the direct exploitation they face by colonialism (Fanon, 2021, p. 199). I add that in the majority of African contexts, class matters for the likelihood and acuteness of this split. Most non-White Africans first encounter Whiteness not as a pervasive culture but as a foreign object. That is, until they become formally educated in schools replete with Eurocentric knowledge systems. In higher education, a preserve of the bourgeoisie, Whiteness becomes even more dominant as theorists on syllabi are rarely Africans and the research subjects in the papers are regularly the colonised. Like the Antillean child reading a colonial text, African elites are trained in universities to see the world through the eyes of White, bourgeois *Man*.

For African elites in regionalism, then, this process of encountering Whiteness and experiencing a split is more acute: many are partly educated outside of Africa, professionally trained via Western programmes and fellowships, speak multiple European languages apart from their native languages, are duty-bound to meet global standards and indicators set by Eurocentric knowledges, institutions, and practices, and engage daily with Euro-American counterparts via informal networks. Who do I mean by *African elites*? Following Fanon, I understand this to include the bourgeois class, but specifically the African individuals and teams responsible for determining the cultures, policies, institutions, and practices of African regional institutions. This

includes the bureaucrats of regional organisations, state leaders, representatives, and members of civil society who participate in regional governance processes. I acknowledge important insights that African elites are diverse in terms of their personal biographies, the domains in which they operate, and also the forms of power they wield (Handley, 2024). Especially important is that African elites in regionalism are ideologically diverse, which means there exists some contestation about the conceptualisations and strategies of regionalism. However, in spite of this diversity, African elites in regionalism, whether consciously or unconsciously, are stuck together in the dynamic of reproducing coloniality. I argue that elites are particularly stricken by the *split* in their psychology due to their proximity to Whiteness through Eurocentric formal education and participation in foreign relations. Without reflexive interrogation of their own practices, African elites in regionalism are more likely to adopt the cultures, knowledges, and institutional tools of *Man*, and thus reproduce coloniality in regionalism.

In this section, I have outlined important decolonial explanations for *why* regionalism reproduces coloniality, ranging from *longue durée* epistemes that naturalise coloniality to psychological conditions that motivate the colonised, especially their elites. In the following section, I now argue for *how* coloniality materialises in the context of African regionalism.

How is Regionalism Reproducing Coloniality?

In this section, I provide non-exhaustive examples of how African regionalism is reproducing coloniality rather than forging non-colonial, indigenous ways of life that foster justice, thus supporting my argument that it cannot save the world as presently constituted. Specifically, I argue that the reproduction of coloniality in African regionalism manifests (1) in the prominence amongst regional institutions of the knowledges (cosmologies, epistemologies, ideologies) of *Man*, and (2) in the prevalent use of the tools (methodologies, techniques) of *Man*, rather than indigenous options. I highlight capitalism and liberal democracy as prominent Eurocentric knowledges and dependence on foreign funding as an important tool that has become normalised in African regionalism. Thus, despite ad hoc internal contestation by isolated individuals and policies, regionalism has largely reproduced coloniality.

The first colonial knowledge that is being reproduced is capitalism. Regional organisations in Africa help to manage and coordinate African states' participation in global capitalism rather than foster economies that operate in line with indigenous economic systems (Getachew, 2019, pp. 107–141). Regional projects have adopted the language of capitalist accumulation, including *economic development* and *GDP growth*. Epistemic communities flow from the AU to UNECA, to the World Bank, to the African Development Bank, to the EU, and back, spaces dominated by neoliberal economic doctrines. As a result, gross wealth inequalities remain amongst African citizens. A much larger industry is either not indigenous (famously, *African* fabrics are actually made by Dutch or Chinese companies) or remains subordinate to the

interests of clients outside of the continent (primary products such as cocoa, oil, and minerals). Kwame Nkrumah acknowledged the risk of African economies remaining tied to global capitalism at the founding of the AU, which motivated him to push for a socialist alternative of economic planning at the regional level (this too is not necessarily an indigenous concept) (Nkrumah, 1963b). Adebayo Adedeji, erstwhile leader of UNECA, made similar attempts to foster self-sufficient African development via the Lagos Plan of Action and the African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes (AAF-SAP), particularly to challenge the Washington Consensus emerging at the time. Nkrumah's and Adedeji's ideas were never implemented. Furthermore, African regional organisations now act as the local managers of the global development industrial complex. Economic development is a doctrine, a knowledge system founded upon a linear understanding of European economic advancement and the belief that this is the only viable path to wealth. In fact, Ha-Joon Chang demonstrates that Euro-American states firmly kicked away the ladder to *development* once they became dominant (usually through colonial appropriation and protectionism whenever a competitor emerged) (Chang, 2002). Rather, economic development is a regime that recruits much of the world's poorest into a capitalist game that they cannot win, reifying Euro-Americans as the civilised saviours of backwards races, and therefore reproducing coloniality (Escobar, 2012). Nevertheless, regional organisations have integrated the globalised knowledges of capitalist economic development into their agendas and practices, which reproduces coloniality by tying Africa to Euro-American standards of modernity. At the same time, it is difficult to find serious discussion in African regionalism of how indigenous African concepts can be mobilised to build just economic relations, which demonstrates how coloniality has closed off the minds of African elites to their own cultural caches.

Another colonial knowledge that is being reproduced is liberal democracy, which comes at the expense of other, indigenous forms of democracy and legitimate governance. This is reflected in the treaties, protocols, and policy documents on democracy that have proliferated via regional organisations. Then there is the hyperfocus on smooth elections via election monitoring, anti-coup norms targeting unconstitutional changes in government, and the proliferation of regional parliaments such as the Pan-African Parliament. During the 1990s, a wave of liberal democratisation swept the African continent, and since then, an entire democratisation industry has emerged to coerce African communities into a Euro-American mould of governance. My contention is not with democracy itself – accountability of leaders to the people and effective participation of the people in shaping their societies and economies in a condition of social justice is desirable – but rather with the uncritical adoption of means to achieve it (for a similar argument, see Mazrui, 2020). What is colonial about this narrowly *liberal* democracy is that it represents itself as the only option, one emanating from a superior White race that has reached *the end of history* (Fukuyama, 1989) and thus must be emulated by lower races. The liberal democratic ideology displaces and renders unthinkable that there might be a plurality of cultural and institutional approaches to realising democracy. The result is forms of governance that have rarely attained legitimacy or improved people's lives. Regional parliaments in Africa are merely the latest manifestation of this ideology: they were created in

response to the important critique that citizen participation at the regional level is lacking, but these regional parliaments, emblematic of liberal democratic governance, themselves are as disconnected from the citizenry as the other regional institutions. Again, I note no sustained discussion at the regional level of how African understandings and practices of democracy and just governance could shape regionalism, which is a reproduction of coloniality by privileging the knowledges of *Man*.

With regard to the tools of *Man*, African regionalism is reproducing dependence on Euro-American financing. Just as colonial metropolises kept the colonies economically dependent to maximise their profits, and just as the African bourgeoisie continued relations of economic dependence after formal decolonisation to prop up their regimes, so African elites in regionalism have reproduced coloniality when funding regionalism. African regional organisations have been highly dependent on financial support from foreign donors, especially wealthy Western states and international institutions, to carry out their projects (they seem to largely cover their own basic operational costs) (Stapel & Söderbaum, 2019). In the AU's first two decades, donors shouldered the funding for virtually all of the AU's programme budget. From 2018, the AU covered 37.4% of its programme budget, showing some improvement (Engel, 2019, p. 25). In SADC, 90% of the programme budget (Mattheis, 2019, p. 100) and 50% of the organisation's entire budget, averaged across the years, are from external donors (Mattheis, 2019, pp. 102–103). At the East African Community, the programmes are almost entirely funded by external donors, with member states only funding operational costs. In a positive move to indigenise funding, ECOWAS and the AU created new funding mechanisms that involve a levy on member states' imports. However, members are inconsistent in forwarding the collected levies to the regional organisations. In general, while the regional organisations may be owned by the member states, the material projects meant to transform the continent – ostensibly the most politically and economically impactful aspects of regionalism – are realised through Euro-American donations. Audre Lorde has warned that *The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house*. Congruently, African regionalism has failed to use the tool of external funding to dismantle capitalism and White supremacist liberal ideology and replace them with just indigenous systems. Meanwhile, modes of funding that might come freely from the people of Africa and their institutions, thereby granting them material ownership of regionalism, have yet to materialise.

In this section, I have provided non-exhaustive examples of the knowledges and tools of *Man* that have been normalised in African regionalism, thereby reproducing coloniality. In the next section, I conclude by suggesting paths forward for practitioners and researchers to forge a radical regionalism that centres the knowledges and tools of the colonised.

Conclusion: Opportunities for Challenging Coloniality and Fostering a Radical Regionalism

A decolonial reading suggests that, as presently practised, regionalism cannot save the world because it is a complex reproduction of coloniality. A *longue durée* racial hierarchy has naturalised African reproduction of Eurocentric knowledges and tools at the expense of indigenous options. A psychological insecurity exacerbated by African elites' class-based proximity to Whiteness motivates them to draw on the knowledges and tools of *Man*. This leads African regionalism to privilege capitalism, liberal democracy (knowledges), and dependence on Euro-American financing (tools). However, this reproduction is not inevitable: a radical regionalism is possible.

How can African regionalism disrupt the reproduction of coloniality and forge a non-colonial life, even as Africa exists within a colonial world order? Wynter theorises the possibilities of decolonial praxis within a colonial world using the metaphor of plot and plantation (Wynter, 1971). Slaves in the Caribbean were sometimes granted small plots of their own on plantation land to cultivate crops. The slaves utilised these discrete spaces for self-sustenance and to practice their traditional cultures, thus fostering resistance from within the plantation. For Wynter, existence within coloniality does not mean a total loss of decolonial possibility but can, in fact, offer surprising spaces for decolonial (re)invention. Radical regionalisms can operate as discrete plots for the colonised to practice other ways of knowing and being (to decolonise), even while existing within the global plantation that capitalism has built.

Importantly, radical regionalism is a critical practice that engages the most just knowledges of the marginalised to realise a good life for all. That is, regionalism becomes a site where African peoples experiment with a plurality of African constructs to identify those that best foster justice and good ways of living with each other and with the planet. Justice is the north star of decolonisation, as such endeavours should avoid the pitfall of nativism, whereby indigenous knowledges are mythologised, fetishised, and uncritically deployed to create new oppressions amongst Africans. Radical regionalism is also not a silo – it engages in critical conversation with the world's plurality of non-African knowledges for the purpose of undoing coloniality and fostering justice everywhere.

African elites in regionalism and scholars of African regionalism have a joint responsibility for creating a radical regionalism. Achieving this means developing a richer historicised understanding of how colonialism has shaped African cultures and the African psyche such that coloniality is reproduced through regionalism (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Ngugi, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). African political and civil society elites wanting to follow in the footsteps of Kwame Nkrumah and Adebayo Adedeji, amongst others, can begin their search for policy solutions primarily through conversations with African communities. That means engaging with the knowledges of African peoples and the historical practices of African ancestors (Tamale, 2020), as well as the plurality of knowledges of the colonised across the world, to develop

regional institutions and policies. This disrupts the *longue durée* practice of failing to imagine anything beyond Euro-American constructs. Scholars of African regionalism can join Ali Mazrui, Sylvia Tamale, methodologists like Bagele Chilisa, and others to determine from an African and anti-colonial positionality the most important research questions, theories, and methodologies rather than drawing disproportionately on Eurocentric debates (Chilisa, 2009, 2020; Mazrui, 1967; Mazrui & Wiafe-Amoako, 2016). If African regionalism is to *save the world*, then its very epistemological foundations will need to be reformed into a radical regionalism that centres the knowledges and tools of the colonised to realise justice.

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Essay 10: Will Regions Save the World?

Regional Organisations and Conflict Resolution



Anselme Ruhumuriza

Introduction

Regional organisations have proliferated across the world over the past years. This growth in number and geographical coverage has been accompanied by increased diversity in the *substance* or *content* of integration (Thakur & Van Langenhove, 2006). With the geographical collaboration and integration of neighbouring countries, the goal of regionalism remains to enhance stability and economic growth, reduce trade barriers, and strengthen political and cultural ties. For example, Asian regional organisations have governance potential in regulatory harmonisation, improved policy coordination, and roles as an effective multilateral dialogue platform between member states (Budiana, 2024). Regional organisations play a vital role in action plans/planning tools together with local authorities to meet strategic measures and address the interconnected crisis that the world is encountering, including but not limited to climate change, global security issues, and biodiversity, underpinned by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Bardal et al., 2021).

In the context of geopolitical shifts and the Cold War, the post-colonial period in African countries in the 1950s and 60s also meant their awakening for unity and Pan-Africanism. “This trend was particularly pronounced when the end of colonialism in the 1950s and 1990s raised expectations that cross-border and Pan-African solidarities would develop” (Mulaudzi, 2006). The development of regionalism post-Second World War went hand in hand with protectionism against the control and hegemonic influence of the external state powers in their domestic policies. The historical anchors of post-colonial states met a snag in which regionalism was culturally and identically conglomerated. Venosa argued that regions are a pivotal critique of colonial-era discourses that were essentially replicated in the postcolonial state as “inherited social and cultural hierarchies” (Venosa, 2015). Saving the world from the complexities of

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post-colonialism was a beacon of a newly starting cornerstone of regionalism and shaped new post-colonial identities.

There are various policy challenges tackled mostly by regional bodies in swifter responses and smoother monitoring, more than the UN does. To address the economic complexities of our times, regional organisations began to embrace public and regional investments in their analytical framework (Balland et al., 2022). Regionalisms come out as products of mutual cooperation and defence alliances in both bilateral and multilateral relations. Exceptions were permitted, both on pragmatic grounds and for reasons of principles whose exceptions are the ability to create trade blocs—free trade areas (FTAs) and customs unions (Schiff & Winters, 2003). With emphasis on regional agreements, covenants, and conventions, pertinent global outcomes are depicted, and humankind must have a sense of a global community of shared responsibility for a shared future. The World Bank (2021) narrates that apart from economic pertinence in terms of cooperation and free movements of persons and goods, regional organisations also strengthen public health emergency responses. Regions serve “as a bridge between the global and national policy levels, strengthening disease surveillance, mobilising supply chains and facilitating trade, supporting the production and procurement of medicines and supplies, and coordinating policies and work with other actors” (Amaya & De Lombaerde, 2021, p. 1; see also Akinpelu & Adebuseyi, 2015).

The role of regional organisations in the realm of peace and security is internationally recognised and written in Article 52 of the UN Charter:

Nothing in the present Charter precludes the existence of regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with such matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security as are appropriate for regional action, provided that such arrangements or agencies and their activities are consistent with the Purposes and Principles of the United Nations.

The United Nations’ peace and security maintenance is a primary goal, which is the basic rationale of regional security architectures, which are fully operational at regional levels and authenticated by all UN members to help save their regions as well as the world. *Charity begins at Home*: from region to region, people communicate through the pathways of development, culture, identity, and values. Regional cooperation enhances cultural exchange amongst members sharing common goals, and culture determines the identity of a human group in the same way as personality determines the identity of an individual (Dosenrode, 2008). Roy (2015, p. 206) adds that integration should not only consider the human identity but also revolve around the convergence of different national interests to a point where solid institutions can be built. Regional contributions evolve around cultural, social, economic and security progression.

Case Studies of Successful Regional Organisations: Conflict Resolution and Economic Gains

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

ECOWAS, established in 1975 and revised in 1993, successfully restored peace and security. At the start of the civil war in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, regional support from ECOWAS and its military observer group (ECOMOG: Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) succeeded in defending the government and beating back the rebels (Docking, 2001). It is very imperative that ECOMOG, under the support of ECOWAS, continued fighting the rebels until late 1997, when the crisis came to a halt with the reinstatement of Kabbah as the President in 1998.

The ECOWAS monitoring group was sent to Liberia on August 24, 1990, with the aim of sustaining military operations without UN authorisation. The UN's own portrayal of events euphemistically says that the UN *supported* the ECOWAS efforts to end the civil war, even though the operation did not have Security Council authorisation (Boulden, 2003). Lessons learnt in the conflict situation of Liberia have provided a benchmark for the future of ECOWAS. The nature of civil conflict in Liberia has tested the capability of ECOWAS, which successfully vanquished the rebels. It is clear that the proliferation of short institutional procedures, which are capable of instigating a framework for the operation in Liberia, has triggered the progress of the mission, even if the UN has stepped in for support. ECOWAS encountered competing interests and objectives of Nigeria, the local hegemon and the architect of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group, but as determined by the region, the confrontation was calmed down.

Regional bodies have vivid problem-solving institutions like councils of elders, mediation and security council committees, or sub-regional zones of early warning, which provide solutions to regional issues of peace and security. With the historical record, the ECOWAS Council of Elders has always functioned very well in terms of its terms of reference in mediation, observation and facilitation. For example, a delegation of Council members, led by Sierra Leone's Speaker of Parliament, Elizabeth Alpha-Lavalie, observed the presidential and parliamentary elections in Gambia in September 2006 when Yahya Jammeh (President 1996–2017), who was beaten through democratic ballot box election in Gambia, refused to hand over to Adamma Barrow who had won the presidential election (Peercy, 2013). Members of the Council have also taken up roles as election observers in other West-African countries, including Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Togo, as well as Zimbabwe (Ndinga-Muvumba & Lamin, 2006). "The establishment of ECOMOG and the deployment of troops to Liberia, Sierra Leone, among others, have in no small way stabilised peace in the region. The ECOWAS suspended Guinea, Niger, and Côte d'Ivoire following coups and worked relentlessly to frustrate dissent in those countries" (Ogbonna, 2024, p. 63).

Despite the challenges of border security and transboundary threats, which can be mitigated and solved regionally, the economic development of ECOWAS

member states has furthered positive outcomes in economic integration. According to Ogbonna (2024), “The Francophone countries, except Guinea Bissau, formed the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) in 1994, which is under the control of a common central Bank” (p. 63). On the economic dividends, Nigeria claimed more economic incentives and investment opportunities for employment creation, poverty reduction and alleviation, and enhancement of regional equality (Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2023). Regional relevance or profits can be comprehended by expediting economic growth, accelerating human wellbeing, and advancing global ecological sustainability without forgetting contributory political stability and peace (Kibaroglu, 2016).

European Union (EU)

The EU has benefited from the commitments of the member states to become a successful regional organisation. The principles of solidarity, social protection, and human rights were incorporated in the founding treaties (di Napoli & Russo, 2018). The European integration process led to a common political, legal, and administrative authority (Shore & Black, 2021). This method successfully served collective pertinence; nevertheless, the EU expedited multilateral trade negotiations and agreements with, for e.g., Mexico and Chile to make sure that their preferential access to the global market is attained (Draper & Bertelsmann-Scott, 2006).

According to Funck and Pizzati (2003), industries have been able to concentrate their production in a region that has grown close to large markets and also benefits from relatively low wages or at least a labour market that is very favourable to businesses. Unlike the regions with less developed industrial policies, ordinary citizens benefit from the highly developed industrial states, irrespective of high competition. Bennett (1999) has argued that many industrial capacities of traditional productions have been vehemently forced to close their doors or lack demand in the face of strong and highly productive overseas competition. However, having this competition provides a leeway for innovations and developing more reliable sources for future humankind than persistently insufficient traditional industrial yields.

The formation and consolidation of regional organisations (blocs) such as the EU, and claiming that these unions are momentous in promoting economic development for collective equitable benefits, is a significant motif that strengthens regional arrangements and saves the world through the encouragement of less advanced member states (Sidaway, 2002). The EU abolished the barriers to free movement of workers and capital, which banned any form of discrimination based on nationality (Baldwin & Wyplosz, 2022).

The EU has shaped the European identity in the form of belonging and inclusion, social and political membership in the European polity and identity, and citizenship and immigration (Kostakopoulou, 2024). It means that regions evolve in shaping their people’s identity through regional leadership and collective codes of conduct. Regional bodies codified regional practices of qualitative new norms such as the

rule of law, good governance, principles of democracy, respect for constitutional governance, fundamental freedom, and promotion of human rights and social justice (UN, 2009).

Association of South and East Asian Nations (ASEAN)

ASEAN was founded in 1967 by its five founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) and later welcomed five other members. It has shown economic advancement, job creation, and security cooperation over the course of its existence. ASEAN has contributed to the peaceful settlement of disputes, for instance, by signing the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002. The successful assets of ASEAN are institutions like the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asian Summit, serving the purpose of informally dealing with both economic and security challenges (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). According to Caballero-Anthony (2022), “These patterns of cooperation include annual summits and ministerial meetings, regular meetings among officials from different sectors, technical and other capacity building programmes including standard settings, as well as joint military exercises and the like” (p.18).

Important achievements can be shown in terms of trade, economic growth, and job creation (ADB, 2021). ASEAN has developed into a hub for trade relations and has increased its market size and bargaining power (Cho & Kurtz, 2023, p.189). A security regime has also been created, in which the utilities of compliance outweigh the costs of defection (Collins, 2013). The value-added of ASEAN was well illustrated in the aftermath of the 2009 global financial crisis, when ASEAN successfully negotiated with China, including funding for the Pan-Baibu Gulf (PBG) economic cooperation (Li & Kwa, 2011).

Comparative Advantages of Regionalism in Conflict Resolution

There is no fallacy of a single factor in the triggers of conflict. Conflicts are often triggered more by political and security tensions, which are historically related to ideological differences, economic interests, narrow nationalism, ethnic disparities or differences (or existing commonalities), and territorial justifications (Khan, 2009). Regions may serve as a beacon for continental unity, prosperity, and conflict resolution among actors in international politics. Creation of regions cannot change the narrative of world anarchy under a realist perspective, but may foster partnerships in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and crisis management by learning from each other (Kirchner & Dominguez, 2013).

According to Stefanova (2006), regional security performs the functions of an external, benevolent, third-party mediator in regional conflicts, and it represents an incentive structure through which contested interstate incompatibilities can be reformulated into the bargain of regional membership. Regional organisations act in geographical proximity in mediation and intervention. Notwithstanding the basis of shared economic, security, and political interests, collective concerns on security easily secure authorisation from member states (Abass, 2004). For example, in 2009, there was a conflict in Madagascar, where the AU and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) sent mediators without consulting each other, and it was declared that only SADC would be the mediator of the Malagasy conflict, given its proximity to the conflict (Phiri, 2018).

Regional organisations leverage diplomatic tools such as sanctions, dialogue facilitation, or regional economic cooperation to mediate and reach a peaceful solution while de-escalating conflicts. In addition to the provided regional case studies, by the years 2008, 2005, and 2000, the African Union brokered a peaceful agreement to halt violence in Kenya, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) stopped and mediated civil war in Sudan, and the African Union assisted the solution on boarder conflicts between Algeria, Ethiopia, and Eritrea (Nathan, 2010).

Regional organisations are optimal mediators of entrenched behaviours and segregated stereotypes in the regional members. Regional organisations “deepen cooperation and ease the contentious characteristics of sovereign and nationalistic rivalries” (Boutros-Ghali, 1992, as cited in Lewis, 2008) and lessen the extent to which tribalism can impact negotiations (Lewis, 2008). In opting to mediate, Frazier et al. (2014) assert that mediation creates bias where regionally more powerful states, as well as those that share (regional) institutional memberships with the disputants, have greater incentives to mediate than some regional counterparts. This means that motivations to mediate are intrinsically linked to the powerfulness of regional actors who act as arbitrators to make non-enforceable recommendations (Hörner et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Regional organisations institutionalise formal structures, conducting regular meetings and summits on issues concerning regions, and designing procedures to foster their social, economic, and political cooperation. For example, in the realm of maritime cooperation, the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) relates to ensuring the safety of commercial ships in the South China Sea (Rothman et al., 2017). Regional organisations of different kinds have broadened their mandates, enhanced cooperation, increased capacity and resources, managed conflicts, and offered resolutions. Regions are optimal mediators because of a better understanding of regional culture, political, and economic nuances. For instance, the ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security provides the formal basis for a regional security architecture (Bach, 2007).

Thanks to regional legitimacy, they apply diplomatic pressure within their respective regions.

Different criticisms are also underpinned by scholars, highlighting issues such as different national interests, limited enforcement of capabilities, and divisive levels of commitment to meet the regional needs. According to Söderbaum and Brolin (2016), on one hand, there is little guidance on how to evaluate the attainment of best regional outcomes, as a result of insufficient monitoring and evaluation tools in this field. On the other hand, there is a clear win-win cooperation, mutual benefits, and respect which open up people-to-people mobility in regional settings, and this harmonises the new regional multilateralism. It is affirmed by Ornelas (2003), in his article *Feasible Multilateralism and the Effects of Regionalism*, that “regional trade agreements help move the world towards a welfare superior equilibrium. The reason is that members in regional trade agreements lower trade barriers against one another, they are induced to reduce their multilateral tariffs as well.” As regional integrations are a means to new building blocks, there is also a sense that regional trade liberalisation does not react in a negative way to multilateral trade liberalisation (Herz & Wagner, 2011). Like African Union trajectories of economic revitalisation, many policies are set like that of the Pan-African payment system to enable Pan-African payments, instant payments, and simplified payments to tackle an estimated 80% of intra-African payments that pass through Europe and the US, triggering high transfer and compliance costs (PAPSS, 2024). Thus, regional stability leads to global stability and will preponderantly save the world.

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Essay 11: Regionalism and Deglobalisation



Alexander Libman and Evgeny Vinokurov

Introduction

Throughout history, the global economy has experienced periods of rapid trade and capital growth followed by periods of increased protectionism and economic fragmentation (Chase-Dunn et al., 2023). The world reached a truly amazing level of globalisation at the beginning of the twentieth century in terms of trade, investments, and migration (McKeown, 2004). In 1913, world exports accounted for almost 14% of global GDP. This level was met and surpassed only by the end of the 1970s (Fouquin & Hugot, 2016; IMF data). For the sake of comparison, world exports in 2023 reached 22.2%.

Currently, we may be experiencing a major transition, with the period of globalisation, which started after the end of the Cold War, being replaced by an era of deglobalisation. Deglobalisation might take the form of the division of the world economy into two or several relatively isolated and competing economic blocs, separated from each other through protectionist and sanctions barriers (IMF, 2023). While some argue that the process might have started already several years ago (James, 2018; Paul, 2021), the debates have been facilitated by the major political ruptures of the last years (Libman, 2022). The deglobalisation process is potentially driven by two interdependent trends. At the political level, countries increasingly perceive economic dependence on other states as a risk and not as an opportunity and are much more sensitive to avoid these dependencies. At the business level, companies are much more aware of the fact that political conflicts and turbulences can lead to sudden and unexpected devaluation of their investments and fragmentation of trade ties. Therefore, they adjust their plan accordingly. Deglobalisation could be a

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game-changer for all aspects of the world economy, including regional integration projects.

The goal of this essay is to theorise about the possible implications of deglobalisation for regionalism. While deglobalisation has already been subject to a scholarly literature (Altman et al., 2024; Baldwin et al., 2024; Balsa-Barreiro et al., 2020; Hillebrand, 2010; Kornprobst & Paul, 2021), its impact on regionalism has hardly been analysed (except for some specific policy fields and regions, e.g., Konovalova & Jeifets, 2024). At the current moment, deglobalisation seems to be rather a direction of development of the world economy with a substantial probability (more likely than merely a couple of years ago) than an unavoidable reality (James, 2018). This essay asks the following: What would happen should the prospects of deglobalisation fully materialise? We provide a conceptual framework, identifying the main factors potentially affecting regionalism under these circumstances. To highlight the counterfactual nature of the analysis, we will refrain from identifying specific blocs into which the world economy could be separated (although their shape seems to be becoming increasingly clear). Our goal is to provide a *concise theoretical argument*. While most scholarly papers start with a list of hypotheses derived from the literature, we will conclude with a list of hypotheses, which we hope will be helpful for guiding future empirical work on this important topic.

The End of Regionalism?

One of the key debates of the last decades was whether regionalism should be seen as a *building block* or a *stumbling stone* of the globalisation process (Baldwin & Low, 2009). Over time, the regional organisations (ROs) became more integrated into the globalisation process. First, their growing networks (the *spaghetti bowl* of regionalism) grew denser and thus in themselves supported globalisation. Second, the idea of *open regionalism* (Bergsten, 1997) became more popular, making regionalism more compatible with globalisation. Third, regional organisations in themselves (particularly the EU) became actors at the global level with their own agenda on the issues of trade and capital flows. At the same time, at least since the 2010s, dissatisfaction with the partial inability of global governance institutions (in particular the WTO) to address pertinent issues triggered the development of so-called *mega-regional trade agreements*, i.e., trade blocs of large groups of countries transcending the traditional regional borders and focusing less on common institutions and more on facilitating trade and investments. Examples include the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the never-implemented Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) (Rensmann, 2017). The relation between mega-regional trade agreements and traditional regionalism remains unclear. The ROs were at least in some cases the main driving forces for the development of mega-regionalism, but at the same time, successful mega-regionalism could make ROs obsolete.

The process of deglobalization puts the tension between ROs and mega-regionalism on an entirely new level. We assume that deglobalisation would lead to the division of the world into coherent economic blocs. Each of them would possess:

1. its own set of common institutions;
2. trade and investment infrastructure (exclusive trade arrangements, investment facilitation arrangements, an independent payment system, compatibility of digital currencies, etc.);
3. exclusive and, possibly, incompatible technological standards in telecommunication, digital sphere, e-mobility, payments, etc.

A common feature of these blocs is likely to be extreme scepticism towards their countries engaging in economic relations with other countries outside the bloc, due to the already described logic, it will be seen as evidence of dependence on possibly hostile powers.

Under these conditions, there is much *less space for the development of integration projects at the regional level*. First, one could argue that since the economic blocs would consist of a smaller number of states than the current global governance institutions (and likely have a strong hegemonic state at the top), they would also be more able to develop common policies and standards than is the case today for global governance (on the trade-off between heterogeneity and depth of integration see Alesina & Spolaore, 2005). This logic is most pertinent to technological standards, but it could also be applicable to trade and investment exclusivity and regulation (Kelley, 2010). Therefore, many decisions that would now be met at the level of the ROs would be moved to these larger economic blocs (one could of course imagine a scenario in which some already existing ROs will transform into new coherent economic blocs, but it is extremely unlikely; with the only exception of the EU, most existing ROs do not have the necessary economic potential to form an autarkic economic space). ROs will become obsolete, as the higher-level economic blocs would, due to their size, benefit from economies of scale and at the same time would become homogenous enough to achieve actual progress in making substantial policy decisions – the selection into these blocs will be, even more than it is today in many ROs (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019), based on commonality of norms, institutions and policies; including countries, which do not fit the common pattern, is likely to be perceived to be risky in line with the arguments in the introduction.

Second, the blocs would also be more concerned about maintaining internal unity¹ (in the environment of the new global competition)² and therefore constrain their countries to a larger extent than is the case today in the global economy.

¹ Again, this is likely to be driven by the perception of disunity and internal divisions as weakening the bloc in the competition with other antagonistic blocs, as it has in fact been the case during the Cold War.

² Unlike the globalisation era, when countries competed in a global economy for mobile capital (Sinn, 2004), in the deglobalisation scenario, competition is likely to be associated with using economic and political pressure to establish privileged access to resources and markets.

Third, new geoeconomic alliances would not necessarily be based on geographic or cultural proximity, which is, in fact, the main foundation of the idea of regionalism (Ethier, 2001). Many regions could be separated by the new division lines, based on factors like political systems and ideologies. In this respect, again, the experience of the Cold War is instructive: during this period, traditional cultural spaces in Southeast Asia and in Eastern Europe were separated between two competing blocs. In Europe, Greece turned out to be on the other side of the Iron Curtain than Bulgaria and Serbia – countries it was traditionally closely connected to. In Asia, mainland China, North Korea, and Vietnam turned out to be in a different camp than Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea.

Under these conditions, there would be *much less room for regionalism in the world economy than there is today*. While in the 1990s and the 2000s, many observers expected the future to be that of *open regionalism*, i.e., a plethora of overlapping regional trade agreements with the more or less porous borders (Bergsten, 1997), in the deglobalisation scenario will see a small number of highly coherent organisations fiercely competing against each other. *The key institutions of the world economy will migrate to the meso-level*, between the global and regional levels, making the regional level less relevant.

Regionalism in a World of Competing Blocs

This scenario offers a gloomy picture of the perspectives of regionalism in a deglobalised world. At the same time, there are at least two factors possibly making regionalism (or at least some ROs) *still partially relevant and useful* for its member states. On the one hand, regionalism could become a practical tool for overcoming the barriers of competing geopolitical/geoeconomic blocs (while the blocs and especially their leading countries, as mentioned, will perceive economic ties to other blocs with scepticism, there will still be countries and businesses interested in maintaining ties to the other side). Second, ROs could become vehicles for pooling resources for a new industrial policy, focusing on developing autarkic production capabilities. These two avenues offer possibilities for regionalism to remain partially relevant and carve out its place under the sun.

ROs as Bridges Between Competing Blocs

A crucial difference between the deglobalisation process in the current world and the previous cases of deglobalisation (e.g., after the end of World War 1, see Horowitz, 2004) is that this one is not preceded by a period of political chaos and complete destruction of existing political institutions. Rather, it is driven by spatially localised conflicts, which, however, have major global implications. This also means that ROs

that emerged during the period of globalisation continue to function to a certain extent; the status quo is not uprooted completely, but rather gradually changes.

This, however, means that ROs, at least for a certain period of time, could assume a very important function: existing agreements liberalising mutual trade and investments will, to some extent, allow their members to counteract the pressures of competing geoeconomic blocs. In other words, regionalism would mitigate to a certain extent the harshness of the defragmented world.

Some of the regional provisions will certainly be cancelled or substantially watered down over time (e.g., due to the pressure of the hegemons or growing mistrust across countries). We have seen a number of instances of ROs losing all or most practical relevance while remaining *de jure* – so-called *Talking Clubs*, *Zombies*, and *Coma* cases (Vinokurov & Libman, 2017). However, in some cases, members of the ROs could try to escape the pressures of deglobalisation. There may be different reasons for it: economic benefits of globalisation that countries will be unwilling to part with, concerns of becoming involved in conflicts of other countries, or fears of excessive dependence on the great powers, which can be avoided by diversifying their foreign ties (Marston, 2024).³ In some cases, this will be driven by sheer necessity: without continuing economic ties to the countries on both sides of the new iron curtain, some states will find themselves in a highly precarious position. In some cases, the continuation of ties will be driven by economic benefits and the logic of arbitrage (Libman, 2023): isolation of economic spaces creates substantial benefits for those able to cross the boundary and engage in transactions with both sides.

While some countries (due to their internal political developments and the already existing structure of external economic and political ties) will fully embrace the logic of deglobalisation, others, for the reasons mentioned above, will be involuntary participants in this process. They will at least attempt to *muddle through*, maintaining the existing institutions as long as possible (for an empirical example, see Libman & Vinokurov, 2024). The existing ROs, which emerged before the division of the world became a reality, would serve as convenient tools for bridging the otherwise isolated spaces.

Still, the main question remains how long the ROs that assume this role will be able to resist the centripetal forces within the larger geoeconomic blocs.

First, the leading states of the blocs are likely to exert pressure on other states, calling upon them to *take sides* in the geoeconomic and geopolitical conflict. For example, the US is already discouraging Asian countries from participating in China-led economic initiatives (Brazinsky, 2023).

Second, the divergence of technological standards will make trade across the boundaries of geoeconomic blocs extremely costly. While it would probably still be economically reasonable to engage in trade in basic commodities as well as lower value-added products, it would be much more difficult to trade in machinery or more technologically advanced goods, for which their fit to existing standards is essential.

³ This could formally revive memories of the Non-Alignment Movement for a moment; however, such parallels might be misleading since, in this case, we are discussing states that fall within an economic bloc and are trying to make its borders looser and more penetrable.

Literature shows that standards harmonisation made an important contribution to the growth of international trade in the last decades (Schmidt & Steingrass, 2022); the issue of possible technological bifurcation between the US and China has been discussed, for instance, by Garcia-Herrero (2023) and Brookings (2021). Ultimately, the fragmentation of standards could put an end to attempts to play an intermediary role in the deglobalised world, but it is impossible to predict how long these attempts could last.

ROs as Vehicles of Industrial Policy

Another reason that ROs could maintain their importance involves another aspect of deglobalisation: a very high perception of political risks. Under the conditions prescribed in our scenario and following its assumptions, countries will try to strengthen their domestic industrial capacity to achieve some level of self-sufficiency, at least for critical goods. The EU's effort to develop domestic semiconductor production capabilities is a prominent example of this logic (Johnston & Huggins, 2023)⁴; another example, which became painfully relevant during the COVID pandemic, is a level of self-sufficiency in the production of medical equipment and medicines. To develop the required production capabilities, countries will engage in massive industrial policy measures, trying to support the establishment of the necessary industries (either by domestic firms or by foreign investors).

The problem is that resources for such global competition (e.g., in the area of semiconductors, AI, or biotechnology) are available only in a handful of countries. While the largest two economies of the world may have sufficient capability on their own, most other countries will face harsh constraints in terms of finance, technology, and components. One way to overcome this constraint is to cooperate internationally with the closest neighbours, which could revive the ROs.

In this case, ROs are likely to change their function from liberalisation of trade and capital flows to pooling of resources for common industrial goals. Experience shows that achieving this type of objective within an RO is extremely difficult due to contradictions between member states (on the problems of industrial policy in ROs, see Eder, 2022). At the same time, with the self-sufficiency of domestic industry becoming a more important goal and the costs of achieving this self-sufficiency being very high, countries may be more open to the transformation of the ROs.

⁴ In 2023, the EU passed the European Chips Act, aiming to increase the share of the EU on the global market for semiconductors to 20% and pledging to invest 34 bln EUR in the semiconductor industry (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Chips_Act).

Concise Theoretical Argument

Summing up, our theoretical argument takes the following form. It is based on the following scenario with three main assumptions.

1. The world experiences deglobalisation.
2. Deglobalisation is tied to the division of the world economy into separate economic blocs isolated from each other. The key institutions of the world economy will thus be located at the meso-level between the global and the regional ones.
3. Each bloc would possess its own set of common institutions, hard and soft infrastructure for trade and investments, and exclusive and, possibly, incompatible technological standards.

Under these conditions, it is possible to derive the set of hypotheses presented below.

1. There will be much less room for regionalism in the world economy than there is today:
 - a. A substantial part of policy decisions that are now made at the level of the ROs will move to the larger blocs.
 - b. Larger blocs will be able to develop more and deeper common policies and standards than is the case in contemporary regionalism.
 - c. The key institutions of the world economy will migrate to the meso-level, between the global and regional levels.
2. At the same time, two factors could support regionalism and ROs' partial relevance:
 - a. Regionalism could become a tool for overcoming the barriers of competing geopolitical/geoeconomic blocs and bridging otherwise isolated spaces. These attempts have a higher chance of success for trade in commodities and lower value-added goods, and a smaller chance on the industrial and especially high-tech level because of the divergence in technological standards.
 - b. ROs could attempt to become vehicles for pooling resources for the new industrial policy, focusing on developing joint production capabilities of a group of countries unwilling to rely on other suppliers. For that purpose, ROs are likely to prioritise the functions of pooling resources for common industrial goals.

Conclusion

The onset of deglobalisation, if this trend becomes a reality, could fundamentally change the nature of regionalism. Two trends associated with the hypotheses (1) and (2) could co-exist and define the place of regionalism within the new deglobalisation wave. The contradictory nature of hypotheses (1 vs 2) reflects an inherent tension that regionalism will face. Namely, it will be attractive for member countries of ROs, but it will contradict the logic of geoeconomic competition.

On the one hand, ROs could dissipate into larger geoeconomic blocs participating in a new version of global competition; in this case, regionalism will become substantially less important than it is today (as will, in fact, global multilateralism). The key institutions of the world economy will be located at the meso-level between the global and the regional ones.

On the other hand, at least some ROs could escape this destiny by assuming one of two functions: either that of intermediaries between competing economic blocs or that of centres of industrial policy, with several countries coming together to amass the resources necessary to achieve self-sufficiency in critical sectors. The *intermediary role of ROs will most likely remain feasible* only as long as the divergence of technological standards across geoeconomic blocs remains limited; in the case of a high level of bifurcation of technological standards, trade between geoeconomic blocs, whether within ROs or not, will become less attractive. For ROs willing to concentrate on a common industrial policy, it will be necessary to overcome major divisions and contradictions between their member states, which is a very difficult task.

While, again, the goal of this essay was to outline a set of possible hypotheses and directions for research, looking for the dynamics of regionalism is a highly promising avenue for academic and policy-relevant studies in the years to come. *Regionalism is entering a difficult era.*

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Essay 12: Towards a Regional Glocalisation



Carlo Caporali and Alessandra Faggian

Introduction: A World of Regions

Since the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the *state-nation* has long served as the primary organising principle of world politics (Morgenthau, 1973). Yet over the past decades, scholars have noted growing pressures on this model—not so much its outright demise as its gradual transformation under the dual forces of regionalism and globalisation (Keohane & Nye, 2002; Scholte, 2005). The *short century* of extreme conflict and ideological confrontation that Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm & Cumming, 1994) labels the period 1914–1991 deeply unsettled the nation-state: two world wars, decolonisation waves, the Cold War's end, and the consequent starting of the globalisation, fractured many imperial and bipolar orders, demonstrating the limits of central governments in accommodating diverse populations (Held et al., 1999; Ohmae, 1995; Sassen, 1996; Strange, 1996).

As the nation-state struggled to maintain its relevance, having become too small for the big problems, too big for the small (Ohmae, 1995), new forms of identity and governance emerged, often in response to the perceived failures of national governments to address the diverse needs of their populations.

Rather than dissolving the nation-state, however, these processes have produced a more layered, multi-level system in which sub-national and supra-national regions both complement and contest the authority of central governments (Hooghe et al., 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009) in a constant negotiation of power relations (Tomaney, 2014).

Economic specialisation, cultural recognition, and the protection of minority rights became focal points for these emerging *non-national entities* (Keating, 1998; Postero, 2007). In many cases, the weakening of the nation-state led to a resurgence

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of regional identities and demands for autonomy, as communities sought to assert their distinctiveness in a rapidly changing world (Eaton, 2004; Fiseha, 2007; Paasi, 2011).

The decline of the *world of nations* thus might signal the approaching end of a historical epoch and the beginning of a new era in which local and regional identities play a more prominent role in shaping the global order. This new era challenges the traditional boundaries of nation-states and calls for a rethinking of how communities are organised, governed, and recognised on the world stage.

In 1993, Peter Katzenstein published an influential article entitled *A World of Regions*, arguing that the post-Cold War world would not be characterised by homogenisation through globalisation. Instead, he envisioned a global order that would be polycentric in structure and plural in substance, with multiple centres of power and diverse regional dynamics shaping global politics (Katzenstein, 1993, p. 82). Building on this idea, Katzenstein later emphasised that understanding the world requires a regional comparison approach, one that is closely linked to an analysis of the global power structures and processes that connect these regions (Katzenstein, 2005). The world has indeed seen the emergence of a *new regional order* (Voskresenski, 2019) in which regional blocs, networks, and identities shape social, economic, and political landscapes.

Amitav Acharya encapsulates this paradigm shift by noting that the practical and theoretical understanding of international relations underwent a significant transformation within less than two decades (from the 1990s to the 2010s). After a first period of minimal attention, eventually the global focus shifted to the acknowledgement that “regions are central to our understanding of world politics” (Acharya, 2007, p. 629). Some key features accompany this shift. Regions have become critical sites of conflict and violence. Increasing climate-related challenges, such as extreme weather events, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation, are increasingly *regional* issues, and so are the strategies to cope with them. The same applies to migration and health-related issues. The interplay between being the centre of complex phenomena and the contextual understanding that regional problems require regional solutions has allowed regions to develop distinct dynamics and policies independent from the direct influence of prominent global actors (Buzan & Waeber, 2003). According to Buzan and Waeber (2003), while globalisation has frequently been the central focus for international relations scholars in discussions about the evolving world order, it now predominantly coexists with regionalisation (De Lombaerde et al., 2012a).

The related literature tends to make overly sharp distinctions between micro-regions and macro-regions (Söderbaum, 2017). *Region* indeed refers mainly to two seemingly different phenomena: sub-national *micro-regions* and supra-national *macro-regions*. Rather than treat these as unrelated, in order to develop our conceptualisation of the new and future role of regions, we draw on work that conceives *regionness* as a ladder of shared attributes—territorial cohesion, institutional capacity, external actorness—observable at multiple scales (De Lombaerde, 2010; De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Massey, 1995, 2005).

Both kinds of regions are partial-state governance levels: they exercise some, but not all, functions associated with sovereignty, and their boundaries shift with

political projects and scalar strategies (Allen & Cochrane, 2007). Empirically, they also converge as international actors: sub-national governments deploy paradiplomacy to attract investment or sign climate accords (Keating, 2000), while macro-regional blocs negotiate trade and environmental regimes on the global stage. Cross-border growth triangles in Southeast Asia or EU Euregios, for instance, demonstrate how bottom-up micro-regional cooperation can both feed into, and be enabled by, top-down macro-regional integration (Dent, 2008; Perkmann, 2007).

This coexistence has advanced to a stage where it is increasingly possible to systematically conceptualise a global order defined by vital regions—what can aptly be described as *a world of regions*.

Viewing regions as points on a dynamic scalar continuum, therefore, lets us analyse how local, national, and supranational arenas interlock rather than compete—a perspective that underpins the glocal argument developed throughout this chapter.

The Glocal Dimension

Fukuyama's (2015) prediction of the *end of history*, marked by an inevitable homogenisation of the world, has not materialised. The inherent diversity and complexity of local communities and their regions were vital in avoiding a path to uniformity. In 1992, Robertson introduced the concept of “glocalisation” into the scientific discourse (Robertson, 1992, p. 173). Since then, many articles and encyclopedias have attempted to unpack its meaning and multifaceted implications (see Roudometof, 2016, for a comprehensive review). Robertson's idea of glocalisation emphasises that globalisation is not an abstract force existing independently of the local context; rather, it is realised in concrete, localised forms. In his view, the local is never entirely *pure* or isolated from global influences. Instead, it is always, at least partially, constructed in response to and through these global forces, highlighting the international and local interconnectedness.

This theoretical debate emerged - no surprise - in the post-Cold War era, signalling a shift in sensibility towards understanding the global structure. Regions started to emerge as significant economic and political actors, embodying concrete realities while reflecting cultural and moral characteristics. This dual role of regions addresses the practical needs of governance and financial management and satisfies the sociological and philosophical reflections on the changing global paradigm. Khondker (2005) further elaborates on the concept of glocalisation, describing it as a sophisticated version of globalisation, distinguished by five key elements: (i) diversity is fundamental to social life; (ii) not all differences are erased in the process; (iii) history and culture function autonomously to impart a sense of uniqueness to the experiences of groups—whether cultures, societies, or nations; (iv) it dispels the fear that globalisation is a tidal wave erasing all differences; and (v) glocalisation does not promise a conflict-free world but offers a more historically grounded and pragmatic worldview.

Glocalisation reflects a complex understanding of globalisation that acknowledges the importance of local identities and regional dynamics. This perspective allows for a more complex and realistic view of global processes, where the local and the global are not in opposition, but interwoven in ways that shape the contemporary world. As regions continue to rise in importance, both as economic and political entities and as cultural and moral communities, the concept of glocalisation provides a valuable framework for understanding the evolving global order. Robertson and White (2007, p. 62) argue that the key to understanding the mechanism of glocalisation lies in the concept of *diffusion*. They suggest that diffusion involves focusing on how ideas and practices spread (or fail to spread) from one locale to another, and they contend that “*diffusion theory [...] anticipated what we now call glocalisation in significant ways.*” However, framing the issue of glocalisation within the context of world culture’s diffusion may be counterproductive. According to world society theory, diffusion and institutional isomorphism lead to global uniformity across various cultural elements. If diffusion results in cultural homogenisation, it fails to provide an empirical mechanism that accurately captures the workings of glocalisation.¹ In their view, diffusion occurs through the *theorisation* of cultural items by those who adopt them, and it is effective when adopters have strong ties to the models they are adopting. When such ties are weak or absent, this theorisation of diffusion can mistakenly present innovation as diffusion (Strang & Meyer, 1993). However, while this concept offers a valuable entry point for discussing glocalisation, unlike the neo-institutionalist strong Durkheimian interpretation of culture, glocalisation can be more effectively theorised by considering interactions on the global stage without assuming the existence or absence of a shared *culture* in the sense understood by world society theory. Moving away from the metaphors of liquidity or diffusion (Ritzer & Dean, 2014; Robertson & White, 2007), Roudometof (2016) proposes the adoption of the metaphor of *wave transmission*. This interpretation suggests that globalisation can be understood as a process in which waves pass through the local context, much like light passing through glass, leading to both reflection and refraction. In his view, glocalisation is defined as the refraction of globalisation through the local, resulting in a blend of the regional and global, termed *glocality*. This perspective allows for conceptualising glocalisation as analytically autonomous from globalisation. Within this scenario, the region emerges as the new key actor. As glocalisation underscores the interplay between global forces and local contexts, regions become vital spaces where this interaction occurs.

¹ World society theorists assume that cultural connections among actors—whether states, organizations, or individuals—are not just relational but also inherently cultural.

Regions: The Glocal Socio-Economic Prism

The interest in space and its relevance, once connoted as place (cultural, economic, etc.), has deep roots tracing back to the early twentieth century. For instance, Beveridge (1944) highlighted the uneven spatial distribution of unemployment across the United Kingdom while analysing the effects of the Great Depression. Prebisch (1950) documented stark regional imbalances in Latin American export-oriented enclaves vastly outpacing interior hinterlands, underscoring how infrastructure and trade patterns shape development paths. Similarly, Celso Furtado (1963) traced Brazil's persistent divergence between its industrialised Southeast and agrarian Northeast to colonial land-use legacies and investment biases, and Gunnar Myrdal (1972) exposed India's patchwork of command posts (Bombay–Madras) versus underdeveloped hinterlands (Bihar–Orissa) as rooted in historical institutional factors. As McCann (2013) acknowledges, geography plays a key role in determining economic behaviour, and much of the discussion on the performance of local, urban, or regional economies is, fundamentally, a question about the relationships between geography and the economy. Geography and economics are strictly interrelated.²

Along this line of thinking, contemporary scholars have further developed a line of inquiry, emphasising the political economy dimensions of these issues. Authors such as Rodríguez-Pose (2018) have underlined the power of local—and often micro-level—dynamics in shaping national and international trajectories, regardless of the political-economic national environment. De Backer et al. (2018) illustrate how the organisation and distribution of Global Value Chains (GVCs) is a testament to the significance of regions within the global economy. As activities within these value chains become more fragmented and dispersed across different locations, regions gain importance due to their specialised roles and contributions. In other words, the role of an area - particularly its position within the global value chain - can influence, and even mediate, national policies. More recently, Boschma (2024) highlighted an even more proactive role of regions that might be able to develop new (and upgrade existing) GVCs.

Arguably, the most recent global demonstration of the importance of regions - and their glocal dimension - within global dynamics has been the uneven impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic highlighted how regional disparities in healthcare capacity, economic resilience, and governance could significantly affect the outcomes of global crises. As Bailey et al. (2020) noted, the spatial-industrial organisation of value chains has been fundamentally challenged, with regions integrated into these chains facing varying levels of disruption. The pandemic exposed

² Urban and regional economics are two very similar approaches and frameworks based on the analysis at the local level. As McCann himself explained, spatial economic analysis is traditionally divided into two sub-fields: urban economics and regional economics. Urban economics focuses on the economic dynamics within a single city, using models designed for urban-specific phenomena. In contrast, regional economics examines broader spatial areas, such as multiple cities or regions, emphasising their interactions and differences. While these fields overlap, urban economics primarily looks at city-level issues, whereas regional economics explores economic variations across different regions, including both urban and rural areas (McCann, 2013).

the vulnerabilities of global, highly specialised value chains, such as those in the automotive industry, which were severely affected by the halting of global circulation and local activities. In contrast, regions that could localise production and maintain more diverse supply chains demonstrated greater resilience.

Recently, Daams et al. (2024) unfolded the dynamics underpinning the uneven impact of the last global financial crisis, unveiling persistent post-crisis asymmetry in local capital market conditions and underscoring the capital risk-safety aspects of agglomeration. Looking at how places were differently affected by the global financial crisis, they offered an alternative explanation of why US economic growth continues to experience spatial divergence after many decades of convergence.

Despite such remarkable advancement in assessing the role of local differential patterns in guiding the impact of macro phenomena, it is interesting to notice that macroeconomic theorists and modellers have long overlooked spatial heterogeneity and its importance (Hewings, 2024). Despite the evident shortcomings of the neoclassical approach, the national scale has continued to be the dominant reference point for both the academic literature and policy makers, mainly ignoring the reality that we live in—and have always lived in—a multi-level world. This neglect persists even though regional science and sociology have long recognised the significance of space and spillover effects. Vines and Wills (2018) highlight that modern macroeconomic theory still fails to acknowledge the crucial roles of spillovers and spatial interdependencies. It often overlooks the regional heterogeneity in exposure to anthropic and non-anthropoc risks and the varying levels of resilience across different regions. Furthermore, there is insufficient recognition that factor mobility is frequently greater within nations than between them and that income distribution impacts are highly heterogeneous due to the intrinsic diversity of economic agents (Hewings, 2024). This lack of attention to spatial heterogeneity and interdependencies underscores a critical gap in contemporary macroeconomic theory, which fails to fully account for the complex realities of a multi-level, interconnected world.

If we look at the European Union, for instance, in which regional disparities are way more pronounced than national ones, the importance of local governments as main interlocutors for implementing socio-economic policies has long been recognised by the European-level institutions (Greenwood, 2001).

Significant contrasts exist within individual countries in various categories, such as graduate employment or unemployment rates. For example, in nations like Italy or Spain, some regions rank among the top performers in Europe, while others fall near the bottom of the European ranking (Eurostat, 2022). As reported by the OECD (2016, p. 26), OECD countries are witnessing increasing gaps in GDP per capita between high- and low-performing regions within countries.³

In this scenario, as highlighted by the 2021 (and subsequent) report of the European Regional Barometer, regions are being ignored by national-level authorities in the process of implementation of national recovery plans, putting EU recovery

³ According to the report, the gaps within countries between the top 10% regions with the highest productivity and the bottom 75% have grown by about 60% over the last two decades.

and green targets at risk.⁴ Beyond European borders, for instance, federal responses in Mexico and India similarly centralised decision-making, resulting in resource-allocation mismatches across states (Ramirez & Castillo, 2023). In particular, despite the vast interregional differences in healthcare capacity, fiscal resources, and COVID-19 incidence, the centralisation of the response by the Indian government “prevented state and local governments from tailoring a policy response to suit local needs” and imposed large economic costs even in areas with few cases (Choutagunta et al., 2021).

The importance of the new paradigm is also clear for broader organisations such as the United Nations (UN). As already noted by Salomón and Sánchez (2008) and De Lombaerde et al. (2012b), the UN actively (and increasingly) engages with the *mixed actor* (partially sovereignty-bound, partially sovereignty-free) character of subnational governments acting internationally. In general, it can be argued that, despite the global evolution of nation-states, regional dynamics (and dynamism)—shaped by local institutions, geographic endowments, and cross-border flows—drive both economic growth and social change (Boschma, 2022; Pike et al., 2014).

As previously mentioned, though, one should recognise that *region* is not a universal concept. Massey (1995, 2005) argues that the existence of a region is defined by the social and economic processes that occur within a specific spatial context. In other words, a region is not just a geographical area; it is shaped and characterised by the activities, interactions, and connections of the people and entities within it. These processes include local economies, cultural practices, social norms, and communication networks, giving a region its unique identity and coherence. By treating regions as variable rather than fixed, we can better capture their glocal dynamism and explain how the same place can simultaneously belong to local, national, and supranational formations.

From this perspective, it is arguable that regions thrive on dense internal ties, but *clusterisation* has a double edge. Bonding social capital—the tight networks celebrated by Putnam (2000)—builds trust and mobilises local resources, yet it can also breed parochialism and resistance to outsiders. Bridging social capital, by contrast, links the region to diverse partners and injects new ideas, cushioning it against insularity.

Precisely because regional success hinges on the interplay of local endowments and external connections, institutional quality matters as much as natural assets (Li et al., 2024; Tomaney, 2014). Weak governance, policy fragmentation or exclusionary politics can lock places out of global value chains, whereas adaptive institutions help regions diversify and upgrade (Boschma, 2024; MacKinnon et al., 2019).

Today’s poly-crisis world amplifies both the promise and the peril. Mission-oriented agendas, green re-industrialisation and pandemic after-shocks thrust regions to the forefront, yet rising protectionism and brittle cross-border relations threaten

⁴ The report, available at <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/brochures/Documents/Barometer%20easer/barometer%202021%20teaser%20en.pdf>, stresses the critical role that regions play (or *should* play) in driving sustainable development and economic recovery, and it warns that neglecting regional needs and perspectives could undermine the overall effectiveness of these initiatives at both national and European level.

new walls (Bauman, 2013). Avoiding a zero-sum *rat race*, therefore, requires what Magnaghi (2000) calls *glocality*: anchoring development in local strengths while remaining porous to global flows.

Delivering that balance is not a regional task alone. It demands multilevel governance that aligns local, national, and supranational actors around shared projects and fair rules (Boulineau & Molinari, 2022; Turco, 2013). Only then can regions convert their distinctive assets into inclusive and sustainable growth rather than into another round of destructive competition.

Conclusion

In an era where Bauman's *liquid modernity* dissolves the rigid contours of the Westphalian order, regions emerge as the critical mediators between global challenges and local needs. This essay has traced how sub-national and supra-national *regions* function as fluid, nested arenas—shaped by geography, institutional legacies, and cultural identities—capable of translating supranational imperatives into context-sensitive policies, and of elevating grassroots innovations onto broader stages.

Looking ahead, scholarship and policy must continue to unpack the mechanisms by which regions learn from one another, adapt global models to local realities, and co-create solutions at multiple scales. In fact, building actual multi-level governance should not be a mere technical exercise. It must be institutionalised through transparent, accountable architectures that reflect the endogenous outcome of power negotiations among state, regional, and local actors (Faguet, 2014; Tomaney, 2014).

In conclusion, regions alone will not save the world. However, a true *regional* approach to global issues might really help put the world on the right track.

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Essay 13: Sub-National Regional Actorness: A Polycentric Pathway via Paris



Ana Dias and Sandrina Antunes

Introduction

As global politics embraces broader, inclusive governance (Hale & Held, 2011), climate action is also moving beyond state-centric approaches (Bulkeley et al., 2014). Recognised as a global public good, a stable climate implies agency provision across borders and governance levels, as acknowledged by the climate regime. Attempting to still *save the world*, Paris adopted polycentric premises to foster such agency across multiple jurisdictions to address such a universal challenge (Jordan et al., 2018). In an evolving climate regime, this contribution explores *regional actorness*, examining the functional autonomy of sub-national regional governments to behave actively and deliberately to achieve Paris' climate goals beyond a purely monocentric paradigm.

The failure of monocentric governance approaches—where the state acts as a centralised power—to address climate issues effectively up to the Kyoto Protocol underscored the need for a paradigm shift. In response, the Paris Agreement recognised a polycentric approach, which acknowledges the importance of diverse actors – private and public, located at multiple scales (i.e., supra-national, national, and sub-national) – in climate governance (Hale, 2016). With this shift, sub-national regional authorities are recognised as functional actors with the capacity to behave actively and deliberately (Sjöstedt, 1977), pursuing their own climate efforts aligned with premises defined by the climate regime. As agents with recognised functional autonomy of action by Paris, regional governments are legitimate performers of what we identify as *regional actorness*.

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Although global regionalism focuses on supra-national regions, this essay brings sub-national regions into the debate on global climate governance. Sub-national regions—understood as territorial units below the sovereign state with variable authoritative decision-making capacities (Hooghe et al., 2010)—may act as functional agents with the autonomy to contribute to global climate goals within a polycentric governance framework. For clarity, when the term *region* is used throughout this essay, it refers specifically to sub-national regions unless explicitly stated otherwise. Furthermore, this essay acknowledges the potential for interaction and collaboration between sub-national and supra-national regions in climate governance, highlighting interconnected roles in governance systems.

This essay attempts to define this phenomenon of regional actorness and explain its emergence. Using regime theory and polycentricity as analytical lenses, it explores how regional actorness has evolved and is performed within the climate regime established by the Paris Agreement. Drawing on regime theory (Krasner, 1982), we interpret regional actorness as part of a broader transition within the climate regime toward polycentric governance. Polycentricity, on the other hand, provides a theoretical foundation that views functional agency as a viable form of self-governance, where autonomous functional units contribute to the provision of global public goods (mitigation and adaptation policies) within their constitutional settings (Ostrom, 2010).

Recent literature highlights the importance of non-state actors in climate governance, acknowledging subnational governments' role in addressing global challenges. However, the role of sub-national regions remains underexplored, lacking a conceptual framework to recognise regional governments as autonomous functional agents of global climate governance. As such, this essay is guided by three main goals and structure: (1) to demonstrate how regional actorness has emerged and is expressed in the climate regime; (2) to explain how regional governments have become more prominent actors through a more polycentric framework; (3) to define and locate regional actorness as a concept emerging from the regime shift in global climate governance. It will do so by extending the explanatory power of actorness to the (sub-national) regional level of analysis, but also by applying polycentricity's dual analytical utility as a descriptive tool applied to the Paris Agreement's framework and an analytical approach to understand regional actorness.

Regime Theory: From Monocentric to Polycentric Climate Governance

Efforts to address greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and climate change are organised within the framework of the UNFCCC, which encompasses the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015). Together, these treaties form a global climate regime that shapes the expectations and behaviours of actors in climate policy (Krasner, 1982). Over recent decades, however, this policy field has experienced

a significant transformation, formalised by the Paris Agreement, marking a shift from a monocentric to a polycentric governance approach (Dorsch & Flachsland, 2017).

Krasner (1982, p. 185) defines international regimes as “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area.” In this context, principles are the underlying beliefs about facts and causation, norms establish standards for behaviour, rules prescribe specific actions, and decision-making procedures outline practices for collective choices (Krasner, 1982, p. 187). A crucial distinction exists between principles and norms, which provide the regime’s foundational characteristics, and rules and procedures, which may change over time without altering the core principles and norms.

When the UNFCCC was established in 1992, it recognised climate change as a serious global concern due to GHG emissions, emphasising the need for states to adopt standard behaviours to stabilise these emissions. The initial vague formulations left significant details to be defined in subsequent treaties, particularly the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement (Pattberg & Widerberg, 2017). The Paris Agreement effectively replaced the Kyoto Protocol, leading to changes in the climate regime’s rules and procedures.

The Kyoto Protocol was characterised by a traditional top-down approach, creating legally binding GHG emission targets for states, thereby reinforcing their central role in the climate regime (Hoffmann, 2013, pp. 8–10). However, it faced criticism for its inability to produce the desired outcomes (Bechtel & Urpelainen, 2015). In contrast, the Paris Agreement introduced a fundamentally different governance model that emphasised a bottom-up approach, allowing states to set their own Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for GHG reductions, with a process for gradually increasing these commitments over time (Keohane & Oppenheimer, 2016).

Furthermore, the Paris Agreement’s Article 7 encourages participation from non-state and subnational actors, recognising their contributions alongside nation-states in climate governance (Hale, 2016). This represents a departure from the regulatory, state-centred model of the Kyoto Protocol to a more catalytic and facilitative institutional model, which reflects a broader shift from monocentric to polycentric governance (Jordan et al., 2018).

Under a polycentric governance framework, the rules and procedures guiding actor behaviour in climate politics are not solely derived from a single authority (i.e., states). Instead, they are “dispersed to separately constituted bodies with overlapping jurisdictions that do not stand in a hierarchical relationship to each other” (Skelcher, 2005, p. 89), allowing for greater functional autonomy and self-governance among diverse actors.

Ostrom (2010, p. 552) recognised this transition as part of an ongoing process of climate governance, describing polycentric systems as characterised by multiple governing authorities operating at different scales, all striving toward common goals in the climate realm. In sum, the Paris Agreement, by shifting essential terms on *how* climate action should be performed and *by whom*, reflects the evolving complexity and diversity of contemporary governance.

Polycentricity as a Self-Governing Mode of Governance

The transition from a monocentric to a polycentric governance approach within climate policy represents a significant shift in how international entities operate and interact in addressing climate change. This transformation enables a diverse array of actors to achieve functional autonomy of action, enhancing their ability to influence and implement climate initiatives. Understanding polycentricity is crucial for explaining how this regime shift occurs and how it facilitates the autonomy of multiple governing authorities in a collaborative governance landscape.

In a polycentric governance framework, multiple entities are recognised for their independent agency, which allows them to act autonomously in the specific domain of climate change (Ostrom, 2010). This environment fosters a considerable opportunity for these actors to perform what can be termed *actorness*, defined as “the capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors” (Sjöstedt, 1977, p. 16). By using their constitutional capacities to put forward climate efforts, diverse actors can engage in self-governance, thereby contributing to collective climate efforts.

Furthermore, polycentric governance creates favourable conditions for interactions among various actors, amplifying their actions and impacts. As these entities maintain relationships—whether competitive or cooperative—they account for one another in their decision-making processes. They enter into contracts, forge partnerships, and resort to centralised mechanisms to resolve disputes (Ostrom et al., 1961, p. 831). This collaborative dynamic helps to build a robust polycentric system that enhances innovation, learning, adaptation, and trust among participants. Such a system can lead to more effective, equitable, and sustainable outcomes at multiple scales (Ostrom, 2010, p. 552).

The evolution toward polycentric governance in the context of climate change represents a fundamental shift in how multiple actors can autonomously engage in self-governance. This dynamic approach offers new avenues for achieving meaningful progress in the fight against climate change, making it essential for stakeholders to embrace and leverage the opportunities presented by a polycentric governance framework.

Regional Actorness Under the Paris Agreement: When Subnational Governments Become Prominent Actors in Global Climate Governance

The governance of climate affairs is undergoing significant shifts, reflecting broader changes within the international system (Bulkeley et al., 2014; Striiple & Stephan, 2013). The Paris Agreement formalised these changes by institutionalising a governance approach that enables regional governments to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors within the climate regime through their functional agency in the pursuit of global climate targets.

This essay focuses on sub-national regional governments as emerging actors within the evolving structure of polycentric climate governance inaugurated by the Paris Agreement. These regional actors are understood as government units within federal and decentralised political contexts with political-administrative, biophysical, and socio-economic structures (Balsiger & VanDeveer, 2012). Additionally, for the purpose of this analysis, we regard regional governments as having the necessary constitutional resources to devise their own mitigation and adaptation climate action plans as an expression of their self-governance in this domain.

Although climate objectives are established and debated internationally, putting these ambitions into action largely relies on each state's own capabilities and, within each state, on its subnational entities. Regions with considerable legislative and administrative autonomy—especially in decentralised and federal systems—play a critical role in climate policies due to their jurisdiction over sectors key to climate action on both mitigation and adaptation, such as energy, transport, industry, housing, and environmental protection. Regional governments hold unique advantages, including their proximity to citizens and greater flexibility compared to national governments, making them essential for effective climate policy implementation (Cittadino et al., 2022). Federal states and provinces like California and Quebec, for instance, have been leaders in advancing climate policies over recent decades both internally and externally, often setting ambitious goals that exceed national targets and promoting cross-level coordination in climate action (Chaloux et al., 2022; Leffel, 2018).

Galarraga et al. (2011) emphasise that regional governments are indispensable for fulfilling global climate commitments. Particularly in federal and decentralised systems, national commitments to climate goals are frequently unachievable without the support and participation of regional governments. Furthermore, regions are positioned close to local populations, enabling them to tailor climate actions to local needs and challenges. This proximity allows regional authorities to set priorities, address specific barriers, and coordinate across different policy areas effectively. Moreover, regions are uniquely equipped to ensure policy success, as climate impacts vary geographically, and each region possesses distinct legal, political, and institutional tools to respond strategically to local climate issues.

With the Paris Agreement moving away from a strictly monocentric approach to addressing climate change, a shift in the climate regime introduced polycentric principles that benefit regional governments in pursuing actorness. Mentioned by Vincent Ostrom et al. in 1961 in the context of metropolitan governance, *polycentric systems* describe arrangements where public goods and services are provided by various self-organised agencies, allowing diverse actors to take on governance roles in ways that best fit their capacities and contexts (Jordan et al., 2018, p. 4). In the climate domain, this model is particularly well-suited to managing global public goods like climate stability, as it enables decentralised units—such as regional governments—to actively participate and innovate within a broader governance framework. Polycentric governance allows these autonomous units to enhance their impact through inter-relationships—cooperating, forming agreements, and employing conflict-resolution

mechanisms—which collectively contribute to the provision and protection of global public goods (Ostrom et al., 1961).

The Paris Agreement's recognition of autonomous units has empowered regional authorities to act as legitimate players within the climate regime, giving rise to what we identify as *regional actorness*: functional autonomy to behave actively and deliberately in the implementation of climate policies (i.e., mitigation and adaptation efforts) within their constitutional capacities, therefore contributing to global climate targets. Simply put, regional actorness is performed when regional governments use their self-governing competencies (i.e., functional autonomy of action) to operate as autonomous climate actors along with other international actors in the contribution to the governance goals established by Paris. They may do this by two non-exclusive and complementary pathways: (1) by internally implementing their mitigation and adaptation policies aligned with Paris' targets; (2) by externally enrolling in formal and informal cooperation arrangements such as bilateral and multilateral arrangements, including transnational networks, to foster their internal know-how and implementation capacity.

Altogether, this context reveals the emergence of a dynamic—regional actorness—that is reshaping the evolving role of regions in global climate governance. Nonetheless, has remained uncaptured in the literature.

Connecting the Dots: Polycentric Climate Governance and Actorness

Given the greater prominent role of regional governments in global governance after Paris, this essay responds to calls in the literature to better understand the evolving landscape of climate governance, which is increasingly seen as part of broader shifts in global politics (Hoffmann, 2011; Bulkeley et al., 2014; Falkner, 2016). It does so by relying on existing frameworks of actorness and polycentricity to examine regional actorness within the climate regime—an emerging framework where regional authorities behave actively and deliberately to accomplish global targets established by the Paris Agreement.

Although regional governments have been playing a significant role in climate efforts, there is limited research on their functional action within this polycentric governance framework (Bechtel & Urpelainen, 2015; Di Gregorio et al., 2019). Existing studies tend to focus either on specific case studies (Di Gregorio et al., 2019; Leffel, 2018; Setzer, 2015) or individual interactions of these actors within the governance system (Bechtel & Urpelainen, 2015; Di Gregorio et al., 2019). This emerging area has yet to explore how challenges like climate change expand our understanding of regional engagement and contribution in the field of global governance.

Climate governance literature has traditionally placed the nation-state at the centre, focusing on multilateral, top-down structures as the primary means of cooperation (Hare et al., 2010). Even in discussions of decentralisation, the nation-state remains the main unit of analysis (Barrett, 2005). However, recent studies challenge this centralised approach by examining frameworks that consider both vertical and horizontal dynamics in climate governance. Concepts such as regime complex (Keohane & Victor, 2011) and fragmented governance reflect the diverse and sometimes overlapping regimes now addressing climate issues beyond the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This emerging complexity aligns with Elinor Ostrom's (2010) concept of polycentricity, which advocates for a self-organised system of governance where autonomous functional units at various scales collaborate to tackle climate challenges. Ostrom argued that an effective response to climate change requires both centralised efforts and a complementary, bottom-up approach that fosters collaboration across multiple scales.

Despite its applicability to describe the diversity of actors in climate governance, the potential of polycentricity to serve as a tool for designing and implementing governance structures remains underexplored (Dorsch & Flachsland, 2017; Ostrom, 2010). The present essay fills this gap by considering polycentricity's dual role: as a descriptive tool for mapping the complex climate governance landscape and as an explanatory tool for understanding how regional authorities position themselves as autonomous functional actors within the climate regime.

The concept of actorness—originally developed by Cosgrove and Twitchett (1970)—was designed to understand the role of international organisations in global governance, moving beyond the traditional state-centric paradigm. Sjöstedt (1977) further solidified the concept, primarily focusing on the European Union (EU) as an entity that demonstrated characteristics of actorness, shifting much of the research focus onto the EU (Drieskens, 2017). Later studies compared the EU's actorness to that of states (Brattberg & Rhinard, 2013) or other regional organisations (Wunderlich, 2012), with only a few scholars examining actorness outside the EU context (Aydinli, 2013; Hulse, 2014). While Tatham (2018) used the term *regional actorness* to describe paradiplomatic activities by subnational regions, this concept has yet to be explored in the context of climate governance. Moreover, while actorness helps identify autonomous roles for regional actors, it lacks explanatory depth on how these roles are operationalised in practice. The essay considers such a theoretical gap, as actorness alone does not fully explain how regional actors gain and exercise autonomy within climate governance.

While actorness provides a foundation for recognising regional actors as legitimate contributors, it lacks insights into the operational mechanisms of autonomy. Polycentricity, although referenced in recent literature, has not been specifically applied to frame the transition in the climate regime marked by the Paris Agreement, nor has it been fully utilised to explain how regional actorness manifests through the use of self-governance capacities. In sum, this essay presents two major arguments to identify and explain regional actorness: (1) it expands the applicability of polycentrism as a descriptive foundation of the phenomenon, but also as an explanatory

framework; (2) it adds an explanatory ground to the concept of actorness applied to regional authorities.

Conclusion

Governing climate change is increasingly recognised as a complex process that extends beyond monocentric (i.e., state-centric) visions (Bulkeley et al., 2014, p. 16). This shift reflects the broader and more inclusive response acknowledged by the UNFCCC climate regime. The Paris Agreement highlights the necessity of climate efforts beyond nation-states for effective long-term climate solutions. Yet, Paris also creates opportunities for regional governments to put their self-governing competencies at the service of its goals —essentially enabling them to perform actorness. This essay has explored its emergence and expression.

Regional actorness in climate governance reflects a shift in climate politics, with the 2015 Paris Agreement marking a pivotal moment by formally recognising the need for climate action beyond central state actors. This acknowledgement empowers regional authorities to exercise actorness by leveraging their self-governing powers to pursue Paris targets through internal mitigation and adaptation policies as well as through international partnerships. By applying actorness literature to the regional level, we define regional actorness as the functional autonomy for regional governments to behave actively and deliberately within the climate regime, establishing themselves as prominent actors. Limitations in existing actorness frameworks lead us to incorporate polycentricity as an explanatory framework. This concept explains how autonomy arises from dispersed authority across entities in an increasingly heterarchical climate regime, where multiple functionally autonomous units collectively advance global climate goals.

In conclusion, this contribution establishes a basis for further studies, particularly on the capacities necessary for regional actorness and the domestic factors that enable or restrict regional roles in global climate governance. Empirical case studies could also clarify motivations for regional functional autonomy, shedding light on individual goals within this complex landscape.

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Essay 14: Interrogating the Potential of ASEAN Regionalism as a Panacea for Global Challenges



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Introduction

The organisational efficacy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), characterised by cooperation, flexibility, inclusiveness, openness and consensus-building (ASEAN Secretariat, 1976, pp. 1–3; ASEAN Secretariat, 2007, pp. 2, 22), has enabled its acknowledgement as the most successful regional organisation of the global South. ASEAN has emerged as an exemplar of regional cohesion, tethering ten diverse and disparate Southeast Asian states and accommodating regional and extra-regional actors as Dialogue Partners and/or members of ASEAN-led institutional mechanisms like ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) etc. Established on August 8, 1967, during the height of the Cold War as an instrument for ensuring regional stability and security, primarily by containing great power interference, ASEAN was envisaged as an organisation cementing “common problems among countries of South-East Asia”, while “strengthening the bonds of regional solidarity and cooperation.” ASEAN’s aims and purposes hinged on accelerating the economic, social, and cultural profile of the region, simultaneously prioritising and promoting the “stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation” and enabling “peaceful and progressive national development” of the five founding members¹ (ASEAN Secretariat, 1967, p. 1). The subsequent induction of five regional states² consolidated its regional identity as the custodian of the aspirations, interests, and priorities of its

¹ Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

² Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

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members, while judiciously upholding and safeguarding the organisation's norms and imperatives.

The purposes and principles enshrined in key documents/declarations like the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN Concord, Declaration on Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), etc., have acted as the fulcrum of resolving contentious issues systematically. Besides, these have cemented its legitimacy as a successful regional organisation, endowed with the potential of fostering regional cooperation and strengthening ASEAN's effectiveness in dealing with the twin structural challenges of intra-organisation inter-dependence and integration into the global economy (Severino, 1998). Its adherence to the "ASEAN Way" as the "operational basis" of regional identity building, relying on "informality and organisational minimalism" (Acharya, 2009, p. 5) while respecting the seminal clauses of TAC,³ embodied universal principles of peaceful coexistence and friendly cooperation among member states. ASEAN's innate potential of *saving* the regional order, and by extension, the international order, premised on the rationale of securitising Southeast Asia, facilitating conflict resolution and fostering regional development, prosperity, and community-building, can hardly be exaggerated. ASEAN's legitimacy, in this respect, is established on its success in maintaining peace and order among its member-states, preventing any major conflict in the region and attempting to bridge the socio-economic gaps among them. This is in addition to engaging with its partners in regional initiatives, managing confrontation and involving them as important stakeholders in the peace, security, and development of the region (Acharya, 2013, p. 21; Yoshimatsu, 2023, p. 27). Furthermore, its engagement with the United States (US) and China, both obliged to the principles of TAC as signatories, provides a buffer to the spillover of great power rivalry into the region (Mahbubani, 2023).

Over its five and a half decades of existence, ASEAN's impressive profile as a regional manager, honest broker and balancer, representing the articulated voice of the strategically significant Southeast Asian region (Acharya, 2017, pp. 273–274; Acharya, 2021; Alagappa, 2003; ASEAN Secretariat, 2019, Para. 3; Caballero-Anthony, 2022, pp. 1–2; Cape & Evans, 2003, pp. 46–48; Chakraborti & Chakraborty, 2023, pp. 189–190; Severino, 2006, p. 11) has garnered respect for ASEAN centrality by regional and extra-regional states and organisations. However, ASEAN's positive trajectory has been punctuated by several challenges, pertaining to internal consolidation, external interference/influence, navigating the onus of collective self-reliance and fulfilling the core organisational objectives, like promoting the socio-economic and cultural development, immunising or moderating the influence of external/great powers on the regional states, in a bid to safeguard its political and economic stability and serve as a forum for negotiation, deliberation, and resolution of intra-regional differences. Significant geo-strategic issues like China's hegemonic forays in the

³ Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations; the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion and coercion; non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means; renunciation of threat or use of force; and effective cooperation among member-states.

South China Sea (SCS) and the incongruent response of ASEAN member-states, military repression in Myanmar, dynamics of the *new* cold war between China and the US, post-COVID resilience, etc., have raised serious questions with respect to the organisation's effectiveness as the cementing force and driving its members towards community-building. These challenges have overshadowed its previous track record (Chakraborti, 2020, p. 143; Leifer, 2003, p. 479) of resolving serious crises, like the Kampuchean (Cambodia) problem, Vietnam's intervention in Kampuchea, or the Asian Financial Crisis.

In this backdrop, the essay situates the SCS dispute, stemming from contested claims to sovereignty among five ASEAN states⁴ and China, as the litmus test of ASEAN's effectiveness and the overall impact on regionalism and the community-building process in Southeast Asia. The purpose of the essay is to analyse the impact of the SCS dispute on ASEAN's organisational unity, constraining effective regionalism and discuss whether ASEAN, as a relevant regional organisation, can emerge as the panacea to this challenge. Although the SCS issue has emerged as one of the major points of contention with China, the manner in which ASEAN has navigated the same, preventing any major flare-up in the littorals, with the promise of a major breakthrough in negotiations by the expected signing of the Code of Conduct (COC) by 2026, its potential as an *honest broker* and negotiator, firmly holding on to its ground as the lynchpin of peace and stability in the region has been demonstrated. The essay argues that, in spite of the impact of this dispute, ASEAN's functional uniqueness, in keeping with the *ASEAN Way*, the commitment of member-states towards securing common objectives and carving a shared destiny, while safeguarding their respective national interests and its spirit of inclusiveness by providing a consultative and deliberative forum for its partners, have provided it a position of centrality, goodwill, and legitimacy. This has also made ASEAN an emulative model for organised and sustained regional cooperation in a region characterised by diverse ethnic, religious, socio-cultural, political, and economic indicators.

ASEAN Regionalism in Disarray: South China Sea Dispute in Perspective

China's hegemonic forays in the SCS⁵ - a strategically significant, contested maritime space, declared as an integral part of its "core interest" of sovereignty, have resulted in unilateral extension of exclusive jurisdiction rights to fishing, navigation, and territorial claims on the islands, underwater reefs, seafloor geographical entities, and adjacent waters. The situation is intensified by China's expanded anti-access area-denial capabilities, deterring freedom of navigation, overflight, unimpeded commerce, routine Intelligence Surveillance, and Reconnaissance exercises, fishing,

⁴ Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

⁵ China's claims over the *nine-dash line*/ Four Sha Islands, Pratas Islands (Dongsha), Paracel Islands (Xisha), the Spratly Islands (Nansha), and Macclesfield Bank (Zhongsha).

oil exploration, and scientific ventures of the claimant states and other coastal actors alike, thus challenging the freedom of access to the critical Sea Lane of Communication (SLOC), which accounts for the passage of 30% of global maritime trade traffic and billions of barrels of petroleum and petroleum products annually (World Economic Forum, 2024). The impact of the dispute on ASEAN's effectiveness as a regional organisation may be interpreted from the following perspectives, focusing on internal/organisational and external impulses. The internal impulses pertain to ASEAN's accommodative and conciliatory posture in dealing with China; the prioritisation of their respective national interests by ASEAN member-states vis-à-vis the collective interests of the organisation and its impact on the process of solidarity and community-building. The dynamics and potential of major power rivalry in the region, intensified by Sino-US tensions, constitute the external impulse, as discussed below.

First, ASEAN's accommodative response, evading a direct confrontational posture, which emphasises a stance of conciliation and cooperative security with China. While on the one hand, ASEAN's stance has offered greater deliberative space and potential between the two sides, it has often evoked contradictory responses from aggrieved member-states, specifically the Philippines and Vietnam. On the other hand, this dichotomy has raised questions regarding ASEAN's intention and capability to address the South China Sea issue. The challenge regarding dispute settlement and confidence-building, in addition to the enervated pace of the institutional mechanism, has been reflected in the protracted nature of ASEAN-China negotiations. This was made clear by the delay and shifting deadline in the signing of a legally binding Code of Conduct on the South China Sea (COC),⁶ although, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) was signed in 2002, and more than two decades have passed since then (Chakraborti & Chakraborty, 2020, p. 28).

Second, ASEAN member-states prioritise their respective national interests vis-à-vis the interests of the organisation. Besides, differences with respect to their capabilities, level of socio-economic development, resource endowment, and consideration of whether they share overlapping sovereignty claims with China have an impact on ASEAN's principle of neutrality towards Beijing. Most of the ASEAN member-states are seldom comfortable taking China head-on, thus providing it more credence and acceptability. The bilateral interactions of member-states with China are not uniform and are guided by their respective preference for either a policy of *pragmatic equidistance* or *tight alignment*. This is manifested in ASEAN meetings and has serious consequences for the organisation's coordinated approach. This relational dichotomy clearly divides the member-states along two verticals: while most of the founding members of ASEAN, who enjoy a greater degree of socio-economic, defence and political development and hence, bargaining power, usually maintain limited alignment with China, the later ASEAN entrants prefer deeper involvement with it (Goh, 2007, p. 116; Laksmana, 2017, p. 114). However, this sweeping generalisation has been negated by Vietnam's adoption of a balanced approach towards China. This

⁶ The deadline for finalisation has been pushed to 2026.

turn has been demonstrated since the end of the Cold War, facilitated by economic interactions, resumption of border trade and the establishment of the *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* between China and Vietnam. Thus, pragmatic considerations of national interests and opportunities for trade, investment, connectivity, infrastructure, tourism, diplomatic exchanges and the advantages of Vietnam's membership of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2017 have demonstrated this balance, as Hanoi pursues the objective of "maximizing its agency" and maintaining a level of strategic autonomy (Chakraborti & Chakraborty, 2024, p. 83; Teo & Emmers, 2025, p. 1).

Therefore, the relations of member-states are conditioned by the imperatives of national interest and pragmatic realism, based on the computations of cost-benefit and advantages they could yield by aligning with or accommodating China, as they resort to policies ranging from appeasement, confrontation, diplomacy, hedging, to bandwagoning (Chakraborti, 2012, p. 292).

Third, the issue poses a challenge to the organisation's goal of promoting solidarity, cohesion, and community-building in general and establishing the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) in particular, in keeping with the preambular provisions of the ASEAN Charter. The Charter acknowledged the need for strengthening regional solidarity as a prerequisite to realising an ASEAN Community as "politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible community," in order to "effectively respond to current and future challenges and opportunities" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2007, p. 2). Differences among the ASEAN member-states regarding the handling of the SCS issue directly challenge the ideals and objectives of the *APSC Blueprint*, viz. security as a shared responsibility, renunciation of coercive use of force in any manner incongruous with international law, reliance on peaceful dispute settlement and confidence building measures which are the key elements for the emergence of a rules-based community of shared values, norms, and form the pedestal for maintaining and enhancing ASEAN centrality (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016, pp. 1–2).

In this context, intra-ASEAN differences have emerged over the drafting of the COC as demonstrated by the resistance to the 2012 Philippine proposal for establishing a "Joint Cooperation Area in the South China Sea" to promote it as a Zone of Peace, Freedom, Friendship, and Cooperation, and regarding the appropriate time for including China in the drafting process of the COC. The fact that the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (2012) failed to issue a Joint Communiqué for the first time in the history of the organisation, due to differences among member-states on the SCS issue, explicitly demonstrates the failure of ASEAN in consolidating regional and organisational interests. They also reveal a clear split among the member-states with respect to their respective equations and relations with China. Besides, intra-ASEAN differences pertaining to the award of Permanent Court of International Arbitration (PCIA) filed by the Philippines in 2016 and the skirting of direct reference to China or its setback in the PCIA in the Joint Communiqué of the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (2016) and ASEAN Chairman's Statement of the 30th ASEAN

Summit (2017) have unveiled Beijing's success in converting its resources into influence over the strategic decisions of ASEAN, challenging the organisation's basic twin steps of community-building: mutual trust and solidarity.

It deserves mention in this context that China has reaped the dividend of taking Cambodia into confidence and successfully alienating Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos from the remaining ASEAN members into reaching a *Four Point Consensus on the South China Sea* in 2016. The consensus principally acknowledged that the dispute, not being an issue between China and ASEAN (as an organisation) "should not affect China-ASEAN relations" and that disputes over territorial and maritime rights and interests "should be resolved through dialogues and consultations by parties directly concerned under Article Four of the DOC" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016). This upheld China's preference for bilateral-level negotiations with the states engaged in overlapping and competing claims to sovereignty, as opposed to engaging ASEAN collectively.

Finally, the situation has been compounded by insinuations of external involvement, tied to Sino-US tensions, realignment of great power dynamics in addition to responses of individual ASEAN member-states vis-à-vis China's neoliberal overtures, as it lures them with developmental and investment prospects through a motley of *Initiatives* like BRI, Global Development, Global Security and Global Cultural Initiative, weaving stakeholders into a "community of common destiny" and shared prosperity (Chakraborty, 2024, p. 37). Mindful of the geo-strategic and geo-economic stakes of the resource-rich SCS and the imperative of maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight of the littorals, regional, and extra-regional actors, organisations and mini-laterals alike, viz. Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, the US, the European Union (EU), QUAD, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), etc., seek greater engagement in regional affairs.

Therefore, ASEAN's position and capability to emerge as a panacea for regionalism and regional solidarity will be contingent upon its serious intent and ability to provide a united stance vis-à-vis China's hegemonic action, advantages, and influence in the region. It will also depend on the degree to which ASEAN, as an organisation, will be successful in addressing both the internal and external challenges and in impressing upon its members the imperative of striking a balance between safeguarding individual national interests and national development, on the one hand, and the organisational priorities and cohesiveness, on the other.

Reposing Faith in Regionalism: Navigating the Challenges

The SCS issue has posed challenges to ASEAN's image and effectiveness as a regional organisation, though it has not impeded the conduct of ASEAN-China negotiations on the legally binding COC. However, the pace of progress in negotiations has been slow, and the finalisation of the COC is expected in 2026. The hallmark of ASEAN's initiatives towards confidence-building among the actors is its adherence

to internal institutional balancing, greater engagement in cooperative and developmental endeavours and external balancing, as discussed in this section. Internal balancing, beginning with China's accession to TAC and its inclusion in ASEAN-led frameworks like ARF, APT, EAS, ADMM-Plus, etc., reflects the significance of the basic ethos, norms, and principles, enshrined in institutional mechanisms and declaratory statements like ASEAN-China Joint Working Group (JWG) and 2019 ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The ASEAN-China JWG is significant in reflecting the consensus on "seeking peaceful solutions to disputes and conducting maritime cooperation" to maintain regional stability. Guided by the principles of "mutual understanding, consensus, consultation and cooperation," the ASEAN-China JWG has been entrusted with the responsibility of analysing and recommending measures to "translate the provisions of the DOC into concrete cooperative activities" for the purpose of enhancing mutual understanding and trust. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024, para. 1) The AOIP emphasises the importance of sustaining an "inclusive regional architecture," acknowledging ASEAN centrality and continued momentum of the organisation as an "honest broker" with respect to issues of competing regional interests. It envisages the promotion of an enabling regional environment for peace, stability, and prosperity, as well as the addressing of common challenges (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019, para. 3–4).

The uniqueness and appeal of the *ASEAN Way* lies in its potential to reconcile conflict between individual national interests, priorities, and objectives, on the one hand, and the organisational goals, on the other hand, thus employing the concept to "rationalise the obstacles to multilateralism," even if it is unable to resolve them entirely (Acharya, 1997, p. 11). Perceived as an enabler of conflict resolution, confidence building, consensus-seeking, regional consolidation, and solidarity, ASEAN's response may be interpreted in the heuristic perspective, based on rational choice decision-making, maximising utility in a strategic situation and identifying consensual outcomes to minimise risks (Barkin, 2015, p. 624). The heuristic approach, which aligns with the principle of issue-based cooperation and complex interdependence with China, has been evident in ASEAN's focus on joint resources management, cooperation in the Blue Economy domain, sustainable development, and preservation of marine ecology, subsequently exploring opportunities for cooperation in using, managing, and conserving ocean, sea and marine life, coastal ecosystems, etc. Simultaneously, it has been committed to upholding "legal and diplomatic processes, without resorting to the threat or use of force, in accordance with the universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023, para. 1–2).

As effective instruments of diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution with China, mention may be made of the *Plan of Action (POA; 2016–2020) to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity*, calling for the full and effective implementation of DOC, early conclusion of COC, on the one hand, while underscoring detailed provisions for undertaking Early Harvest Measures through execution of joint cooperative projects, on the other. The successive *POA (2021–2025) to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-China*

Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity envisages cooperation to accelerate the implementation of UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, promoting complementarity with the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.

ASEAN's impetus on engaging China, in keeping with organisational norms and diplomatic practice, is supplemented by the policy of external balancing, conducted through institutionalised ASEAN-led mechanisms of the ilk of ASEAN Plus One Summit, APT, ARF, EAS, ADMM-Plus, etc. The policy of external balancing also fosters ASEAN's collaboration with partners through their "support and substantive, practical, and tangible cooperation," particularly in key areas of maritime cooperation, sustainable development initiatives, trade and economy, physical and digital infrastructure, business and investments, and other potential spheres. Simultaneously, institutional frameworks like the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and ASEAN-Indo Pacific Forum provide opportunities for greater interaction, dialogue, and consultation on strategic issues pertaining specifically to the situation in the SCS, full and effective implementation of DOC, early conclusion of COC, promoting sustainable aquaculture and fisheries, promoting joint sustainable development, integrated management of water resources, natural resources and biodiversity, among others (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020, para. 10–12, 26, 39). These initiatives not only facilitate the dynamics of cooperative security, based on the convergence of mutual interests and benefits, but also augment ASEAN's relations with Dialogue and Development Partners through the envisaged Plans of Action, Practical Cooperation Areas, Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), and development cooperation programs. Their emphasis on sustainable and equitable growth as potential contributors to the realisation of ASEAN community-building and bridging the developmental gap among the ASEAN member-states is significant. Thus, the *ASPC Blueprint* reiterates the imperative of *outward-looking* regionalism, enshrined in *ASEAN Vision 2020* (2012), with the ASEAN providing a "common platform" for bolstering cooperation and engagement with "Dialogue Partners and external parties," besides inviting new potential partners for developing mutually beneficial relations and responding collectively and constructively to global developments (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016, para. 10). Similarly, AOIP's emphasis on encouraging external partners to support and undertake mutually beneficial cooperation with ASEAN in key identified areas like connectivity, economic, maritime sphere, and sustainable development, not only strengthens the existing mechanisms of partnership, but also serves the interests of regional peace, freedom, stability, and development and by extension, fosters the process of ASEAN community-building.

In an increasingly interdependent world order, trans-regional and extra-regional repercussions of regional issues provide an extended space for engagement of regional and external actors. This imperative, primarily emanating from the rationale of safeguarding their stakes, benefits, and interests, may seem to question ASEAN's effectiveness in negotiating outstanding crises like the one under review. However, it is worthwhile to accept this involvement in the right spirit of cooperation, while acknowledging ASEAN's potential of utilising the deterrent effect of the external *agency* towards articulating international opinion on the issue, as exemplified by, for instance, India's insistence on the COC being substantive, effective, and consistent

with international law, without prejudicing legitimate rights and interest of nations not party to discussions or QUAD's serious concerns over Beijing's *dangerous maneuvers* in the SCS. Since deterrence is a guarantee to maintaining the *status quo* and respect to the tenets of a peaceful and stable regional order, ASEAN records the "growing interest from countries and regional organisations outside of the region in developing stronger collaboration and substantial cooperation with it, including through applications for formal partnerships with ASEAN" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019, para. 7). Its accommodating and outward-looking approach is balanced by its adherence to strategic autonomy in decision-making, expecting its partners to be respectful of the norms of ASEAN centrality and principles of regionalism, thus engendering constructive engagement.

Conclusion: Charting the Way Ahead

Among the daunting challenges, generated both from internal and external impulses, which impede ASEAN's efficacy as a regional organisation and steps towards community-building, the SCS issue presents a litmus test for the success of regionalism in general and ASEAN regionalism, in particular, necessitating a consensual, time-bound, and practical approach for resolution. The following recommendations may be relevant in this regard.

First, the salience of facilitating ASPC and community-building impinges on strengthening ASEAN architecture holistically, reinforcing ASEAN centrality, as the driving force in regional agenda-setting, conflict resolution, and confidence-building to shape an open, transparent, inclusive and rules-based region, while safeguarding the strategic autonomy of individual member-states and maintaining the delicate balance between the bilateral-multilateral/organisational dichotomy with respect to China. The distinguishing features of ASEAN as a regional organisation are contained in its "cultures of accommodation, consultation, and consensus" (Mahbubani, 2022, p. 78), pragmatism, and informality in operation, characterised by the *ASEAN Way*, which have bound the *mélange* of member-states together, notwithstanding their internal and intra-organisational differences. ASEAN has also engaged its Dialogue Partners in both treaty and non-treaty-based strategic alliances by practising "respectful inclusiveness" and providing a platform for "maximising interstitial spaces and options" (Kausikan, 2021) for meaningful engagement and consensual decision-making. A significant contribution of ASEAN's culture of pragmatism and accommodation has been demonstrated in its successful prevention of any major conflict in the region since the end of the Cold War, either intra-ASEAN or with its regional partners, with the exception of a few skirmishes flaring up between China and some claimants in the SCS. This has earned ASEAN an edge over the European Union (EU), with its inadequacy as a regional organisation to prevent the ongoing war in Europe or bring the adversaries to the negotiating table.

Second, ASEAN, in its organisational capacity, must sustain engagement with China through confidence-building and preventive diplomacy initiatives, striving to

minimise intra-ASEAN disparities by encouraging progressive measures like IAI, emphasising socio-political integration and community-building. This could also be achieved by reducing the explicit dependence of member-states on China, thereby preventing their co-option as well as expanding the web of allies and fostering substantial engagement with Dialogue Partners and external partners based on mutual benefits, interests and complementarities.

Third, ASEAN must push forward with the successful culmination of COC negotiations, adhering to the new deadline of 2026, in addition to making it legally binding on the signatories, while exercising restraint against provocative action in the inter-regnum, in case of disputes and flare-ups. This would also prevent external power intervention or militarisation, in lieu of balancing or deterring China's hegemonic overtures in the region. The recent conundrum between Chinese and Philippine forces at the Second Thomas Shoal, sparking stimulus for greater US involvement in the regional dynamics, based on its treaty obligation with Manila, in the event of Filipino forces being attacked in the disputed littorals, is a case in point.

Fourth, ASEAN and China must continue the pace of cooperation in the sphere of Blue Economy, sustainable development, and preservation of marine and coastal ecology of the SCS, which will foster confidence-building and expand the space for further negotiations.

Finally, ASEAN member-states must evaluate their ties with China from a realistic prism, being cognisant of the negative impact of its insinuations in lieu of developmental projects and policies. For instance, the states need to be cognisant of BRI's socio-economic, political, and environmental impact, in addition to its proven potential as a debt trap. An authoritative survey highlights the growing concern among civil society respondents in Southeast Asia regarding China's increasing economic dominance and political influence in the region, its hegemonism in the SCS and the employment of economic tools⁷ to leverage its position and influence. With over 50% of the respondents from Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand expressing apprehension about China's burgeoning silhouette in the region in general and on individual member-states, in particular (ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024, p. 51) its popularity, influence and level of acceptance based on receding popular perception, may affect national policy decisions for reducing overdependence on China, thus deterring its unencumbered regional influence and auguring well for the future of regionalism.

ASEAN faces the challenge of reconciling two divergent dynamics in its intra-organisation relations: adherence to the normative motivations contained in the *ASEAN Way*, on the one hand, and legitimising the primacy of national interests and strategic autonomy of the member-states, on the other. Despite being in the eye of the storm, stemming from myriad challenges and scepticism marring its past performance and position, ASEAN has not only been successful so far in navigating the SCS dispute by adhering to the core organisational principles and in accordance with international law, but also in preventing major conflicts through preventive diplomacy and confidence-building measures. Given the strategic significance of the region and

⁷ 37.2% and 35% of the respondents, respectively, expressed concern.

stakes shared by regional states and external partners alike, more so in the context of an interdependent world order, the uniqueness of ASEAN as a regional organisation has been demonstrated in its adherence to the spirit of informality, “eschewing legal formulations and legal binding commitments” (Severino, 2006, p. 4) rather than emulating other models of elaborate supranational institution-building like the EU. While the ASEAN has been able to uphold its commitment as a security community by adhering to the norms of peaceful conduct and maintaining peace and order in the region (Roberts, 2012, p. 2; Acharya, 2021, p. 1), its acknowledgement as the panacea for regional and global challenges will be contingent upon the organisational ability to amalgamate the collective will of the member-states, motivating “joint efforts” and “spirit of sacrifice” (ASEAN Secretariat, 1967, p. 4) in order to bolster the sense of solidarity, mutual trust, and envisaged community-building.

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Essay 15: The Place of Regionalism in Investor-State Dispute Settlement



Magdalena Bas Vilizzio

Introduction

Investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) is globally under scrutiny. The regime is a United States-Europe axis' creation to provide legal certainty to their investors abroad, and nowadays is supported by a thick net of more than 3300 international investment agreements – mainly bilateral treaties.¹ It allows foreign investors to bypass local courts and sue states in international ad hoc tribunals administered by global institutions such as the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), even regarding public interest or human rights measures. Philip Morris v Uruguay (tobacco control measures, ICSID Case No. ARB/10/7), Eco Oro v Colombia (conservation of paramo ecosystems/climate action policies, ICSID Case No. ARB/16/41), Legacy Vulcan v Mexico (environmental protection, ICSID Case No. ARB/19/1), Vattenfall v Germany (II) (national security and nuclear energy, ICSID Case No. ARB/12/12) or RWE v The Netherlands (energy transition, ICSID Case No. ARB/12/4) disputes are illustrative examples.

Regions or regionalism did not have a solid presence in ISDS or investment protection in general. Still, during the last decades, some disruptive changes have been introduced in the European Union (EU) and the downcast Union of South American Nations. In the polyglobalisation era (Grynspan, 2023) and facing a multiplex world order (Acharya, 2018), regions have a renewed relevance, mainly because of the decentralisation or multipolarisation of trade in regional patterns.

In this changing landscape, how relevant is regionalism to understanding the politics of international law and economy? What place does regionalism have in the ongoing discussions and new developments in investor-state dispute settlement

¹ Data is available in the UNCTAD Policy Investment Hub, last accessed: July 10, 2024.

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(ISDS)? As regionalism articulates internationalisation and globalisation phenomena (Bizzozero, 2014, p. 440), what are the regional proposals in this area? Are regional organisations better equipped to tackle ISDS fault lines or dilemmas than global organisations, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL)?

To answer the questions, this essay examines the experience of two regional organisations with different trajectories in ISDS creation and development: the EU and Mercosur. The temporal focus is between 2015 and 2024, after Brazil's groundbreaking Cooperation and Facilitation Investment Agreement (CFIA) model, which does not include ISDS provisions.

European Union: Duality and Contestation

The ISDS regime was created on the United States—Europe axis to protect the investments of corporations of their nationalities in countries that were perceived as legally uncertain. More than sixty years after the first bilateral investment treaty (BIT) between Germany and Pakistan (1959), the negative externalities of ISDS affect countries in the Global South and the Global North, as detailed below. However, motives and interests around sovereignty, development, human rights and climate action write different versions of the same story.

The EU case presents deep complexities based on its duality: termination of intra-EU treaties and withdrawal of the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) (1994) vis-à-vis the remaining part of extra-EU BITs. What are the roots and drivers of this position? Notably, renewable energy cases against Spain or Micula² and Achmea³ disputes regarding arbitration between national investors of one member state and another member state triggered much controversy about ISDS. Moreover, in Opinion 1/17 regarding ISDS provisions in the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada (CETA), the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) concluded that arbitration between a national investor of a member state and another member state is inconsistent with the autonomy of EU Law. As an outcome, on May 5, 2020, 23 member states signed an agreement to terminate the bilateral investment treaties between them, including the survival clauses.

Similar arguments can be found in case C-741/19 (Republic of Moldova v Komstroy), where the CJEU ruled that ISDS provisions in the ECT are inconsistent with the autonomy principle. This controversial treaty protects fossil fuels even in the *era of global boiling*. The EU and some member states did not agree to change those provisions in the agreement in principle on the modernised ECT. The new text is clearly contrary to the principles and objectives behind the European Green Deal, Fit For 55, REPowerEU, or the Paris Agreement, and consequently, it undermines

² ICSID case ARB/05/20, Ioan Micula, Viorel Micula, S.C. European Food S.A., S.C. Starmill S.R.L., and S.C. Multipack S.R.L. v Romania.

³ CJEU case C-284/16.

climate action (Brauch, 2022). Further, it allows foreign investors to continue suing member states despite infringing the autonomy principle.

Thus, on April 24, 2024, the European Parliament approved the coordinated withdrawal of the EU and the European Atomic Energy Community from the ECT. Consequently, on May 30, the Council gave the final green light, adopting a set of decisions that completed the legal cycle. The scenario completes with the individual withdrawal of seven member states chronologically between December 2022 and May 2024: Poland, France, Germany, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain.⁴ All withdrawals shall take effect one year after notification thereof. However, the sunset clause in Article 47 (3) stipulates that the ISDS provisions will still cover investments made before the withdrawal. Ignoring the sunset clause is unviable; alternatives might include establishing a shorter period or agreeing not to apply it (Voon, 2019).

The claim for more policy space is a way to address the negative externalities of investor-state arbitration (Morosini & Ratton Sanchez Badin, 2018). The EU contests the regime by withdrawing a selected set of treaties, remaining engaged in others connected to Global South countries; as Amorim et al. (2021) argue, “reactions in the developed countries were, in general, more restrained”. Although this contestation, following Wiener’s terminology (), the EU partially remains in the traditional regime (Bas Vilizzio, 2019, 2022). Also, the proposal for a parallel investment court system has been largely unsuccessful since the regional parliaments of Wallonia and Wallonia-Brussels refused to approve this chapter in CETA. Amidst this duality, internal/external, the EU is not tackling ISDS dilemmas but is making the first move.

A Brazilian Mercosur?

Initially on the margins of the ISDS regimen, three of Mercosur’s founding members – Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay – entered the regime in the eighties/nineties during the Washington Consensus. Two decades after Latin American countries voted no to the ICSID Convention (in Tokyo, 1964), they were driven to sign it as well as international investment agreements. Nevertheless, Brazil has always been an outsider (Bas Vilizzio, 2017, 2019) due to constitutional concerns regarding jurisdiction and national investors.

Since 2015, Brazil has been negotiating a new treaty model, the CFIA, that does not include ISDS and is aligned with its constitutional provisions. Two years later, Brazil regionalised its interests with the Protocol on Cooperation and Facilitation of Investments intra-Mercosur (2017). The protocol’s governance is innovative. It covers a mandatory mechanism for preventing state-state disputes and excludes corporate social responsibility, corruption and illegality, environment, labour issues, and health

⁴ The domino effect also impacted the Netherlands and Ireland, which announced their intention to withdraw from the ECT, but no steps were taken until July 2024. Outside the UE, the United Kingdom notified its withdrawal on April 26, 2024.

measures from state-state dispute settlement. This last point goes hand in hand with the United Nations Guiding Principle 9 on Business and Human Rights (2011), which points out the need for coherence between the commitments assumed by the State in matters of human rights vis-à-vis the trade and investment agreements.

As it follows the Brazilian CFIA model, the new protocol does not change in substance the investment policies of the other founding members: Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay still accept that ISDS remains part of BITs. The Protocol does not question the regime's legitimacy or the relevance or irrelevance of continuing within it and does not imply a contestation – as in the case of the EU. However, it demonstrates that international investment protection agreements do not require ISDS to be effective. In the current cartography of treaties, there are other illustrative cases, such as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) (2018), which maintains ISDS only for specific sectors in investments between Mexico and the United States, or the United Kingdom-Australia Free Trade Agreement (2021) that excludes ISDS provisions.

Amid a legitimacy crisis of the WTO's rules-based order, Brazil was also a key actor during the proposal and negotiation of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA). This pioneering treaty focuses on investment facilitation instead of investor protection; therefore, it does not have the traditional provisions in international investment agreements – for instance, national treatment, expropriation and compensation, fair and equitable treatment, or ISDS. However, the IFDA has a limit: it just recognises in the preamble “the right of Parties to regulate in the public interest within their territories so as to meet their policy objectives”. Despite UNCTAD's (2015) recommendations on strengthening the right to regulate, the provision is a general recognition without examples or references to specific areas of regulation that may lead to inconsistent interpretation.

Currently, the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement has 125 co-sponsors and is one light of hope for the WTO's survival. It is supported by developing and least-developed members, such as Brazil, China, and Russia, but not South Africa or India. Moreover, the last one is blocking the request to make the IFDA part of the WTO's legal architecture, arguing that investment facilitation is a non-trade issue. The consensus rule in a 164-member global organisation is a challenging obstacle to overcome, particularly when negotiating conflicting topics.

Instead, regional organisations include non-trade issues in the agenda, such as education, health, labour, energy, structural convergence, or environment, which provide a broader range of interdependent regulatory areas to make concessions. At the same time, they have fewer political and economic narratives to consider, considering the number of members. Thus, regional negotiations tend to be more adaptable and elastic than multilateral ones when agreeing on controversial or problematic topics.

Brazil's leading role on the multilateral and regional levels regarding innovative investment treaties opens the question of whether Mercosur's Protocol is a genuine regional construction or an extension of the Brazilian experience. The answer probably lies between Brazil's leadership role and the inertia of Mercosur members

towards change. However, this alternative does not put under scrutiny their traditional positions in the regime; it is a crucial step to dig deep into an area that exceeds the typically weakened and mistrusted commercial dimension.

Discussion

Mercosur or the EU present more advantages over global institutions in crafting investment agreements that are more efficient, balanced, and potentially disruptive in scope. Both regional bodies can address specific needs and challenges that global frameworks have been failing to capture fully. Their adaptability or elasticity presents them as promising arenas for creating innovative legal and economic structures tailored to their member states.

While 125 developing and less-developed countries have supported the recent agreement within the WTO, India has notably opposed it, showcasing the difficulty of achieving global consensus on such matters. Although this innovative agreement adapts to the changing times, the consensus rule in a 164-member multilateral organisation makes it less elastic to complex and interconnected issues. In parallel, discussions in Working Group III (UNCITRAL) regarding the standing mechanism for resolving international investment disputes focus on the composition of the Dispute Tribunal and the Appeals Tribunal, as well as procedural and cross-cutting issues. The draft statute (A/CN.9/WG.III/WP.239) does not include general or specific exceptions that may lead to a more balanced regime limiting claims access. Therefore, the risk is that an alternative system might replicate the same structural conditions.

Reform efforts within the ICSID are narrowly focused on procedural issues. For instance, the Amendment Rules (in force since July 1, 2022) successfully tackled the majority of stakeholder concerns, preserving ICSID's core principles while ensuring all interested parties have a fair opportunity to be heard in a highly transparent and procedurally efficient manner (Alarcon, 2022). However, this reform does not balance the scales, leaving substantive policy concerns largely unaddressed.

Within this context, regionalism emerges as a promising alternative. The EU and the European Atomic Energy Community's withdrawal from the ECT underscores the importance of regionally addressing the tensions between climate change, energy transition, investment protection, and investor-state arbitration (Bas Vilizzio, 2024). However, regionalism can also be a mere path for the needs or interests of a particular state or groups of states instead of a space for normative construction in which common interests and values are articulated. Regional constructions, such as those within Mercosur and the EU, demonstrate this approach's opportunities and limitations. For instance, they reveal the difficulty of addressing issues beyond individual members' immediate concerns, such as Brazil's outsider status or Spain's challenges with arbitrations in the renewable energy sector.

Despite these limitations, the experiences of Mercosur and the EU show that regional cooperation can offer significant advantages in areas where multilateralism struggles to achieve consensus. Even with Mercosur's internal inertia and the EU's

duality between internal and external policies, these regional bodies have demonstrated their ability and elasticity to respond more effectively to shared challenges. By prioritising cooperation and fostering shared values, they can provide a more robust alternative to the often divisive and fragmented nature of global negotiations.

Conclusion

Regionalism is still relevant to understanding the politics of International Law and Economy, especially when fostering common interests and values rather than narrow agendas. Despite Mercosur's inertia or the EU's internal/external duality, regional cooperation can be a better alternative for multilaterally conflicting areas. Regional organisations could be better equipped than global institutions to reach more efficient, balanced, and disruptive investment agreements to tackle traditional ISDS fault lines or dilemmas.

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Essay 16: Digital Regionalism: Exploring Fault Lines in Global Digital Governance



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Introduction: Regions and the Global Contestation of Digital Governance

The Internet has, since its inception, been envisioned as a global, boundary-defeating technology, allowing different computer networks to exchange information using a common protocol, independent of location. From that *idea* of the global Internet, a number of governance instruments have emerged that attempt to manage this uncharted territory. As governance of digital technologies has become embedded in every walk of life, the *global idea* of the Internet has shifted from technical management of the Internet's core infrastructure into a range of different issue areas. Global debates on digital governance have accompanied this shift (Lewis, 2018; Reinicke, 1998). Digital governance encompasses an array of institutions, processes, technologies, and policy areas. Among these, Internet governance, cybersecurity governance, and governance of artificial intelligence are currently the most consequential. While digital governance arrangements are varied in nature, they are typically decentralised (Raymond, 2016) and polycentric (Scholte, 2018), taking place in both formal and informal settings by an array of actors (Braman, 2006), and are inherently politicised (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Yet the idea of a global Internet is heavily contested by major state actors, some of whom are pushing technological

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and regulatory developments that may transform the way we view the *global Internet*. Regional approaches to digital governance may, under certain circumstances, help either mitigate or exacerbate some of these concerns (Musiani, 2022).

This *spirit* of governance in the digital sphere continues, to an extent, to be one dominated by a willingness and necessity to work together in multistakeholder environments. The multistakeholder approach is often referred to when describing deliberative spaces that bring together governmental and non-governmental actors (Epstein, 2013). Here, however, we would like to adopt a more practical approach focused on decision-making by formal and informal actors in a variety of settings, insofar as those decisions affect citizens' digital experiences (Braman, 2006). In this view, multistakeholder engagement is not as much of a choice as it is a necessity, given that (often mundane) technical, business, and policy decisions are made by a multitude of actors without any one of them holding the ultimate power to dictate the decisions of others. This necessity of multistakeholder approaches in digital governance is not constant, but is notable in the area of infrastructure governance: the dependence of most digital technologies on computer networking necessitates certain global standards and protocols, for example for the management of critical Internet resources like domain names and Internet Protocol (IP) addresses (Raymond & DeNardis, 2015). These technical requirements place limitations on actors' agency in structuring governance arrangements. In doing so, they also establish certain points of leverage and contestation (Farrell & Newman, 2019). For example, the United States Department of Commerce, functioning as the initial contracting authority, served as a major point of contention for the international community, up until the IANA transition was completed in October 2016. As such, policy deliberation is but one aspect of digital governance. Multistakeholder collaboration around actual decision-making (e.g. development of standards) and practices of running the Internet (e.g. the management of critical Internet resources) are equally important components of the emerging governance arrangement (van Eeten & Mueller, 2013). Regional arrangements provide an opportunity for a wide range of stakeholders to engage in different forums, such as the Regional Internet Registries (RIRs), which offer mechanisms for the allocation of global Internet addressing resources regionally and locally.

Global digital governance will remain a complex and contested field, as it touches upon issues such as human rights, economic investment and development, and contesting established power structures, whether they be based on tensions between the Global North and South, nation states and so-called *Big Tech*, or between small technology companies and both Big Tech and nation states. Within these key areas, there is no global agreement on ways forward, as local norms, values, and interests differ across countries and even regions. We currently see that states and regional international organisations are increasingly vying for dominance in various aspects of digital governance, as they develop ways to control the development, deployment, and use of technologies in their jurisdictions (Musiani, 2022). This creates tensions between global governance and local regulation, which are highlighted below. It also provides opportunities for regional governance mechanisms to coordinate and act as intermediaries (Epstein & Nonnecke, 2016).

Regions as Mediators: Challenges and Opportunities

Acting as mediators between the global and the local, regional governance mechanisms are increasingly influential in facilitating local experiences taking place on inherently global information infrastructures. But there is no single way in which these kinds of mediating functions can be performed, and they can serve different goals. Accordingly, such mechanisms can be abused for the suppression of universal human rights locally or serve as catalysts of Internet fragmentation, but they can also provide spaces for bridging the faultlines that have emerged in digital experiences and their governance. Such mediating mechanisms offer an opportunity to ensure that great powers are constrained in their global reach, and at the same time offer a space to interpret and translate global norms and ideas for local contexts (Acharya, 2004; Epstein & Nonnecke, 2016). Regional structures for digital governance provide a degree of autonomy to the members of each region, whilst also offering the incentives to overcome narrow national interests in pursuit of an interoperable global digital infrastructure. As economic and regulatory blocs, regions may also be far more capable of acting as a source of power against the handful of very large *Big Tech* corporations, and give more capacity to smaller states to act in coordination to ensure that their social, cultural, and economic norms are protected (Musiani, 2022). However, as we describe in the following section, regionalism is not a *silver bullet* approach to governing cyberspace—it is contested, may have unintended consequences, and is certainly not self-evident.

Regional Approaches and Tensions in the Global Digital Governance Landscape

The contemporary trajectory of digital governance can be described as an interaction between global, regional, and local governance arrangements and practices. Past analyses focused on geopolitical tensions as those engaged with the changing power balance between an individual and a state, facilitated through the Internet (Braman, 2006; DeNardis, 2014). Rooted in a similarly global perspective, current discussions revolve around digital empires (Bradford, 2023), the four Internets (O'Hara et al., 2021) or the BRICS Internet (Thussu, 2017) when describing the different geopolitical actors in digital governance. Generally, embodied by individual countries such as the US and China, and regional economic blocs such as the EU and the Group of 77, they represent different ideologies, often described as: the US being market-driven, China being state-driven (or authoritarian), and the EU being rights-driven (Bradford, 2023). Other research has examined liberal versus authoritarian variants of multilateral governance arrangements that have been championed in large part by these great powers (Kleinwächter, 2019; Raymond & Sherman, 2024). Another issue of contention is the role of multistakeholder institutions in a global space still dominated by multilateral governance arrangements (Raymond & DeNardis, 2015).

Underpinned by a global communication network, the contemporary digital environment is dependent on global coordination for the deployment and operation of physical infrastructure, the development and promotion of standards that allow robust and consistent information flows, and addressing intended and unintended social phenomena facilitated by it (e.g., financial activity, crime, or knowledge creation). The Internet governance ecosystem remains an example of a global multistakeholder arrangement that works, even if imperfectly. For example, the norms and values of global connectivity that underpin the work of organisations managing names and numbers prevented immediate punitive action against the Russian sector of the Internet after the beginning of the invasion in Ukraine (Marby, 2022). While such an act could be understandable in the context of the specific conflict, it could undermine the integrity of the global Internet as a whole. Another example of this emerged in the Amazon rainforest region, where the states with territory in the region contested the creation of the *amazon* top-level domain, which had been requested by the technology company Amazon (Sepulveda, 2017). This reveals that contestation also exists between *Big Tech* corporations and actors acting regionally, but also that global norms have been successfully utilised by actors in the Global South to protect the interests of disadvantaged communities. Alongside these examples of global norms favouring maximised global interconnection and the protection of the disadvantaged, it should be noted that the global nature of Internet governance arrangements also allows, at least in some instances, for co-optation by major powers. For example, the Snowden revelations made clear the extent to which the National Security Agency had been able to exploit certain characteristics of Internet standards and governance arrangements to conduct far-reaching digital surveillance (Lyon, 2014). US and other major state intelligence agencies are likely still engaging in substantively similar efforts.

A major concern regarding the growth of regionalism in digital governance is that of Internet fragmentation. This concern is often rooted in digital sovereignty rhetoric, which cautions against the rise of divergent standards, regulations, and technical infrastructures that are believed to entail harm to the global reach of the Internet and the openness of its architecture (Mueller, 2017). Indeed, regional approaches to digital governance have, to date, been dominated by national interests. Different approaches in digital governance have always been present, with the US *laissez-faire* approach dominating the scene for many years, notably alongside Chinese and Russian *cybersovereign* approaches (Kokas, 2022; Thumfart, 2022). These *great power* approaches to governing the Internet have essentially allowed for the global management of the core underlying infrastructure for the global Internet, but added layers of control on the *content layer* of specific *Internets*.

At the same time, regional governance arrangements can serve as coordination mechanisms allowing for localisation and adaptation of global digital governance norms to specific cultural, legal, and economic contexts or, alternatively, the introduction of local and regional norms into global governance arrangements (Epstein & Nonnecke, 2016). The European case offers an interesting example, as the European Union—building on the (perceived global) success and adoption of its legislation in the field of personal data protection (GDPR)—has moved to legislate in a number of

key digital governance areas, including social media platform governance, with regulation on Digital Services and Digital Markets, as well as rules on data governance and media freedom. The EU has also launched its own Declaration of Principles and Rights on the Internet, which it hopes will become a cornerstone in global discussions about digital governance. This legislative and regulatory action from the EU has a global impact as the rules apply to European citizens independent of territory, and thus need to be applied even by corporations based outside of the EU (Li et al., 2019).

Efforts such as the Declaration on the Future of the Internet, co-authored by the European Commission and the US Government and signed by some 60 states, have pushed for a global set of norms to underpin digital governance approaches. Yet, such efforts are not uniformly accepted, and other regional powers, such as China, have developed their own set of norms and rules as well. These conflicting systems have led to three types of faultlines: A horizontal battle between national and regional actors regarding the creation and implementation of norms and values (regulation); a vertical battle in which companies have to comply with the rules of countries and regions that they trade in; and a diagonal battle where the US and Chinese tech companies have to adhere to EU lawmaking (Bradford, 2023).

An increasingly dense regional layer for digital governance arrangements is likely to have a variety of consequences. On the one hand, the regionalisation of digital governance arrangements offers potential to accommodate multiple kinds of differences in the international system. This includes both the accommodation of different cultural perspectives and values across the world's diverse regions, as well as the accommodation of rising great powers who can be provided scope to lead the development of governance arrangements in their regions (Epstein & Nonnecke, 2016). For example, regional and national IGF initiatives have been found to function as mechanisms for adaptation of global Internet governance norms to regional and local settings (Epstein & Nonnecke, 2016; Thakur, 2012). On the other hand, increased involvement of regional international organisations is likely to create further difficulties associated with both normative complexity and contestation and practical operational activities. One example of this kind of dynamic can be found in efforts to create a *code of conduct* on cybersecurity within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and subsequent moves to export those principles via United Nations General Assembly deliberations, including in the Third Committee on a treaty governing cybercrime (Raymond & Sherman, 2024). To the extent that regional international organisations reflect the cultural differences and conflicting interests of major states within those regions, these regional governance arrangements are likely to conflict with each other. At a minimum, this may create difficulties for firms in maintaining regulatory compliance across major global markets. Competition policy requirements, privacy and consumer protection requirements, and other substantive issues are likely to evince these dynamics.

Given the global nature of governance arrangements for digital technologies and the design of standards and protocols, it is important to note that some regional organisations may also adopt approaches to digital governance that are incompatible with the technical requirements for maintaining global Internet interoperability.

These issues are most likely to arise around public decency issues, such as online exploitation of children, and around issues that are framed in national security terms for the purposes of controlling or limiting the flow of information. The latter are particularly notable since this kind of framing can be exploited to suppress political dissent (Raymond & Sherman, 2024).

Crucially, we expect that regional governance arrangements will vary in their effectiveness and in their substantive content. Thus, there is little reason to expect a single uniform answer with respect to whether or not regional governance represents a net benefit or a net challenge in the area of digital governance. Like any other kind of governance arrangement, performance and legitimacy will differ. Further, assessments of the performance or legitimacy of a governance arrangement are also dependent on the values of the evaluator. This protean character of regional governance arrangements originates in the different values, interests, histories, and political cultures of the world's various regions and the major actors within each. Indeed, some regions like the Americas and Southeast Asia are likely to see relatively limited regional governance efforts on digital technologies because they have no major history of employing regional governance arrangements. Both the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) play much more limited roles than either the European Union or the African Union.

To date, regional governance arrangements are novel enough that there has been little interregionalism on digital governance issues. The European Union has engaged in efforts to negotiate data transfer arrangements with the United States, but in this example, of course, the United States is a country rather than a regional organisation. The first official meeting between the European Union and the African Union on cyber issues took place only in June 2024 (Belgian presidency Council of the European Union, 2024), and the EU has developed bilateral ties with other countries beyond the US: India, China, and Japan, to mention just a few.

The net result of these considerations is that there is no single expected trajectory of the effect of increased regional governance on digital governance. It may well be the case that a move to increased regionalism simultaneously improves human rights performance in some regions and degrades it in others; and that it could simultaneously improve the technical performance of digital communications in terms of availability, affordability, efficiency, or other metrics in some regions, while leading to a reduction in others. The exception to this variation is to be found in the effects of increased regionalism on aggregate global effects, but rather than any genuine global pattern, we expect that these aggregates will be driven by the different trajectories of regional and other governance arrangements in the various individual world regions. In short, regionalism provides an additional dynamic to the sphere of digital governance but does not have an inherently positive or negative impact.

Conclusion: Regions as Mediators

Contestation of global digital governance arrangements will have important implications for the future of what is often called the rule-based liberal international order. Importantly, contestation of that order is occurring in part through competition among major states and large private actors to shape future digital governance arrangements (Barrinha & Renard, 2020; Raymond & Sherman, 2024). Shaping the rules for digital governance is likely to have outsized effects on the future of global governance more broadly, since digital issues are fundamental to almost every other issue area in the international system.

Regionalism in digital governance emerges as a crucial mediator between global norms and local implementation. As the digital landscape evolves, regional approaches work at a conceptual and policy level to provide a space for this mediation between the global and the local. Regional approaches offer both opportunities and challenges for human rights protection and addressing power imbalances in digital governance. It is thus important to consider regional arrangements with an eye towards norms, practices, and power structures they challenge or reify. Regional governance arrangements, or a decision to engage with them, are not always a choice. Some degree of regionalism is unavoidable. There are institutionalised mechanisms for the management of the digital infrastructure (e.g. Regional Internet Registries), and intergovernmental organisations are likely to enact policies (e.g. the EU digital legislation).

Mediating between global norms and local implementation, regional arrangements also challenge the idea of a global digital governance framework, especially when it comes to issues of basic human rights that are agreed upon at the global level. To the extent possible, however, when engaging with such regional, mediating governance arrangements, there is a need to consciously consider the norms and values that they reify and valorise, in order to minimise unintended global consequences, particularly those that may harm basic human rights. Existing practices and future trends suggest that many world regions are at risk of degeneration in basic human rights enjoyment as a result of states' efforts to leverage digital technologies for surveillance and control. These efforts to date exist mostly at the national level. If they were to migrate into regional governance arrangements, for example, in the form of international cooperation on cybercrime that defines the term so as to include political dissent, their diffusion would likely be significantly amplified. Regions are mediating tools sitting between the local and the global, as useful mechanisms to facilitate both global norm development and local implementation. Regions also serve as an alternative space to increasingly securitised national responses to digital governance.

Insofar as we engage with regional frameworks, we need to understand what we reify through these structures. Possible movements towards regionalism are being developed in digital governance discussions, for example, around the Global Digital Compact, where we see a strong movement with a united EU and a collaborative Group of 77 that are making joint statements about their vision for the future of

Internet governance. We also see developments in other issue areas, such as regional regulatory efforts on AI and on space. These collaborations and developments will shape the future of regional actorness in digital governance.

The open-ended and indeterminate nature of regionalism (like any broad modality for global governance) means that much of its actual value will depend on the specific substantive decisions made by actors in erecting and operating regional governance arrangements for digital technologies. At the end of the day, people need to ask themselves about what kind of digital environment they want, and work towards that.

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Essay 17: Constructing Transnational Governance from the Regional Level: The Role of Regional Institutions in the Areas of Health and Migration



Giovanni Agostinis and Leiza Brumat

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to discuss the characteristics and effects of regional governance initiatives that have allowed African and Latin American states to address pressing transnational issues in the fields of public health (epidemics/pandemics) and migration (displacement crises). Africa and Latin America are two developing regions that share a long-standing tradition of regional cooperation and limitations in terms of state capacity. This makes the cross-regional comparison relevant for understanding the drivers and impact of regional governance in the Global South. By analysing a set of initiatives in the two policy sectors, we illustrate how the regional level provides states and non-state actors with a crucial meso-space for addressing complex transnational policy challenges. This is particularly true considering the stalemate that global governance institutions are experiencing due to growing great power competition. We show that regional governance is not an alternative to global governance but a building block for formulating effective transnational governance solutions. In so doing, we contribute to the debate on the relationship between regional and global governance (i.e., the regional-global governance nexus) (Kacowicz, 2018).

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Regions as Platforms for Constructing Transnational Governance Solutions

One of the key features of contemporary world politics is the emergence of a multi-level governance architecture composed of global, regional, and national initiatives characterised by varying levels of legalisation, delegation, and pooling (Acharya, 2014; Zürn, 2012). The growing complexity of transnational challenges has stimulated a rich literature on *global governance* that identifies relevant governance-making actors (e.g., states, international organisations (IOs), and non-governmental organisations) and analyses the main challenges to the legitimacy and effectiveness of global institutions (Acharya, 2016; Zürn, 2018). Literature has mostly focused on the global level, overlooking a crucial component of transnational governance initiatives: *regionalism*. Situated between the domestic and the global, world regions are strategic policy spaces for states to provide collective goods, manage interdependence, and respond to common threats (Börzel & Risse, 2016; Estevadeordal & Goodman, 2017). This is particularly the case with respect to transnational policy challenges that create significant externalities between neighbouring states. Public health issues, above all transmissible diseases, are a typical example of a challenge endangering lives across national borders and creating high levels of interdependence among governments (Buse et al., 2009; Youde, 2018). Likewise, migratory movements, particularly those stemming from domestic and/or international crises, pose significant coordination challenges to states sharing a common geographical space (Geddes, 2012; Geddes et al., 2019). Forced migration flows predominantly unfold *within* regions (Deutschmann, 2022; UNHCR, 2024), turning regional governance into the most appropriate tool for addressing challenges related to the handling of migrants' access to host countries and the protection of migrants' rights.

The growing fragmentation and polarisation in global governance institutions (Cooley & Nexon, 2020), together with increasing contestation of the post-1945 world order by emerging powers (Goddard et al., 2024; Lake et al., 2021; Zürn, 2018), have further increased the relevance of regional governance (Kahler, 2017). Regional institutions provide spaces for dealing with transnational problems that can neither be addressed individually by states nor tackled at the global level due to coordination problems and competition between global powers (Börzel & van Hüllen, 2015; Rüländ & Carrapatoso, 2022; Söderbaum, 2015). Regional institutions bring together states that share not only a common geographical space but also a set of common principles and norms. In some regions, such as Africa and Latin America, states share a common history of colonialism and external exploitation and interference, which resulted in an approach to regionalism focused on consolidating national sovereignty and state capacities (Acharya & Johnston, 2007; Söderbaum, 2004). For these reasons, regional institutions – regional organisations (ROs)¹ in particular – provide the most adequate space for pursuing inter-state coordination with the support

¹ ROs are formal institutions endowed with a permanent secretariat and/or headquarters and composed of at least three states sharing a common geographical and/or political and cultural space.

of relevant non-state actors from within and outside the region (Börzel & van Hüllen, 2015). Additionally, ROs are not just platforms for states to formulate governance responses; they are also governance actors. Among key non-state actors that can drive transnational governance responses are technically oriented regional institutions, such as secretariats and issue-specific agencies (Johnson, 2014). Despite often lacking substantial decision-making authority, these actors can conduct transnational initiatives through indirect governance strategies based on persuasion, entrepreneurship, expertise, and mobilisation of intermediaries (Abbott et al., 2015). Regional institutions' agencies grow in times of crisis when interdependence deepens, pushing states to seek the leadership of a third actor capable of facilitating inter-state coordination and enlisting external actors endowed with strategic resources (Nicoli, 2020). In what follows, we discuss a set of regional governance initiatives in the fields of public health and migration that allowed African and Latin American states to respond to transnational policy challenges while consolidating functional linkages between regional and global governance.

Regional Governance of Public Health Emergencies

Health issues have traditionally been a key driver of international cooperation. This is primarily due to the transnational nature of many health threats, which endanger lives across borders and create high levels of interdependence among governments (Buse et al., 2009). Interdependence traditionally stimulated health cooperation across both the developed and the developing world, particularly in managing the spread of infectious diseases. The increasingly rapid flow of goods and people across borders has accelerated the spread of pathogens, creating health challenges that defy Westphalian sovereignty and make transnational cooperation imperative. In response to these changes, global health governance has shifted from being World Health Organisation (WHO)-centric to a complex constellation including other IOs, NGOs, and private actors such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Youde, 2018). Regional institutions have gained growing relevance in governing transnational health problems. The literature on regionalism explored the role of ROs as platforms for coordination among states, international organisations, and foreign donors in the public health sector (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021; Amaya et al., 2015; Riggirozzi, 2015). States engage in health governance initiatives within ROs for various reasons, such as disease control, sharing best practices, pooling resources to produce medicines and medical devices, attracting external funds, and coordinating joint positions in multilateral fora.

The effects of health governance vary greatly across regions, depending on states' capacities, the presence of regional leaders willing to sustain collective action, and the intensity of external actors' involvement. That said, since the 2010s, regional health institutions have emerged and consolidated across all world regions. This resulted from a sequence of epidemic outbreaks (N1H1, SARS, MERS, Dengue, and Ebola) that accompanied the intensification of globalisation in the XXI century, threatening

human safety and economic growth on an unprecedented global scale. In response to the growing intensity of international health emergencies, states created technical regional institutions with the support of external donors. Caribbean countries established the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) in the institutional setting of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Central American states created the Executive Secretariat of the Central American Health Council (SE-COMISCA) within the Central American Integration System (SICA). South American states established the South American Institute for Health (ISAGS) within the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). African states responded to the Ebola outbreak by creating the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), which was inserted into the institutional framework of the African Union (AU). The emergence of these technically oriented bodies has consolidated regional health governance in the two regions. These institutions have not only provided states with a platform for exchanging best practices but also orchestrated state and non-state actors in support of initiatives aimed at fighting transmissible diseases and boosting member states' public health capacities (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021; Nash, 2023).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic confirmed the relevance of regional institutions in the governance of transnational health challenges. COVID-19 posed a daunting challenge to global health governance, exposing its institutional limitations and vulnerability to power politics. Regional institutions filled the vacuum left by global institutions, leading the transnational response in Africa and Latin America. The expertise and entrepreneurship of Africa CDC, CARPHA, and SE-COMISCA allowed them to steer the health response to the pandemic, extending their agency beyond what was established by formal mandates. Regional institutions orchestrated the governance of the pandemic through their capacity to enlist state and non-state actors endowed with issue-specific resources that member states needed to tackle the crisis (Agostinis et al., 2021; Nash, 2023). For example, CARPHA, SE-COMISCA, and the Africa CDC engaged actors from the global health governance system (e.g., the WHO/Pan-American Health Organisation, UNICEF, GAVI, donors, and international financial institutions) to grant member states access to vaccines and medical equipment (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021; Parthenay, 2021). Thanks to their expertise-based legitimacy and networks, regional institutions connected African and Latin American states with global health actors, creating synergies and economies of scale (such as in the case of the African Medical Supplies Platform) that benefited particularly smaller countries. Additionally, regional institutions used their technical expertise to persuade member states to implement best practices in the fight against COVID-19 established at the global WHO level (Oloruntoba, 2021). In so doing, regional institutions acted as brokers and facilitated the convergence between regional and global (WHO-centred) responses to the pandemic, consolidating the regional-global governance nexus. It is worth noting that in those world regions (e.g., Southeast and East Asia) where technically oriented regional institutions were weak or absent, states implemented uncoordinated national responses based on bilateral agreements for vaccine and medical equipment procurement and distribution. The weakness made the interaction between the domestic and the global governance levels more difficult.

Regional Governance of Migration

Migration is, by definition, a transnational policy issue: the existence of national borders turns mobile persons into transnational migrants (Zolberg, 1999). Like public health issues, migration produces high interdependence among neighbouring states, primarily because human beings tend to move to nearby places (Deutschmann, 2022; UNHCR, 2024). A state's decision to admit or reject a migrant affects the politics of another state (Betts, 2011). Therefore, when states make unilateral decisions on migration, they impose externalities on other states, increasing costs and reducing benefits for all the parties involved (Betts, 2011). This interdependence has created incentives to cooperate across world regions. However, global-level cooperation has remained limited and fragmentary. This is because international migration touches upon one of the most sensitive features of national sovereignty, the prerogative to decide who can enter and stay in a state's territory (Zolberg, 1999). Global migration governance is characterised by fragmentation, lacking a unified legal regime and a single, focal global institution in charge of regulating states' response to human mobility. This has given states considerable autonomy to define their migration policies, resulting in a patchwork of national policies regulating different aspects of migration and targeting different migrant groups. The fragmented nature of global migration governance affects individuals' access to rights, creating categories of persons with differential access to mobility rights based on factors such as whether they are "forced" or "voluntary" migrants, students, highly qualified workers, or family members of non-nationals. The international asylum regime represents an exception to the traditional deficiencies of global migration governance (Lavenex, 2024). The international refugee regime was established in the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 New York Protocol. This regime enshrined the non-refoulement principle, a fundamental tenet of international law, which prohibits states from returning individuals to a state where their lives or physical integrity are at risk. In so doing, the regime places responsibility on one state to safeguard the rights of persons who have left another state where their rights were not secured (Lavenex, 2024).

The spread of faster and cheaper means of transport, coupled with growing economic, social, and political transnational exchanges, has expanded human mobility across borders (Gabrielli et al., 2019). The increasing number of armed conflicts worldwide has led to historically high numbers of displaced persons, most of whom reside in states of the Global South (UNHCR, 2024). These factors have further intensified the transnational nature of policy challenges related to migration, incentivising the search for shared regional governance (Geddes et al., 2019). In the absence of a global migration regime, regional institutions have gained growing relevance in the governance of transnational migration flows. A key example is the emergence of regional frameworks for the free movement of persons. In 2018, the AU adopted the Free Movement of Persons protocol aimed at facilitating intra-regional migration through the opening of legal paths for migration for all nationals of African countries. Once ratified by 15 member states, the Protocol will create a right

to cross borders, a right of residence, and a right to perform economic activities for *all* citizens of African states (Hirsch, 2021). This complements multilateral border opening agreements adopted by sub-regional ROs such as the East African Community and the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) (Acosta, 2019). In Latin America, Mercosur created a regional residence regime for nationals of most South American countries.² The regime guarantees access to a wide set of rights, including the right to work, education, and family reunification (Acosta, 2018; Agostinis & Brumat, 2025). Caribbean states have established a right to work for certain categories of migrants within the framework of CARICOM's Single Market (Acosta & Harris, 2022). Most world regions have also witnessed the establishment of Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs) aimed at boosting the exchange of good practices and technical expertise for addressing challenges on migration (Lavenex, 2019).

The effects of migration governance vary greatly across regions, depending on states' capacities, the presence of regional leaders willing to sustain collective action, and the influence of external actors. Despite this variation, regions have proved to be a functional platform to deal with displacement crises. Given Western immigrant-receiving states' reluctance to deepen international commitments on migration, Africa and Latin America have adopted regional frameworks to address displacement. These frameworks expanded the international definition of *refugee*³ and fostered the adoption of shared regional policy solutions to displacement crises that increased access to rights for displaced persons, particularly in crisis situations. The Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), an African RO, acted as the convening institution for the negotiation of the 2017 Nairobi Declaration on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees and Reintegration of Returnees in Somalia. The Declaration instrumentalised the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), a global operational guideline to address large-scale movements of refugees adopted by 193 UN member states in 2016. The UN framework is focused on providing durable solutions for refugees' integration into local communities. IGAD's activation of the CRRF attracted international funding to address the displacement crisis (Dick & Schraven, 2019). Additionally, African regional institutions have played a crucial role in the social and political integration of refugees. For instance, IGAD supported the participation of Sudanese refugees in the peace process and peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan, while the African Union has successfully expanded education opportunities for refugees in several member states (Dare & Abebe, 2019; Sharpe, 2013). In so doing, African ROs have brought about the convergence of regional and global efforts in the area of forced migration, consolidating the regional-global governance nexus and filling the functional gaps of global migration governance.

² Venezuela is the only South American state that did not ratify the Agreement. Consequently, most South American states do not apply it to Venezuelan nationals (see Brumat, 2021).

³ The Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa of 1969, the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons (known as the Kampala Convention), and the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees of 1984 extended the 1951 definition of refugee to situations of external aggression, internal conflicts, serious disturbances of public order, generalized violence, and massive violation of human rights.

In Latin America, most responses to the large-scale displacement of Venezuelan nationals have been unilateral and fragmentary (Brumat, 2021). Despite lacking a regionally coordinated response, some South American countries used regional legislation to address the crisis. An outstanding case is Brazil, which registers the highest regularisation rate of Venezuelan nationals in South America (Baeninger et al., 2022). Brazil achieved this by applying two regional norms: the Cartagena definition of refugee and the Mercosur Residence Agreement (MRA), which enabled Brazilian authorities to grant the status of refugees to Venezuelan migrants irrespective of the reasons why they left their country (Brumat & Geddes, 2023). Argentina and Uruguay have also used regional legislation (the MRA, in particular) to provide facilitated regularisation pathways to Venezuelan migrants (Brumat, 2021). The unilateral activation of regional norms aimed at facilitating the regularisation of intra-regional migrants allowed displaced Venezuelans to access crucial rights in the context of the largest displacement crisis in Latin American history.

The cases of Africa and Latin America show that regional institutions provide a strategic space for formulating governance solutions to migration challenges. In the absence of a cohesive global migration regime, regional governance boosts states' capacity to manage displacement crises on the ground while creating opportunities to consolidate the nexus between national, regional, and global policy solutions.

Conclusion

The growing competition between great powers has drastically reduced the effectiveness of the UN and other global governance institutions, turning regional institutions into crucial platforms for tackling complex transnational problems. Regions can fill governance gaps, both material (knowledge and resources) and legitimacy (ownership and representativeness) ones, particularly in crisis situations that generate heightened interdependence and political pressure at the domestic level. Our discussion of regional governance initiatives in the areas of public health and migration confirms that regional institutions provide states with crucial tools to manage crises. Additionally, our analysis indicates that regions are strategic spaces for adapting global policies to local needs and developing innovative solutions that can travel across regions, consolidating the regional-global governance nexus (Kacowicz, 2018). The main challenge ahead for regional governance in Africa and Latin America is ensuring necessary funding amid growing international tensions/conflicts while avoiding excessive dependence on extra-regional actors. The lesson we can draw from health and migration governance in Africa and Latin America is that regional, technically oriented institutions, if well-funded and staffed, can be crucial drivers of interstate cooperation and key brokers of collaboration between the regional and global levels of governance.

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The Future of Interregionalism

Essay 18: Overlaps, Observers, and Organisational Cooperation: New Perspectives on Interregionalism



Tainá Siman, Sören Stapel, and Pawel Tverskoi

Introduction

Global Governance in the early twenty-first century has become contested, complex, and fragmented. To capture this change, Acharya (2017) propagates the idea of a multiplex world order: an order that is both multipolar and complex. Multiplexity captures that multiple actors in various parts of the globe possess power, broadly defined as material and ideational. As emerging and regional powers advance on the global stage, they also vie for a more pluralistic, diverse global governance that does not necessarily align with ideas of established powers. At the same time, the transnational and transplanetary nature of challenges that can no longer be addressed solely at the national level, with climate change and global pandemics being two examples, results in complexity. More so, an increasing number of actors and institutions occupy spaces to address these challenges, and the variety of solutions sometimes is at odds with each other, resulting in both institutional complexity and fragmentation. Established, emerging and regional powers as well as non-state actors become ever more economically, culturally, and politically linked and interconnected. Thus, under multiplexity, actors should no longer be treated as isolated because they are, in fact, interdependent.

Regions and regional international organisations (RIOs) form an essential feature of a multiplex world. Emerging and regional powers rely on their respective regions and RIOs as springboards in their quest for influence and promotion of principles and norms. Yet, RIOs should not be miscounted as mere tools of powerful members and sites of power rivalry, but as actors in their own right with their own aims and agendas to which they have gained autonomy and authority. In other words, RIOs have acquired actorness, albeit to different degrees. Moreover, the rise of regions and RIOs contributes to the densely institutionalised landscape of global governance. At the same time, RIOs have to navigate complexity, interdependence, and fragmentation if

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they want to make a meaningful contribution. Hence, they have actively and passively, formally and informally, developed relations with other regional and global IOs as well as states and non-state actors outside their respective regions. This phenomenon has been studied under the prism of interregionalism, i.e. the “process of deepening political, economic, and societal interaction between international regions” (Roloff, 2006, p. 18).

However, many empirical phenomena have not been captured in the interregionalism research program. RIOs have developed a diverse toolkit to build relationships and to manage complexity, interdependence, and fragmentation. Therefore, we argue that phenomena as diverse as inter-organisational cooperation agreements, observer-ships, but also new forms of multi-issue partnerships and external funding could enrich the debate on interregionalism. With diverse forms of interregionalism in mind, it is likely that interactions and interconnectedness of regions diversify in a multiplex world. Such forms of interregionalism likely bring about many positive gains for a broad range of actors. Yet, we caution against potential perils that may arise – from increasing levels of protectionism to dependency and vulnerabilities. As such, interregionalism promises to be a building block for stabilising the system of global governance and contributing to new multilateralism, but it may come with strings attached for regions, regional actors, and RIOs. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of contemporary interregionalism, it is imperative to study such phenomena from a systematic comparative angle, across different regions and diverse forms of interregionalism.

State of the Art of the Interregionalism Research Program

The study of interregionalism began in the 1990s. As RIOs built external relations beyond their regional reach, exemplified by initiatives led by the European Union (EU) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), research sought to capture this new regional political activity at the intersection of regionalism, multilateralism, and (regional) foreign policy.

Initially, the object of inquiry revolved around the relations between two RIOs. This has been termed *pure* or *bi-regional* interregionalism. Yet, RIOs do not stop at interactions with their counterparts. They also engage individual states or groups of states from another region, and sometimes also non-state actors. This has been referred to as transregionalism. Finally, hybrid regionalism denotes situations when a more or less coordinated group of states within a region interacts with a RIO or another such group from another region (Baert et al., 2014; Hänggi et al., 2006). Hence, conceptual innovations have become more sophisticated. On the downside of conceptual proliferation, the object of inquiry becomes less clearly delineated and cumulative empirical research is harder to establish.

Similarly, a range of theoretical arguments has been put forward regarding the emergence, outcomes, and contributions of interregionalism. Interregionalism has been studied from the perspectives of foreign policy analysis, International Relations

theory, international political economy, norm diffusion, and critical theory. Clearly, these different approaches have their merits and, collectively, they provide for a holistic understanding of interregionalism. Yet, even after more than two decades of this research program, “[t]here is still an urgent need to develop more persuasive and parsimonious theoretical approaches for the explanation of interregional relations” (Rüland, 2022, p. 274).

Empirically, the interregionalism research program has long suffered from an extensive focus on the EU and its foreign policy. What has been less featured under the prism of interregionalism are interregional partnerships that do not include the EU. At best, literature overviews duly reported the existence of South-South cooperation and listed various partnerships and fora. This imbalance inspired Ribeiro Hoffmann (2016) to distinguish between EU-centred and South-South interregionalism. Still, empirical work that does not include the EU or focuses on South-South interregional relations remains rare (Mattheis & Siman, 2023). With regard to policy issues, most research focuses on security or trade. As an ever-increasing number of RIOs have built interregional relationships, the empirical basis is broader and somewhat diversified across regions. It would thus be worthwhile to explore interregionalism across other policy issues. A final addition, beyond state-led, formal regionalism, research has recently acknowledged non-state actors and informal regionalism as important dimensions of interregionalism (Litsegård & Mattheis, 2024).

New Interactions Across Regions and RIOs

Although interactions across regions and RIOs have flourished, not all developments feature in the study of interregionalism. To further the debate, we outline several developments of how regions and RIOs interact: overlaps, organisational cooperation, observers, and newer forms of partnerships.

The connectivity between regions and RIOs can best be underlined by the fact of increasing overlaps, i.e. situations when RIOs have member states in common and entail identical policy competencies at the same time (Panke & Stapel, 2018). While such overlaps were rare in the wave of regionalism immediately following the end of World War II, they significantly increased after the end of the Cold War due to the scope expansion of RIOs, membership enlargement, as well as the inception of RIOs with broad mandates and membership bases. The presence of overlaps provides two important inroads for the study of interregionalism.

By the very nature of overlaps, RIOs are connected through shared member states. This connection allows for information to quickly travel between organisations in an informal manner. Moreover, the bureaucracies of RIOs also gain in importance in situations of overlap. In their wish to organise policymaking and implementation, they develop ways to exchange information and coordinate (Herpolsheimer, 2023). Such informal interregional relations are plentiful if we take anecdotal evidence seriously, yet there are few systematic empirical studies.

On the downside, member states may selectively engage certain RIOs while leaving others aside, using strategies such as forum-shopping, chessboard politics, or regime shifting (Alter & Meunier, 2009). This may compromise the effectiveness and efficiency of individual organisations and global governance writ large. To overcome potential negative externalities, coordination and cooperation may help the concerned organisations to address potential challenges up-front or even develop collective solutions. They do so through direct, codified inter-organisational agreements which define the issue areas and instruments for cooperation. Increasingly, RIOs that overlap with each other have established such connections to manage complexity (Panke & Stapel, 2024). For instance, through the instrument of information-sharing, states no longer have the option to play off one organisation against another, as Clark (2022) has shown regarding the overlap of global and regional financing arrangements in emergency lending.

Another dimension of interactions between regions is the involvement of out-of-region actors in the dealings of RIOs. For instance, in 2023, Ukraine and the Association of Caribbean States discussed a framework for the country to join the RIO as an observer (MFA Ukraine, 2023). The same year, Ghana applied and was granted observer status with the Pacific Alliance (African Business, 2023). Kenya became an observer to the Organisation of American States (OAS) in June 2024 (The East African, 2024). The League of Arab States holds observer status within the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (Astana Times, 2022), as does the EU in the Pacific Community (EEAS, 2021). These are just some examples of interactions between regions through states and RIOs. If observers are to be conceptualised as ambassadors or even connectors, their roles in regional fora need to be investigated more critically. From there, new reasons/ways for theorising interregionalism emerge: What are observers, and how do they end up in such a role?

While member states of organisations can express their preference in an institutionalised way through speech acts and resolutions and, most crucially, can vote, observers cannot take part in the formal voting procedure (Shaumyan, 2018). Often-times, they also do not get to present their perspectives in a formal setting (Chater, 2016). Yet, some RIOs encourage active participation and input by their observers. A case in point is the Council of Europe (CoE). Its observer states – USA, Canada, Mexico, and Japan – substantially contributed to the debate on cyberspace regulations compliance within the CoE (Interview, 2024/06/27). Interestingly, observers from its geographical sphere are prohibited by the regulations of the organisation (ibid.). This example demonstrates how the connector role can play out in a RIO.

There are also other functions for observer states within the IO-observer dimension. In the case of the OAS, the purpose is to sensitise, establish, and strengthen connectivity between regional and out-of-region actors (OAS, 2021). More specifically, the organisation provides a forum that, on the one hand, facilitates involvement of observer states in its various projects, such as the OAS Electoral Observer Missions, and, on the other hand, supports cooperation with the respective beneficiary OAS member states.

However, these are only some of the factors that push and pull IO-observer relations in the context of interregionalism, while apart from the functional dimension, there are other considerations pertaining to notions of legitimisation and socialisation that require further investigation. Nevertheless, the literature has hardly engaged the phenomenon of observerships as a form of interregionalism, although it clearly shows the relevance of RIOs for a broad range of state, non-state, and IO actors and underlines yet another dimension of how RIOs have become increasingly interconnected and interdependent.

In addition to these blind spots, it should be mentioned that formal RIO-to-RIO interregionalism or RIO-to-state transregionalism remain important. Today, RIOs and their out-of-region partners go beyond the traditional focus on security and trade policy issues and instruments for cooperation. A new era of interregional and transregional relations can also be perceived through infrastructure investment and new modes of external funding that are connecting regions.

The flourishing of new external investments, especially in physical infrastructure, seems to have the physical connections to the Global South as a focus and is characterised by intercontinental connectivity. Those initiatives should also be read as interregional investments since physical connection allows for distances to vanish. While the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) focuses on trade routes infrastructure, the EU's Global Gateway distinguishes itself by substantial investments in digital infrastructure and the environment (da Conceição-Heldt, 2023). In contrast, US initiatives focus on traditional national or intra-regional investments within its Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (The White House, 2024). Other interregional examples are the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor or the Latin American Bioceanic Corridor, which attempts to reduce the Atlantic–Pacific divide.

Furthermore, RIOs and regional projects are increasingly supported, financially and materially, by external actors through the provision of external funding (Stapel et al., 2023). External partners are both individual states but also other regional and global IOs. In many instances, external contributions amount to the majority of recipients' budgets. They invest in personnel in RIO headquarters and also support policy programs and project implementation in areas as diverse as security, health, and environmental governance. Many RIOs in the Global South rely on these external contributions at the expense of homegrown initiatives and the buy-in from their member states (Engel & Mattheis, 2019). Yet, external funding clearly relates to interregionalism. It is important because it enables RIOs to provide collective rules and goods. It also facilitates the flow of information and convergence of policy approaches between actors.

The Promise and Perils of Interregionalism

Changes in the international system towards a multiplex world leave room for new interregional dynamics, which are perceived by affected actors and audiences both as opportunities and threats. The emergence of the Global South constitutes a considerable number of new scenarios that are often overlooked or not interpreted within the interregional framework, leaving their consequences unexplored. There are several scenarios that impact interregional dynamics, bringing specific implications for interregionalism, whether it be South-South or North-South: strategic opportunities especially for actors from the Global South, dominance of emerging and regional powers, but also new means for established powers to exploit interregional relations to their own benefits.

The increase in South-South cooperation underlines new interregional dynamics. Although it is not a new phenomenon, it has had meaningful regional repercussions, especially through the signing of interregional trade agreements, such as the ASEAN-RCEP or COMESA-EAC-SADC tripartite. Moreover, organisations like Mercosur have experienced a complete shift of priorities to focus on the signing of such agreements (Mercosur, 2015). Those can be seen as venues for alternative partnerships beyond established powers inside and outside the region, thus creating opportunities for reducing the impact of traditional hegemons. A survey conducted with the question “If ASEAN were forced to align itself with one of the two strategic rivals, which should it choose?” has shown varying responses over time. In 2023, 38.9% of respondents favoured China, while 61.1% favoured the US. However, in 2024, the responses shifted to 50.5% favouring China and 49.5% the US, showing that new cooperation ties can significantly alter the perception of threats (ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024). Nevertheless, new interregional relations may create intra-regional divides, disintegration, as well as new competitions and distrust at the same time. For instance, the rise of the Pacific Alliance caused a debate not only by the possibility of fracturing South America between the Atlantic and the Pacific but also to have RIOs to choose between competition or cooperation (Briceño-Ruiz & Morales, 2017).

Seen as alternatives for the Global South, they might pose an optimistic scenario, but at the same time, they raise important concerns regarding competition over partnership and, in extreme cases, dispute. Some of these actions are perceived as new means of exploitation or *soft imperialism* (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2005). Even when those partnerships are taken as positive by Global South actors because they can choose from a range of options, it also leads to concerns about how traditional hegemons react to competition, as possible reactions could include protectionism or clubness. The trend of Mega Regional Trade Agreements, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, might be a sign in this direction, in an attempt for the Global North to lock in its traditional trade partners, especially on investment protection, reducing strategic vulnerabilities (Rensmann, 2017).

Another change in these relations can be observed through the emergence of regional leaders, such as the BRICS, alluding to the role of focal points for interregional governance as the Global South is concerned (Naik, 2019). As self-proclaimed regional representatives, regional leaders often claim to be a bridge or platform for small states' demands to be heard (Naude, 2019), but in some cases, they pose as regional voices when in fact they are voicing their own preferences and interests instead of those of the region (Malamud, 2011). In other cases, they are even viewed as regional threats (Klintworth, 1998). By allegedly carrying the interests of the region, this legitimacy has often been used as an argument for new interregional relations, especially regarding trade agreements. That can lead to an increase in intra-regional tensions once this expectation for opportunities is not met, as illustrated by the China-Mercosur versus China-Uruguay relations (Goodman, 2023). In other instances, the emergence of regional leaderships may also create new interregional dynamics through the interference with existing regional arrangements, as the case of the Myanmar-China Partnership demonstrates, which could be potentially perceived as a threat to both ASEAN and its member states (Chenyang, 2012).

Conclusions

Regional IOs and interregionalism form an important feature of a multiplex order. They exemplify the complex and interdependent nature of contemporary global governance. Interregionalisms equally underline the crucial role of world regions and their representatives. This development is likely to stay and to further progress, most evidently through the strengthening of South-South cooperation that will complement and complicate North-South relations. The forms of interregionalism will further diversify, as we outlined regarding overlaps, organisational cooperation, observerships, and new modes of interaction. Moreover, interregional relations relate to the potential pathologies of multiplexity. On the one hand, depending on actor interests and strategies, overlaps and complexity may contribute to fragmentation and subversion. On the other hand, interregional relations may contribute to alleviating and to counteracting such potential negative effects, as RIO actors work together through information-sharing, coordination, or more advanced forms of cooperation (Panke & Stapel, 2025).

Why should these new developments be analysed specifically within the framework of interregional relations and from a comparative angle? As the presented examples underline, interregionalism is an intervening factor in regional constructions, with the potential to explain the disintegration of regions, regional tensions, and regional competition. On the one hand, a series of new dynamics were presented, often overlooked, and the lack of attention dedicated to these new dynamics can lead to research being stuck in a still image that does not capture contemporaneity. On the other hand, interregionalism often lacks empirical application when compared to the theoretically rich framework it offers. This link allows and ensures the study of interregionalism to remain relevant and reflective of current global trends, while

providing additional nuances and insights into the emerging complexities of regional and interregional interactions.

As such, interregionalism will be an important cornerstone of the multiplex world. While interregionalism promises gains for a variety of actors, it may equally put others in vulnerable positions and risks new forms of exploitation or *soft imperialism* for certain regions, regional actors, and RIOs. Thus, the potential benefits and equally important perils should be more closely observed. As interregionalism promises to be a building block for global governance in a multiplex world and contributes to multilateralism, its academic study will also remain important. Hence, it is indispensable to further invest in the systematic empirical analysis of interregionalism beyond its current dominant focus on security and trade issues through formal, codified agreements, with a Western/EU bias, but rather to fully appreciate diverse interregional relations beyond the West and how they contribute to global governance.

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Essay 19: Interregional Fluidness of the Global South



Kanica Rakhra

Introduction

Multilateralism and the changing global dynamics have brought forth a new term for analysts and scholars: the Global South. In existence for many years, the term became popular primarily during the pandemic, when the Global North did not share vaccines equitably with the Global South, and during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, when the Global North demanded but was unable to receive an equally confrontational response from the Global South towards Russian aggression.

Regular use of this term has built a significant scholarship on how State actors such as the United States of America (USA), France, China, and India interact with the region and which country assumes a leadership position to speak for the Global South. The Indian government's outreach via its *Voice of the Global South* Summits that began during its G20 Presidency (2023), China's consistent engagement with the G77, and the somewhat belated attempt by the USA to engage with the Global South by offering alternatives to Chinese developments, are all part of the process for States to prove that they can speak for and lead the Global South more than the other State.

Many analysts question the significance of the term, claiming that the Global South stops States from having their agency and clubs them into a group that has no meaning (Mohan, 2023). However, the term fights against existing hierarchies (Hogan & Patrick, 2024) and provides a voice to States that previously were unable to put their perspectives on the table. As a loose entity, it gives a voice to State actors who may not be part of the bigger *great game* but bring varied perspectives from those of the major powers.

While the Global South States engage with all the significant actors, they also ensure a balance between different States (Madhubani, 2024). For instance, Bangladesh engages with India and China with equal ease, ensuring that it receives

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the best in terms of foreign aid and military equipment, respectively, from the two Asian giants. Similarly, Brazil engages with China as much as it engages with the United States of America. Thus, most Global South States are drawing from the evolving nature of power dynamics (Rakhra, 2024) while choosing to raise issues, such as South Africa taking up the problems of the Palestinians as a result of Israel's on-ground aggression.

Specifically, regarding the Israel-Palestinian conflict, there has been uniformity of statements across different regions of the Global South (Tant & Larbi, 2024). However, these statements have not come in the form of a regional grouping such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), or the Group of Latin America and the Caribbean (GRULAC). They have come from State actors within these different regional groupings, united in their clamour against the narrative of the Global North.

These events raise the question: How are States making decisions? By pursuing strategies as the nation-state or as the region? Additionally, what does the Global South as a region imply for interregional dynamics? What role do multilateral institutions and groupings such as BRICS and G20 play in the evolving dynamics of the Global South?

This essay seeks to understand the role of regional and non-regional groupings within the Global South and how they impact multilateral engagement. It aims to further scholarship on the Global South and build a better understanding of the fluidness that comes with the region.

Regional Dynamics

Regions and intra-regional power dynamics have been a constant area of research, especially in Western scholarship (Rafael, 1999). Whether it be South Asia, Latin America, or Southeast Asia, scholars focus on the success or mishap of the region based on economic ties, conflict along the borders, and support for other States in the region at international forums such as the United Nations (UN). While some regions, such as Southeast Asia and Europe, successfully integrated in the form of ASEAN and the European Union, respectively, some regions, such as South Asia and Latin America, suffered from claims of regional hegemony.

Regionalism provided a critical perspective to view and understand the evolving global dynamics. The question of Middle East peace processes, the nuclear stand-off in South Asia, tensions in Northeast Asia, the development of Latin America, or the issue of ASEAN centrality – each region had a specific issue that defined its dynamics with the world. This is no longer valid. Smaller States such as Vietnam, Bangladesh, Algeria, and Morocco are moving beyond their regions and engaging proactively on global issues such as human rights and climate change. Middle power States such as Germany, Italy, Argentina, and Indonesia are also participating and putting their points across in multilateral forums.

While the Global South as a region holds promise by offering flexibility in terms of its agency, it also comprises multiple regions with middle and small States, each keen to define how prime powers engage with the Global South. As the Global South actors unearth their role and their relationships with each other, global powers continue to vie for the region's leadership.

The growing agency of the Global South is evident in the US's inability to convince States such as Brazil, Egypt, and Indonesia to isolate China the way these countries had isolated the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Madhubani, 2024). In such a scenario, it becomes difficult for States such as the US to expect Brazil to support an anti-Russian campaign during the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a result of both States' affiliation to the Organization of American States (OAS) or for even Global South States such as India, to count on the support of Bangladesh, its friendly neighbour and co-member of regional groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

One of the success stories in regionalism studies has been ASEAN and the concept of ASEAN centrality that was held closely by the member states. The Southeast Asian States came together to form a regional grouping, kept their differences apart and worked towards improving the region as a whole. The vision that each State should seek the benefits of development and progress together, rather than engage in infighting, held the regional grouping in good standing. For decades, the ASEAN states have not allowed for third-party intervention in their internal matters. However, external pressures seem to have reached ASEAN as well (Liow, 2023). For instance, they are unable to function effectively with Indonesia and Thailand, which have different perspectives on engagement with the Junta in Myanmar.

Intra-regional dynamics in other regions have evolved in different directions too. While SAARC may have begun with some enthusiasm, South Asia is no longer a region (Jacob, 2024) that engages politically or economically. Similarly, the entry of the African Union (AU) into the G20 was a positive step, but engaging within Africa can be challenging, not just politically but also economically.

Since intra-regional dynamics are in constant flux, State actors are choosing to break free of regional groupings and are engaging in decisions that reflect their interests. As a result, interregional relationships are superseding intra-regional dynamics, and States are now engaging on issues across regions. Areas of concern that bind States from different regions, especially the Global South, are normative in nature and speak against the dominant narrative of the Global North while continuing to engage with them economically.

The Multiplex World Order

A multiplex world is not defined by a single hegemon (Acharya, 2017) but by co-dependency. This co-dependency results from economic engagement, regional and international institution building, and an intermingling of conflicts and identities.

The advent of the multiplex world order has, in turn, provided the Global South States with a more substantial say in world matters. Smaller and medium-sized countries are using alternative multilateral forums to put forth their perspectives on a range of issues. Thus, co-dependency between States is growing, leading to more States claiming their space in the comity of nations. However, there are limits to this co-dependency.

For instance, the Indian External Affairs Minister made a famous quote when asked about the Russia-Ukraine crisis being a global crisis. He stated, “Europe’s problems are not the world’s problems.” This statement gave a massive impetus to the Global South countries. It resonated with many countries that felt neglected by the major powers during their times of crisis. It received acceptance as a strong statement from the Global South towards the Global North. In response to the statement and expanding on the argument, an Indian Member of Parliament responded, “that while Europe’s problems are not the world’s problems, the world has suffered on account of Europe’s problem in Ukraine” (Tharoor, 2023).

This statement is symptomatic of the current multiplex world. The Ukraine conflict may be localised to a specific region, but in an interconnected world, the impact of a conflict in Ukraine directly influences the sale and price of sunflower oil and forces the set trade routes from Russia to Africa to find alternatives. It is not only Russia, Ukraine, and Europe that suffer from the localised war, but global supply chains are disrupted and impact States that are not involved in the war as well. Resources are being diverted towards war efforts rather than towards addressing food insecurity in different regions of the Global South. Thus, the Global South may not be comfortable with it, but it cannot afford to be delinked from other regions.

Global South in Interregional Groupings: G20 and BRICS

The most significant interregional grouping, the UN, today, suffers from a number of internal and external discord due to multiple power centres focusing on different issues. Calls for a new UN and the ability to develop a new international organisation on the lines of the UN exist (Darnal, 2023). At the same time, States such as Russia, China, the United States, India, and Vietnam are sharing proposals for upholding the norms of the UN while modifying the structures of the UN. Whether it is the India-led *New Orientation for a Reformed Multilateralism*, the Vietnam-sponsored *Upholding the UN Charter*, the China-initiated *Upholding multilateralism and the UN-centred international system*, or the Russia-convened *Effective Multilateralism through the defence of the principles of the UN charter* (UN, 2024), they all offer some variations in the UN structures. However, these calls have not been backed by action from State actors or the UN. As a result, State actors started coming together in smaller multilateral groupings to discuss issues of concern.

One such grouping began as a multilateral engagement between Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) in 2009 and later added South Africa to make BRICS. On January 1, 2024, BRICS admitted four new members: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and

the United Arab Emirates. Many other States, such as Pakistan and Argentina, have also requested consideration for membership in an informal manner. Most recently, Indonesia was admitted as a member of the BRICS plus, taking the total number of members to ten. The request from other States in the Global South to join this grouping suggests that the platform serves the member States in an equal capacity and is willing to engage with voices and ideas that may be outside the mainstream.

The Group of 20, or the G20, is a multilateral grouping comprising nine countries, along with the European Union, from the Global North and 10 countries from the Global South. While BRICS has gone on to expand its membership base from various regions of the Global South, the G20 offers a different perspective – that of equal representation between the two regions of the Global North and South. Until the Indonesian G20 Presidency (2022), the G20 did not have much normative value. However, with the breakout of the Russia-Ukraine war during Indonesia's G20 Presidency, the Global South States collectively resisted the pressures of the Global North countries to ensure that Russia was not removed from the G20, as the G8 had decided to remove the Russian Federation and become the G7 (Rakhra, 2023). The subsequent Presidencies of India, Brazil, and now South Africa have ensured a stronger presence of the Global South narrative with issues such as Women-led Development, food insecurity and inequality, and solidarity and empathy being brought to the fore.

As States find their voice in international forums such as the G20 and BRICS – sometimes united and often disunited – the power dynamics are shifting within interregional and intra-regional relationships. The examples of BRICS and the G20 lay out the future of interregional ties and multilateralism within and with the Global South. State actors from different regions are keen to engage within the Global South as much as with global issues, irrespective of their regional affiliation.

Global Governance and the Challenge of Traditional Multilateralism

Interregional organisations like the BRICS and G20 offer a new perspective on multilateralism. They operate without a permanent secretariat and discuss a range of issues from health to education, from energy to the economy. The rotating chair gives every state a chance to set the narrative and is not bound by the permanency of rules but rather by a Terms of Reference that has been set collectively, along with some guidelines for engagement.

The BRICS and G20 could come across as unstructured in their approach, especially to those in the Global North. But it is the unstructured nature of these multilateral forums that appeals to State actors. In a multiplex world, manoeuvrability is key, and that is found in forums such as BRICS and G20. Additionally, structured approaches such as the UN are struggling as they have been overburdened by legal terms and rules of procedure.

The intra-regional and interregional developments suggest a new turn for global governance. Regions in the traditional sense may not be the building blocks of the global geopolitical system. State actors find more agency under the regional grouping of the Global South as the multiplex world demands more flexibility in engagement between them. The Global South and Global North as regions can provide the impetus to a multilateral order where States engage with each other.

Multilateralism, at least in its traditional form, has not been able to deliver global governance. If State actors are able to find a pathway that is multilateral but not regional or global, a pathway where State agency is not under threat and there is an overarching cover of a grouping like the Global South, there may be some merit in understanding if this is the way ahead for global governance.

Conclusion

Multiple definitions exist for the Global South (Hansen, 2023). Some analysts refer to the region's location as a primary defining factor. In contrast, others point to the shifting definitions of a group of States that were post-colonial, developing, and essentially part of the Eastern segment in the East–West divide. Thus, while Australia may not be part of the Global South, even though it is regionally in the South, Central Asian States may be considered the Global South regardless of their location.

However, the primary binding factor for the Global South is the ability of States to come together or to unilaterally bring perspectives that challenge the set narrative of the Global North States.

It is in forums such as the G20 that the tussle between the Global North and Global South is evident. Whether it is about data protection, climate financing, pandemic preparedness, or multilateral banks, the G20, as a multilateral forum, provides space for the multiplex world to engage with each other. On the other hand, middle and small powers can unite strategically in groupings such as the BRICS and collectively make decisions that benefit the Global South.

Regions have been an accessible lens for studying countries outside the *Western* hegemonic world. However, at a time when States can put their perspectives across in international and multilateral forums, regional hegemony is under serious question. The structure of the nation-state is seemingly taking precedence over the regional identity in world affairs.

At the same time, as a region, the Global South is providing space for State actors to be part of a larger collective while keeping their nation-state identity alive. The Global South has successfully brought together middle and small powers at a time when States within a specific region cannot meet on common ground. Interregional support for common causes and engagement becomes more efficient under the aegis of the Global South, whether it be in multilateral forums like the BRICS and G20 or at the United Nations. The fluidness of the Global South is reflected in its multilateral institutions as well, and this flexibility or multiplexity will define interregional, intra-regional, as well as international engagement between States.

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Essay 20: Science and Technology in Interregional Association Strategies: The Construction of Geopolitical Circles of Trust in the New Multipolarity



Ignacio De Angelis and Nevía Vera

Introduction

The current international order is facing the redesign of a new systemic logic characterised by the profound transformation of the principles governing the multilateral Western order and liberal globalisation. As a result, we are experiencing a transitional stage or interregnum where the characteristics of the new global order will be defined. In particular, we believe there is evidence to suggest that we are moving towards the consolidation of a multipolar world configured by interregional association strategies based on the construction of geopolitical circles of trust, where science and technology, especially science diplomacy and technodiplomacy, will play a central role. This essay refers to the cases of Latin America and the European Union (EU) as examples of regions seeking to improve their relative positioning and consolidate a strategic bi-regional alliance. This way, the essay aims to discuss various conceptual tools, incorporating the analysis of the role of science and technology in the configuration and strengthening of interregional linkages.

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Crisis of the Liberal Order and Emergence of the New Interregional Multilateral Order

The questioning and evident transformation of the normative system that governed globalisation over the last 50 years is expressed as an interregnum that insinuates an eventual shift towards a new global order. The relative decline of the West and the emergence of more fragmented power poles demonstrate the shift of the main terrain towards the East as the most novel expression of the modern capitalist order (Colombo & De Angelis, 2021; Sanahuja, 2022).

This relative decline of the West is manifested on several simultaneous and interconnected fronts, perhaps the most evident being the (re)emergence of Asia, especially China, as a central actor in current economic and technological interactions. The relocation of the most active core of capitalism towards the East entails new dynamics in the accumulation of economic, commercial, and scientific-technological capabilities, as well as military and diplomatic ones. Ultimately, it leads to a greater capacity to sustain challenges to the liberal multilateral order, forging a new scenario of interregional alliances and relationships.

While the erosion of Western power and the questioning of U.S. hegemony as the guarantor of the liberal multipolar order have accelerated in the twenty-first century, these issues have occupied an important space in the theoretical agenda of international relations since the 1970s. Therefore, this is not a new phenomenon. Various theorists and analysts have repeatedly exposed the limits of hegemonic power based on the relative loss of power, i.e., in relation to the performance of other emerging actors.

Authors like C. Layne (1993) have argued that the differential growth between major powers and the inevitable multipolarity in the global context are grounded in a long-term perspective on the historical cycles of rise and decline of powers. From this perspective, differences in economic growth and power attributes between major powers would inevitably lead to a change in the global power distribution.

In the twenty-first century, several events began to weaken confidence in U.S. hegemony, which had been consolidated during the post-Cold War era and, for some authors, since the 9/11 attacks (see, for example, Krauthammer, 2002). The 2008 financial crisis was one of the first milestones to externalise and accelerate the questioning of the liberal order led by the West. Other significant events include the failure of the WTO Doha Round, Brexit, the resurgence of nationalist and protectionist measures under the Trump administration, the intensification of the U.S.-China conflict centered on technology, the COVID-19 pandemic that exposed the vaccine nationalism strategies of many Western countries, the war in Ukraine and the economic and financial sanctions on Russia, the failure of the liberal project in the Middle East, and finally the advance and consolidation of a Reactionary International as a new critical core of internal questioning.

Moreover, the current weakening of the rules of liberal multilateralism reinforces the convergence and interconnection of multiple crises that simultaneously impact the global system, affecting its response capacity. Adam Tooze (2022) calls this

phenomenon *polycrisis*, referring to the accumulation and overlap of economic, social, political, and environmental problems, whose combination creates a highly complex and challenging situation for managing global public goods.

In this context, the multilateral institutions created by the West prove impotent in responding to the management of global public goods. The liberal multilateral order weakened due to its own incapacity in terms of democratisation and legitimacy – particularly regarding peripheral countries' issues – which are especially severe around the financial regime; intra and international inequality problems in the global trade structure; the climate crisis; pandemic management; and the regulation of technological change. All these interconnected problems converge in the idea of polycrisis.

The inability to respond effectively to global problems requiring joint responses is an endemic symptom of the current order. However, this incapacity has become more visible now that the specific interests of central countries are affected. This compels us to be vigilant in discussing and diagnosing the current state of globalisation since it is from there that the regulation of a new order will seek to emerge. This aspect is especially sensitive for peripheral countries, particularly concerning the regulation of financial, commercial, and especially scientific and technological flows, which is currently the major organising element of international economic relations.

As for the transformation of the normative system specific to globalisation in recent years, it is possible to note a more or less generalised consensus that we are not facing a de-globalisation but rather a profound transformation of its liberal foundations. Simply put, what is in crisis is not globalisation itself but its form of liberal or market regulation, the *depoliticised globalist* model corresponding to the liberal multilateral order. In other words, the idea of interdependence that characterised international relations until the early twenty-first century represents this instance of globalisation driven by *depoliticised forces*, as described by Alan Greenspan (Tooze, 2022).

However, the return of ideological elements to the debate on the international order becomes particularly relevant when it is often used to deter the external actions of peripheral countries. This shift in centres of international dynamism not only implies economic and commercial consequences and impacts but also disputes over which values and institutions will shape relations between states (and other actors) in the near future. Particularly against liberal principles, re-emerging powers like China and Russia, along with the growing influence of other emerging nations like India or Brazil, challenge U.S. hegemony. This dispute consolidates the multipolar configuration and, according to the most current theoretical debates, compels us to understand the implications of the possible future global order (Acharya et al., 2023; DeShaw Rae, 2021; Zhang, 2022).

In this context, economic, commercial, and technological linkages are increasingly viewed through an eminently geopolitical lens, leading to regions regaining prominence, which, in our view, allows us to foresee the emergence of a multipolar world configured around interregional association strategies based on the construction of geopolitical circles of trust. These can be understood as strategic alliances between countries and/or regions that share economic and political interests,

aimed at ensuring resilient supply chains for natural resource provision to strengthen security and stability in an international context characterised by uncertainty and volatility. These interregional alliances seek to reduce dependency on potentially unstable extra-regional actors, promoting a new type of multipolarity where different centres of power cooperate to ensure global production and distribution of goods and services. At the same time, these dynamics aim to guarantee and enforce the development of vital scientific and technological trajectories in terms of infrastructure, communication, and security (De Angelis & Vera, 2023).

In geoeconomic, commercial, and technological terms, this phenomenon is reflected in the search and consolidation of relationships with politically aligned partners to build not global but interregional value chains from a new relocation of global production, which U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen (2023) referred to as *friend-shoring*.

Science and Technology as Key for Interregional Linkages

The focus of this essay on the role of science and technology (S&T) in building interregional linkages is neither casual nor arbitrary. Historically, scientific and technological cooperation has been an instrument of cohesion in multilateral, intergovernmental, and transnational relations due to its ability to bridge positions based on results and to search for concrete solutions (Vera et al., 2023). Particularly in this essay, it is perceived as a key element in configuring new strategic alliances that can operate at a decentralised level and various scales in these emerging geopolitical circles of trust (through thematic linking networks, mobility agreements, and specific management regimes, among others).

The emphasis on S&T is crucial today because what underlies the decline of U.S. hegemony and the transformation of globalisation regulation is the emergence and consolidation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In general terms, it is a productive and social transformation driven by the emergence of new technologies that reorganise production sectors and lead to a generalised increase in productivity.

This process is currently driven by technologies centred on robotics, 5G, artificial intelligence, energy transition technologies, digitalisation, the Internet of Things (IoT), nanotechnology, biotechnology, and quantum computing. The emergence and rapid diffusion of these innovations have generated new global issues, necessitating the implementation of new regulations. Moreover, they have once again made S&T catalysts for geopolitical concerns and changes, especially visible in the digital sector, which threatens to redefine and accelerate international power distribution.

It might be in this area where the growing gap between China and the U.S., on one side, and the rest of the world, on the other, becomes most evident. According to some trends recorded in recent years, R&D investment has concentrated in a few countries worldwide: in 2019, the U.S. accounted for 27% of the total, followed by China with 22%, Japan with 7%, Germany with 6%, and South Korea with 4% (National Science Board, 2022). Both major powers seek to dominate strategic sectors driving the new

techno-economic paradigm, and in this field, growing tensions are evident: the U.S and China account for most of the world's major digital platforms, hold three-quarters of patents related to blockchain technology advancements and cloud services, and represent half of the global investment in the Internet of Things. They also lead in research on emerging and strategic technologies such as artificial intelligence, 5G, and semiconductor production (Allison et al., 2021).

Additionally, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which produces the Critical Technology Tracker, identified China's leadership in 37 out of 44 strategic technologies and stated that China hosts the ten most important institutions developing research in strategic technology sectors. In this context, it is not surprising that advances in S&T experience a process of *weaponisation* impacting international relations, nor that they are a fundamental instrument of current foreign policy strategies.

These dynamics shape new alliances and linking strategies, for example, with the proliferation of initiatives at the intersection of S&T and foreign policy —known as science diplomacy or technodiplomacy— and with the promotion of large infrastructure projects aimed at determining areas of influence and dividing peripheral and semi-peripheral territories in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These trends suggest that the world seems to be heading towards a technological decoupling to reduce techno-economic and commercial interdependence between the poles delineated by the U.S and China, which has significant consequences for regions lagging in this competition.

One of the first initiatives that sought to strengthen ties between regions to secure value chains was the New Silk Road, launched in 2013 by Xi Jinping, consisting of the construction of land and sea corridors to connect China with Eurasia and Africa, which in recent years incorporated Latin America. Over time, this mega-initiative acquired novel forms and orientations such as the Digital Silk Road, the Green Silk Road, and the Health Silk Road, with increasing prominence of S&T alongside infrastructure.

For its part, the U.S - especially during the Biden administration - has committed to revitalising its industry with large investments to drive technological innovation and S&T linked to combating climate change, addressing two relevant and interconnected problems of the great power: domestic weaknesses that fuel its relative power decline and the need to contain Chinese expansion. Thus, in 2021, the Build Back Better World initiative was announced, later renamed the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII) and relaunched within the G7. According to the White House, this initiative seeks to build infrastructure in the developing world based on the diffusion of values, standards, and transparent partnerships in infrastructure inherent to Western liberal and democratic countries, offering more than 40 billion USD. Recent communications and documentation suggest that the PGII has shifted to cover needs in African and Asian territories, reinforcing its goal of serving as a containment barrier to Chinese expansion.

These examples demonstrate how the world's major powers and regions of greatest strategic relevance have initiated a series of ambitious infrastructure initiatives, presciently designed to meet their foreign policy objectives. These actions not only

seek to ensure the continued supply of vital natural resources and critical materials but also to contain and counter the influence and expansion of other major powers, thus contributing to an increasing fragmentation of the international order. These initiatives are framed within a regional framework, although they often materialise through bilateral agreements.

The EU and Latin America as Examples of Using S&T in Building Geopolitical Circles of Trust

The EU has become aware of the growing difficulty in competing for power and maintaining its autonomy, and in this scenario, it tends towards techno-economic bipolarity. Therefore, in 2021, it launched the Global Gateway initiative, which proposes encouraging private investment by European companies in developing countries. To this end, it provides 300 billion EUR between 2021 and 2027 to advance investment in sustainable infrastructure in various geographic areas, including Latin America. Like the PGII, it seeks to promote fundamental Western values such as democracy, transparency, and good governance practices, encourage green energy, adherence to security aspects, and boost private investment. Additionally, Global Gateway aligns its goals with the Sustainable Development Goals and identifies five priority investment sectors: digital, energy transition, transport, health, education, and research.

Faced with the increasing struggle of central economies to appropriate technological development rents, other, more lagging regions like Latin America find themselves in a complex situation. They must choose between greater cooperation and the possibility of technological transfer along with commercial and financial opportunities offered by China, which leaves them vulnerable to potential retaliation from the U.S., or favouring the traditional security and defence alliance implied by their belonging to the North American sphere of influence. These regions also see their decision-making autonomy rapidly diminishing.

As can be seen in several of these examples, one of the fundamental components of these initiatives is S&T, an aspect often overlooked in studies of international relations and regionalism. Consequently, the S&T dimension is understood as an elementary component of power but also as a key tool for thinking about autonomy, especially for regions caught in the middle of the technological competition between China and the U.S.

This fact has reinforced the idea of using science diplomacy or technodiplomacy (broadly understood as the use of S&T for foreign policy purposes) as a fundamental instrument in the international policy toolbox. In particular, it is useful not only for strengthening relationships but —especially— for reinforcing the pursuit of technological autonomy and sovereignty. That is, to expand the margin of action in the face of strategic decisions affecting national interest and development. An example of this can be seen in the relationship between Latin America and the EU.

The EU has established scientific and technological cooperation as a hallmark of its foreign policy, as demonstrated by the programs that have historically guided relations in this area with other actors. Consequently, the notion of science diplomacy has gained increasing relevance in recent years, as evidenced by its mentions in the European Commission's Communication on a Global Approach to Research and Innovation and the Council of the European Union's Conclusions on the Global Approach, both in 2021, and later in the first biennial report from the Commission on the implementation of the Global Approach in 2023. These documents highlight the growing importance of developing a joint science diplomacy strategy, which led to a meeting of S&T ministers from the bloc's member states in July 2023 to discuss a common roadmap for the first time (Van Langenhove et al., 2024).

In February 2024, as part of the Horizon Europe Program, the European Alliance for Science Diplomacy published a policy brief with recommendations to develop this common strategy and strengthen relations within the bloc and with external actors to reinforce the region's resilience and strategic autonomy.

This European pursuit of greater margins of action in the context of the geotechnological competition is a common factor with Latin America. Ironically, autonomy in foreign policy and scientific and technological policies have not been sufficiently addressed together in academic literature, and currently, few studies seek to combine them. However, both the Latin American School of Thought in Science, Technology, and Development (PLACTED in Spanish) and the autonomist school of Foreign Policy have explored possible responses. In fact, Latin America's Foreign Policy debates have produced concepts like *relational autonomy* and *active non-alignment* – the latter specifically elaborated for the context of the U.S.-China competition, addressing both economic and financial as well as technological discussions.

Regarding relations between the EU and Latin America, despite the intermittent dialogue during the second decade of the twenty-first century, the bi-regional alliance formalised in 1999 at the first Rio de Janeiro Summit has strengthened. In recent years, joint action has been decisive in achieving multilateral agreements such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement. Additionally, since the early twenty-first century, the bi-regional association has been consolidated with the signing of association and cooperation agreements between the EU and most Latin American countries. At the last summit in 2023, cooperation in digitalisation and new technologies for energy production took centre stage, driven by the Global Gateway initiative, to consolidate the strategic alliance.

Considering the common concerns of both regions about expanding the margins of autonomy, linking through sectoral agreements seeks to strengthen the current interregional circle of geopolitical trust. Historically, both regions have used S&T to strengthen their relations, as evidenced by the myriad programs, forums, and joint spaces derived from the EU-LAC summits. Examples of these efforts include the Common Knowledge Space, the 2021–2023 Roadmap, Bella II, and the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programs, among other contextual and specific initiatives. Currently, this dimension has acquired special relevance and can be key to achieving greater autonomy in the current geotechnological competition.

Of course, this window of opportunity also entails the challenge of not replicating colonial relations and dependency in the interregional link, of reprimarizing or deepening the great asymmetries between the two territories, and of reproducing the logic and patterns of North–South relations. The temptation is great due to the presence of important strategic resources in Latin America and the difference in scientific and technological capabilities between the two territories. However, both regions should aim to jointly achieve greater autonomy in the context of growing geotechnological competition.

Conclusion

We are currently facing a context of crisis in the liberal order, erosion of multilateralism, and weakening of the principles that have regulated globalisation since the mid-twentieth century. These processes have accelerated due to the emergence of key technologies that have profoundly modified the scenario of power distribution and economic benefits. Consequently, we are witnessing a growing global dispute over the dominance of geotechnological dimensions, which propels the resurgence of regions as protagonists and interregional relationships as guarantors of supply chains, determining a multipolarity different in its foundations.

In this context, the undisputed leadership of the U.S. and China stands out, seeking to establish links with various regions to secure the supply of resources and markets to sustain the ongoing industrial revolution. In turn, lagging regions like Latin America and, to a lesser extent, the EU, accelerate the search for greater margins of autonomy through the consolidation of a circle of trust based on a strategic bi-regional alliance that has seen more than 20 years of advances and setbacks. What is certain is that, in the current context, there is an emerging consensus among key players: there is an exceptional opportunity to redefine global economic structures and alliances, promoting a rebalancing of power and greater stability in international relations through the strengthening of regions and bi-regional cooperation.

In this essay, we proposed considering S&T as the facilitating element of interregional associations that drive and strengthen the construction of geopolitical circles of trust, especially in a context that shows signs of moving towards multipolarity. We argue that the scientific and technological field becomes a vital scenario for rethinking joint strategies, as it is a central focus of the hegemonic dispute that is reorganising global value chains. Thus, cooperation in S&T emerges as a key area for expanding autonomy in both the EU and Latin America. We believe that science diplomacy and technodiplomacy, especially at the interregional level, have the potential to become a fundamental instrument where national, regional, and extra-regional interests can converge, unite, or complement each other virtuously.

In this way, we aim to present a constructive proposal that serves as a basis for a research and action agenda and future empirical studies on regionalism, combining the study of S&T (from a social science perspective) with the analysis of regionalism and interregionalism.

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Essay 21: Towards Global Cooperation via Megaregion Formation: Facing the Global Polycrisis



Andrea Paganini

Introduction

The Anthropocene, marked by unprecedented human influence on Earth's systems, has ushered in an era of global polycrisis where interconnected crises compound one another, magnifying their collective impacts. With the nation-state capabilities being pressured by a globalised setting, and with de-globalisation trends ensuing from the fragmentation of global institutions, the world might find a renewed balance in emerging forms of global regionalism.

In the first two sections of this essay, two new mega-trends of world politics are identified: the great fragmentation and megaregion formation. The former is a historical period defined by environmental degradation, socio-economic inequality, geopolitical tensions, and other systemic failures that, together, are jeopardising mankind's future. The latter is a complex dynamic giving rise to densely interconnected economic corridors and urban clusters that enhance local development, foster innovation, and bolster economic competitiveness beyond the nation-state. Since megaregion formation represents a shift toward global regionalism, the final section will explore policy frameworks designed to manage this growing complexity. The goal is to prevent uncoordinated urbanisation and mitigate the risks of further fragmentation – i.e. *Globalisation of Tectonic Plates* scenario (Magnani, 2024).

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The Great Fragmentation: The Global Polycrisis

Globalisation surely is a complex and multidimensional process that comes in waves of intensification and contraction. Yet, it would be unsafe to accept the present de-globalisation trend at face value, without questioning the root causes and the deep-running implications of global disorder: climate change, natural disasters, the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, US-China tensions, the erosion of social cohesion, forced migration, etc., should neither be dismissed as historical happenings nor be approached with a *business-as-usual* mindset. (Homer-Dixon et al., 2023). Two phenomena justify such reading and explain why the new dominant trend in global politics is that of a *great fragmentation*.

Firstly, the capabilities of altering mankind's trajectory have never been so enhanced in human history, so much so that a new geological epoch has been proposed: the Anthropocene. Indeed, the *Great Acceleration* experienced in all human activities and fields of knowledge is quantifiable and measurable in the rate of change of a plethora of socio-economic indicators (Head et al., 2021). For instance, considering the spikes in global patterns of energy consumption linked with each industrial revolution, since 1950 total energy consumption worldwide has experienced a sixfold increase, from 28,564 TWh to 178,899 TWh; being energy consumption/demand strongly positively correlated to the degrees of complexity in human-related systems, it is easy to frame the relevance of these figures.

Secondly, although humanity has always lived under *poly*-crises conditions, it is only during the Anthropocene that the state of global polycrisis has actually set in motion. A global polycrisis arises when multiple crises interact across different and interconnected global systems. Due to this underlying entanglement, vulnerabilities, risks, and harm are amplified in ways that drastically degrade humanity's prospects (Lawrence et al., 2022). Polycrisis exhibits two distinctive qualities, explaining why the overall impact is far more massive and more persistent than the one that would be generated if crises were to happen in isolation from one another. First, they involve knock-on forces, which propagate through cascading effects that exploit systemic vulnerabilities rather than being directly driven by the initial hazard or the immediate damage caused (Pescaroli & Alexander, 2015). Second, they are characterised by causal entanglements, where complex interdependencies create feedback loops that increase the likelihood of subsequent crises.

It is thereby evident how, out of this polycrisis context, a first megatrend in world politics can be pinned to the *great fragmentation*, as noticed by several authoritative voices. *The Great Fracture* is the issue opening the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA, 2024, p. 1) 78th session, where UN Secretary General Guterres denounced that the present geopolitical deadlock on major global challenges is jeopardising the implementation of SDGs and triggering further fractures. Likewise, ISPI's (2023) Dossier refers to an upcoming trend of *Great Fragmentation* dominated by two tectonic rifts: West–East confrontation and North–South double velocity. The former will be triggered by China's economic surpassing of the US by the end of the decade, potentially causing the split of trade routes and regulations on major sustainable

transitions (e.g. AI). The latter will reflect the widening gap between the regions that have already experienced the take-off phase and those which are cut off from the benefits of global capitalism (for historic, systemic, or contingent factors). On this note, since current crises have inflated pre-existing stark inequalities across regions, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) *Global Outlook 2023* has identified a *great fragmentation* also within the K-shaped trajectory of the global economy – labelled *The Great Divergence* (OECD, 2022).

A growing convergence of environmental, economic, social, and political stressors is overwhelming institutions and individuals alike. The Stockholm Resilience Centre warns that the degeneration of the global polycrisis is pushing mankind towards *evolutionary traps*, where seemingly rational individual practices become maladaptive on a planetary scale (Søgaard Jørgensen et al., 2024). As crises become increasingly interwoven and self-reinforcing, humanity enters the Age of Insecurity (Paganini, 2024). Yet, the greatest challenge is not only the fallout of polycrisis but also the erosion of social cohesion in responding to it. Geopolitical rivalries, trade conflicts, and a weakened neoliberal order have undermined trust in multilateralism, reinforcing the above-mentioned traps, where evolutionary forces obstruct large-scale collaboration. Without a shift toward cohesive governance, humanity risks deeper disorder and maladaptation; however, the formation of megaregions could counteract this trend of great fragmentation, fostering regional integration as a stepping stone toward a more coordinated and resilient global order.

Megaregion Formation: Emerging Economic Corridors and Megacities

Since its theorisation and emergence in the context of multilateral integration and sub-state power devolution, regionalism has significantly evolved. Today, regions play a central role in addressing global challenges, while transnational economic corridors drive local development and economic competitiveness. At the same time, cities have gained quasi-autonomous agency on the global stage, as seen in initiatives like city diplomacy. Hence, the relatively novel concept of megaregion becomes increasingly relevant in describing a new dimension of socio-economic organisation as well as a new scale for driving economic performance that goes beyond the nation-state.

Due to globalisation, the realist premises according to which the nation-state is a *unique* and *rational* actor that speaks with one voice are significantly challenged. Indeed, nation-states are pressured with complex interdependencies from above (global governance) and below (glocalisation) (Keohane & Nye, 2000). Moreover, the current polycrisis is in and of itself the epitome of the failure of the global dimension. With such a degree of global disorder, no international – normative – power structure is capable of effectively projecting a sound path to sustainable development. Hence, the crisis of globalisation is triggering a planetary *Great Disconnect* between

regional blocs across different dimensions: economic (e.g. protectionism and de-dollarisation), technological (e.g. lack of openness in innovation and the strive for technological sovereignty), cultural (e.g. radicalisation in social media) or political (polarisation of the debate and nationalisms) (Magnani, 2024). It follows that the complexity of world politics, with its intertwining dynamics that range from the local to the global, passing through the *intermestic* dimension, is left in a substantial vacuum of trustworthy leadership and management.

After the excesses of globalisation and the inconsistencies linked to the neoliberal paradigm, the return to an old concept like regionalism could provide a renewed set of policies and economic measures apt at leveraging a better global world order with path-breaking strategies (Barbieri, 2019). Certain regional blocs have historical origins or geopolitical roots, such as the African Union, built on Pan-Africanism, or ASEAN, initially formed in response to Cold War dynamics. Others are economic in nature and rely on commercial agreements, which is the case for MERCOSUR and the European Single Market. Some are instead formed with the intent of promoting defence and national security, NATO being the prime example.

Albeit these types of regionalism are not mutually exclusive, their origin pivots around the will of nation-states. What will be focused here is instead a type of economic-based push towards regionalism, that does not rely on blocs of nations but rather at the sub-state/transnational level: *megaregion formation* via emerging economic corridors and megacities, which is the case for Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, the Texas Triangle or the Blue Banana Area in Europe. Unlike traditional regional blocs, these megaregions are not bound by national alliances but rather by infrastructure, trade flows, and urban networks. This economically driven regionalisation reflects a new, functional form of integration that transcends political borders while shaping the global economy.

If providing an acceptable definition of a megaregion is relatively easy – i.e., a geographical area qualified by extremely high levels of productivity and competitiveness, which (1) becomes increasingly densely populated and interconnected and (2) whose extension is not factually limited by political or administrative borders (Labbé & Sorensen, 2020) – defining its contours is not. The morphological approach dominates the literature as it provides an objective and comparable measurement based on population density and degree of urbanisation, both of which can be visually captured via satellite. Nevertheless, the functional approach suggests that megaregions actually branch out into peri-urban or rural areas, as the patterns of interactions taking place in the emerging network (e.g. exchange of material/immaterial flows) do not always correlate with the morphological parameters (Glocker, 2018; Rae & Nelson, 2020).

On the grounds of the available literature (Brunner, 2013; Harrison & Gu, 2019; Hospers, 2003; Labbé & Sorensen, 2020), I shall argue that the process of megaregion formation mainly relies on two intertwined pillars: (1) emerging economic corridors, and (2) megacities. Economic corridors are highly urbanised backbones spanning across national borders which boast exceptional economic indicators compared to surrounding areas: greater per capita incomes, lower unemployment rates, clusters

of production sites, complex transportation networks, and advanced telecommunications infrastructures. Being an economic powerhouse, these corridors also become flourishing hubs of innovation, vibrant cultural centres, and powerful decision-making cores. Hence, they are not simply geographical axes where people commute or goods are produced and exchanged, but they are rather catalysts of socioeconomic activities deeply embedded in the core activities occurring in a defined area; as such, they bear no meaningful values per se and must be analysed within their own geospatial context.

The traditional economic corridor in the European Union was the *Blue Banana*: a strip of land extending from Manchester to Milan, passing by Paris, where spatial analysis confirmed exceptional values for demographic concentration and GDP distribution. Albeit still relevant to this day – perhaps in its *Pentagon* re-iteration – there are other emerging economic corridors complementing the role of the Blue Banana in the EU: the Yellow Banana/Sunbelt from Milan to Valencia, the Green Banana/Baltic Adriatic Corridor (BAC) from Trieste to Gdańsk, and the Rhine-Danube Corridor (RDC) (Hospers, 2003) (Fig. 1).

Looking outside of Europe, there are several other emerging economic corridors, the trajectory of which is often interrelated with geopolitics. That is the case of the delicate India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, through which India aims to fuel its economic pragmatism policy by rekindling the Eurasian ties. The spillovers from said commercial corridor are expected to dampen the frictions, qualifying the current Middle East situation through partnerships with the United Arab Emirates and the Arab Gulf. Another paramount case study is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the most important project for reshaping (Afro-) Eurasian geo-economics by investing in regional connectivity and infrastructure with non-Western qualities. Remarkably, the intent is to focus on economic development so as to build partnerships that are distant from the zero-sum game logic of the Cold War (Barbieri, 2019). Nevertheless, if at face value this could represent a virtuous example of regionalism positively shaping global politics, economic corridors could also reignite overarching tensions between contrasting powers. Being global regionalism is a double-edged sword; these ties can be easily exploited for pushing political agendas, especially where the local institutional setting is weak (Forough, 2019).

As far as megacities are concerned, the European Commission JRC *Atlas of the Human Planet 2024* defines them as cities with more than 10 million inhabitants and considers them to be the new feature of urbanisation in the 21st Century, especially in the Global South, where the population is still increasing. Indeed, although in 2020 most city dwellers lived in cities with a population between 1 and 5 million, the megacity population size class has grown at the fastest rate, now accounting for the second largest share of the world population living in cities (Ehrlich et al., 2024, p. 44). Moreover, in 2020, cities' population have on average doubled in size compared to 1975, a trend which explains both why the total number of megacities in the world has skyrocketed from 7 to 32 during the same period and why it is expected that by 2050 over 70% of the world will be urban dwellers. Nevertheless, the exorbitant push for urbanisation in megacities is equally leading to slums, rampant inequalities, and miserable living conditions – especially in developing countries.

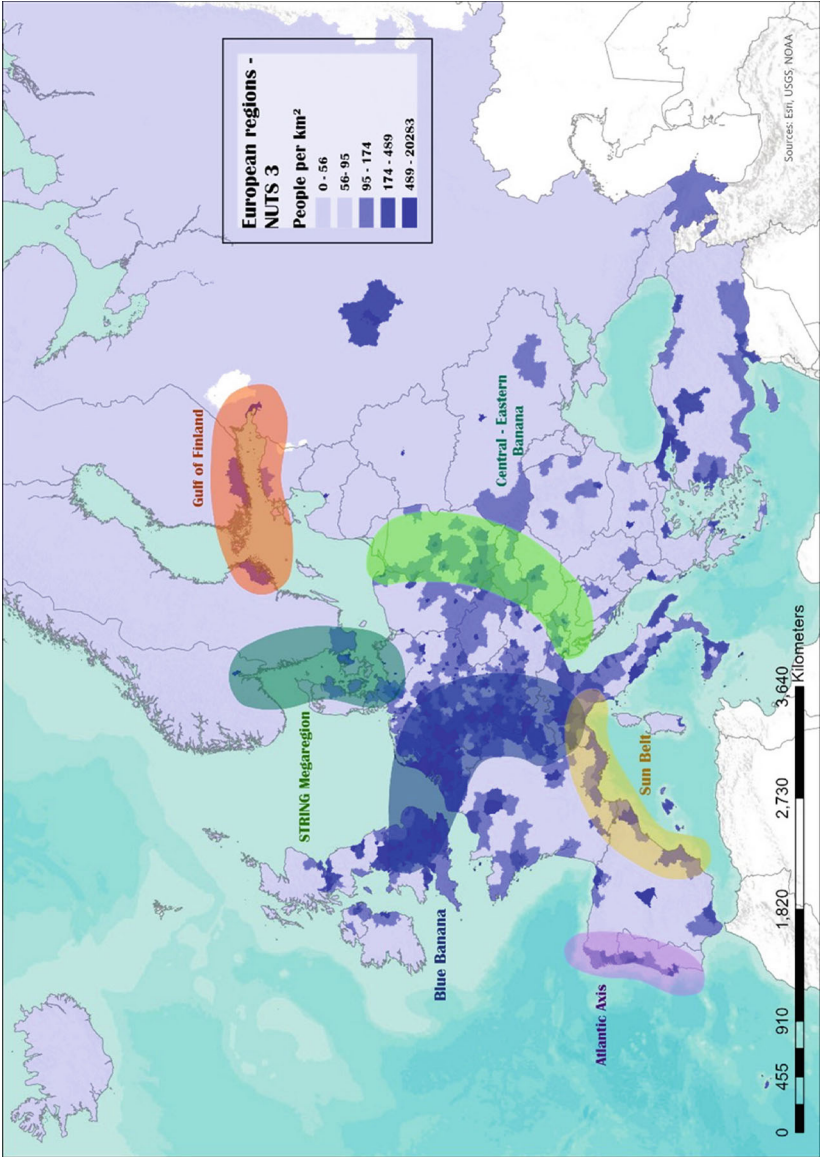


Fig. 1 Emerging economic corridors that signal presence of megaregions in Europe, here overlapped with population density. *Source* Map made with the ArcGIS tool by Nicola Conte¹

¹ Nicola Conte is currently a data analyst at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission.

This further demonstrates the pivotal role of (mega-)cities in addressing the global polycrisis and the *Anthropocene Traps*, since adaptation and mitigation initiatives become actually effective only insofar as they grant sustainable and resilient urban futures across the board. Because cities, and especially megacities, will be the forefront of sustainable development, the make-or-break deal for global challenges will take place at the sub-state level. Therefore, “this entails understanding the roles that cities worldwide have played to date, both in their own right and as part of a broader multi-level governance structure with national and regional governments” (UN-HABITAT, 2024, p. 38). It is precisely by managing and influencing megaregion formation that said challenge can be effectively tackled: by spatially anchoring the spread of megacities along the axis of emerging economic corridors and by reaping the demographic dividends of megacities through the vibrant labour market prompted by the competitiveness of said corridors.

Given the massive impact of Sub-Saharan Africa on global demographic trends, one of the hotspots to carefully observe is the megacity region emerging from Abidjan to Lagos. Indeed, a case study can be found displaying the challenges and opportunities emerging from the interplay of corridors, megaregions, and megacities in a high-stakes context. The megaregion stemming from the West-African Corridor is one of the fastest-growing in terms of urbanisation and population. Despite the polycentricity of the infrastructure network, granting more and better opportunities for the small-scale businesses typical of the poorer regions, the unplanned urbanisation linked to the demographic bomb occurring in Sub-Saharan Africa is jeopardising the potential benefits of the megaregion. The culprit is to be found in the lack of policy coordination, as the cities that do have a development plan do not consider themselves as part of an organic integrated region (Choplin & Hertzog, 2020).

Policy Implications: Improving Global Cooperation

Megaregion formation within a fragmented world politics opens the debate on how to foster a governance structure that is both locally responsive and globally effective, particularly in the polycrisis context. Achieving what Magnani (2024) refers to as a *Mundialisation* scenario, where global regionalism fosters cooperation rather than division, requires the recognition that international collaboration is the only viable path forward. In this sense, a global regionalism through megaregions could serve as a gateway between local self-determination and global collective interests.

The previous section has highlighted how megaregion formation is dependent on the economic backbones that foster urbanisation, development, and competitiveness – aggregated eventually in mega-cities. The implication is that, at its core, megaregions represent an open-ended economic-political project, constantly re-adapting to both crises in the global system and the divergent agendas of key international actors. However, the long-term impact of regionalisation depends largely on the type of global governance model it aligns with, which in turn is shaped by the policies jointly pursued.

As a matter of fact, one looming risk is an intensification of regionalism that is *not* harmonised with the necessity to address planetary challenges, as envisaged in *The Great Disconnect* (Magnani, 2024). Such a possible scenario of *Globalisation of Tectonic Plates* would be qualified by geopolitical instabilities and volatile alliances escalating tensions between regional blocs, with economic downturns caused by a slowdown in global trade and foreign investment; the absence of a unifying global narrative prevents regions from moving beyond their narrow, localised interests to engage in coordinated, long-term solutions.

A renewed theoretical framework based on neo-functionalist spillover dynamics could better promote this integration process. Albeit (neo-)functionalism has limited explanatory power in the context of Non-Western regionalism – the origins of ASEAN, ECOWAS, or the Arab League are best understood through constructivist lenses (Acharya, 2009; Barbieri, 2019) – it remains highly relevant when considering the economic rationale behind megaregion formation. If one accepts the premise that economic drivers underpin this process, a materialist and rationalist perspective offers a more suitable toolset for steering the debate. The logic is that neo-functionalist spillovers, where economic gains translate into deeper political coordination, could strengthen global cooperation along the lines of emerging megaregions.

Despite the increasing economic interconnectivity of megaregions, the persistence of intergovernmental control over key governance areas highlights how any management effort of megaregions cannot be effectively put in place without the participation of nation-states (Rodrik, 2012). Indeed, while economic activities along emerging corridors transcend geographical borders through market mechanisms, regulatory frameworks and political will remain confined to national jurisdictions. This supports Moravcsik's (1993, 2005) argument, which rejects the idea of automatic spillover effects in regional integration, asserting that expansions of supranational authority still result from state decisions, not functional inevitability. Therefore, although megaregions drive economic convergence, polities aggregate their risk preferences in political structures that remain mostly state-centric.

Following this line of thought, policies apt at global cooperation should focus on managing the complexity of global regionalism governance, namely the nexus between megaregions and the different levels of governance. As found in the conclusions of the OECD working paper, *The Rise of Megaregions*, there are two important caveats on the matter (Glocker, 2018). Firstly, governance on its own has limited ability to empower a territory that lacks a strong economic, social, or institutional basis for collaboration. Conversely, without effective governance to guide local partners in defining shared objectives, maximising their collective spending power, and coordinating the implementation of their action plan, the impact of their efforts will remain minimal. Secondly, to foster cooperation among partners within a megaregion, a tangible project that generates positive spillovers can act as a catalyst for enhanced collaboration. In the context of megaregions, shared transportation challenges have been recognised as a key driver for encouraging more coordinated planning efforts.

Exploring the benefits that complexity principles have when applied to governance under high levels of uncertainty could empower relevant stakeholders to see

new possible solutions (European Environment Agency [EEA], 2024). Considering, though, that megaregions are generally not officially acknowledged within the governance hierarchy – contrary to cities or metropolitan planning organisations (MPOs) – the starting point is less than ideal. Bearing in mind that this underwhelming approach is consistent in the Global North and in the Global South, one practical change that could be delivered without excessively altering the *status quo* is to adopt *Centres of Government*. These bodies act as buffer zones between different administrative and political layers by translating “government agendas into whole-of-government strategies to help governments work on complex issues and make policy trade-off decisions (OECD, 2024, p. 13). Therefore, they could be essential for bridging the gap between different levels of governance in managing megaregions.

Conclusions

The megaregion formation trend demonstrates that in spite of the global polycrisis, the international system is transitioning towards global regionalism. Acharya (2014, p. 650) labels this type of (re-)distribution of power as *the Regional World, through which the necessity of framing regionalism into a “wider global and comparative context” is theorised*. Provided the abandonment of a Western-centric perspective, then reflected in the global institutional balance of power, global regionalism is actually not at odds with the nature of globalism, and most certainly it does not attempt to replace it. Conversely, it can be argued that the push towards regionalisation is one of the natural responses to the crisis of globalisation and of the nation-state.

The need for conceiving effective governance strategies calls for more thorough academic research into megaregions amidst crisis scenarios. While attempts like the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative demonstrate the potential of megaregions for achieving cooperation across multiple states, rapid urbanisation has also led to environmental degradation, especially as showcased by Chinese megacities. Such overall ambiguity on sustainability raises key questions on how not to offset the gains of megaregion formation with the inherent risks of new paths to development. Benefitting from a clearer understanding of the phenomena in place, policies will subsequently play a decisive role in whether global cooperation is going to be leveraged out of regional integration. Nation-state-led centralised planning versus market self-organisation remains an open debate for managing megaregions (Harrison & Gu, 2019), particularly as pilot examples like Centres of Government explore alternative governance solutions.

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Essay 22: Opportunities and Challenges of Interregionalism: The Case of the European Union-Mercosur Negotiation



Nicolás Pose-Ferraro

Introduction

This essay approaches the opportunities and challenges of interregionalism through the case of the European Union (EU)–Mercosur (*Mercado Común del Sur* or Southern Common Market) negotiation. These blocs launched a negotiation in 1999 to form a bi-regional Association Agreement (AA), which 20 years later resulted in an *agreement in principle* on the Trade Pillar, followed by an equivalent deal on the Political Dialogue and Cooperation pillar a year later. However, since then, the agreement has not been formally concluded or ratified, as it has faced strong opposition, especially in Europe. To appease this opposition, from 2023, the European Commission (EC) and Mercosur renegotiated some of its content and reached a new technical agreement in December 2024. That said, the ratification is far from certain in the EU, as powerful actors within the European bloc still staunchly oppose the initiative.

The case is useful to shed light on the prospects of interregionalism, as it not only offers insights into the opportunities to form a deal and the role it may play in tackling common policy challenges and navigating the current geopolitical context, but also on the challenges imposed by society-centred political economy considerations. The essay first discusses the opportunities related to an interregional AA and then approaches the challenges it has faced and the potential implications of the absence of agreement. The conclusion further discusses the potential contribution of this interregional agreement to the world by highlighting its role as a building block for stabilising the global geopolitical system, as well as its capacity to tackle policy challenges and to provide a model for tangled issues in the multilateral trade arena. Relatedly, it emphasises that despite this potential, its implementation is not guaranteed.

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Opportunities

The EU and Mercosur established an Interregional Framework Cooperation Agreement in 1995, which was the first deal signed by Mercosur as a subject of international law. Then, in 1999, negotiations to form an AA with a preferential trade agreement (PTA) –the so-called *Trade Pillar*– were launched, as the United States (US)-led Free Trade Area of the Americas proposal seemed to threaten the EU's footprint in the Southern Cone of Latin America. In that context, both negotiations were seen as an intermediate step in the full insertion of Mercosur into the booming economic globalisation of the time (Bizzozero, 2008; Grandi, 2000). However, as Torres Jarrín and Daza Aramayo (2023) note, during the several back and forths of the negotiation between 1999 and 2019, the world order changed substantially.

In 2016, the two blocs relaunched the negotiation that led to the 2019 *agreement in principle* (European Commission, 2024).¹ As Caetano and Pose (2023) point out, this was a *compromise agreement*, since both parties agreed to give up some of their offensive demands –albeit to a different extent– in order to reach an understanding. A combination of factors made this outcome possible. In Brazil, the peak industry organisations historically opposed to an EU-Mercosur PTA –due to distributive incentives considerations– shifted their stance, as they started to conceive mature industrial economies as potential partners to fight the deindustrialisation process led by the *China shock*. While in Argentina, although large portions of the industry remained more reluctant, the government made this deal a foreign policy priority as it perceived it would report large *institutional gains*, even if the EU's agricultural market opening was not substantial (Pose-Ferraro, 2024). Moreover, Mercosur's large agricultural sectors found an alternative buyer in China. In parallel, geopolitical factors, such as the challenges represented by Donald Trump's administration in the US and the exit of the United Kingdom from the EU (i.e., the Brexit), made the EU more inclined to sign PTAs, a tool to present itself as the guardian of the international liberal order (Álvarez & Zelicovich, 2020). Besides, EU companies were also losing ground in Mercosur's markets, this time at the expense of China, so gaining preferential treatment could help to reverse this trend (Nolte & Correa Neto Ribeiro, 2021).

The announcement of the 2019 *agreement in principle* raised strong opposition within Europe, not only from the *usual suspects*, that is, agricultural producers and EU countries with large farming communities, but also from environmental activists concerned about the effect of a PTA on climate change. The main driver behind the latter stance was Brazil's policies towards deforestation in the Amazon region during Jair Bolsonaro's tenure, which even led the European Parliament to approve a motion stating opposition to ratifying the deal in its current form, although the agreement had not yet been submitted for formal ratification (ibid.).

However, by late 2022, changes in Brazil's domestic politics and global and regional geopolitical events combined to produce a new *window of opportunity* to conclude the agreement (Caetano & Pose, 2023). In Brazil, the victory of Luiz Inácio

¹ This is a technical agreement subject to legal revision, translation, and ratification.

Lula da Silva over Bolsonaro in the 2022 presidential election removed one of the most rejected political figures by the EU's political circles and public opinion. This paved the way for the EC to renew efforts to overcome the internal opposition to a deal, for which it resorted mainly to geopolitical arguments. In a context of “geopolitisation of European trade and investment policy” (Meunier & Nicolaidis, 2019), the Commission argued about the need of a PTA with Mercosur –as well as with other partners– in order to diversify allies and strengthen the resilience of supply chains, given the multiple challenging developments the EU was facing, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on supply shortages, the return of war to Europe amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine, growing geopolitical tension between the West and China, and the eventual return of Donald Trump to the White House. In sum, the EC saw an interregional agreement with Mercosur as a tool to rebalance the geopolitical field and diversify allies and risks (Caetano & Pose, 2023; Torres Jarrín & Daza Aramayo, 2023).

In order to placate the opposition on environmental grounds, the EC engaged with Brazil to renegotiate the environmental rules contained in the deal, in particular, to strengthen the parties' commitment to observe their targets in the Paris Agreement on climate change. In exchange, the EC offered to set up a cooperation fund. In addition, Lula's government successfully requested the revision of some concessions made by his predecessor in the Public Procurement chapter of the deal, in order to exclude the purchases for the *Sistema Único de Saúde* and to increase the value of the bids that sets the floor under which Brazil's and EU's providers would compete on an equal footing for public contracts (Chade, 2024). In this way, the Brazilian government widened the policy space available to use government procurement as an industrial development tool. Likewise, in the renegotiation, Brazil secured longer liberalisation baskets for electric vehicles (EVs) than those previously agreed for traditional combustion ones.² Finally, as part of these talks, Mercosur also secured the inclusion of a *re-balancing mechanism*, so as to prevent the forthcoming European Green Deal's legislation –the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the Regulation on Deforestation-free Products– from overturning the market access gains of the PTA (ibid.).

Certainly, the agreement still has some flaws. For instance, it does not address the distortive issue of EU's agricultural subsidies and preserves the practice of tariff escalation in some of EU's agro-industrial markets (Azevedo et al., 2019; Ghiotto & Echaide, 2019); it incorporates the concept of special and differential treatment in tariff schedules but not in a qualitative difference in terms of coverage; and includes flexible rules of origin (ROs) for some specific sectors, like machinery and equipment, that would be challenging for Mercosur's producers (Pose-Ferraro, 2024). That said, overall, from the perspective of the Southern countries, it represents a better arrangement when compared to the average North–South PTA. For example, it includes a progressive tariff reduction for manufactured products, with 60% of Mercosur's goods placed in a 10-year or longer basket, and the most sensitive located in 15-year ones (Azevedo et al., 2019) –plus the 18-year basket agreed for EV in the 2023–24

² Based on the texts of the 2024 technical agreement, available at <https://tinyurl.com/b55jcxk4>.

renegotiation, which can go to 30 years for full cell EV powered by hydrogen. From the perspective of most Brazilian industrial producers –and some Argentine ones– it sets ROs stringent enough to accommodate most sectoral sensitivities, and even to allow for the prospects of interregional supply chains that replace Asian inputs (Pose-Ferraro, 2024). Intellectual property does not include TRIPS-plus commitments on patent terms and test data and provides flexibility for preexisting Mercosur producers to continue using protected geographical indications. It also provides some room for manoeuvre in government procurement, and finally, it does not include the widely questioned investor-state dispute settlement mechanism (Bas Vilizzio, 2019).

Therefore, an interregional AA between the EU and Mercosur could play a relevant role in tackling common policy challenges and navigating the current geopolitical context. A telling example is that after the 2023–24 renegotiation, it provides a mechanism to address the global need for a green transition that includes a cooperation fund and a platform for interregional dialogue. Likewise, the re-balancing mechanism the parties have agreed to include could serve as a basis for exchanges in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), where the EU faces the challenge of accommodating its new unilateral trade measures, part of the European Green Deal, to the existing multilateral rules. In addition, if properly planned, the combination of the ROs set and the prospect of joint green initiatives could provide tools for the development of interregional supply chains that help both regions to resist the pressures toward deindustrialisation.

In geopolitical terms, the conclusion of the agreement could serve to cushion the pressures coming from the growing rivalry between the US and China, as it allows for diversifying allies and amplifying the political room to build more autonomous joint stances. In this way, the agreement may contribute to both the *strategic autonomy* doctrine that seeks to gain ground within the EU (Verdes-Montenegro, 2022) and the proposal of *active non-alignment* put forward by Latin American academics and former foreign policy practitioners as a response to the growing US-China divide (Fortín et al., 2021). Relatedly, and finally, the AA could help to reinvigorate the legitimacy and political attractiveness of regionalism, at a time when both Europe and Latin America were *under stress* (Nolte & Weiffen, 2021).

Challenges, Scenarios, and Implications

Although the 2023–24 renegotiation that led to an adjusted technical agreement includes new environmental commitments to appease the opposition to a deal within the EU, the ratification of the AA is far from assured. The main reason has to do with a traditional society-centred political economy factor: the opposition of the EU's agriculture producers to a deal. Unlike Mercosur's distributive losers from a PTA –i.e., most Brazilian and Argentine industrial sectors– who shifted to a stance of support (Brazil) or passive acceptance (Argentina) (Pose-Ferraro, 2024), agricultural producers in the EU continue opposing the agreement out of fear of being displaced

by their more competitive Mercosur counterparts, even if the market opening in the most sensitive EU agricultural products granted by the PTA is actually quite small.³

In January 2024, the opposition of countries with large farming communities led by France, combined with the eruption of farmers' protests throughout Europe, paralysed the talks to reach a new agreement (Chade, 2024). Then, out of fear that farmers' discontent may be capitalised on by far-right parties, the European Parliament elections of June had the same effect (Culshaw, 2024). After the elections, in a *high-stakes gamble* (Luciano et al., 2024), the EC decided to move forward with the initiative even in the face of frontal opposition from France. The full ratification of the AA, that is, of both the Trade and the Political Dialogue and Cooperation pillars, requires ratification by all EU members, which is very unlikely to happen in the short term. But even if the AA is split to seek the entering into force of the Trade Pillar—an EU's competence—a blocking minority of at least four countries representing 35% of the EU's population in the EU Council can prevent that from happening. At the time of this writing, driven by the demand of their agricultural sectors, France, Poland, Austria, and the Netherlands have publicly stated their opposition, while Italy is still pondering its stance. If the latter finally sided with the French-led coalition, the deal would be blocked.

A new failure to approve the agreement would have consequential implications. First and evident, the alternative to interregionalism is a growing bilateralism between the EU and Mercosur's countries. This tendency is, in fact, not new, as it was seen in the 2007 EU-Brazil Strategic Partnership and, more recently, in the 2023 EU-Argentina Memorandum of Understanding on raw materials. Second, the absence of agreement would be a missed opportunity to promote more sustainable production practices in both regions through interregional cooperation and a platform for dialogue. There are other EU initiatives in the region, like the Global Gateway, that besides recurring to old recipes such as the mobilisation of private investment to fund the social and environmental transitions, in contrast to the deployment of public funds within the EU for the same goal (Sanahuja & Costafreda, 2023), entail the risk that, individually, Mercosur countries will compete against each other for the same resources.

Relatedly, as Malamud (2023) has argued, the lack of an interregional agreement could incentivise the search for bilateral PTAs with the EU by Mercosur's countries, producing as a result the *CANificación* of the Southern bloc, i.e., the end of the goal of building a functioning customs union. Alternatively, it could lead these countries to search for alternative partners such as China or the US, likely, for political economy reasons, through go-it-alone strategies. In any case, this will compromise the potential of an interregional partnership with the objective of stabilising the global geopolitical system. Finally, from the EU's perspective, the absence of agreement may erode its credibility as a regional actor capable of using instruments such as trade deals in order to advance its own global geopolitical objectives.

³ Take, for instance, the much-commented example of bovine meat, where the 99,000 tonnes granted to Mercosur at a preferential tariff rate—of 7.5%—represent around 1% of EU's annual consumption.

Conclusion

The essay explored the opportunities and challenges of interregionalism through the case of the EU-Mercosur negotiation. Overall, it shows that an interregional AA can contribute to the world in several ways. First, in a context of great power competition between the US and China, an association between two blocs encompassing around 800 million people and 20% of global GDP represents a contribution to a multipolar world order, allowing for the diversification of alliances and therefore for greater room for manoeuvring – both for those directly involved and for third parties. In this way, from a geopolitical perspective, the agreement can be understood as a building block for stabilising the global geopolitical system. Besides, it has the potential to reinvigorate the legitimacy and political attractiveness of regionalism, which, in a more fragmented world, will be a necessary tool for small and medium-sized states to navigate the challenging geopolitical context.

Second, the agreement seems suitable for tackling common policy challenges, like a green transition that recognises the need for North–South cooperation funds and technical assistance in line with the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities enshrined in international environmental law. Likewise, by providing a new market scale for economic activities and ROs that cushion producers from the most challenging competitors in Asia, the agreement may help to overcome the tendency toward deindustrialisation experienced in the two regions. That said, to avoid the reproduction of asymmetric patterns of trade in favour of the most developed region of the partnership, the tools contemplated in the Cooperation Protocol and the Review Clause agreed in 2024 must be properly used.

Third, the agreement can serve as a model to address tangled issues at the WTO. Specifically, the new re-balancing mechanism included as part of the 2023–24 renegotiation may serve as a focal point to discuss how to accommodate EU's new unilateral trade measures, the Regulation on Deforestation-free Products and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, within the overall framework of multilateral trade rules. Likewise, the exceptions and safeguards to accommodate sensitivities on both sides can serve as a guide to foster discussions about the need to combine multilateral trade cooperation with space for variation of national domestic policies.⁴

Despite this potential, the implementation of the AA is far from certain. In fact, due to the agricultural opposition in Europe, the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Pillar, which requires ratification by the 27 EU member states, is highly unlikely to enter into force, and even the ratification of the Trade Pillar by a qualified majority in the EU Council is not guaranteed. If ratification were to stall again, as it did in 2019, it would be a serious blow to the future of interregionalism.

⁴ This point builds on Rodrik's trilemma (Rodrik, 2011).

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Essay 23: The Interregionalism Imperative: Europe's Myopic Response to Irregular Migration and Displacement Challenges and an Alternative Path Forward



Niklas Krösche

Introduction

In May 2024, the European Union (EU) formally adopted its *New Pact on Migration and Asylum (the Pact)* that had been in the works for several years. The Pact, touted as a regional solution to a regional challenge (European Commission, 2024d), is the result of European regionalism at work.¹ It evolved out of a highly politicised process that required balancing different priorities and attitudes across member states, involved various EU institutions, and spurred organised civil society into action. To this date, the Pact remains controversial, and its implementation is anticipated with anxiety and scepticism by a broad range of stakeholders. This notwithstanding, the Pact's advocates point to it as evidence that European regionalism can work and respond to citizens' expectations even in the politically delicate field that is migration and displacement (cf. European Parliament, 2024). This is certainly not without merit. Since the number of irregular arrivals into member states skyrocketed in 2015, the EU has scrambled for a regional solution that saw the emergence of deep trenches between its members. Producing legislation that is supported not only by the European Commission but also by most member states and a majority, albeit slim, in the European Parliament is therefore to be seen as a notable accomplishment from a political perspective.

At the same time, migration and displacement pose not only regional challenges. The regional level is couched between the global and national levels. The relevance of the national level, with states exercising their sovereign rights, is self-evident. At the global level, we have seen not only the development of international law,

¹ I refer to regionalism as “cognitive or institutionalised (state-centric) projects” (Bach, 2014, p. 183).

spearheaded by the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, but also an increasing awareness that migration and displacement are indeed global challenges. This understanding has served as an impulse to finalise the Global Compacts on Refugees (GCR) and for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) in 2018 under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). Still underappreciated, however, is the *interregional* level and the role of interregionalism.² The realisation that migration and asylum policies call for engagement with actors beyond one's own region is by no means novel. As shown below, the EU has indeed elevated the importance of neighbouring non-EU countries for the implementation of its policies as well as prioritised the topic of migration and asylum in its engagement with external national and regional-level actors. This demonstrates that the EU is fully aware of its own limitations.

In this essay, however, I argue that the EU's current approach to interregionalism, characterised by the shifting of responsibilities and driven by political opportunism, is myopic due to its fixation on short-term relief above all else. Consequently, the EU's adopted approach not only poses a risk to the lives of many people on the move but also weakens its strategic position outside of Europe and threatens to undermine its long-term political and economic agenda. Why this is the case, and how a commitment to comprehensive and sustainable interregionalism may still be able to steer the EU off this treacherous path, is discussed in the following.

The EU's Approach to Irregular Migration and Displacement

Mounting political pressure to address concerns about irregular migration into the EU led to the adoption of the Pact ahead of European parliamentary elections. The Pact itself consists of ten legislative instruments (nine regulations and one directive), entering into application in June 2026, and replaces existing rules and procedures that have hitherto failed to achieve the desired outcomes. The Pact was primarily designed to promote solidarity and clarify responsibilities within the EU, in addition to streamlining asylum procedures and securing external borders (European Commission, 2024c, pp. 2–3). Equally noteworthy, however, is that the Pact constitutes the EU's next step towards reducing the number of irregular arrivals and accepted asylum-seekers by shifting responsibility onto third countries as part of its broader quest for externalisation.

The Pact has been the subject of intense criticism and scrutiny from different sides. Despite already moving the EU further to the right, criticism from the far-right factions holds that the Pact does not go far enough to address their concerns over irregular migration and threatens to undermine national sovereignty by shifting competencies to EU authorities. Much of the criticism, however, was voiced by

² Leaning on the definition for regionalism, interregionalism may be understood as cognitive or institutionalised (state-centric) projects *across two or more regions*.

those opposed to the apparent shift towards the right. Statements from dozens of civil society organisations (CSOs) have not minced words when expressing their disapproval of large parts of the Pact and their concern about its implications for people on the move.³ Shortly before the final vote in the European Parliament, for example, more than 160 CSOs signed a letter warning that the Pact “creates a system whereby the right to seek asylum in the EU is severely threatened and will engender a proliferation of human rights violations against people across Europe due to their migration status” (PICUM, 2024). Critics have also called into question the effectiveness of the Pact in reducing irregular migration (e.g., Romeo, 2024) as well as its promise to promote solidarity among members (e.g., Greens/EFA, 2024). While the internal dimension received much attention, the external dimension—underspecified in the Pact itself but nonetheless crucial to its implementation—is equally worth looking into and shall be the focus of the remaining section.

The Pact's external dimension can only be understood if placed in the broader context that is characterised by the EU's efforts, in combination with efforts by individual members, towards externalisation, meaning “the extension of border and migration controls from the so-called migrant receiving nations in the Global North and into neighbouring countries or sending nations in the Global South” (Stock et al., 2019, p. 1). The Pact envisions the establishment and strengthening of *international partnerships* to, according to EU framing, (1) prevent irregular departures and loss of life, (2) fight migrant smuggling, (3) cooperate on return and readmission, and (4) promote legal pathways (European Commission, 2024a). This so-called *new approach* is already being put into practice and embedded in *comprehensive partnerships* recently initiated with countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania—with an eye towards further expansion (European Commission, 2024b).

Several aspects of the EU's approach, reaffirmed in the Pact, directly or indirectly affect third countries from different regions. There is the reliance on the *safe third country* and *first country of asylum* concepts (cf. Art. 57–64, Asylum Procedure Regulation), which render applications inadmissible where applicants for international protection are considered to be able to enjoy effective protection elsewhere. In this regard, the Pact explicitly declares that “[w]here the Union and a third country have jointly come to an agreement [...] that migrants admitted under that agreement will be protected [...], the conditions [...] regarding safe third-country status may be presumed fulfilled” (Art. 59.7, Asylum Procedure Regulation). Accelerated procedures are to be applied to those who come from countries with comparatively low recognition rates or *safe countries of origin*⁴ (Article 42(e, j), Asylum Procedure Regulation). There is an overall emphasis on swift return and readmission, including those whose applications were rejected within the asylum border procedure. They

³ *People on the move* is an overarching term for “people who are moving from one place to another for relatively long periods of time” (Pijenburg & Rijken, 2021, p. 274). Thus, it includes the traditional categories of refugees and migrants but is more inclusive and reflects the practical difficulty of neat distinctions.

⁴ The concept is defined in Article 61 of the Asylum Procedure Regulation. Notably, this makes “exceptions for specific parts of its territory or clearly identifiable categories of persons” (Article 61.2).

are considered not to have entered the territory of the member state, and shall not be authorised to do so (see Art. 4, Return Border Procedure Regulation)—based on the so-called *legal fiction of non-entry*. Relying on external cooperation to make this system work, it is unsurprising that the EU deems it “necessary to promote and build tailor-made and mutually beneficial partnerships” with third countries (Para. 5, Asylum and Migration Management Regulation). To this end, financial contributions as part of the EU’s solidarity mechanism may even be directly used for actions in—or in relation to—relevant third countries by member states experiencing migratory pressure or crisis (Art. 56.2b, Asylum and Migration Management Regulation; and Art. 8.1b, Crisis Regulation). The fact that relocation offers are not mandatory, but merely one of the three categories of solidarity measures from which member states can choose, only adds to the incentives for countries of first entry to prioritise stopping irregular arrivals above all else. Relying on third countries, as well as on countries of origin, is thus a clear feature of the system as currently designed.

There are three broader notions to which I relate criticism and concerns about the Pact and the EU’s general approach, moving beyond valid objections on moral grounds. First is the notion of values, meaning the extent to which they observe and promote the values on which the EU and its policies are (supposed to be) based. Second is the notion of effectiveness, meaning the extent to which they are a rational choice for achieving the (declared) purposes. Third is the notion of trade-offs, meaning the extent to which their implementation or execution requires the EU to compromise on other goals and interests. With these notions in mind, this essay contends that the EU’s current interregional approach to dealing with people on the move (1) increases reliance on authoritarian regimes, (2) undermines international principles and safeguards, and (3) paves the way for future crises. The implications for people on the move, neighbouring regions, as well as the EU’s own strategic interests, are potentially dramatic and worth unpacking in more detail.

Relying on Authoritarian Regimes

As the EU’s chosen approach relies on the cooperation or assent of third countries, it becomes dependent. The EU itself can neither fully implement nor execute its own policies, nor can it control their shelf life. The perils of relinquishing policy autonomy, from a European perspective, are exacerbated by relying primarily on authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning regimes. This is most obvious in the Southern Mediterranean neighbourhood, where the EU closed particularly controversial agreements with Tunisia, rapidly descending into full-blown authoritarianism, and Egypt, and continues to support the Libyan coastguard that is credibly accused of collusion with traffickers and complicity in crimes against humanity (Human Rights Council, 2023). With the EU scrambling to reduce irregular arrivals, neighbouring countries can leverage their role in preventing departures from their territories to use what has been dubbed *reversed conditionality* (Cassarino, 2007, p. 192). The threat of allowing or facilitating onward movement of people towards European borders when

demands—whether related or unrelated to the subject at hand—are not met, is bound to regularly put the EU in a bind and may well leave it in an overall worse position than before.

The shifting power dynamics in favour of the EU's neighbouring countries generally weaken the EU's ability to pursue its agenda abroad. To the extent that it helps balance interests among actors from the different regions more fairly, this can be viewed positively. A growing reluctance to confront authoritarian regimes, however, spells trouble for the future of EU-led democracy and human rights promotion. Relatedly, it severely curtails efforts to protect the rights of people on the move in host countries to which the EU remains at least publicly committed. The partnership with Tunisia is just one recent example that drew criticism, with the EU being accused of turning a blind eye to the repression of human rights, the mistreatment of migrants, and the dismantling of democratic institutions (Geddie, 2023). Without shared values and an aligned vision for the future, cooperation risks becoming strictly transactional and myopic. Therefore, the EU's emphasis on short-term goals relating to migration comes with trade-offs in the pursuit of other strategic priorities and raises questions about the overall sustainability of cooperation.

Undermining International Principles and Safeguards

Beyond the adverse consequences for the EU's own strategic position and policy autonomy, it is critical to mention that the increased rent-seeking behaviour around people on the move contributes to their commodification (Freier et al., 2021). The implied dehumanisation has potentially dramatic consequences for those affected. Libya, with *pay-to-intercept* and *pay-to-release* as parallel business models, serves as a warning example for the suffering caused by the commodification of those transiting through the country; a suffering enabled in part by the EU's chosen approach (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). The abdication of responsibilities also risks a loss of international reputation and credibility, and the perception of the EU's culpability in the deaths and mistreatment of migrants, or the increasing instability in host countries, is likely to spread as its push for externalisation and deterrence continues. The more the EU is viewed as not practising what it preaches, the less room there is for the EU to strengthen relevant international norms and effectively discourage or challenge norm-violating behaviour.

Perhaps most consequentially and perilously is the prospect of other actors emulating the EU's approach. Besides the strategic involvement of third countries and the resulting commodification of migrants and refugees, concepts such as *instrumentalisation*⁵ and *crisis*, as developed in the Crisis Regulation of the Pact, are likely to appeal to countries seeking to legitimise actions contravening the spirit or

⁵ The EU clarifies that “[a] situation of instrumentalisation could arise where a third country or a hostile non-state actor encourages or facilitates the movement of third-country nationals or stateless persons to the external borders of the Union or to a Member State, where such actions are indicative

letter of international law. All this is rooted in the idea that providing international protection to those in need is undesirable and should be avoided or at least limited by various means. Ultimately, international law—already inherently presented with serious enforcement challenges—risks being sidelined even further by a mindset that views the allocation of responsibilities in strictly transactional terms and firmly elevates national politics over international obligations. Such a mindset turns people seeking international protection into pawns in negotiations and undermines the very pillars on which the international asylum system rests.

Paving the Way for Future Crises

Finally, the EU's approach conjures up new crises in two ways. First, the abdication of responsibilities adds to the overburdening of those poorer countries already hosting the largest share of the world's displaced persons. Increasing the burden on such countries, which include most of the EU's neighbourhood, raises concerns about rising intra- as well as interstate tensions that undermine national and regional stability. Whether related to ensuing mistreatment and rights violations, violent conflict and political turmoil, or lack of economic opportunities and poverty—increasing instability adds to the motivation for parts of the population to make their way to neighbouring countries and regions, including Europe. Second, policy success is increasingly measured by the number of irregular arrivals. Resulting from domestic pressure and ideological shifts, the current prioritisation incentivises the pursuit of solutions that promise immediate relief over long-term viability and effectiveness. Hence, addressing the root causes of migration and displacement takes a backseat to trying to control the flow of movement, with the EU seeking “to prevent departures from happening in the first place, at all costs” (Pugliese, quoted in Euro-Med Monitor, 2024).

Jointly, these two reasons create a bottleneck with people continuing to seek international protection or other forms of relief while being halted in countries outside of their preferred destination. Coupled with host countries that are either unable or unwilling to prevent onward movement, for example, due to changes in the political or economic calculus or even the collapse in state capacities, this creates a volatile and untenable situation. Referring to Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan, for example, Cooper and Nimer (2024, p. 798) point to “downstream dangers (e.g., political tensions and even state collapse risk) in the *neighbourhood*” caused by the EU's current approach. This, in turn, poses not only a risk to regional stability in the European neighbourhood but indeed portends future large-scale movements of precisely the kind of which the EU is most afraid.

of an intention of a third country or a hostile non-state actor to destabilise the Union or a Member State [...]” (Para. 14, Crisis Regulation).

A Chance to Reconceive the EU's Interregional Approach

The pitfalls and dangers associated with relying on authoritarian regimes, subverting international principles and safeguards, and destabilising its neighbourhood for short-term relief—all of which form part of the EU's current approach to interregionalism—are clear. But what is the alternative? After all, the subject of how to deal with people moving to Europe will not fade into obscurity anytime soon. It starts with a simple acknowledgement: if migration and asylum are regional challenges requiring regional solutions in Europe, as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen correctly points out (European Commission, 2024d), then this also holds true for neighbouring regions. Thus, I contend that solutions cannot be based on bilateral agreements and selective engagement but must instead be built on comprehensive interregional strategies. For this, five core tenets bear mentioning.

First, the EU's budget must reflect the priority assigned to the issue area. This is a banal but nonetheless critical acknowledgement and *sine qua non*. The EU cannot expect to successfully meet what it holds to be one of the core challenges of the present and future without proportionate and long-term resource commitments. This includes, but is not limited to, investing in the development of neighbouring regions as well as their institutional capabilities; a requirement that must not be overshadowed by undue securitisation. While the perception of crisis has infused a sense of urgency, it remains to be seen whether the EU fully appreciates the resources and endurance required to effectively address relevant causes rather than delaying their effects.

Second, the EU must commit itself to equal partnerships with actors from different regions and adequately consider their priorities and concerns if it strives to develop lasting interregional solutions. While joint commitments have been formulated, such as the 2006 Joint Africa-EU Declaration on Migration and Development in Tripoli, the priorities in practice continue to reflect the underlying Eurocentrism and power asymmetries. Most notably, this concerns the increasing securitisation of the topic at the expense of focusing on the migration-development nexus, which is particularly important for countries of origin.

Third and relatedly, the EU, alongside its interregional partners, must address the root causes of displacement and proactively tackle structural challenges rather than react *ad hoc* to resulting (perceived) crises. In this context, it is also crucial to focus on the push factors of initial and onward migration in all its forms, including forced displacement, instead of—to borrow from the push–pull framework terminology—adding even more intervening obstacles, such as the elements associated with externalisation, and altering pull factors by creating an even harsher asylum system or otherwise distressing irregular migrants and refugees.

Fourth, people on the move must be supported where they are, including in countries of origin, transit, and (temporary) destination. The EU's *whole-of-route approach*, which promises to identify and respond to patterns along the whole migration route alongside countries of origin, transit, and destination (Council of the European Union, 2019), allows for broader and timelier engagement. However, it risks being misused as primarily a policing approach for disrupting movement that is

neither sustainable nor humane. It is incumbent on the EU to allocate resources and attention not primarily based on the short-term reduction of irregular arrivals into the EU but instead on suitable long-term solutions for people on the move.

Fifth and finally, the EU must ensure legal pathways for migration as well as accept its responsibility under the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) resettlement scheme. The Union Resettlement Framework, in addition to expanding other legal pathways, offers a welcome chance, but questions remain about its implementation and impact. If one of the EU's biggest concerns is the irregular nature of arrivals, as consistently highlighted in its communication around combatting human trafficking and smuggling groups, then cooperation with the UNHCR in an effort to resettle refugees in a coordinated manner brings benefits for all parties involved—including safe passage for refugees in need of resettlement as well as for relief host countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the transregional nature of the challenges and the multitude of stakeholders across regions mean that not only regionalism but indeed *interregionalism* is imperative to dealing with the large-scale movement of people. A selective and myopic approach to interregionalism, however, risks doing more harm than good. Goodhart's law states that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. European countries must move past their fixation on short-term arrival numbers as the primary measure of success, or else lasting solutions will continue to prove elusive. The long-term prospects of interregionalism depend on the desire among relevant stakeholders to work through joint frameworks that are inclusive, well-funded, and built on shared values. Cooperation must target the root causes of displacement and support people where they are, thus moving away from proximity to European borders as the key factor in determining the level of engagement and sense of urgency. And above all else, interregional cooperation can only succeed in the long run if it seeks to share rather than shift responsibilities.

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Regional Perspectives

Essay 24: Unravelling Stability: Regional Power in West and Southern Africa Through Three Lenses



Odilile Ayodele and Babatunde Fagbayibo

Introduction

Contemporary international relations discourse must still sufficiently distinguish between the multiple conceptual frameworks to examine regional vs. global hegemony. On the surface, both have similarities. However, the mechanisms that drive their power projection are distinct and require varied analytical methodologies.

Essentially, the traditional emphasis on global power dynamics frequently obscures regional subsystems' complex interplay of influence. In practical terms, this means that regional powers might exert influence that may elude global-level examination. For example, a state may be a decisive hegemon in its territory, yet it may look like a middle power in the global power hierarchy. This is the case in Southern Africa and Nigeria in West Africa. The post-Cold War era has undeniably witnessed what Pentland (1975) and, later on, Acharya (2007) describe as the *regionalisation of world politics*, thus rendering this analytical distinction increasingly vital. This duality challenges conventional international relations theories that typically position states on a singular hierarchical continuum.

The duality becomes even more acute when analysing the transition of regional subsystems from open multilateral configurations to closed hierarchical systems. In this essay, we look at South Africa and Nigeria's *tacit* expressions of regional hegemony to explore the emergence and functioning of closed regional systems. We

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do this against the backdrop of Nigeria's declining influence, as was evident when border closures with Niger negatively affected Nigeria more than the intended targets, leading to a paradoxical situation where smaller neighbours became essential for the stability of regional powerhouses. This border closure escalated food prices, negatively affecting food security in multiple countries such as Ghana and Burkina Faso (Al Jazeera, 2023; European Commission, 2024). South Africa, arguably the largest and most advanced African economy (Lu, 2024; US International Trade Administration, 2024), is also experiencing a relative decline in regional influence (Cocks, 2025).

Nevertheless, despite recent declines in power, both regional hegemonies can still convert areas of multilateral exchange into hierarchical spheres of influence. For instance, South Africa is still instrumental as a steadying force, with varying degrees of success in Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe. Much of this is achieved through driving regional coordination processes. For instance, the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) commenced in July 2021 to address the insurgency in Cabo Delgado province, with significant troop contributions from South Africa aimed at stabilising the region (Mandrup, 2024). South Africa was instrumental in establishing the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park in 2002, which integrated conservation areas from South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe into a unified transboundary protected zone (Theron, 2014).

In responding to the query on whether regions become potentially threatening or destructive when they evolve into closed spheres¹ of influence dominated by regional hegemonies. We adopt three analytical lenses that together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding contemporary regional dynamics. *Beyond the East–West Strait* challenges traditional global politics and economics binaries, revealing how regionalism creates more nuanced power configurations. These configurations often lead to *Regional hegemonic dominance*, significantly impacting cooperation patterns as dominant actors shape regional agendas and institutional structures. Such regional power dynamics are particularly visible in the *Entanglements* observed in Southern and West Africa, where regional interactions are inseparable from global forces and colonial legacies, demonstrating how historical patterns continue to influence present-day regional relationships.

The development of closed-off regional spheres poses a significant obstacle to the principles of inclusive multilateralism. When regional powers consolidate authority through exclusive economic agreements or preferential security alliances, they risk establishing what we call *hegemonic enclosures*. Building on Achille Mbembe's (2001, 2019) concept of *disenclosure*, which posits decolonisation as a response

¹ A closed sphere represents a regional configuration where a dominant power establishes significant influence over neighbouring states while restricting external influence. This occurs when regional arrangements lose critical equilibrium: national sovereignty becomes subordinated to regional mandates, dominant powers exercise unilateral leadership without meaningful participation from smaller states, and the region becomes isolated from productive external engagement. In such spheres, the hegemon influences economic, political, and security frameworks primarily serving its interests, creating a closed system that limits member state autonomy and constructive outside involvement.

to *postcolonial enclosure*; essentially, it describes how hegemonic regimes create social, economic, and ideological enclosures to maintain, as well as David Harvey's (Harvey, 2003, 2017) concept of *accumulation by dispossession*, which describes how hegemonic nations and institutions are strengthened by global capital's creation of enclosures through commodification, privatisation, and economic dominance. Our concept refers to a scenario in which regional organisations primarily function to legitimise the interests of the dominant state rather than promoting authentic collective action. This is seen in how certain regional powers have used their influence to obtain preferential access to resources or control regional crisis response systems. The recent tensions over ECOWAS's reaction to military coups and the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) approach to security issues show how regional frameworks can be used for hegemonic control instead of working together to solve problems. The interplay between external powers and regional dynamics further complicates this picture.

Regionalism Beyond the East–West Strait

Acknowledging the tectonic shift on multiple levels is essential to understanding how regional closure/hegemony creates new forms of dominance outside the East–West binary. On a macro level, new Global South orientations have emerged, as evident in the BRICS + grouping that threatens to upend long-established patterns of interaction between the global North and South, and on a meso-level, interstate relationships are changing. The most interesting development has to be the emergence of new sub-regional groupings.

Recent military coups undermined long-standing regional cohesiveness and collaboration patterns, bearing witness to the potential transformation of coastal states into a new organisational framework. This represents a significant shift in regional dynamics in West Africa. We see a loose reorganisation of power relations and linkages amongst littoral nations rather than a clear institutional reorganisation. Expectedly, these upheavals have stressed established regional frameworks, resulting in *informal corridors of influence*.² But, rather than isolate the regional hegemon, Nigeria, the rest of the region is putting increased pressure on it to stabilise the region and use its influence to ensure a return to formal institutional structures and specified membership.

² Informal corridors of influence are non-institutionalized pathways of regional interaction and power projection that operate outside official frameworks. These corridors represent *regionalism from below* (see Hettne & Söderbaum, 2010; Fioramonti, 2013), where connections between states and communities develop through grassroots networks, unofficial economic activities, cultural exchanges, and social movements rather than through formal treaties or organisations. They allow regional powers to broaden their influence and smaller entities to manoeuvre within regional dynamics via informal channels, establishing alternative systems of regional integration that frequently operate alongside official frameworks.

Outside of this potential reorganisation, Nigeria has been increasing its market protection, as was seen with the 2019 border closures and their consequent regional impacts, which starkly contrast with the 2023 border closures that affected Nigeria adversely. Nigeria's hegemonic posture in West Africa shows itself in many spheres of influence, especially in marine infrastructure and digital economics, as seen in Nigeria's involvement in Ghana's advanced fintech ecosystem—best shown by startups like Flutterwave and Paystack—driving regional digital transformation. Nigeria's technical domination effectively propagates Nigerian business frameworks, technical benchmarks, and financial practices. This digital expansion empowers Nigeria to influence the region's economic development and technological integration while simultaneously encouraging dependencies on its platforms and systems, thereby strengthening its position as a regional leader without necessarily depending on official institutional frameworks. Moreover, Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS, which dictates regional rules on cybersecurity and digital payments, further strengthens this digital impact. Concurrent with port congestion and efficiency issues, Nigeria's rivalry with Senegal over marine trade supremacy shows how determined it is to keep its position as the principal logistics hub for West Africa. Lagos State, the richest sub-national government in Nigeria as well as the entire sub-region, is also positioning itself as a key player in maritime and transport logistics in implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in the sub-region (Lagos State Government, 2022). This illustrates that despite current setbacks, Nigeria still has a sophisticated appreciation of how multi-sectoral collaboration could assist it in gaining regional leadership while promoting collective economic stability within ECOWAS.

South Africa's influence, which has long stood as the *gateway* to Southern Africa, is evident in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange's (JSE's) dominance in regional financial markets. It remains critical in shaping the region's political and economic landscape. For instance, South African banks have deepened financial dependency through regional expansion efforts. Similarly, there is significant South African investment in Nigeria, but there have been major exits from the Nigerian economy in recent years due to the country's economic instability. This is largely the result of the Nigerian government's incoherent fiscal policy.

Due largely to its involvement in Mozambique's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) development and Zambia's debt restructuring, South Africa is essential to the economic stability of the Southern Africa region. Since South African banks have significant stakes in Zambia as a key financial hub, Zambia's economic stability is crucial to the health of the regional financial system. With Sasol at the forefront of major innovations in natural gas, South African companies have made significant investments in Mozambique's LNG sector. Moreover, South Africa's military support for the Cabo Delgado region underlines its commitment to its security and economic goals, despite its contested leadership within SADC. South Africa's hegemony fosters regional stability and integration by integrating economic cooperation, security aid, and development diplomacy. South Africa's multidimensional approach to regional leadership—combining economic cooperation, security assistance, and

development diplomacy—transcends the traditional East–West binary in global politics. Its approach demonstrates how regional powers can create independent avenues for stability and integration tailored to local contexts rather than simply replicating the models established by superpowers. The regional dynamics in Southern Africa function according to its unique internal principles, creating what may be regarded as a *third way* in international relations that resists simplification into either Eastern or Western frameworks. By prioritising African agency and interests, South Africa's regional leadership fosters a more comprehensive understanding of global power dynamics that recognises the validity and importance of governance systems driven by regional initiatives.

Regional Hegemonic Dominance and Regional Cooperation

Regional cooperation gives life to the *Africa Rising* narrative (Maritz, 2012), yet, ironically, it often masks new forms of economic dominance. The exercise of regional dominance can be best described as an interlocking system of tides and currents; institutional power (the main channel's flow) is strengthened by economic control (tributary rivers) and infrastructural power (the undercurrents). Three interconnected power dimensions work together: institutional power (the main channel's flow) represents formal governance structures and diplomatic frameworks; economic control (tributary rivers) involves trade patterns and financial dependencies that feed the main flow; and infrastructural power (undercurrents) consists of the hidden but essential transportation networks, digital systems, and energy grids that sustain the entire system. Together, these elements create an integrated framework of influence that flows throughout the region. Thus, regional organisations have become the flagships of hegemonic power, as evidenced by the Southern African Customs Union's (SACU) revenue arrangements and ECOWAS's intervention protocols, which can be leveraged to serve dominant states' interests. In addition, both Nigeria and South Africa are the most important financial contributors to their respective sub-regional organisations (Obasi, 2024; Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2021).

An illustrated example is South Africa's continued domination of the region's economy through the JSE, which remains Africa's largest stock market and facilitates crucial capital flows throughout Southern Africa. The JSE provides a platform for companies from neighbouring nations like Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe to tap into larger pools of capital (Shipalana & Moshoeshe, 2019). Moreover, South Africa leads SADC's Industrialisation Strategy whilst also being the primary driver of major regional infrastructure projects such as the Lesotho Highlands Water project, which provides water to Gauteng, South Africa's industrial centre, and hydropower to Lesotho, and the Kazungula Bridge, which has significantly improved trade routes and reduced transport times along the North–South Corridor (Lesotho Highlands Development Authority, n.d.; Southern African Development African Development Bank Group, 2021; Community, 2015).

Similarly, Nigeria's continued economic dominance in West Africa has continued into the fintech sector. Flutterwave, for instance, has emerged as a key player in promoting digital financial inclusion throughout West Africa, expanding into several countries, including Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal. Nigerian fintech companies are building a robust digital infrastructure by facilitating cross-border transactions and supporting trade along vital routes such as the Burkina Faso-Ghana corridor³ (African Development Bank Group, 2024; Michael, 2025; World Bank, 2019). This effort aligns with ECOWAS's broader economic integration goals while also helping to bring informal economies into more traceable and secure systems. Nigeria's influence is felt in the push towards an ECOWAS single currency, which would decrease transaction costs and increase trade efficiency. In the case of ECOWAS, there is significant pushback against the single currency initiative by smaller francophone countries.

Like South Africa, Nigeria is the economic engine of its region through infrastructural projects. However, all hegemony is contested and, to a large extent, negotiated. Smaller vessels always find ways to navigate through alternative passages. This is exemplified by various *look-east* policies to diversify their international partnerships and bilateral cooperation networks to counter regional hegemonic dominance. These alternative partnerships provide economic options and diplomatic counterweights, enhancing smaller states' bargaining power within regional structures. This ongoing negotiation creates a dynamic regional system where dominant powers must continually adapt to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness.

Entanglements: Regional Dynamics in a Global Context

A major obstacle to regional development and integration is the continuing presence of colonial systems in modern-day Africa. The modern African political economy is still shaped by the colonial era's trade routes, borders, and economic interdependence; this is especially true of the effects of the British Commonwealth in East Africa and the CFA franc system in French West Africa (Robinson, 2019). Initiatives such as AfCFTA, which aim to promote intra-African commerce and economic autonomy, are prime instances of contemporary attempts to overcome these historical limitations.

Resource management and environmental governance have become important hubs for African regional cooperation and conflict (Isik, 2016; Kishi, 2014). Strategic mineral resources in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), particularly cobalt and lithium, point to underlying tensions between local resource ownership and international interests within global supply chains. The disputes surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam among Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt illustrate how resource management can generate regional tensions within the Nile River Basin. This trend is further seen in the Lake Chad Basin, where environmental deterioration

³ Known as the Ouagadougou-Tema corridor.

has worsened security issues and forces such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission to coordinate actions (Lake Chad Basin Commission, 2018; Skah & Lyammouri, 2020).

The increasing security presence of Western powers in West Africa, partly motivated by a desire to counter China's and Russia's influence, demonstrates how regional spaces can become arenas for broader geopolitical competition, potentially undermining regional autonomy and collective decision-making (Basedau et al., 2025).

Remarkably, diaspora networks have become increasingly important in determining the balance of power in Africa's regions (Magocha, 2020; Sincuba, 2024). The diasporas of Ethiopia, Ghana, and Nigeria illustrate how transnational populations may significantly influence their home countries through cultural interchange, political activism, and remittances. For example, the Ethiopian diaspora's support for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's reform initiatives has been relatively influential (BBC, 2019; Hairsine, 2020). These initiatives include a mixture of political and structural reforms, encompassing enhanced gender representation in government, economic restructuring toward private sector leadership, and appointing a former opposition leader to head the electoral commission. Such reforms strengthen investor confidence and signal positive long-term prospects despite ongoing complex challenges in the country (BBC, 2019; Soliman & Demisse, 2019). These diaspora networks can link regional and global concerns, offering intellectual and financial capital, and influencing domestic and international policy.

Nested regionalism offers a valuable framework for comprehending the intricate interactions between different tiers of regional organisation (see Penfold, 2017; Shintaro, 2022). This is especially clear in the interaction between the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where different reaction capacities and overlapping mandates produce dynamic patterns of regional administration (Gaens et al., 2020). Various levels of regional organisations can compete with and complement one another in tackling African issues, as evidenced by ECOWAS's quick involvement in recent West African political crises in contrast to the AU's more expansive but slower continental strategy. Regional African organisations operate as complementary layers, with sub-regional bodies like ECOWAS providing rapid responses to local crises while the AU develops broader continental strategies. When outside powers strategically interact with various organisational levels, they create intricate interdependencies through investments, economic institutions, and security alliances, bringing these regional dynamics into contact with global forces.

The analytical frameworks presented in *Beyond the East–West Strait*, *Regional Hegemonic Dominance*, and *Entanglements* highlight the increasing significance of regionalism in global politics by demonstrating how regions forge power centres that function beyond conventional East–West paradigms, how regional hegemonies develop alternative models that resonate with local priorities, and how colonial legacies persist in shaping modern regional configurations. This indicates that regions have progressed from being simple components of a global framework to becoming

more independent entities with unique internal dynamics—an essential observation for comprehending the developing multiplex world order.

Conclusion

Southern and Western Africa demonstrate how spheres of influence foster cooperation or enable dominance. Through our three analytical lenses, we observe that regional hegemonies like Nigeria and South Africa have wielded significant influence over their respective regions, though in markedly different ways. Nigeria's assertive leadership within ECOWAS, particularly regarding military interventions and monetary policy, contrasts with South Africa's more subtle economic dominance within SADC. These patterns also reflect how regional organisations can weaken or reinforce hegemonic power based on their design and accountability mechanisms.

Institutions with robust accountability and balanced representation can check dominant members' power, while weak institutional design enables powerful states to use regional platforms to legitimise their unilateral interests. These dynamics shape whether regionalism develops collaboratively or serves dominant states' interests, creating intermediate layers in global power hierarchies and establishing nodes of authority in the emerging multiplex world order.

The potential threat of closed regionalism becomes most acute when three conditions converge: consolidation of hegemonic power without effective institutional checks, exclusionary economic practices that deepen regional dependencies, and the manipulation of regional narratives to justify unilateral action.

To address these challenges, it becomes crucial that new frameworks for regional cooperation integrate institutional safeguards designed to protect the interests of smaller states while preserving the advantages of regional integration. Rotating leadership arrangements, weighted voting procedures that avoid hegemonic domination, and open dispute-resolution procedures are a few examples. The capacity of programs such as AfCFTA to advance open regionalism while halting the formation of closed, hegemonic spheres of influence will be crucial to their success.

A critical consideration is how techno-political forces shape regional inequalities as technology and economic systems become more interconnected. Mobile money systems and digital infrastructure initiatives have the potential to either foster inclusive regional development or perpetuate existing power imbalances, contingent upon the governance and implementation strategies employed.

Do regions become potentially threatening when they develop into closed spheres of influence? They certainly can, but this is not a given. The threat comes about when regional institutions lose three necessary balances: regional integration vs. national sovereignty, dominant leadership vs. shared responsibility, and regional self-governance vs. external involvement.

Pragmatic regionalism with solid institutional frameworks and an understanding of the politico-economic diversity of member states is required (Fagbayibo, 2022). Practically, this requires maintaining robust accountability mechanisms while

remaining open to cooperation with external partners. In other words, a more flexible and inclusive form of regionalism that allows for the advantages of regional collaboration can be maintained while preventing the formation of closed, potentially harmful regional spheres.

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Essay 25: Regionalism and the Quest for Geopolitical Stability: An Analysis of the Role of ECOWAS



Olumide Ekanade and Michael Popoola

Introduction

The uncommon growth in the overall number of regional institutions and the range of their activities over the last century has generated humongous interest in the study of regionalism. Independent states have come to appreciate the realities of the prevailing international system, which largely thrives on interdependency. Although they still try to guard their sovereignty as jealously as possible (Nwangwu et al., 2019), the reality is that states in all parts of the world are increasingly adopting regional cooperation and integration as tools to address transboundary challenges (Spandler & Söderbaum, 2023). Regionalism as a concept is the expression of a shared identity and purpose with a focus on the development of political, economic, and social systems based on adherence to common rules by a certain geographic region which shares common ideological and cultural traits (Enaifoghe & Ramsuraj, 2023). Their formation has often been driven by the growing impact of economic globalisation as borders have become more porous and states have sought to co-operate more closely in order to deal with the consequences of interdependence (Bloor, 2022).

The creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on the 28th of May 1975, by the fifteen West African states in Lagos, Nigeria, is emblematic of regionalism. Its founding was a response to the cataclysmic recession of economies within the region following the global oil price shock of 1973. Its foundational objectives included the establishment of an economic union that would promote cooperation and development in all fields of economic activity particularly in industry, transport, telecom, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, monetary and financial sectors, and in social and cultural matters for the purpose of raising the standard of living of its peoples, of increasing and maintaining economic

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stability, fostering relations among member states (Multilateral Treaty of ECOWAS, 1976). On the strength of the aforementioned, the Community followed up with the minimisation of tariff barriers and other charges of equivalent effect among member states in respect of importation and exportation of goods, abolishment of restrictions to trade and free movement of capital, goods, and their peoples. Implementing this has had its downsides, as free movement across borders has instigated challenges to member nations' security architecture. This has manifested in terrorism, proliferation of small and light weapons, human and drug trafficking, among others (Sabi, 2024). The organisation also harmonised policies on industry, agriculture, economy, and monetary matters, promoted common projects in member states and implemented schemes for joint development of transportation, communication, and energy projects, among other critical infrastructure (Multilateral Treaty of ECOWAS, 1976).

Following this, ECOWAS has made some positive strides in the harmonisation of macro-economic policies, implementation of the Common External Tariff (CET) adopted in 2013 and the ECOWAS Trade Liberation Scheme (ETLS), which are the main instruments for fostering intra-regional trade in West Africa (African Development Bank, 2020). The CET has streamlined trade policies and customs procedures across the region, thereby reducing administrative burdens. The ETLS, though promising, has on its part posted dismal performance as intra-community trade stood at 12% of total trade as of February 2024 (Habib, 2024). Implicated in this regard are issues of political will and trust, awareness levels, poor direct taxation, and capacity deficiencies of the ECOWAS commission (Fajana, 2018).

One of the major areas of achievement for ECOWAS is entering into treaties and creating sub-units. The sub-units created by ECOWAS include the West African Monetary Zone in 2000; the Regional Investment Guarantee Agency with USD 1 billion to mitigate political risks associated with investments in West Africa in 2013; the Regional Agency for Agriculture and Food (RAAF) in 2013; and the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) in 2015. These agreements and sub-units of ECOWAS are crucial frameworks for promoting economic development, peace, security, and good governance in the sub-region. In order to foster intra-African trade, ECOWAS welcomed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) treaty signed by several African countries in March 2018. The Community also encouraged its members who are yet to sign the agreement to fast-track the signing process (Nwangwu et al., 2019).

ECOWAS has also embarked on some innovative projects, such as the construction of the Abidjan-Lagos Transport Project, the Dakar-Abidjan Multimodal Corridor (NEPAD, 2017), as well as the Praia-Dakar-Abidjan Multimodal Corridor (ibid). Likewise, the ECOWAS –Regional Electricity Access Project has advanced electrification efforts in The Gambia, Mali, and Guinea, which will fast-track economic growth and create more jobs in the region (Angbulu, 2024). The overarching outcomes of these projects are the improvements in the transport infrastructure with a view to supporting regional integration, enhanced productivity, industrialisation, trade, and economic development (Ehouman, 2020). Interestingly, this will also enhance accessibility from and towards landlocked countries. There has also

been some progress in facilitating the regional mobility of labour, particularly in the ECOWAS sub-region, where a common travel document permits nationals of one member country to enter the other member countries without visa requirements (Ndukwe, 2004).

Following this background and overview of ECOWAS' foundational objectives and achievements, the second section discusses the criticality of ECOWAS geography for unfettered global trade, peace, and stability. The third section appraises ECOWAS management of its military intervention forces in various flashpoints in West Africa. The fourth section examines the emergence of an alternative regional arrangement that has handled the deficiency of ECOWAS in regional security architecture. The fifth section looks at ECOWAS' promotion of good governance and its seemingly self-destructive practices in the same space. The sixth section covers the concluding remarks. This essay argues that ECOWAS, as a regional body, has made good efforts at co-prosperity and geopolitical permanence in West Africa; however, its efficiency has been hampered by intra-state conflicts, external interference, funding, and the multifaceted nature of its regional security threats.

The Criticality of Geo-Political Stability in West Africa

This area, also around the Gulf of Guinea, holds strategic importance for global peace and stability because of its proximity to Europe, the Americas, and other parts of Africa. It is a crucial transit point for global trade and migration. Rupturing stability in the region can unleash the spillover of conflicts, leading to illegal immigration with its attendant problems and predisposing secure intercontinental shipping lanes on the Atlantic Ocean to high levels of insecurity. The area is also of interest to the global North given its humongous deposit of natural resources such as hydrocarbon deposits, oil, gas, gold and diamonds, uranium, titanium, and agricultural products, all of which require a steady flow to the global market and any form of disruption to the process would impact negatively on global economic stability. Beyond this, West Africa has also been a fertile ground for extremist activities, with clusters like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and Islamic State of West Africa Province operating sometimes with impunity, causing panic and anxiety in the region and beyond. The lax maritime security has transformed the Gulf of Guinea into the favourite trans-shipment zone for Colombian and Latin American narcotics cartels and their local accomplices seeking less protected routes into Europe and America. Really, stability in West Africa is crucial for global counterterrorism and anti-drug trafficking efforts as it helps to curb the spread of extremist ideologies and the global triangular trade in narcotics between Latin American drug barons, Europeans, and African criminal gangs (Musah, 2009). Thus, the criticality of the area to global peace, prosperity, and stability can not be overemphasised. An evidential proof of this was the establishment of a United States defence base in the Niger Republic around Agadez in 2016 to serve as a hub for the USA's military activities in the region.

ECOWAS Interventionist Forces: Managing Geo-Political Stability in West Africa – Feats, and Fault-Lines

There was turmoil in post-Cold War Africa, as exemplified by civil wars starting with Liberia from 1989, morphing and engulfing several member states subsequently. Acknowledging that real economic integration can only be built upon sustainable peace and political stability, ECOWAS revised its founding treaty in July 1993 to include a mandate to facilitate peace, security, and stability in West Africa. Thus, ECOWAS, in its quest for geopolitical stability, intervened through its regional peace-keeping force led by Nigeria to checkmate the crises in the sub-region. ECOMOG successfully intervened in Liberia between 1990 and 1997, ensuring that democratic elections were held, facilitating the resettlement of refugees in Nigeria, conducting DDR programmes, and reintegrating ex-combatants into civilian life. ECOMOG achieved this level of success because it switched from peacekeeping to peace enforcement. This switch was occasioned by the recalcitrant attitude of Charles Taylor, the head of the main rebel faction in Liberia. ECOMOG had to compromise its neutrality by occasionally cooperating with and giving logistical support to other warring factions so as to contain the military influence of Charles Taylor's faction. Through UN cooperation, a UN observer mission (UNOMIL) was sent to Liberia to legitimise and facilitate the mandate of ECOMOG. Thus, through diplomacy backed by force, the ECOWAS peace plan for Liberia succeeded in achieving its primary objective (Golwa, 2009). ECOWAS intervention in Sierra Leone from 1997 to 1998 dislodged rebel groups, who were demobilised and reintegrated into the society as the organisation restored Tejan Kabbah's presidency. Furthermore, the body midwived a peace agreement in Guinea-Bissau in November 1999 after resolving their hostilities. In 2003, Côte d'Ivoire was in turmoil, and ECOWAS deployed its troops there (ECOMISI) to complement United Nations (UN) and French forces to enforce their 2003 ceasefire agreements. Again in 2003, ECOWAS deployed troops under the ECOWAS mission in Liberia (ECOMIL) to contain the second civil war while serving as an interpositional force that kept warring parties apart and facilitated the arrival of the UN Mission there. Again, in 2017, ECOWAS, under the aegis of the ECOWAS mission in the Gambia (ECOMIG), intervened to restore democracy, and the stabilisation forces as at 2023 were still in the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau (Explainer, 2023). ECOWAS, also in collaboration with external partners like the African Union, meets at the mid-year coordination meeting (with Regional Economic Commissions) to align its work and coordinate the implementation of the continental integration agenda (Angbulu, 2024). If not for these initiatives, the whole region would have been engulfed in perpetual fratricidal wars (Ighobor, 2024).

However, in the management of crises, two incidents stand out where ECOWAS has been methodically absent. These are the Malian crisis and Boko Haram insurrections that have transcended the ECOWAS borderlines. For the former, ECOWAS as a security actor had an ill-adjusted operational structure and lacked logistical resources to deploy the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) (which replaced ECOMOG in 2004) in Mali. This showed its structural and functional incapability to reach full operational

capability (Sampala, 2024). For the latter, ECOWAS has had little or no input in the fight against Boko Haram, which has ravaged Nigeria since 2009. The reasons posited are that, in military terms, Nigeria is the most influential member of the body, which makes ECOWAS military assistance less necessary. Another reason is that the fight against Boko Haram has stretched into adjoining countries like Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, a nation which is beyond ECOWAS' orbit.

A trans-regional solution was thus needed to fight the insurgency. Nigeria teamed with Benin, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad to resuscitate the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) of the Lake Chad Basin Commission in October 2014 to prosecute the fight against Boko Haram. On 3rd of March 2015, the AU authorised the initial 12-month deployment of the MNJTF, consisting of up to 8000 military and civilian staff with ECOWAS and Lake Chad Basin Commission assuming civilian oversight (Report No. 291). Notwithstanding enduring limitations, the MNJTF has recorded considerable feats. Their efforts and successes challenged BH and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) terrorists, resulting in a significant decline in insurgencies in the region. The recent acquisition of assets, growing coordination among the sectors, and shift from a defensive to an offensive posture are factors that have led to the successes of the MNJTF (Onuoha et al., 2023).

The MNJTF is thus a veritable alternative form of regionalism, which relieved ECOWAS of the pressure of managing the troubled Lake Chad Basin states, whose socio-economic situations were compromised. What MNJTF did differently was that it adopted the African Union Peace and Security framework and sourced counterpart funding for its operations from the United States and the European Union (EU) through the European Peace Fund, which provided funds for its counter terrorism efforts. The downside of this, however, is that with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, funding from Europe slowed down (Onuoha et al., 2023). Beyond funding and its constraints, some other innovations that enhanced MNJTF's operational successes included its Civil-Military cooperation cell and quick impact projects, which fostered collaboration and trust among security forces, civilians, humanitarian agencies, and local communities, shifting cooperative practices beyond military-centric interventions. This tactic helped MNJTF to recapture territories hitherto lost to Boko Haram, and it is a testament to the effectiveness of interregionalism, multilateralism, and its coordinated regional response in addressing cross-border conflict (Ayandele & Anekwe, 2024).

Despite ECOWAS's sidestepping of the war against Boko Haram, the Nigerian response to the insurgency has had a major consequence on the institution's role as a peace and security actor. Boko Haram has made ECOWAS prioritise what it refers to as terrorism as a regional security threat. The focus on terrorism also means that ECOWAS sees an urgent need for ESF forces to receive counter-insurgency (COIN) training. This objective is partly being achieved through bilateral COIN training support that Nigeria is currently receiving from various international partners (Tejpar & Lins de Albuquerque, 2015). Presently, as of July 2024, ECOWAS had spent USD 13 million on counterterrorism and humanitarian efforts helping refugees and internally displaced persons in affected frontline states (Angbulu, 2024). This goes a long way to fortify geopolitical stability in the region.

ECOWAS and Good Governance Initiatives and Western Reaction

ECOWAS has promoted adherence to democratic governance practices in West Africa. In December 2001, the bloc adopted the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which guaranteed free, fair, and transparent elections and zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means (Djibril, 2008). This led to certain achievements protecting and deepening peace, stability, and democracy, albeit temporarily. Amongst these successes were the April 2012 negotiation and restoration of constitutional rule in Mali, and the facilitation of the return of interim President Michel Kafando in Burkina Faso after a military coup in September 2015, in addition to the successful transition in The Gambia after long-time leader Yahya Jammeh tried to unlawfully remain in office (Mhaka, 2023), the recently successful election observation mission to Senegal in 2024, and the facilitation of the signing of an agreement for National Unity in Sierra Leone (Angbulu, 2024). Interestingly, ECOWAS seemingly protected democracy for a while as it kept undemocratic forces at bay in West Africa between 2015 and 2020.

However, ECOWAS's inability to introduce strict term limits for its members' presidents proved ruinous for the region, ushering in a fresh groundswell of agitations, political violence, and utterly compromising its stated aim of cultivating stability and economic integration among states in West Africa. For instance, as of May 2015, ECOWAS jettisoned a proposal to restrict West African Presidents to two terms after opposition from Faure Gnassingbe and Yahya Jammeh (The Cable, 2015). ECOWAS also failed in the Togo matter. On 18th August, 2017, opposition figures in the Republic of Togo took to the streets to protest the continued rule of Faure Gnassingbe, the incumbent President, who had spent 14 years in power. The 2001 supplementary protocol obliged ECOWAS mediators to intervene in the Togolese crisis, broker peace, and produce feasible, implementable solutions acceptable to both the government and opposition. Nana Akufo-Addo and Alpha Condé led out in the talks but failed to get Faure to step down as the opposition had asked for a retroactive application of the two-term limit on Faure, who had exceeded the two terms in office. ECOWAS was also constrained because the constitutional convergence principle of its 2001 supplementary protocol has no such provision to enforce compliance. Indeed, an effort to introduce a region-wide adherence to two-term limits for presidents through a proposed amendment to its 2001 supplementary protocol on Democracy and good governance did not receive the usual needed consensus at the May 2015 summit of the Authority of Heads of States and Governments (Odigie, 2020). Another bad case is that of Alassane Ouattara, the president of Côte d'Ivoire since 2010, who had openly supported a coup in his country in his search for power. Presently, he is the sitting President.

To this end, the ouster of Guinea's elected president, Alpha Condé, in September 2021, brings to the fore the systemic failures in the region and ECOWAS's timid response to regressive and repressive rule. Incidentally, Conde in 2020 unlawfully pushed for tenure elongation, which he won in a highly disputed electoral context.

The resultant effect was the military coup that forced him out of office in September 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2021). ECOWAS' body language via its communal quietness and phlegmatic posture in the matter sent a lucid signal to West Africa's ambitious coup leaders that the rules do not count, and this ushered in an avalanche of successful coup plots from Mali to Burkina Faso and to Niger, all of whom make up Central Sahel.

A weak-willed ECOWAS with a compromised leadership that could not rein in Conde or Quattara decided to now activate its intervention clause by imposing sanctions on the Sahel states in order to deter the coupists from remaining in power. However, the move has been counterproductive as it polarised opinions around the controversy over the differentiated application of ECOWAS rules to the unconstitutional changes of government taking place in the region. These sanctions were particularly controversial as they came at a time when the three countries were facing exceptional pressure from terrorist intimidation against which the ECOWAS defence mechanism has shown its limits. On 28 January 2024, against this backdrop of institutional tension between the ECOWAS framework and the above-mentioned member States, the latter jointly decided to pull out of the Community, and subsequently founded the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), as they now saw ECOWAS as an agency of Western imperialism. This new posture has remodelled the regional map and called into question the process of building peace and stability in the region as the security threat became increasingly hybridised and transnational (Sampala, 2024). On account of these successful coup plots, France, the traditional ally of these Sahel states, pulled out of Mali in 2022 and left Niger and Burkina Faso in 2023. Concomitantly, the United States of America also completed the withdrawal of its remaining 1000 military personnel in July 2024. While severing ties with former Western allies, the Sahel states increasingly pursued military and economic ties with Russia, which was waiting in the wings (Al Jazeera, 2024). Fraternity with Russia has thus fractured ECOWAS' integrationist efforts in the region. Given the extroverted nature of the economies of the ECOWAS member countries, the Sahelian states' exit could also present opportunities for reform and endogenous development.

Conclusion

ECOWAS has fostered regional cooperation through its integrationist policies in West Africa. These policies are reflected in the promotion of democratic governance and trade liberalisation schemes, which have facilitated trade, prevented economic stagnation, and supported co-prosperity, even for smaller economies. Regionalism made possible the security of the lives of Liberian refugees in far-away Nigeria, stemmed the tides of intraregional conflicts and instabilities and inequality. ECOWAS also birthed intraregional infrastructural facilities, which in turn enhanced connectivities, livelihoods, and intraregional mobility of labour, translating into investments in West Africa and the creation of more jobs. However, ECOWAS's effectiveness in the region has been disturbed by problems of diverse states' aspirations, slow economic growth,

and capacity deficiencies in the Commission itself. Furthermore, ECOWAS' poor management of regional security threats birthed the multilateral MNJTF. Although initially successful, the force later struggled due to the growing number of conflicts, the prioritisation of individual states' interests over regional stability, and reliance on inadequate external funding, all of which undermined regional autonomy and made it vulnerable to external influence. MNJTF has also heavily degraded the capabilities of Boko Haram and its offshoots such that there is a collateral decline in the activities of insurgents, which has in turn helped the region sidestep the crises of displacement, refugee flows and failed statehood. Finally, MNJTF needs to prioritise independent funding and training for its military personnel in modern asymmetric warfare strategies. ECOWAS, in its push for co-prosperity, has to discourage nationalist aspirations and redefine its institutions for effective implementation and coordination of regional programmes and projects, while strengthening human capital development. ECOWAS needs to develop early warning systems and strengthen conflict prevention mechanisms so as to nip conflicts in the bud because so many resources are dissipated during crises in West Africa. This is critical to any meaningful development, and it will guarantee the continual relevance of ECOWAS to the development process in West Africa.

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Essay 26: Regionalism and Endemic Instability: How to (not) Understand the Illusion of Regionalism Dividends in Africa



Sebastian Angzoorokuu Paalo and John-Paul Safunu Banchani

Introduction

Regionalism has fostered diverse conditions aimed at achieving sustainable development in Africa, creating environments for social cohesion and regional identities, establishing processes for economic integration, and facilitating pathways toward political stability (Ighobo, 2024). Nevertheless, the potential of these regions is undermined by their limited capacity to ensure political stability across the continent. This leads to the following questions: How should we understand the apparent ineffectiveness of regional bodies in promoting sustained peace in Africa? How can regions serve as building blocks for achieving geopolitical stability? *Regionalism and Endemic Instability* aims to address these questions, providing crucial scholarly insights to inform potential policy actions on the relationship between regional organisations (ROs) and political stability in Africa. The atmosphere of regionalism and regional integration largely emerged from the conditions of self-determination that followed the founding of the United Nations (UN) in 1945. Within the context of evolving global and regional governance thinking and practices in the twentieth century, newly independent African nations rapidly pursued regional integration by establishing the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union (AU). The OAU advocated Pan-Africanism through regional integration to achieve meaningful self-governance for a prosperous population (Buzdugan & Payne, 2016).

By the early twenty-first century, decades of increasing economic pressure on most independent African states prompted the rise of subregional bodies, often referred to as Regional Economic Communities (RECs), to facilitate local, continental, and global development interventions. Major RECs include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa

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(COMESA), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The UN's Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) supported the establishment of RECs by operationalising the Lagos Plan of Action (Uzodike, 2009).

The expanded scope of ROs has addressed a wide range of mandates and contributions, from peacekeeping and stabilisation missions through the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) to trade liberalisation and economic integration efforts, with the most recent and arguably most ambitious framework being the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Salih, 2025). However, in light of pervasive intrastate civil and political conflicts across Africa since the early 1990s, ROs have devoted considerable time and resources to peacekeeping and conflict resolution. Presently, ROs offer dedicated support to member states in addressing prolonged fragilities, including longstanding chieftaincy, ethnic, political, and land tenure conflicts, as well as emerging insecurities related to terrorism, violent extremism, forced migration, and climate change-induced crises. These contexts have led to various interconnected forms of fragility throughout Africa's porous borders and within many states, particularly in the West African Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and Central Africa (Collier, 2015).

Overall, the ineffectiveness of African ROs in sustainably addressing persistent instability is linked to issues of internal conflicts among member states (El-Affendi, 2009), systemic disconnects between regions and states (Wulf & Debiel, 2010), and adverse external influences affecting African ROs (Piccolino, 2020). This essay intends to contribute a vital scholarly perspective on this matter, drawing on relevant academic and policy discussions. It argues that the challenges faced by Africa's ROs in promoting political stability across the continent are reflected in three interconnected dimensions—lack of coherent political logic within states, Africa's ongoing catch-up role in global affairs, and ineffective internal security control/management. These facets of the challenge are (re)produced through the complex interplay of local and global obstacles to effective regionalism, observed through historical and contemporary dynamics of geopolitics that co-create evolving limitations to ROs' ability to manage security on the continent.

In the following sections, the context of regionalism in Africa is briefly presented, followed by a discussion on the triad perspective depicting how ROs in Africa have struggled to become foundational elements for achieving geopolitical stability on the continent. The conclusion will be accompanied by recommendations for a potential review of African ROs to enhance the harmonisation of political and economic institutional frameworks among member states, thereby improving the prospects of achieving meaningful synergies for more contextually relevant ROs, which could positively influence the continent's security.

Regionalism Amidst Protracted Instability in Africa

The concept of regionalism has a long history, dating back to 19th-century Europe, and gained momentum in the mid-twentieth century (see Carpenter, 2009). This essay presents regionalism as encompassing various ideologies aimed at creating platforms for state, multistate, and multilevel integration of institutions, procedures, and practices designed to provide globally cooperative channels to address complex challenges. The concept of regionalism has evolved from notions of old versus new regionalism (Friskén & Norris, 2001) to more nuanced characteristics that associate regions with less rigid geographies, ideologies, mandates, and actors than were understood by the end of the twentieth century (Söderbaum, 2016). In the African context, the evolving and fluid nature of regionalism has shifted from the OAU's pan-Africanist philosophical and state-centred political activity to the contemporary era of more expanded and sometimes ambiguous regional objectives, mandates, and associated actors (see Paalo & Banchani, 2025). These fluidities became more pronounced in the periods following the Abuja Treaty (1991) on continental economic integration and the AU Constitutive Act (2000), which significantly revised the mandate of the OAU (Buzdugan & Payne, 2016).

The development of regions in Africa falls within the broader global governance rationale, aiming to forge geopolitical stability through regional efforts (Kacowicz, 2018). However, this aim is less successfully achieved in Africa, as ROs have failed to address protracted socio-political and economic challenges that reproduce various forms of fragility and endemic political instability across most parts of the continent (Söderbaum & Stapel, 2022). Söderbaum and Stapel (2022) attribute the limited capacity of ROs in Africa to two schools of thought. First, the African integration school of thought blames the struggles of ROs on Africa's colonial legacies, which dictate challenging path-dependent post-colonial structural factors, including global capitalism and fragmented national economies. Second, the functionalist-institutionalist school of thought draws parallels from the European integration experience, viewing African ROs as inherently weak, characterised by insufficient commitment or limited synergy among member states and RECs, thereby undermining the process of meaningful regional integration. These challenges are further illustrated through disaggregated internal and external factors that complexly intersect and weaken the capacity of African ROs to foster sustained security in the region.

The major internal challenges include inadequate funding (Eke & Ani, 2017), hegemonic politics (Isike & Schoeman, 2023), overlapping membership and mandates (Bayeh, 2020), lack of robust institutional frameworks linked to minimal political will for policy implementation, disparities in economic orientations (Mshomba, 2017), and competing interests among member states, particularly concerning global trade and resource allocation (Lehne, 2017). The externally driven challenges involve global power dynamics, particularly competing interests in the African market and resource exploitation, especially among China, the EU, and the US (Taylor, 2017). These complex relations generate dependency and intricate

networks of local and global players based on economic transactions that undermine consistent regional integration efforts, posing significant security threats (Harrison, 2013).

While these discussions highlight important dynamics regarding the limited effectiveness of ROs in tackling political instability in Africa, there is insufficient nuance about the intersection of regional and state operational logic in Africa, the realities of the evolving global order, and the everyday practice of state and regional security. Understanding the nexus between these intertwined factors offers crucial insights and potential policy directions for addressing the vicious cycle of political instability in Africa within the context of evolving regional integration efforts.

Three-Pillar View of Regional Struggles Towards Political Stability in Africa

A critical engagement with the relevant literature on regionalism, politics, and development in Africa has yielded three dimensions through which the failure of ROs to sustainably address political instability in Africa should be viewed: incoherent political logic within states and regional economic communities (RECs), Africa's ongoing catch-up role in global affairs, and the internal security challenges faced by member states and RECs.

Incoherent Political Logic

While regions often embody varying and competing social and historical constructs, the effectiveness of regional integration depends on the broader acceptance and practice of common institutional and procedural values and principles (Castiglione, 2009). The AU, RECs, and member states exhibit incoherent logic concerning political ideologies and practices. This is evident in the history of African regionalism, particularly with the founding leaders of the OAU, who were divided between the Casablanca and Monrovia groups. The Casablanca group advocated for the immediate political unification of African states, while the Monrovia group preferred a gradual approach to African union through economic cooperation. This discord in political orientation within the OAU hindered the development of a potentially harmonious institutional framework that could foster coherent and predictable continental political, legal, and economic processes and outcomes. This ideological division among member states left them fragmented during the Cold War, adversely impacting the OAU's efforts to address political issues in countries such as Angola, Namibia, and Mozambique (Adeniji, 1993).

The disjointed regional political orientation in Africa continued into the post-Cold War era. The AU's adoption of frameworks, such as democracy and good governance in the context of the liberal universalist unipolar world order, has not consistently yielded positive results (see Piccolino, 2020). In this context, the manifestation of democracy varies across sub-regions and member states. Notably, countries like Namibia, Benin, Senegal, Ghana, Botswana, and South Africa have emerged as strong examples of liberal democracies, albeit with some crucial challenges. Conversely, many others, including Mozambique, Zimbabwe, DRC, Niger, Central African Republic, Chad, Cameroon, Mali, Somalia, Burundi, Sudan, South Sudan, and Eswatini, have exhibited much significant democratic deficits, some experiencing multiple coups and non-democratic changes in government, with the latest occurring in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Niger (Afrobarometer, 2023). These examples highlight the broader challenges that ROs face in cultivating a unified continental democratic practice, despite their commitment to the political and economic principles of the liberal world order.

Moreover, the rising multipolarity in recent decades appears to reiterate the historical divisions in political ideology and related challenges in Africa (Malamud & Viola, 2020). A notable example of the impact of multipolarity on weak political integration within the AU is observed in ECOWAS, where Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali formed the three-nation Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023, largely due to persistent anti-West sentiments. In contrast to ECOWAS, the AES has explicitly leaned toward a less liberal political orientation, favouring bilateral relations with non-Western, less traditional forces such as Russia, China, and the Gulf states. The AES asserts that its guiding principle is to promote local interests rather than external, particularly Western preferences, which have been advocated by ECOWAS (see Adekaiyaoja, 2024).

These varying political orientations reveal a lack of cohesive political principles necessary for fostering sustained regional political and economic growth. This represents a significant setback for ROs as they strive to establish a political and economic identity that enhances prospects for political stability, sustainable resource governance, and economic progress, to ultimately address potential fragilities.

Africa's Continued Catch-Up Role in Global Affairs

The second challenge regarding the contribution of African ROs to political stability relates to the continent's ongoing catch-up role in global governance (politics, international relations, and trade), which undermines political stability in member states. Africa's ambition to become an influential actor in global affairs and to engage with Global North states in geopolitics has led African ROs and member states to enter numerous bilateral and multilateral agreements with external organisations and countries in critical areas such as political processes and institutions, economic structures, and natural resource governance (see Lebakeng, 2024; Paalo et al., 2024). However, these arrangements have weakened Africa's agency in global politics and resulted

in complex local socio-economic conditions, generating prolonged insecurity and political instability in many African states (Langan, 2018).

The external gaze of ROs both reflects and reinforces state practices, as Africa's bureaucracies are primarily modelled after Weberian bureaucracies alongside liberal market economies, leading to detrimental effects that diminish the competitive edge of African economies in the global market (Makki, 2015). As states and ROs mutually reinforce their inconsistent and incoherent mimicry of the Westphalian system, Africa's indigenous resources and capacities have been underutilised, while the adopted governance and economic principles are applied superficially in both state and regional arenas. As Piccolino (2020) suggests, decades of African ROs' relations and mimicry of the structures and operations of Western ROs, particularly the EU, have largely neglected local resources and weakened the potential of the AU and RECs to foster sustained security.

With these vital drawbacks, Africa remains generally at the back bench in global governance in terms of external policy influence and domestic obligations, while providing easy grounds for global power struggles for spheres of influence in politics, trade, and resource transactions. This has involved complex local and external relations and actors, which often provoke endemic conflicts and instability (Lebakeng, 2024). In the context of rising multipolarity, Liam Richardson predicts that a multipolar world could boost the AU's leverage and agency in international politics, enhancing the chances of achieving its Agenda 2063: *The Africa We Want*. However, he avers, the mounting geopolitical power flux could likewise cause further divisions within the continent, as RECs and member states forge varying agreements with a growing number of external powers through various principles (Richardson, 2024). In this backdrop, Africa's catch-up role in geopolitics could remain a major source of division in state and regional practices, significantly impeding synergistic efforts towards political stability.

The Challenge of Internal Security Control

The third challenge with African ROs' limited capacity to address endemic instability in Africa rests on ineffective internal security control by member states, which, linked with related challenges, hampers regional efforts in ensuring sustained security. The concept of internal security varies contextually, but it broadly denotes securing a state's internal sovereignty by forging adherence to the rule of law and enhancing the peace and security of citizens. This is achieved by tackling internal and external threats emanating from armed rebellions, economic security, environmental security, and cybersecurity (Qureshi, 2021). Historically, African states and ROs have failed to establish internal security controls in the context of complex global and internal conditions (Langan, 2018). These internal security struggles are generally seen from the African state architecture, fast-paced societal change, and the liberal universalist approach to security in Africa.

On the effect of state architecture on security, Bryden et al., (2008, pp. 3–4) opine that:

[...] At the heart of the African insecurity story is a breakdown in governance systems...At best, while maintaining a façade of viability and stability, this situation has created state repression of local populations under authoritarian regimes concerned, above all, with preserving the regime rather than ensuring the security of the state and its citizens...it has led to the outbreak of armed conflict and humanitarian tragedy.

Therefore, the state is both vulnerable to insecurity and culpable in inhibiting conditions to enhance internal security controls. These challenges are colonial legacies, thus path-dependent, and (re)produce conditions of political instability (Ansorg, 2017).

The link between societal change and internal security concerns relates to the fact that rapid changes in various socio-economic and political aspects of African societies have produced contestations over access to power and natural resources. This causes perceptions of illegitimate governance and conflicting rights, generating violent conflicts and leading many states to overstretch their limits in providing meaningful security (Marc et al., 2015). While different African countries have demonstrated varying capacities in handling internal security challenges, there are more concerns about failing security control mechanisms in the face of rising internal and political conflicts, terrorism, and violent extremism, especially in the Sahel, West Africa, and the Horn of Africa. Addressing this prevalent security challenge is further thwarted by ROs' resource constraints and incoherent political stances, including on security matters.

The last aspect of the internal security challenge is connected to the violence of liberal universalist security approaches adopted by ROs and, invariably, member states. Muntschick (2022) stresses that while African RO-supported networks of state and non-state peacebuilding and security interventions have embraced pluralism, local ownership, and hybridity as means of acknowledging and engaging local resources, in the end, the dominant epistemology and approach revolve around the liberal peace. However, the liberal universalist approach, often linked to democratic peace, which favours state and liberal-oriented actors, usually fails to substantially embrace the everyday constructs and practices of peace and security in Africa. This impedes inclusive political processes and erodes the required legitimacy in the pursuit of sustained peace (see Taylor, 2017), as seen in places such as DRC, Central African Republic, Somalia, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, and Cameroon, where different internal groups have contested the legitimacy of the central government and regional security partnerships (see Sears, 2013).

Conclusion

The essay contributes a vital nuance to the literature on security and regionalism in Africa by addressing the broad question of why regions have not successfully served as building blocks for political stability in Africa. The relevant debates on regionalism, politics, and development in Africa reveal important internal and external

factors hampering the capacity of African ROs to tackle political instability on the continent. Advancing the discourse on regionalism and global order relating to Africa, this essay has argued that the limited success of ROs in providing lasting solutions to political instability is caused by the entwined triad challenges of incoherent political logic within states and RECs, Africa's continued catch-up role in global affairs, and the internal security control challenges of member states and RECs.

The policy implication of this conclusion is that establishing ROs to be building blocks for regional and geopolitical order requires committed efforts by African leaders to contextualise an operational principle of African ROs, which nonetheless strictly embraces the local political underpinnings of each state. The challenge though is that as indicated in the preceding sections, a contextualised regional or sub-regional operational principle is a challenging task because regional integration in Africa is heavily dependent on external funding and expert support, tinged in universalist values, impeding the potential for indigenous and endogenous operational values for African ROs (Adekaiyaoja, 2024; Piccolino, 2020). Besides, as most African polities have been characterised by polarised social identities and political structures, the possibility of a single accepted political orientation in member states remains a difficult reality. However, the engagement of the literature lends an understanding that, given the required political will among African leaders and less invasive external support, African ROs can be framed and pursued in ways that prioritise local understanding of politics and security. This could position African ROs to address protracted instability and contribute to geopolitical order.

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Essay 27: Advancing Regional Resilience: Lessons from Article 16 of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in the IGAD Region and SOP Development in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia



Stanley Osaba

Introduction

The question “Will regions save the world?” compels a critical examination of regionalism’s potential in addressing global challenges. While no single entity holds the key to global salvation, regional organisations like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) offer compelling examples of how collaborative action can build resilience (Brenn et al., 2022). This essay analyses the IGAD Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, focusing on its contribution to regional resilience in the face of disasters and climate change, and subsequently to a more stable and equitable global order. Specifically, it examines Article 16 of the Protocol, which addresses the movement of disaster-displaced persons, and the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) developed by Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia to implement this provision.

The IGAD Protocol on Free Movement of Persons

The IGAD region comprises Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Eritrea. It is situated in sub-Saharan Africa, where 7.4 million internal displacements by disasters were recorded in 2022, the highest figure ever reported by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) for the area (Platform on Disaster Displacement, 2023). The IGAD region in East Africa faces diverse challenges, including conflict, poverty, environmental degradation, and climate

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change. These factors contribute to displacement and migration, posing significant threats to human security and regional stability.

Recognising the need for collective action and as a response to these regional challenges, IGAD member states embarked on a process to establish a free movement regime in 2017. This involved country consultations, development, and negotiations of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and Transhumance. The Protocol on Free Movement of Persons was endorsed by the IGAD Committee of Ambassadors on February 26, 2020. It was then approved by the IGAD Member State Ministers in charge of Internal Affairs and Labour in 2020. Finally, the IGAD Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs adopted the Protocol on June 24, 2021 (IGAD, 2020). This landmark agreement aimed to facilitate the free movement of people within the region, enhancing regional integration, economic development, and resilience. The Protocol is grounded in the understanding that free movement can mitigate the impact of these challenges and contribute to a more stable and prosperous region.

Several factors drove the adoption of the Protocol. Initially, IGAD member states recognised the need to address the growing challenges of displacement and migration in the region. The Protocol aligns with the African Union's Agenda 2063, which advocates for free movement within regional economic communities. Secondly, the Protocol aims to enhance regional economic integration and development by facilitating the movement of labour and promoting trade. This is particularly important for countries like Djibouti and Somalia, which have smaller economies and can benefit from increased labour mobility and trade with larger economies like Kenya and Ethiopia. Thirdly, the Protocol seeks to strengthen regional cooperation and solidarity in responding to shared challenges, including disasters and climate change (Tamara Wood, 2019). This is crucial for a region prone to droughts, floods, and other natural hazards, where cross-border displacement is a common occurrence.

For instance, Ethiopia, with its large pastoralist population, has a strong interest in facilitating the cross-border movement of herders and livestock during droughts. Similarly, Uganda, which experiences frequent flooding and landslides, sees the Protocol as a mechanism to ensure the safe and orderly movement of disaster-affected populations. Kenya, as a regional economic powerhouse and a major host of refugees, has a vested interest in promoting regional stability and managing migration flows, including those triggered by disasters (Platform on Disaster Displacement, 2024a).

Article 16 of the Protocol

Article 16 of the Protocol is particularly relevant in the context of increasing climate change impacts and disaster-related displacement in the IGAD region, and it may be considered a lifeline for disaster-displaced persons. It urges member states to admit citizens of other member states who are displaced due to disasters. The article also calls for developing laws, policies, and procedures to protect cross-border disaster-displaced persons. This provision is crucial for enhancing regional resilience as it provides a framework for managing disaster displacement in a coordinated and more

humane manner. The IGAD Protocol on Free Movement of Persons is unique in that it explicitly addresses disaster displacement, demonstrating a proactive approach to climate change and its impact on human mobility.

The Development of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

While the Protocol provides the overarching framework to translate words into action, individual member states have developed SOPs to guide the implementation of the Protocol, particularly Article 16, at the national and bilateral levels. These SOPs are designed to facilitate cross-border cooperation and ensure the smooth movement of people displaced by disasters.

In collaboration with Kenya, on 11 May 2023, Uganda concluded a simulation exercise to test and validate these SOPs (Platform on Disaster Displacement, 2023). The exercise focused on providing practical guidance for both countries to improve collaboration in preparing for and responding to sudden-onset hazards like floods and landslides. The SOPs cover various aspects, including entry and reception, registration, stay, and assisted return or extended stay for disaster-displaced persons.

Kenya collaborated with both Uganda and Ethiopia to develop SOPs on admission and stay in disaster contexts. These SOPs have been disseminated to national governments in the IGAD region to guide their responses to cross-border disaster displacement. On 1 January 2024, Kenya formally assumed the Chairmanship of the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), taking over from the European Union (EU), advocating for implementing measures to protect cross-border disaster-displaced persons (Platform on Disaster Displacement, 2024b).

Ethiopia was another key player in the development of SOPs for cross-border disaster displacement within the IGAD region. The country participated in simulation exercises and consultations to strengthen its capacity to manage crisis situations at border entry points and address mixed migration flows (IGAD, 2023). Ethiopia also collaborated with Kenya on developing SOPs to provide concrete guidance on how the two countries can collaborate bilaterally or regionally to prepare for and respond to cross-border disaster displacement.

Implementation Challenges and Opportunities

The IGAD Protocol and SOPs represent a significant step towards enhancing regional resilience. However, several challenges need to be addressed to ensure effective implementation:

Harmonisation of National Laws and Policies: Member states need to harmonise their national laws and policies with the Protocol's provisions to ensure consistency and avoid legal barriers to free movement. This is particularly important for managing the movement of disaster-displaced persons, as inconsistencies in national laws can create confusion and delays at border crossings, hindering access to safety and assistance.

Capacity Building: Strengthening the capacity of border officials and other relevant authorities is essential for the effective management of cross-border movement, particularly during disasters. Training on the Protocol's provisions, SOPs, and best practices in humanitarian border management is crucial to ensure that disaster-affected populations can move safely and access assistance in a timely manner.

Data Collection and Information Sharing: Improved data collection and information sharing mechanisms are needed to monitor the implementation of the Protocol and track the movement of people, especially in disaster situations. This is essential for effective disaster response and preparedness, as it allows authorities to anticipate needs, allocate resources, and coordinate assistance for those displaced across borders.

Addressing Socioeconomic Disparities: Addressing socioeconomic disparities between member states is crucial to mitigate potential concerns about increased migration and competition for resources (IOM, 2017a). This is particularly relevant in the context of disaster displacement, as people may be reluctant to return to their countries of origin if they face significant economic hardship or lack of opportunities.

Limited Awareness and Understanding: Many people are not aware of the Protocol and its provisions, which can hinder its implementation (UNECA, 2024). Raising awareness among border communities, disaster-affected populations, and government officials is crucial to ensure that the Protocol's provisions are understood and applied effectively during disasters.

Concerns about Security and Sovereignty: Some member states have expressed concerns about potential security risks associated with free movement. These concerns can be particularly acute in the context of disaster displacement, as governments may be wary of potential security threats posed by large-scale population movements. Addressing these concerns requires strengthening border security measures, enhancing cooperation among security agencies, and implementing effective mechanisms for information sharing and risk assessment.

Despite these challenges, the Protocol has the potential to significantly enhance regional resilience by:

Facilitating Safe and Orderly Movement: The Protocol provides a legal framework for the safe and orderly movement of disaster-displaced people within the region, reducing the risks associated with irregular migration. This can help to prevent human trafficking, smuggling, and exploitation of vulnerable populations during disasters.

Promoting Regional Integration: By enabling the free movement of people, the Protocol contributes to regional integration and cooperation, strengthening regional responses to shared challenges. This can enhance collaboration in areas such as disaster management, climate change adaptation, and peace and security.

Enhancing Economic Development: The protocol seeks regulated provision for working, which can contribute to economic growth and development by allowing people to access employment opportunities across the region (IOM, 2017b). This can be particularly beneficial for disaster-affected populations who have lost their livelihoods and are seeking to rebuild their lives in a new location.

Improving Disaster Response: Article 16 and the associated SOPs provide a mechanism for managing disaster displacement in a coordinated and effective manner, enhancing regional resilience to disasters. This can help to ensure the safety and well-being of people displaced by disasters and facilitate their access to assistance and protection.

IGAD's Broader Regional Role

IGAD plays an important role in promoting regional cooperation and integration in East Africa. Its mandate extends beyond free movement to encompass various areas, including peace and security, food security, environmental protection, and economic development. IGAD's efforts to address climate change and disaster risks are particularly relevant in the context of increasing vulnerability in the region. Through these efforts of promoting regional cooperation and developing coordinated responses, IGAD contributes to strengthening resilience and building a more sustainable future for the region.

Significance, Target Audience, and Assumptions

Policymakers and practitioners involved in migration management, disaster risk reduction, and regional integration, academics and researchers working on regionalism, migration, and disaster displacement, and international organizations and NGOs engaged in humanitarian assistance and development in the IGAD region can significantly utilise this case study of how regional organisations can address broad challenges like disaster displacement and climate change as well as draw lessons from its contribution to the broader debate on regionalism in global governance. This analysis assumes continued political will from IGAD member states to implement the Protocol, the availability of adequate resources, and the establishment of effective coordination mechanisms.

Conclusion

The IGAD Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, particularly Article 16 and the associated SOPs, demonstrates the potential of regionalism to address challenges like disaster displacement and climate change. The protocol's approaches to facilitating safe and orderly movement, promoting regional integration, and enhancing disaster response contribute to building a more resilient region. While implementation challenges remain, IGAD's commitment to free movement and its broader regional role in addressing shared challenges offer a pathway towards a more stable and equitable future for East Africa. The Protocol's focus on disaster displacement is particularly significant in the context of climate change and its impact on human mobility. Through this framework for managing cross-border displacement, the Protocol can contribute to climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction efforts in the region.

In the long term, the Protocol can contribute to addressing broader challenges in the IGAD region, such as conflict prevention and sustainable development. By promoting regional integration and cooperation, the Protocol can help to build trust and understanding among member states, reduce tensions, and encourage peaceful resolution of disputes. The free movement of people can also contribute to economic growth and development, creating opportunities for trade, investment, and knowledge sharing. This can, in turn, contribute to poverty reduction, improved livelihoods, and greater stability in the region.

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Essay 28: Global Spaces for Co-Existence, Governance, and Sustainability: Intersections of Climate Change, Herder–Farmer Conflicts, and Human Security from the Regional Context of ECOWAS



Sylvanus S. P. Doe

Introduction

Rapidly transforming and safeguarding planetary system spaces to enable (non-) humans to freely and peacefully co-exist in the face of growing interconnected global risks is at the heart of good governance and sustainability agendas of the United Nations (Accelerator for Systemic Risk Assessment, 2024; Otto et al., 2020; Sachs et al., 2024) and regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). From all indications, some nation-states in the ECOWAS, like Ghana and Nigeria, are democratically experimenting with constitutional governance regimes to aid regional integration, trade, and peaceful co-existence. However, recent non-democratic disruptions by youthful military groups in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, and Mali culminated in the formation of a separate Alliance of Sahel States to threaten ECOWAS' integration agenda (International Crisis Group, 2024). Now, there is mounting urgency among regional bodies, not only in the ECOWAS but also around the globe, to innovate, co-design, and effectively implement good governance schemes and frameworks to enhance the quality of positive inter-country cooperation. Many of the regional bodies realise that the significant concept of regionalism, if institutionally coordinated well, can light service spaces for diverse people to critically rethink, manage, and govern transboundary ecosystems, financial and political institutions to drive sustainable growth, economic transition, and health delivery (Amaya & De Lombaerde, 2021; Mansfield & Milner, 1999). In ECOWAS,

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one of the undervalued practices which this essay highlights and situates the relevance of regionalism in a changing polycomplex world is a cross-border movement of herdsmen (popularised as *Fulanis*) and their livestock, especially cattle, here referred to as transnational pastoralism.

Within the broader sense of traditional agrosilvopastoral systems, transnational pastoralism creates significant opportunities for improved regional food trade and infrastructural development as key components of regional integration. Using conceptual explanations of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), here, agrosilvopastoral systems basically mean combining trees, animals (i.e. cattle, sheep or goat), and crops in mixed production systems for various (in)tangible benefits—ecosystem restoration, increased income, heritage preservation, and sustainability. Outside of the ECOWAS, agrosilvopastoral systems have been found to improve soil health, leading to better crop and fodder productivity (Venkatesh et al., 2024). Yet the practice of herding cattle to criss-cross national borders is inversely inflicting multifaceted risks, e.g. eco-conflicts on agrarian societies and, ultimately, reversing socio-environmental gains to undermine a corporate vision of a regionally integrated ECOWAS. The predominant actors tightly entangled in theoretical, legal, and policy discourses, regarding how to sustainably transform and increase the productivity of agrosilvopastoral systems to catalyse and sustain the achievement of the ECOWAS integration, *The Africa We Want*, or UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are smallholder farmers, traditional chiefs, and herders.

This essay succinctly explores the farmer-herder crisis and the multiple risks it poses in the context of ECOWAS by emphasising an urgent need for regional policy reforms and new socio-technological innovations to support greener regional development of agrosilvopastoral landscapes, including the realignment of endogenous institutions to the goal of sustainable regionalism in West Africa. It advocates for shared cooperation and inclusive policy dialogues in all member states of the ECOWAS. The latter can serve as a multi-strategic platform to deepen understanding towards minimising misconceptions, misinformation, and contentious eco-conflicts in order to advance human security and SDG actions, while offering essential lessons for other regional blocs, e.g., the Southern African Development Community, and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. Added to that, customised recommendations, including readjusting the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to incorporate green certification of meat on the ECOWAS markets, are proposed to stimulate further theoretical debates, new policy negotiations, and advanced scientific research into the interconnectedness of agriculture, climate, and livestock trade for effective and sustainable regionalism.

Herder–Farmer Polycrisis as a Challenge for ECOWAS Stability

Cross-border herding activities are worsening civic instability in certain ECOWAS communities. For example, studies evidently revealed that herders have caused public fear, destroyed human lives (2,500 Nigerians died in 2016 and 300,000 fled from Herder–Farmer conflicts in 2018), and burned tonnes of food crops and acres of dry savanna forests (International Crisis Group, 2018; Doe, 2008). At a point, about 3,471 eco-conflicts were reported in Nigeria, which cost nearly EUR 10 million in military interventions (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020). In the entire West and East Africa, bloody eco-conflicts attributed to malbehaviours of herders were recorded (Adams et al., 2023; Georgis & Makonnen, 2024; Krätli & Toulmin, 2020). Credible (inter)national media outlets reported how smallholder farmers were frequently killed, raped, robbed, or forcefully driven from their inherited croplands by herders (Suuk & Wozny, 2024). The recurring eco-conflict brings to light strong evidence and conviction that the possibility for ECOWAS to achieve stable, resilient, and sustainable integration is far from over in West Africa, which comparatively has the highest record of fatalities involving pastoralists (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2018). At any moment, fierce eco-conflict strikes, livelihoods are lost, and health complications emerge to compound systemic risks, responsible for escalating crises of life loss, ecojob loss, poverty, and hunger, and excluding poor people from the region's safe ecospace. The rising herder-related killing or violence (Figs. 28.1, 28.2) is indicative of the fact that security, safety, and adaptability among indigenous smallholders in the ECOWAS is fragile, seriously narrowing a genuine desire by policymakers and leaders to rebuild and stabilise regional peace in line with the AU Agenda 2063 and UN Agenda 2030.

On many occasions, migrant herders have aggressively crossed geopolitical, inter-district, and intercommunity boundaries as well as *protected* ecosystems to violate land property rights and biocultural values of the indigenous people who cultivate lands for food, dignity, and self-reliance. Moving herds of cattle from one borderline to the other could spread zoonotic diseases harmful to human health. Also, eco-conflicts originating from cattle movements tend to destabilise indigenous societies, economies, and thereby disintegrate the ECOWAS. Thus, the Herder–Farmer crisis has profound negative implications for the sustainable management of natural resources, climate adaptation, and the future of regional integration. Apart from the fact that eco-conflicts put a successful amalgamation of countries in the ECOWAS at risk, an interconnected challenge is hunger. A sustainable development report demonstrated that all the member states of the ECOWAS went off-track on most of the 17 SDGs (Sachs et al., 2024). For example, the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024* report, jointly published by the FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2024), proved that the hunger crisis (SDG#2) deepened in West Africa. The 2024 Global Hunger Index also estimated hunger in *Africa South of the Sahara* at 26.8%, severely higher than in other regions (WHH, Concern Worldwide & IFHV, 2024).

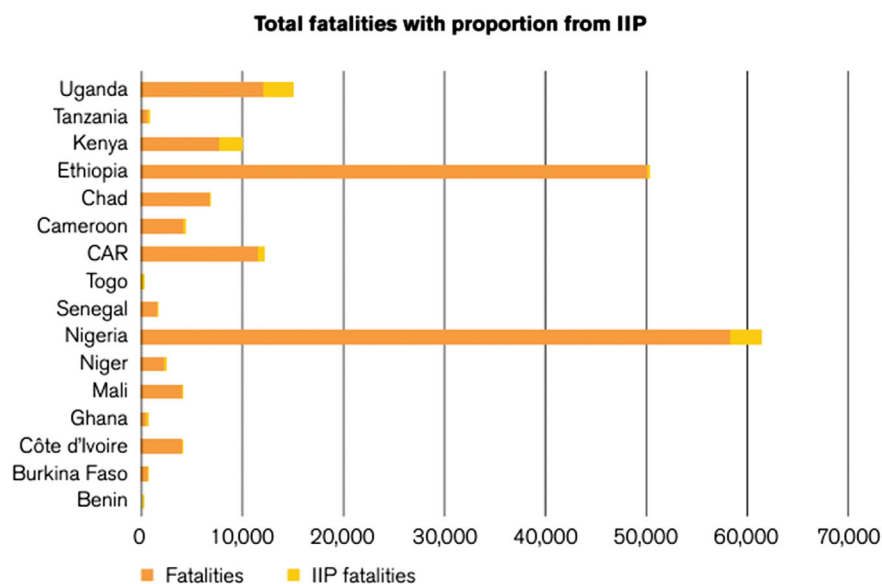


Fig. 1 Incidence of Total Violence and Proportion of Incidents Involving Pastoralists (IIP) by Country (1997–2017). (Source Krätli and Toulmin (2020))

Cattle Movements, Regional Resource Benefits, and Management Risks

On the territorial landscapes of the ECOWAS, the importance of cattle rearing in meeting food requirements and averting social unrest cannot be overemphasised. The region's agrosilvipastoralism resources generate services to improve societal resilience necessary for boosting integration, because such assets create local jobs, livelihoods, and supply dairy products to furnish the needed micronutrients for reducing malnutrition among vulnerable children, the aged and women in the region. Although herders control and carry out day-to-day management of a large cattle population, the majority of them are not the rightful owners. In the agrarian bioeconomies, cattle owners usually sell the *whole-body-cow* to earn income, exchange cow dung for cash, and reserve high-yielding breeds for prestige and honour. Owning large herds of cattle can earn a person the title of a development chief, since it connotes wealth. The price of 50 kg of cow dung is rising, making it a hot agri-byproduct to buy on open rural markets today for the production of biogas, fire-lit, organic pesticides or enriching topsoils to grow edible vegetables.

Commercially managed cattle are socio-economically important for transforming West, Central and East African communities (African Georgis & Makonnen, 2024; Union, 2010). A number of studies have shown how cattle production substantially contributes to the agricultural gross domestic product of the national economies of the member states of ECOWAS. For example, economic development in Burkina

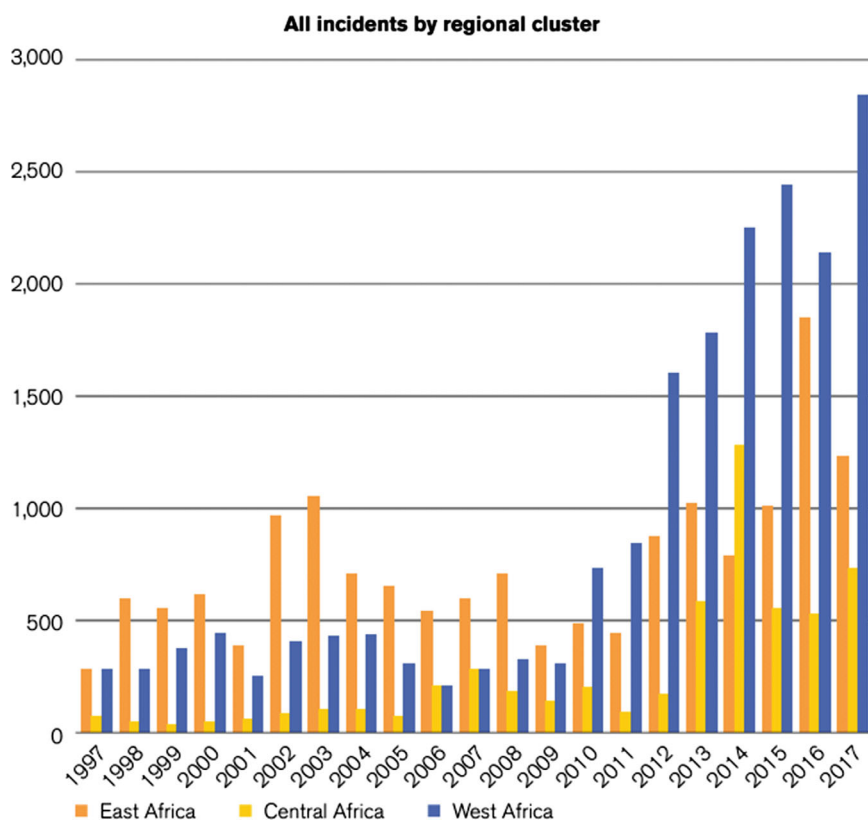


Fig. 2 All Conflict Incidents and IIP by Regional Cluster (1997–2017). (Source Krätli and Toulmin (2020))

Faso, Benin, Mali, and the northern parts of Nigeria is driven by the cattle trade (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020). According to the Department of Rural Economy and Agriculture of the African Union, Côte d’Ivoire derives 5% of its agricultural contributions from livestock, while 44% of Mali’s economic gains depend on it (African Union, 2010). In northern regions and coastal savanna belts of Ghana, cattle ranching transforms resources into common livelihood activities. Despite contributing to the food economy and regional export trade between the member states, the job of herding cattle is largely *informal* and publicly disrespected. The pastoralists are poorly remunerated, resulting in a low standard of living—a situation that contradicts regional development goals and targets. Generally, it should not be forgotten that:

“Pastoralist culture is part of the cultural heritage of Africa, and animal and plant resources in pastoral areas comprise one of the most important types of genetic resource[s] on the continent” (African Union, 2010).

How cattle movements cascade eco-conflicts and other risks to affect regional resource management, for example, in the Volta River Basin, is not doubted. The sad

truth, though, is that violent eco-conflict emanating from cattle herding is trivially treated as a social issue, without recognising that the root cause is climate change. In the West African savannas, extreme climate overheating usually manipulates rainfall patterns to distort the biospheric cycle of grasslands and rangelands, leading to water scarcity and a sharp decline in the quality of biomes needed for feeding livestock. The International Crisis Group (2018) agrees and will not dispute the fact that “the conflict’s roots lie in climate-induced degradation of pasture...”. Extremely hot climate, at times exceeding 35 °C, often wilts savanna phytospecies or grasses by reducing their moisture content, palatability, and nutrient quality. This harsh climate feature, called *Harmattan* (a local name for extreme heatwaves in Ghana), affects savannas stretching from Burkina Faso to northern Ghana. The overdried grasslands and general green infrastructure deficit during the *Harmattan* period are usually unable to support livestock carrying capacity—cattle, goats, and sheep. Similar to the experience in Nigeria (Chukwuma, 2020), savanna dryness partially compels herders, e.g., to migrate in search of water and palatable feed for their cattle. Migrant herders are mostly not able to quickly adapt within behavioural boundaries, new biocultures, and ethnosentiments, and, as such, end up not adhering to indigenously set grazing regulations, codes, and farming ethics in their new locations. Consequently, they tend to face a hostile attitude from local folks. Extreme heatwaves that force herdsman to migrate re-echo the rationale that climate tipping points are reached or fast-crossing, posing severe threats to the ECOWAS region.

A critical issue at the intersection of society, climate, and resource use, which policymakers should not ignore, is that, as the cattle population increases, adverse climate impacts on regional natural resources, coupled with urbanisation, also reduce grassland areas and their quantity. Also, noting that the methane emission level rises mostly from beef consumption. Cattle movement accompanied by intensive overgrazing tends to remove grass covers, thereby exposing land surfaces to hard pan formation or damaging floods. Eventually, a chain of other environmental degradation risks gives rise to savannisation and, later or sooner, desertification begins to set in at varying timescales and intensities to cascade new risks that are not favourable for regional peace, integration and resource sustainability.

Climate Adaptation, Eco-Conflicts, and Integration Policy System Failures

As indicated earlier, mainstream livestock husbandry plays a major role in supplying various animal products to lessen hunger and child malnutrition and satisfy part of the region’s meat demands (African Union, 2010). Thus, keeping livestock is helping communities to better adapt to climate change. Today, however, the nomadic practice where herdsman cross borderlines with their cattle, for example, in the western coast of Africa, has become problematic. The cattle movement is turning out to be civilly barbaric, causing human displacements and resource dispossessions

and negatively affecting smallholder farmers' ability to adapt to climate-induced hardships. Migrant herders (sometimes child herders) have been accused of causing physical harm, emotional trauma, and sparking eco-conflicts to put civic safety at high risk in their host communities. Once they arrive, the safety of the vulnerable indigenes disappears, not all herdsmen cause the social disorders or the feeling of insecurity though. The reality is that the feeling of being unsafe makes people hesitant to stay on their croplands to protect and preserve natural resources towards climate adaptation.

The interesting thing is that the ever-deepening eco-conflict is superficially conceived as a one-sided issue, lacking a systems thinking approach and triple-bottom-line context: society (human systems), climate/environment (earth systems), and monetary considerations (market systems). In other words, intergovernmental policy responses, e.g., the 1998 ECOWAS protocol on free movement (Garba & Yeboah, 2022) and AfCFTA, which could halt the farmer-herder crisis, fail to appropriately embed the idea of sustainability science into redefining the transnational herding problem, managing competing interests, and redesigning collaborative plans for future policy actions. The consequence is that vital intersystem issues such as justice, power, equity, and rights are obscured, and are not being properly diagnosed or streamlined to free the region from the rise of *herdsmen militancy* (Chukwuma, 2020) that is weakening adaptation capacity. More importantly, the neglect of the intersystem issues has bloated knowledge gaps such that it is so difficult to explicitly comprehend the regional dynamics of the eco-conflicts, and what progressive governance solutions to initiate, not only to scale-up adaptation but to serve as a fine route to enhance regionalism. The gaps have led to a situation where the larger society is misinformed about productive pastoralism, defaming its public image and the potential relevance in boosting regional economic liberty, prosperity, and sustainability. Not only that, but public policy conversations have also been negatively influenced around *securitisation, fulanisation, and sedentarisation* (Chukwuma, 2020) to a great extent, criminalising transnational pastoralism (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020), a vital backbone of the ECOWAS's agrifood trade and climate adaptation. For now, intriguing questions remain unanswered: What can be done differently to enable ECOWAS to resolve benefit-climate-cattle conundrums to advance future regionalism? What plans can elevate the region to better adapt to climate change? How best can multilateral governance and eco-entrepreneurial innovations (Doe, 2022) be nurtured or harnessed to help all actors to reorganise knowledge, tools, and power relations to co-exist safely while acting together to ensure that SMART pastoralism delivers regional integration goals?

Policy Engagements Toward Future Integration

The ECOWAS region could become more disintegrated or difficult to govern if inter-regional relations are extensively bruised due to clashes between farmers and herders. One of the pathways to prevent the clashes is by strengthening tolerance among

herders and farmers through transnational partnership arrangements. These should be robust strategies that help to rebuild farmer-herder societies that are conducive to living. Healthy interrelationships among member states, communities, or institutions, for example, co-designing and implementing joint policy learning events, if consistently and inclusively nurtured from *the bottom up*, could boost compassion and cohesion to facilitate the objective of sustainably integrating migrant herders into new societies or finding feasible alternatives to meet expectations. Actions to empower farmer-herder societies must be premised on the understanding that herders and farmers have co-existed for centuries (Adams et al., 2023), prior to the pre-industrial revolution or colonisation, the latter of which geopolitically introduced borderlines.

Obviously, moving large cattle populations over long distances in West Africa is a consequence of fast-deteriorating ecosystems largely attributable to climate impacts. This suggests that traditional leaders, farmers, and herders, with support from intergovernmental agencies, must co-create friendly ecospace to reciprocally relate, interact, and negotiate in matters of living together, ensuring that no one is worse off living or operating within *newly urbanising* agrosilvipastoral zones. This means that policy instruments like the AfCFTA must help to enrich rather than harm biodiversity conservation in the region. The parties or actors need to recognise that for regionalism to become a reality in ECOWAS, as part of global futures, it will require that no one is left behind. As such, recovering back green from the COVID-19 pandemic, economic setbacks, and adverse climate shocks needs an urgent and complete departure from the farmer-herder type of persistent eco-conflicts. This places a responsibility on herders to learn, heed, and embrace local values, rules, and norms in destination communities. The parties, including the universities, authorised chiefs, ECOWAS Commission, central government banks, African Development Bank, and the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development, must realize that as far as cattle production relatively works in certain developed or emerging regional economies of Australia, Canada, Argentina, and Brazil, the later which has some traits of savanna climate, it can succeed in the ECOWAS region too. The perspective to reiterate is that sustainable cattle ranching without causing damage to cross-border ecoproperties is possible. Again, subregionally co-designed remedies to stop eco-conflicts should embrace technology-driven solutions that are culturally and financially smart. Thus, critical attention must be given to interregionalism in reformulating green economic policies and solutions. ECOWAS should spearhead innovative soft solutions to heal ethnocentric divisions and to reconcile chieftaincy disputes around land tenure systems.

As of today, the responses of ECOWAS and its subsidiary or pan-African bodies like the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice (Lizarazo Rodríguez & Casalin, 2024) or even AfCFTA to farmer-herder violence are inadequate and unsustainable. This honest assertion is based on a verifiable fact that eco-conflict is rising in West Africa (Figs. 28.1, 28.2). Looking at the interwoven issues discussed in this essay, it is strongly asserted that the formation of system thinking knowledge around the regionalism concept can meaningfully catalyse processes to mobilise the right civil societies, pastoralist movements, and other endogenous actors to

brainstorm and roll out socially tipping interventions to proactively deal with the polycomplexity of eco-conflict emergencies. As such, some suggestions to promote transnational pastoralism to minimise eco-conflict costs to actualise the dream of ECOWAS integration are carefully summarised as:

1. *Farmer-herder crisis learning events*: Intensifying behavioural change communication alongside crisis education to sensitise various actors, advocates, and activists from the grassroots to subregional levels will incentivise risk reduction. This should include the creation of regional learning opportunities.
2. *Capacity simulation and transboundary pastoralism research*: Herder society should see herding of cattle across regional blocs as a green mission to make lives better for all. This requires further eco-conflict assessment to generate realistic data for understanding and socially simulating the capacity of actors to gain new skills and capabilities in inclusive digital engagements.
3. *Sustainable Earth System Law (SESL)*: Interregional environmental laws and regulations should harmonise the arbitration of eco-conflicts or disputes and synchronise them with biodiversity treaties, conservation projects, indigenous rights, and Ramsar conventions. SESL and interregional parliamentary duties should facilitate participatory governance of transboundary natural resources.
4. *Eco-entrepreneurship for new regionalism*: Conventional protection or conservation of the regional resources is insufficient. ECOWAS should adopt a win-win approach to ecodesign and invest in and enhance green infrastructure within the agrosilvipastoral system so that it can equitably work for farmers and herders alike.
5. *Restructuring multilateral regional governance*: The challenge to achieve zero eco-conflict can succeed best by employing multilateral approaches and reconnecting human decisions to regional governance. ECOWAS should urgently replace the outdated regional governance architecture, including a review of identity and community entry.
6. *Green mobility, certification, and digital innovations*: Partnering and digitalising cattle movements can foster safety for both cattle and people. Successfully adopting AI-assisted technologies like drones to tag, monitor, and redirect cattle routes or certify meat on food markets can minimise fatalities. If digitalising the agrifood value chain helps society to shift from beef consumption to plant-based diets and seafood, then eco-conflicts and emission risks can be eliminated over time.

Conclusion

Clearly, the future of living justly and securely within the savanna and Sahel territories of the ECOWAS is threatened by rising deaths, risks, and tensions from the clashes involving transnational pastoralists. On this basis, transitioning from the current interstate relationships towards ECOWAS integration remains elusive. Effectively implementing policy-driven mechanisms is one of the ways the ECOWAS can

meaningfully contribute to ending pastoral disorders to secure cooperation, ecopeace, and human security in the region. As a result of the complex underlying issues ranging from intermarriage, micropolitics, ethnicity, languages, poverty, land, chieftaincy, rights, survivalism linked to consumption, and microclimate among others, which multidimensionally converge to complicate eco-conflicts, ECOWAS should be seen more championing frontline partnerships for fixing the crisis rather than offloading tasks to the AU, EU, or UN. The relevance of ECOWAS as a regional body is obvious in eco-conflict matters. Additionally, the geopolitically dynamic trend of transnational mobility among herdsmen means that each individual member state of the ECOWAS, which retains national sovereignty, has very little chance of winning the battle against this pressing cross-border crisis. This uniquely places the ECOWAS Commission in a far better position to coordinate, streamline, and empower members to implement joint sustainability decisions and actions. Also, a comprehensive science-based inventory of the current loss and damage to society and the environment caused by eco-conflicts can generate quality information for reframing polarised theories and policies to work in the interest of all member states. The information can stimulate stakeholders to reconceptualise transnational pastoralism and accordingly assemble the necessary human agencies and green finances to fix deadly eco-conflicts. In conclusion, it is important to remind ourselves that a greener transition to sustainable regional integration is impossible without redressing the farmer-herder polycrisis, risks, and threats in the ECOWAS.

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Essay 29: Human Rights Architecture: A (Safe) Space for All Africans? Human Rights of LGBTIQ+ Persons and the Role of the African Union



Mariel Reiss

Introduction

Will regions save the world? Probably not. Will regional organisations (ROs) provide a space to safeguard human rights? Maybe. Many regional organisations at least claim to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights and subscribe to this in their mandates. The African Union (AU) is one of them and has, over time, established an elaborate human rights architecture. “Every individual shall be entitled to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognised and guaranteed in the present Charter without distinction of any kind such as race, ethnic group, colour, sex, language, religion, political, or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth, or other status” reads Article 2 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (also called Banjul Charter). The Banjul Charter was implemented by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)—predecessor of the AU—in 1986, and “is a human rights instrument designed to champion the promotion and protection of human rights and basic freedoms in Africa.” The Charter further states that every individual shall be entitled to equal protection under the law, thus paving the way for the equal treatment (also) of sexual and gender minorities (SOGI) within the human rights mandate. However, the continued high levels of violence, discrimination, and other human rights violations perpetrated due to a person’s real or assumed sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) persist on the national and regional governance levels on the African continent (Arcus Foundation & Iranti, 2019; Coalition of African Lesbians & African Men for Sexual Health and Rights, 2013). They are furthermore embedded in a global assault on the

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basic human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals.¹

In this essay, I will delve into the question of whether the AU and its human rights architecture constitute a space that respects, protects, and fulfils the human rights of sexual and gender minorities. Directly linked to this are questions of identity and belonging. The narrative of the *UnAfricanness* of non-hetero and non-cisgendered Africans is appropriated not only at the national but also at the regional governance level to shrink the spaces for LGBTIQ+ activists and their allies. I argue that this ostracises LGBTIQ+ Africans and their allies from the regional integration project, undermining the aspirations of the AU's human rights framework at a time when a safe regional space is needed.

Unity in Diversity—Or Rather Not?

In the fall of 2016, in Arusha, Tanzania, at the headquarters of the East African Community (EAC), I am conducting an expert interview with an official from the judicial arm of the RO, the East African Court of Justice (EACJ). The expert tells me that their motto is *Unity in Diversity*, but that they might want to get rid of the *diversity part* in order to make sure *the gays don't come here* (again). Roughly two years prior, the *Anti-Homosexuality Bill* that was passed in Uganda was taken before the EACJ and challenged there. A technical issue—the bill had been passed in the Ugandan parliament, but the necessary quorum had not actually been reached—led the Constitutional Court of Uganda to rule the act invalid on procedural grounds. This led the EACJ to dismiss the case. In May 2023, Ugandan President Museveni signed an updated version of the *Anti-Homosexuality Act*. This time, the parliamentarians responsible for the piece of legislation made sure all seats were filled when tabling and passing the bill, which introduces the death penalty for *aggravated homosexuality* and other severe punishments. The bill was challenged before the Ugandan Constitutional Court, which upheld parts of it and was also brought before the EACJ by relentless activists fighting for SOGIESC rights.

After the interview in Arusha at the EACJ, I went back to my hotel room to call my girlfriend in Germany. Positionality is complex. For me, it is part of the constant reflection on the research I carry out on and in collaboration with a community I am globally a part of; however, my privileges and my experiences of marginalisation are different from those identifying as lesbians in Tanzania, Uganda, or other

¹ The terms SOGI, SOGIESC, and LGBTIQ + will be used interchangeably. The LGBTIQ + acronym is largely a Western conceptualisation to denote non-heterosexual orientations and non-cisgender identities (Tamale, 2011). The terms and acronyms render invisible non-Western descriptions and designations. Colonial continuities need to be reflected here too, as the reproduction of the *common* abbreviation and the continuation of making other terms invisible is in itself highly problematic and a continuation of power dynamics. Furthermore, the acronym is an oversimplification of the different identities, lived realities, and the intersections of identities of the people it tries to describe.

(African) countries. Within the broader and highly diverse LGBTIQ+ communities everywhere, intersecting forms of power and exclusion shape experiences in complex and multilayered ways. I write this piece from the position of a *white*, lesbian, cis-woman, educated in Germany and Sweden, who enjoys many privileges—one of them being to write about this topic from a safe space. I also write this piece from the position of an implicated subject (Rothberg, 2019) as a German/European and thus part of the world from which the criminalisation of same-sex sexual conduct originated—laws that were exported all over the world and imposed, particularly, on African countries, with legacies that persist to this day.

Colonial Legacies and the *UnAfricanness* Narrative

Colonial legacy laws have, to today played a significant role in the criminalisation of LGBTIQ+ identities, bodies, and lives—especially those of gay men/men having sex with men. Laws criminalising same-sex (sexual) relations, so-called *anti-homosexuality laws* or *sodomy laws*, were passed under British colonial rule and remain in force in over 30 of the Commonwealth's 56 member nations, including over a dozen African states. These laws commonly use terms such as *carnal knowledge*, *unnatural offences* and *indecent practices*, which have been interpreted to prohibit sexual acts between persons of the same sex, typically targeting men who have sex with men. These colonial-era laws remain embedded in Penal Codes based on British Commonwealth law (Han & O'Mahoney, 2018; Jjuuko, 2020). Tamale and Bennett (2011, p. 5) reflect: "Ironically, while Africa is holding onto these archaic colonial laws, countries from which they were imported have largely scrapped them from their statute books."

Today, LGBTIQ+ persons in many parts of the African continent are framed as imports from *the West*; their identities and bodies are said not to be African. They are labelled as *UnAfrican*. The narrative that non-cisgender and non-hetero persons are a recent import from *the West* is perpetuated by an alliance between politicians and religious leaders (Mwikya, 2014). However sticky the narrative, it is ahistorical and apolitical. Based on the accounts from eastern and southern Africa, Morgan and Wieringa (2005a) see the point of departure for this narrative in the influence of missionaries and Christianity and subsequently the lasting impact of (settler) colonialism in African countries. Regarding the lived realities and experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals in the multifaceted settings all over Africa in the past and present, four seminal readers bring together accounts from across the continent which debunk the narrative of the *UnAfricanness* and show how diverse African SOGIESC have been. Morgan and Wieringa (2005b) focus on female same-sex relationships and practices in eastern and southern African countries. In three more recent compilations, scholarly, activist, and artistic contributions from across the continent illustrate multifaceted aspects of the discussions and discourses around the lived realities of LGBTIQ+ Africans. These are Tamale's *African Sexualities: A Reader* (2011) and the *Queer African Reader* edited by Ekine and Abbas (2013). Another

edited volume by Namwase and Jjuuko sheds light on *Protecting the human rights of sexual minorities in contemporary Africa* (2017) from a legal perspective and provides insights into nine country contexts with a view to debunking the myth of *UnAfricanness*.

The framing of Africans that are not hetero and/or cisgender as *UnAfrican* is, of course, an oversimplification and overgeneralisation. The discourse is meant to encompass the whole continent and thus create a sense of communality that is rooted in the othering of LGBTIQ+. It does not only prevail on the national level. Increasingly, regional arenas are being appropriated with this terminology—as elaborated in the following part.

LGBTIQ+ Within the African Human Rights Architecture

The African regional integration landscape is structured through the AU and the implementation of the treaty establishing the African Economic Community² and the eight recognised Regional Economic Communities.³ The AU functions as an umbrella body and spells out a six-stage process that centres on economic integration but goes well beyond that. Similarly, the human rights architecture of the AU constitutes the umbrella framework for the continent and the sub-regional governance levels; it consists of an elaborated framework of organs, institutions, policies, and politics (Centre for Human Rights, 2021). Already under the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the AU's predecessor, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (the Charter, also called Banjul Charter) was implemented in 1986, which is a human rights instrument designed to champion the promotion and protection of human rights and basic freedoms in Africa. In 1987, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (the ACHPR, also called the Commission) was inaugurated to oversee and interpret the Charter, which is one of the most important instruments in protecting and upholding human rights.⁴ In 1998, the OAU introduced the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR), which was operationalised in 2006 in Tanzania. The court's jurisprudence has been expanded over time. Most prominently, between 2014 and 2016, the Court issued landmark rulings on human

² Also called the Abuja protocol, which entered into force in 1994 under the predecessor of the AU, the Organisation of African Unity.

³ Arab Maghreb Union; Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa; Community of Sahel-Saharan States; East African Community; Economic Community of Central African States; Economic Community of West African States; Intergovernmental Authority on Development; Southern African Development Community.

⁴ The Commission consists of eleven Commissioners who serve in their personal capacity as independent experts from a variety of professional backgrounds. Commissioners can serve for six years and are eligible for re-election, but not consecutively and are nominated by their own governments. The appointed Commissioner should meet the highest standard of independence, impartiality and be competent in their fields of their work (Criteria for the nomination and election of members of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, AI Index: IOR 63/002/2007).

rights violations by Rwanda, Tanzania, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire on critical issues such as free speech, political rights, fair trial standards, and state accountability. In response, those four countries withdrew their acceptance of the AfCHPR's jurisdiction for individual and NGO cases. Even though the court has continued to expand its case law, its enforcement powers are limited due to political resistance from some member states. Over time, the role of the African Commission has also been expanded to include mechanisms like rapporteurs and working groups and as a platform for engagement with civil society. Additionally, thematic mandates on gender, freedom of expression, and indigenous rights were added, and new reporting mechanisms for states on human rights compliance were developed. "While the African Commission has a wide mandate covering the monitoring, investigation, and promotion of human rights, the African Court's mandate is exclusively limited to receiving and adjudicating complaints on violations of human rights" (Dersso, 2021, p. 654). Overall, the African human rights system has significantly developed over the past decades (Centre for Human Rights, 2021; Murray, 2004) and can be seen as a norm leader (Okafor & Dzah, 2021). Within the African human rights architecture, the role of rights connected to SOGIESC is highly contested—especially in the past two decades.

Developments within the human rights arenas of the AU, such as the ACHPR, in the past two decades show that the *UnAfricanness* narrative has been used to appropriate these regional spaces. It has been used to prohibit the registration of NGOs with a focus on LGBTIQ+ issues for observer status. It has also led to the de-registration of a transnational NGO called Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) from having observer status with the African Commission due to the interference of the AU's intergovernmental body, the AU Executive Council (Reiss & Tabengwa, 2024).

However, the picture is more complex and not a single story of *African homophobia* (Ndashe, 2013) —neither on the national nor on the regional governance level. Around the same time of these contestations surrounding the de-registration of CAL, the ACHPR adopted Resolution 275 in its 55th ordinary session in Luanda, Angola, in May 2014 (ACHPR/Res.275(LV)2014). Resolution 275 on the *Protection against Violence and other Human Rights Violations against Persons on the basis of their real or imputed Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity* marks a widely acknowledged milestone for the advancement of the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa. It condemns the increasing incidence of violence and other human rights violations, including murder, rape, assault, arbitrary imprisonment, and other forms of persecution of persons on the basis of their imputed or real sexual orientation or gender identity. It further condemns the situation of systematic attacks by state and non-state actors against persons on the basis of their imputed or real sexual orientation or gender identity, and admonishes African states to prevent, investigate, and remedy such acts of violence by both state and non-state actors (Network of African National Human Rights Institutions, 2020).

For the first time ever, the highest human rights body on the continent recognised the need for the protection and promotion of the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons. Resolution 275 is the outcome of the relentless and long-standing activism of crucial

LGBTIQ+ NGOs in collaboration with other NGOs on the continental level within the Commission as the relevant regional arena. It broke a long-standing position of denial against the inclusion and recognition of LGBTIQ+ persons in the African human rights discourses (Network of African National Human Rights Institutions, 2020; Nibogora, 2021; Reiss & Tabengwa, 2024). Since then, the human rights of sexual and gender minorities have been included in soft law instruments such as the 2017 adopted Resolution 376 on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Africa, which calls for the protection of human rights defenders in Africa and specifically mentions protecting those working on sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, in March 2023, the African Commission adopted Resolution 552 on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Intersex Persons in Africa. This Resolution calls on states to develop and implement measures on the suggested recommendations and normative reforms that are essential for the integration and inclusion of intersex human rights in the human rights development agenda, especially accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030. Through these and other mechanisms, the Commission has acknowledged the ongoing violence, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination faced by LGBTIQ+ persons in society, with particular attention to LBTI women and intersex persons (Reiss & Tabengwa, 2024).

Are African Union Human Rights Spaces Safe?

The discussed contestations of the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons within the AU human rights architecture are not happening in isolation but are deeply embedded in a broader development: the attack on the human rights of sexual and gender minorities globally. This can be understood as a response to perceived deviations from (hetero-) patriarchal norms, leading to the othering of bodies, identities, and individuals who do not conform to the gender norm of cisgender identity and heterosexual orientation. As discussed, this also manifests in the AU's human rights spaces—*inter alia*—through the narrative of *UnAfricanness*. Related to this are discussions around *African values* and *family values*—which subscribe to a (hetero)patriarchal norm of family and reproduction, the conformity to binary gender roles, and cisgender identities. As pointed out, these *values* were widely introduced with colonialism and the subsequent criminalisation and are an ahistorical notion of *African* sexualities, which have always been diverse. Today, these notions are perpetuated by transnationally operating political and religious leaders, think tanks, and NGOs (Kaoma, 2012; Strand et al., 2024). The 2023 Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill is an example of the manifestation of transnationally active *anti-* LGBTIQ+ actors which have influenced the scripting and introduction of the bill. Furthermore, the proponents of this bill diffuse their blueprint across the continent to influence policymakers in other parts of the continent (Mersie & Hlatshwayo, 2023).

When the space for LGBTIQ+ persons is shrinking on the national level—due to locally active, globally connected *anti-gender* and *anti-* LGBTIQ+ networks—the regional integration project can be seen as a place to turn to. This is evidenced

in the case of the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill and Anti-Homosexuality Act, which were both challenged before the EACJ by transnational activists. It is also conveyed by activists from all over the continent in the documentary *The Commission: from Silence to Resistance* (Ditsie, 2017) and by activists from the southern African region who have expressed this expectation vis-à-vis the AU and particularly the ACHPR (Reiss, 2024). In the face of globally operating anti-LGBTIQ+ transnational networks, the regional level could provide a space where the rights of minorities are safeguarded as intended by the African human rights mechanisms and the idea of Pan-Africanism. Tamale points to this in her seminal work on Ubuntu in *Decolonisation and Afro-Feminism* (2020). With Resolution 275 and some of the soft law mechanisms discussed above, the Commission has proven it can be a safe space—to some extent—for sexual and gender minorities and their allies. Especially now, at a time when it is crucial to uphold human rights for all and ensure due institutional processes to safeguard the rights of minorities, the AU should take this opportunity to constitute this safe space and beacon of hope for discriminated minorities. It should withstand the undue influence of Western actors to undermine the very notion of the Pan-African idea of unity in diversity and Ubuntu.

Conclusions and Way Forward for Regionalism Research

Researchers from (or associated with) the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria have been at the forefront of scholarly-activist debates on human rights discourses concerning SOGIESC on the African regional governance level (Centre for Human Rights, 2021; Dersso, 2021; Jjuuko et al., 2022; Okafor & Dzah, 2021; Viljoen & Sogunro, 2024). Their analyses stem mainly from socio-legal perspectives. What is largely missing from the scholarly debates in regionalism research is a focus on certain subjects—such as LGBTIQ+ individuals and communities—within the African human rights architectures and the safeguarding of their rights. Here, questions of belonging to and within regional integration projects and thus within crucial governance spaces, such as the AU, are key. Beyond this, understanding the contestations of the institutional set-up of African ROs and their human rights framework and norms is increasingly relevant for scholars, policymakers, and activists, more so in the age of the polycrisis and when the rights of sexual and gender minorities are under attack globally. Here, regionalism research can think and conceptualise further the role of African ROs—and the AU in particular—as a space of belonging to the Pan-African project for all its subjects, including LGBTIQ+ individuals.

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Essay 30: Evaluating the Rising Tides of Regional Economic Integration in Africa: The Reality and Illusion of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)



Michael Popoola and Olumide Ekanade

Introduction

The concept of regionalism has been subjected to divergent interpretations by different international relations scholars. But for the purpose of this essay, regionalism would be described as the development where countries within a specific geographical region come together to form alliances or organisations to achieve common goals. In other words, regionalism can be described as a transnational cooperation for the purpose of addressing a common challenge, especially those that transcend national borders. The cooperative arrangement involved in regionalism includes issues such as socio-cultural matters and political, military, and economic activities. The concept, whose origin could be traced to the establishment of Customs Unions and trade alliances by the European countries in the nineteenth century, became more popular across the globe at the beginning of the twenty-first century as the United Nations Organisations and other multilateral bodies placed a high premium on regional organisations (Fawcett, 2013). As a matter of fact, articles 51, 52, and 53 of Chapter VIII of the UN Charter contain some clauses that recognise the roles that regions and regional organisations could play in contributing to international peace and security (Sarooshi, 1999). This made Barbieri (2019) posit that regions and regionalism are playing a quasi-autonomous role in shaping global policies and in addressing several issues that were previously tackled in the framework of global multilateral institutions. Similarly, Söderbaum and Shaw (2003) opine that regional organisations are so important in the contemporary international system that it may be hard to imagine a world without them. Therefore, the crux of this essay

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is to evaluate the nascent African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) within the context of the question: *Would regions save the world?* and to sensitise African leaders about the potential threat that may consign the organisation to the limbo of inactivity.

Overview of the African Quest for Economic Integration

Regional economic integration has stood as a cornerstone of Africa's journey towards collective prosperity and self-determination. The history of economic integration in the region can be traced to 1980, when the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA), together with the Final Act of Lagos (FAL), was established by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in Lagos, Nigeria. It was meant to help African countries achieve economic growth and sufficiency, build a self-reliant economy for Africa, and increase Africa's world industrial production, among others.

The ultimate goal of the arrangement was to achieve the establishment of an African Economic Community by the year 2000. Unfortunately, the programme could not stand the test of time due to a lack of effective monitoring and follow-up mechanisms for its implementation. This was compounded by the emergence of many economic blocs, which were given more attention by the member states. Furthermore, issues such as collapse in export commodities prices, fluctuating exchange rate, the Gulf crisis and hike in oil prices, as well as the burden of debt servicing, stifled the growth potential of intra-African trade.

The next effort by African states toward economic integration resulted in the establishment of the African Economic Community (AEC) on June 3, 1991, in Abuja, Nigeria. The agreement came into force on May 12, 1994. The ultimate goal of AEC was to create a free trade area, customs union, a central bank, a common currency, and a common market, leveraging on Sub-Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as fundamental building blocks for the advancement of African nations (UN Economic Commission for Africa et al., 2017). The deepest form of economic integration which the AEC sought was believed to be the best solution to Africa's economic miseries.

However, the AEC could not achieve its aims for several years after its establishment. The deep economic integration which it sought was said to be a standard too high for it. Moreover, State leaders selectively adhered to OAU/AU directives on AEC based on self-interest, which hindered the organisation's effectiveness. In addition, the Sub-Regional Economic Communities (RECs) placed sub-regional interests over the collective well-being of Africa (African Union, 2019).

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

The conviction that economic cooperation and integration, at the continental level, was a *sine qua non* to achieving sustainable development and prosperity across Africa made African leaders resilient in seeking the establishment of an organisation for pan African economic integration. In January 2012, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union adopted a decision to establish a Free Trade Area (Erasmus, 2024). After many years of negotiation and consultations, the Free Trade Area was formally launched on 15th June 2015. On 21st March 2018, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement was signed by AU member nations. The agreement came into force on 30th May 2019. But due to the outbreak of COVID-19, trading under AfCFTA did not commence until January 2021.

The AfCFTA agreement is aimed at ensuring the free movement of business, persons, and investments within Africa, stimulating economic growth, creating jobs for the teeming African population, and accomplishing full comprehensive regional economic synergy and development among the 54 members of the AU that endorsed the agreement (Eritrea being the only exemption) (Odijie, 2023). The objectives of the organisation are to:

1. Strive to create a single market for goods and services, which would deepen economic integration in Africa.
2. Propagate the liberalisation of trade.
3. Facilitate investment building in member states and RECs.
4. Institute a continental customs union.
5. Establish economic and monetary union.
6. Enhance the competitiveness of the economies of African countries.
7. Facilitate infrastructural and industrial development on the continent.

Part of the agreement was the construction of an institutional structure, including a secretariat, headed by an elected Secretary General in Accra, Ghana. The AfCFTA initiative has attracted positive comments from some international figures. For instance, the United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, remarked that, “AfCFTA is set to be an engine of trade and industrialisation that will advance sustainable, inclusive growth in Africa. Its full implementation could generate income gains of up to nine per cent by 2035. This would lift up to 50 million people out of extreme poverty and reduce income inequalities in Africa” (UN News, 2023). Similarly, the coordinator of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) African Group, Ambassador Eheth Salomon said that “the AfCFTA can help generate value addition on the continent with all the benefits that it would bring in terms of economic diversification, higher income, and better jobs (WTO News, 2022).

Among other things, the AfCFTA agreement seeks to fulfil a cardinal aim of economic integration, which involves the systematic removal of both tariff and non-tariff impediments to trade in order to boost productivity, foster greater economic interdependence, and sustain mutually beneficial relationships among participating

nations. The AfCFTA agreement encompasses various protocols aimed at driving economic integration and development across the African continent. These protocols include trade in goods, trade in services, investment, intellectual property rights, and competition policy.

Article 2 of the Trade in Goods protocol outlines its primary objective as fostering a liberalised market for the exchange of goods. In ensuring that the liberalisation of trade is achievable under the agreement, Article 4 accords the Most Favoured Nation Treatment (MFN) to all States under the agreement. This requires each state party to grant immediate and unconditional treatment to one another that is no less favourable than what it grants to any most favoured nation. The same Article 4 also stresses that member states are to progressively eliminate import duties which have a significant effect on goods coming from other African states. In consonance with the principle of special and differential treatment (S&D), outlined in the agreement, the least Developed Countries (LDCs) are tasked with gradually eliminating 90% of tariffs on non-sensitive products over a period of 10 years, whereas non-LDCs are required to implement this elimination within 5 years (International Trade Centre [ITC], 2021). In addition, Article 9 of the protocol states that member nations cannot impose quantitative restrictions on either imports from or exports to other African states except otherwise stated in the AfCFTA regime.

The AfCFTA agreement also includes the *Trade in Services* protocol. This is a practical approach to liberalising service trade, which constitutes about 50% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) across Africa. Through this agreement, African countries demonstrate their commitment to gradually liberalising services by allowing service providers from other African nations to access their domestic service markets. This focuses on five priority service sectors: telecommunication, tourism, transport, financial services, and business services, which already have considerable concentration in the African market. The principle of the mutual recognition clause within the Agreement is expected to accelerate the liberalisation of service trade between and among the host countries.

Furthermore, the goal of the protocols on investment and intellectual property rights is to attract foreign investment, promote innovation, and protect the rights of investors. The inclusion of a competition policy emphasises the commitment to ensuring fair competition and preventing anti-competitive practices so as to foster a level playing field for businesses.

Evaluation of AfCFTA

Creating a continental value chain development is at the core of the AfCFTA agreement. In order to realise this objective, the first Guided Trade Initiative, which covered only trade in goods, was launched on October 7, 2022, with eight countries (Cameroon, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, Tanzania, Egypt, Ghana, and Tunisia) to kick-start the AfCFTA preferential trade activities for 96 identified commodities. These include ceramic tiles, tea, coffee, processed meat products, corn starch,

sugar, pasta, and glucose syrup, amongst others (African Union, 2024). Consequently, value-added coffee has been traded from Rwanda to Ghana. Similarly, batteries and tea have been traded from Kenya to other countries in Africa. The private sector in Africa has also been leveraging the opportunity offered by the Certificate of Origin provision of AfCFTA to maximise its potential. The first AfCFTA Certificate of Origin was issued by Tanzania for a shipment of coffee to Algeria in November 2023. Tunisia also issued a Certificate of Origin for the export of chemical and agro-food products to Cameroon in December 2023, while South Africa issued its first Certificates of Origin for a shipment of some goods to other African countries in January 2024. The second phase of the AfCFTA Guided Trade Initiative has also been launched, with 35 AU members indicating interest in it (Ifoghale, 2024).

On the issue of addressing tariff barriers to trade, the AfCFTA Council of Ministers secured tariff offers from 45 African countries in 2024, while tariff offers from seven other countries are going through verification. With this schedule, the AfCFTA has opened state parties to more meaningful trade, which will allow them free access to about 97% of goods produced across the African continent. This is key to the objective of greater economic interdependence and economic integration (Ifoghale, 2024). Without tariff concessions and rules of origin, the free trade area may not be operational. Although up until now, the tariff offer has been effective only on about 100 items, out of approximately 45,000 traded items identified.

The desire to remove some other hindrances to trade has led AfCFTA to adopt the corridor approach as a form of intervention to further identify impediments to trade and eliminate them. A team from the AfCFTA Secretariat has been able to assess six trade corridors so far. These include the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor; the Northern Corridor which runs from the port of Mombasa in Kenya to DRC via Uganda and Rwanda; the Central Corridor that commences from the port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda; the North–South Corridor of SADC; the Central Africa Corridor which include Cameroon, Gabon and Congo; and the North African Corridor.

Furthermore, the AfCFTA Adjustment Fund was officially established in 2023, and it became operational the same year. The fund, which is being hosted in Rwanda, is required to mobilise the huge sum of USD 10 billion over a period of ten years to compensate for revenue losses that some State Parties may experience in the process of liberalisation for the full implementation of the AfCFTA. This is to further strengthen the commitment of the state party to the organisation's agreement.

The Trade in Services Protocol of AfCFTA has also come into force. This has encouraged African countries to be committed to gradually liberalising services, allowing service providers from other African nations to access their domestic service markets. This Agreement places emphasis on five priority service sectors. They are tourism, telecommunication, transport, financial services, and business services. The investment protocol, intellectual property rights, and competition policy protocols of AfCFTA have been adopted for ratification. All of these can be described as the reality of AfCFTA.

Limitations of AfCFTA

The above goals of AfCFTA have been implemented, although at a minuscule level. Some scholars of African affairs opine that AfCFTA is an ongoing economic arrangement that is still in its formative years and is trying to grapple with the vagaries of the global economic market. To such people, assessing AfCFTA performance may appear to be premature. However, it will be appropriate to point out some limitations which have been hindering the progress of the organisation and which, if care is not taken, may make the whole arrangement an illusion.

About six years after the creation of AfCFTA, African countries have not been able to achieve unanimity in the most basic commitment to the enforcement and implementation of the agreement (Trade Law Centre, 2023). As of 2024, only 47 African countries have ratified the instrument of AfCFTA, while only 46 have deposited their instruments of ratification to AfCFTA headquarters. Seven other nations have signed but have not yet ratified the agreement. This aligns with the opinion that the problem of political will of African nations is a huge factor capable of hindering the course of implementation of the AfCFTA agreement. Africa records a trend of its leaders assenting to or ratifying an agreement only to become apathetic to its enforcement. For this reason, intra-continental trade has remained slothful and a contrast to the excitement and optimism which surrounded the birth of AfCFTA.

In addition, the political and economic realities of some African countries are discordant with the objectives and implementation of the AfCFTA agreement because the types of barriers which AfCFTA is trying to eliminate are what they depend on for survival. For instance, the political economy of the Republic of Benin has relied on what Odijie (2023) describes as an informal or illegal entrepot, based on smuggling and illicit trade with neighbouring countries, particularly Nigeria. The AfCFTA agreement prevents member countries from smuggling or illegal cross-border trade. It also prevents member nations from imposing a transit tax on trade passing through their territories. This might be the reason why the Benin Republic is one of the countries that have not ratified the AfCFTA agreement. Similarly, the RECs are supposed to be the building blocs for AfCFTA, but some RECs whose major sources of revenue are tariffs and custom duties find it difficult to pursue, with commitment, any programme that strives to eliminate about 90% of tariff barriers to trade.

Related to the above issue are the protectionist policies which resonate throughout Africa and have made the idea of shared economic vision elusive in Africa right from the colonial era. The diverse economic milieus across the continent, as well as the clandestine economic rivalries between some African countries, have not been in favour of AfCFTA objectives (Oke, 2024).

Moreover, non-tariff barriers to trade remain a challenge in Africa. According to exporters and stakeholders, Logistics and policy hurdles are more challenging within Africa than when exporting to other countries. This, coupled with the absence

of uniformity in trade rules and guidelines, makes cross-border trade more challenging and unpredictable. Some exporters claimed that in certain situations, it is more economical to ship goods to Europe or the US than to other African countries.

In addition, a successful regional integration requires the availability of infrastructures such as a good road network, an efficient transportation system, a good port management scheme, reliable energy generation, an availability of a smart border, and a well-coordinated telecommunication technology. The absence of these facilities in most African states constitutes a hindrance to the realisation of AfCFTA objectives (African Union, 2019).

A 2024 report by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) showed that African countries continue to favour trade with the rest of the world over intra-continental trade. The African Export–Import Bank (Afreximbank) also stated that as of 2024, only a mere 17% of African trade was intra-continental, as against 68% within Europe and 59% within Asia. Similarly, a report by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2024 revealed that Nigeria’s export to other African countries was 12.13% of its total exports. During the same period, Nigeria’s export to Europe was 45% while its export to Asia was 25.31% (Erasmus, 2024). Hence, African countries have not fully taken advantage of the larger market created by market integration under the AfCFTA arrangement.

AfCFTA, no doubt, holds significant promise in promoting industrialisation and boosting the manufacturing sector across Africa. However, the limited production or low industrial capacities informed by heavy reliance on external suppliers is another major limitation to the realisation of the aspirations of boosting the manufacturing sector in Africa.

Furthermore, Africa is a continent with more than 40 distinct currencies. Unlike Europe, where a single currency facilitates trade, the multiplicity of currencies in Africa has constituted a serious roadblock to the free flow of goods and services across borders. It has also led to a high cost of transactions, inefficiencies, and other complexities, which impede economic integration within the continent.

Can AfCFTA Save the African Region?

There is no gainsaying the fact that the fragmented African economies need concerted efforts to overcome economic backwardness. This is what the AU seeks to achieve through AfCFTA. With the right support, AfCFTA can promote the full utilisation of the abundant human and natural resources in Africa and make the continent a huge industrial hub.

AfCFTA is the largest economic integration arrangement in the world, by the number of member countries. Expectedly, the large market which could emerge from AfCFTA will serve as an incentive for inward foreign direct investment within the continent. Multinational companies would be encouraged to see the continent as one big economic space into which they can make strategic investments. This

would curtail the prevailing industrial deficit in Africa, promote economic diversification and address the continent's over-dependence on primary commodities exports. Furthermore, AfCFTA would enable the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Africa to have access to larger markets, better infrastructure, information, and technical support from their supporting agencies within Africa.

In addition, if fully implemented, AfCFTA could bring about a continental value chain that will facilitate production from the original stage to processing, packaging, transportation, customs clearance, export shipping, and sales to other countries. This implies that the production process can smoothly change hands from country to country. Leveraging on the provision of elimination of tariff barriers and unrestricted movement of goods, services, as well as factors of production across the participating African nations, this can create a prosperous and resilient Africa in the twenty-first century (Ifoghale, 2024).

Increased intra-African trade and indigenous exchanges will result in more job creation that will launch Africa into a thriving economic orbit. Maliszewska et al. (2020) posit that AfCFTA is capable of increasing intra-African exports by more than 81%. This assertion has been corroborated by some international agencies and institutions. A research carried out by the World Bank shows that the socio-economic activities which AfCFTA would generate when fully operational, could reduce the number of people living in extreme poverty in Africa by 30 million, improve the incomes of about 68 million others who live on less than USD 5.50 a day, increase income in Africa by USD 450 billion by 2035, and boost Africa's exports by USD 560 billion (Maliszewska et al., 2020). Similarly, the UN Economic Commission for Africa opines that the single market trade agreement will enable the African economy to reach the USD 29 trillion mark by 2050 (Tine, 2022).

Over time, this economic prowess could translate into non-economic benefits such as socio-cultural harmony, improved diplomatic ties, peace and security, political leverage, and regional stability. Therefore, AfCFTA is an initiative that holds the potential of transforming and unlocking Africa's economic capability, fostering all-encompassing growth and development, thereby saving Africa from its parlous economy. On the heels of this, one can say without equivocation that the region can save the world.

Conclusion

Having established the fact that AfCFTA can actually save Africa by fostering inclusive growth and development, which is the main aim of establishing the organisation and having discussed the limitations which could make the realisation of this laudable objective an illusion, this essay will conclude by recommending some policy measures which AfCFTA as an organisation and individual African countries can adopt to deal with the limitations.

AfCFTA needs to put a robust monitoring and evaluation framework in place so as to track the progress of the implementation of the AfCFTA agreement, including key performance indicators, benchmarks, and regular reporting mechanisms.

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Essay 31: A Critical Appraisal of Regional Economic Integration in the Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)



Faith Chelangat

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Agreement, hereinafter referred to as the AfCFTA, is an agreement by 54 out of 55 African countries, signatories to the African Union (AU) and contracting member states to the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs), to establish the world's largest free trade area through the creation of a single market. As a flagship project of the AU's Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA aims to accelerate intra-African trade in order to boost Africa's trading position in the global market. According to the AU, it posits that this can only be achieved if African member states economically unite to strengthen Africa's common voice and policy space in global trade negotiations.

Subsequently, RECs play a central role in the implementation of the AfCFTA, as they constitute a regional economic integration foundation towards continental integration. The Agreement establishing the AfCFTA acknowledges that RECs play the role of building blocks, as well as constituting principles exhibited by RECs' best practices. Additionally, RECs are perceived as principles that promote preservation of *acquis* while also acting as tools for political regional stability. This essay explores the question of whether regions will save the world in the context of achieving continental integration under the auspices of the AfCFTA. The question explores the role of RECs in advancing the implementation of the AfCFTA and how these RECs can be leveraged to achieve continental integration. The first section analyses the role of RECs as provided for in the AfCFTA Agreement, the next section probes into the relationship between RECs and AfCFTA by analysing the opportunities it presents, the third section analyses the challenges encountered in exploiting RECs as AfCFTA's implementation vehicles and submits actionable recommendations on each challenge, and finally a conclusion that articulates how REC-AfCFTA collaboration can strengthen Africa's position in creation of a competitive continental market.

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Role of RECs as in the AfCFTA Agreement

RECs as Building Blocks for the AfCFTA

Regional Economic Communities form the basis of regional integration in Africa. The Preamble of the AfCFTA Agreement, verbatim, acknowledges the RECs' Free Trade Areas as building blocks towards the establishment of the AfCFTA. This is further illustrated in Article 5 (b) of the AfCFTA Agreement that outlines the principles governing the AfCFTA, to include "RECs' Free Trade Areas (FTAs) as building blocks for the AfCFTA." Through RECs, African countries have, to the maximum, utilised trade as an engine to achieve economic growth and sustainable development, at both individual and regional levels. The Agreement establishing the AfCFTA keenly notes the significant advantage that can be derived from inculcating RECs in acceleration of the implementation of the AfCFTA.

RECs Best Practices as Principles for the AfCFTA

The Agreement highlights, under Article 5 (l), that the AfCFTA shall be governed by "best practices in the RECs, in the State Parties and International Conventions binding the African Union." Consequently, the AfCFTA, in its mandate to eliminate trade barriers and boost intra-African trade, is required to abide by best practices exhibited by RECs in implementing and promoting trade in regional trading spaces. This is not only limited to the exchange of goods and services, but also relies on RECs' legal, regulatory, and institutional framework to structure AfCFTA's sound framework.

Preservation of the Acquis

The Agreement is governed by the principle of considering the preservation of the *acquis*, as directed in Article 5 (f). This principle endorses the firm belief that the AfCFTA, in its mandate to boost intra-African trade and promote integration, will build on what RECs have achieved. Although the Agreement does not define the term *acquis*, the vocabulary was noted and adopted as a guiding principle during the negotiations for the establishment of the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA). *Acquis* is a French term meaning *that which has been agreed*. Contextually, it meant that the TFTA negotiations should commence and reinforce trade negotiations that COMESA, EAC, and SADC had reached.

The AfCFTA's inclusion of the principle of preservation of the *acquis* applies during the negotiations for tariff concessions. State Parties in RECs that do not have preferential arrangements between them will negotiate for such terms, while those

that have will “maintain that which has been agreed” and “build on the acquis of the existing REC FTAs” to achieve trade liberalisation. Article 19 (2) of the Agreement establishing the AfCFTA acknowledges that “state parties that are members of RECs, RTAs and CUs, which have attained higher levels of integration than under this Agreement shall *maintain such higher levels among themselves*.” This demonstrates the significant role RECs play in assisting the AfCFTA achieve its mandate to promote intra-African integration through trade, as there is no trade without liberalisation.

Opportunities: Leveraging the REC-AfCFTA Relationship

The REC-AfCFTA relationship foresees the co-existence of several African FTAs alongside each other for the furtherance of regional integration. This relationship ensures that AfCFTA States pursue specific strategies and disciplines within the RECs integration agenda to deepen integration on trade, investment, and meet necessary local needs, including political cooperation, seamless mobility of people and goods, harmonisation of regional trade policies, regional programmes on infrastructure, technical expertise and institutional capacity, etc. This section delves into the opportunities presented by the REC-AfCFTA relationship and how African states can leverage this relationship to deepen integration towards advancing the AfCFTA.

Movement of Persons, Goods, and Services

The AfCFTA’s mandate to achieve the elimination of trade and non-tariff barriers, boost intra-African trade and market integration, and ultimately create a single common market is possible with trade facilitation measures in place. Additionally, the AfCFTA is able to structure the removal of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) with the intervention and involvement of relevant RECs. For instance, in West Africa, ECOWAS guarantees free movement of persons across its region by granting an ECOWAS passport. This strategy has deepened market integration in West Africa and led to sustainable growth.

In a 2018 UNCTAD Report on *Regional Integration and Non-Tariff Measures in the ECOWAS*, the Committee noted that the regional integration process is fuelled by two regional organisations: ECOWAS and WAEMU. Both institutions are driven by similar objectives: increasing trade integration, harmonising policies, and creating a common market for their regional member states. Consequently, the two institutions have eliminated trade barriers (tariffs and non-tariffs) in order to promote effective trading. Through the ECOWAS passport, there has been freer movement of persons and factors of production, while WAEMU, a common monetary area, has contributed to financial integration. The AfCFTA’s protocol on free movement of persons across the continent is highly likely to rely more on best practices exhibited by RECs.

The East African Community (EAC) has also made progress in terms of facilitating the free movement of persons, goods, and services. On 16th December 2024, Kenya elected to introduce a *Class R* work permit that allows EAC nationals to obtain documents free of charge. Through the Kenyan Gazette notice, although not publicly available at the time of this writing, the Prime Cabinet Secretary announced that EAC citizens will only need proof of citizenship to work in Kenya. The country joins Rwanda in the EAC, which has abolished work permit fees for EAC nationals. This move is not only applaudable, but also acknowledgeable as it seeks to leverage opportunities within the EAC region as well as the AfCFTA.

RECs as Implementation Vehicles

RECs are viewed as implementing vehicles as they effectively facilitate the realisation of policies and initiatives, as well as fostering cooperation and deepening integration among member states. RECs act as implementation vehicles by promoting political stability, trade liberalisation, and harmonising trade policies to advance economic integration. African RECs offer innumerable opportunities to gain ground for the implementation of the AfCFTA.

RECs are responsible for political regional stability as they play a crucial role in peacekeeping and mediation efforts within their regions. RECs promote democratic values, good governance, and respect for human rights and the rule of law within their member states. RECs are cognizant of the fact that cross-border trade is made impossible under situations of unrest, protests, and political instability. Further, the implementation of the AfCFTA is likely to be hampered in cases where there are violence and insecurity issues.

RECs have established legal systems and tools that address conflict and authority to intervene and resolve before it escalates and potentially destabilises the region. For instance, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), through its Protocol on Politics, Defence, and Security Co-operation, played a major role in intervening in protests occurring in Eswatini and Lesotho, as reported by African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD, 2022) in *The Role of SADC in Eswatini: Lessons from Lesotho*. The Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) has been involved significantly in conflict prevention by deploying peacekeeping forces to several countries in West Africa, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau. At the moment, ECOWAS is actively involved in mediation efforts by Senegal and Togo in persuading the Alliance of Sahel States: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, to reconsider their decision to permanently leave ECOWAS in 2025.

RECs act as implementation vehicles by promoting trade liberalisation in terms of reducing trade barriers—tariffs and non-tariff barriers, thus facilitating free flow of goods, services, capital, and labour across African borders. Through RECs, member states have established free trade areas and customs unions to promote trade, investment, and economic growth within the region. Some RECs, such as

ECOWAS and EAC, have enabled free movement of persons through regional passports, thus increasing the workforce and flow of goods and services. Regional economic growth has been witnessed through the role RECs play in infrastructure development. RECs facilitate pooling resources and coordinating investments, thus promoting the construction of regional infrastructure projects, roads, railways, and energy grids. This has enhanced market access, reduced transportation costs, and improved connectivity within the region.

The AfCFTA has leveraged the efforts RECs have in place to deepen integration and further improve it. The most notable endeavour is the development of the Trans-African Highway (TAH) network. The network has ten routes that connect various African countries and is developed with the support of RECs. The TAH network has the potential to benefit the AfCFTA by reducing transportation costs for AfCFTA traders, increasing trade flows, enabling faster delivery times and promoting regional integration by breaking down trade barriers and connecting traders to markets. Finally, the TAH network will stimulate economic growth through job creation and increase investment in member states, both domestic and foreign investment.

Challenges in the REC-AfCFTA Relationship

This section acknowledges that the REC-AfCFTA relationship offers a plethora of opportunities that African member states can leverage to achieve economic growth, deepen regional integration, and further their quest to achieve continental integration. In the same breadth, the section concedes to the fact that the REC-AfCFTA relationship faces challenges that have a trickling effect on the implementation of the AfCFTA. This section discusses the challenge presented by the overlapping membership of African countries in several RECs and their commitment to the AfCFTA. This discussion extends to address the concept of non-compliance by African states of AU decisions, especially on the moratorium limiting the formation of new RECs. This part invites the ongoing political instability in ECOWAS and the resolution by the Alliance of Sahel States to permanently depart from the main regional bloc. Finally, the section will discuss the challenge posed to the REC-AfCFTA relationship in ratifying the Free Movement of Persons Protocol and how this can be resolved to achieve Africa without borders.

Multiplicity and Overlapping Membership in RECs

Africa's integration is facing the biggest challenge of multiplicity and overlapping membership in RECs. Among the major objectives of the AfCFTA is the creation of a single market with a liberalised form of trade. However, according to Farr and Gallagher (2021), the existence of the eight RECSs has created a spaghetti bowl effect that slows down the process of creating a single market. The spaghetti bowl effect,

as coined by the renowned economist Jagdish Bhagwati, is not a new experience in Africa. This effect restricts member states from negotiating trade arrangements with third parties. Without losing sight of the fact that AfCFTA is an FTA, parties to an FTA are allowed to retain their own trade tariffs with third parties. Overlapping membership in FTAs results in possible complications as parties are required to comply with several rules and standards.

As it stands, the AfCFTA is determined to achieve continental integration. This involves coordinating and harmonising policies that are expressed through the eight existing RECs. The AU Constitutive Act (AU, 2002) recognises that these RECs are building blocks for continental integration and does not encourage the establishment of more RECs. Additionally, as discussed in this essay, the AfCFTA agreement recognises these RECs as governing principles, under Article 5 (b) of the AfCFTA Agreement. The overlapping membership challenge projects a situation where AfCFTA member states will have difficulties in harmonising trade policies developed in the 8 RECs, as this requires significant political will, coordination, and cooperation among member states and RECs. Odinga (2024) writes in The East African News that it is time to cede loyalty to supranational African ideals. Raila Odinga, Kenya's former Prime Minister and the African Union Chairman (AUC) contender, while addressing the challenge of multiplicity and overlapping membership of RECs, submits in his article that, "Africa is considered to have the highest concentration of sub-regional economic organisations that promote integration but, today, the continent has remained the least integrated among the globe's key regions."

Non-Compliance: Formation of More RECs

Further to the AU Constitutive Act (AU, 2002) is a declaration that resulted from a ministerial meeting held in Ouagadougou, which placed a moratorium on the creation of new RECs. The Declaration limits the formation of more integrative units that result in the birth of additional RECs, contrary to the goals and objectives of the AU. The ongoing formation of the Alliance of Sahel States, a fragmentation of ECOWAS, is a clear and defiant move of non-compliance with the Declaration limiting the formation of new RECs.

The ECOWAS region is currently experiencing political instability that has seen Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso announce their departure from the West African regional bloc to form a defence pact called the Alliance of Sahel States (Al Jazeera, 2024). The three military leaders, Captain Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso, Colonel Assimidi Goita of Mali, and General Abdourahamane Tchiani of Niger, met in Niamey, Niger, on 6th July 2024 for an inaugural summit of the leadership in the Alliance of Sahel States region. As reported by Africa News on 7th July 2024, in a joint statement, the three states led by Junta leaders accused the ECOWAS of "moving away from the ideals of its founding fathers and Pan-Africanism" and further claimed that the regional bloc is "under the influence of foreign powers." They added that

ECOWAS had failed to protect the three states when they experienced regular insurgent attacks that left thousands of people dead, therefore staging military coups to address perennial insecurity issues in the three states.

The trilateral decision of the three countries to irrevocably withdraw from ECOWAS is a blow to regional integration efforts and further endeavours to achieve continental integration under the AfCFTA (Bhattacharya, 2024). Additionally, the decision impacts the fundamental principle of the free movement of persons that is enshrined in the ECOWAS region, which has consequential effects on the trade of goods and services, as discussed in the next section. Suffice to say, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are members of the eight-nation West African Monetary and Economic Union (WAEMU), also known as Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA, in French). The Union promotes West Africans' unity through a common shared currency—the West African CFA Franc, which is pegged to the Euro.

Thioune (2024) submits in *The Conversation* that Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger hint at a new West African currency. In February 2024, Niger's General Tchiani hinted at a possible currency for the Sahel region, as a move away from the CFA Franc that is “a legacy of colonisation.” The decision to launch a new multi-lateral currency within the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS) region is a question that this paper would have loved to explore; however, it is beyond its ambit. Regardless, it is clear that there are risks involved, including the fact that the new currency stands to be treated as a threat to the regional influence of WAEMU as a supranational institution. Further, it would cause major fragmentation of existing economic blocs, which would hinder the efforts towards regional integration and continental integration in extension. AoSS' use of a separate currency seeks to weaken the existing currency zones that have been the cornerstone of economic cooperation in West Africa. The effect of fragmentation of currency zones hinders regional integration by creating trade barriers, thus discouraging trade within the region.

Ratification of the Free Movement of Persons Protocol

In the quest to implement the AfCFTA lies a significant requirement for AfCFTA state parties to ratify the Protocol on the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence, and Right of Establishment, which is hereinafter referred to as the *Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons*. Although the REC-AfCFTA relationship offers an opportunity for African member states to open their borders and deepen integration, it is clear that AfCFTA state parties are reluctant to embrace the idea of Africa without borders, as it challenges the concept of state sovereignty, which African states have placed so much value on. According to Olaniyan (2008), African states have associated the idea of physical borders with territorial sovereignty, as a way to preserve national identity. Thus, the compelling reasoning of Odinga (2024) is that it is “time to cede loyalty to supranational African ideals,” for Africa to achieve continental integration.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2023) addresses the ratification challenge in an article titled *Momentum builds for free movement under AfCFTA*. So far, the Protocol has been ratified by four states: Mali, Rwanda, Niger, and São Tomé and Príncipe. The disparity in numbers is a clear indication of how AfCFTA state parties are not enthusiastic about the Protocol. This essay acknowledges that the free movement of persons across African borders is paramount for economic development, and that is why some RECs, such as EAC and ECOWAS, have specific rules and procedures in place that regulate the free movement of persons within the region, i.e., regional passports. Therefore, the real challenge lies in opening up the borders at a continental level at the first attempt, instead of encouraging RECs to ratify the Free Movement of Persons at regional levels, and ultimately having the RECs open regional borders to each other. Somehow, this move will soften the blow on state sovereignty by allowing African states, through their respective RECs, to make decisions on opening up African borders, without the feeling that they were forcefully made to do so.

Conclusion

This essay sought to establish whether regions will save the world in the context of examining regional integration in the implementation of the AfCFTA. Into the bargain, the essay analysed the role of regional organisations in promoting models of regional cooperation, including the role of RECs in the quest to achieve continental integration. The essay demonstrates that the AfCFTA Agreement recognises RECs as governing principles, and that there is a moratorium limiting the creation of new RECs. However, due to Africa's passion for flexible integration and liberty to form integrative units that suit their interests, needs, and priorities, there is a likelihood for the birth of new units that could take the shape of RECs, thus inviting the question of non-compliance. The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AoSS) by members of ECOWAS, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is an indication of dismemberment from an established regional bloc; thus, it is a miscarriage of the goals and objectives of the AfCFTA and the AU towards achieving African unity.

The essay explored the REC-AfCFTA relationship and the opportunities it presents for AfCFTA state parties to deepen regional integration, promote economic development and act as implementation vehicles. Further, the essay addressed challenges faced by the REC-AfCFTA relationship, including multiplicity and overlapping membership of African member states to RECs, the issue of non-compliance with AU decisions as evidenced by the formation of a new REC-AoSS, and the slow ratification of the Free Movement of Persons Protocol.

In conclusion, the essay finds that the REC-AfCFTA collaboration is a significant tool in the implementation of the AfCFTA. Member states are encouraged to objectively explore how the relationship could be leveraged to deepen regional integration and continental integration. The essay recommends that efforts to harmonise trade policies on a continental scale may commence at regional levels so as to allow a

seamless transition to trading under the AfCFTA. Additionally, the essay mentions that the success of the Free Movement of Persons Protocol is hugely based on how much it exploits the regional platform, for both its ratification and implementation. This Protocol stands a high chance of opening African borders if RECs are encouraged to open borders first, within themselves. At a continental level, states through RECs may negotiate on terms to lift border restrictions, thus promoting trade without borders.

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Essay 32: Regionalism: Lessons from Africa



Mohamed Ashour

Introduction

Regionalism and regional integration in Africa, with intellectual roots spanning over a century, are shaped by a complex legal and regulatory framework. It has been profoundly shaped by the continent's historical interplay with the West and the colonial division of its territory into diverse and heterogeneous states (Ashour, 2007). In the post-independence era, Africa adopted diverse development strategies. Regional integration emerged as a pivotal tool for both economic transformation and national cohesion. Building upon pre-colonial cross-border ties, numerous Regional Economic Communities (RECs) were formed (Hout & Salih, 2019). The establishment of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in the 1960s provided a new impetus for RECs. The Lagos Plan of Action, adopted by the OAU in 1980, outlined a roadmap for an African Economic Community, with RECs as building blocks. Then, the Abuja Treaty 1991 recognised eight RECs as the building blocks of the African Economic Communities: the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), East African Community (EAC), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) (UNCTAD, 2019a).

This proliferation can be seen both as a step toward continental economic and political integration and as a potential stumbling block due to its multiplicity (Karns et al., 2015). This variation in the assessment of the role of sub-regional organisations has led to differing views regarding efforts to coordinate among these entities, including the Framework Agreement for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). At the same time, some see it as addressing the difficulties and challenges

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arising from their multiplicity (Karns et al., 2015). Others argue that the agreement is more politically motivated than economically, suggesting it may fail due to African leaders' inability to learn from previous experiences (Adebajo, 2019).

This essay examines African regionalism, addressing both the successes and limitations encountered, seeking to extrapolate lessons from the African experience to understand the broader implications for regional integration efforts.

Regionalism and Regional Integration in Africa: Motives and Objectives

A careful examination of the provisions of continental and sub-regional treaties and agreements reveals the diversity of motives and goals underlying regional integration efforts in Africa. Overall, these are mostly linked to concepts of national liberation, African unity, economic and social development, as well as stability and security within the continent and its external role and influence. For example, when the preamble of the Abuja treaty 1991—a basic reference for most African economic organisations—outlines the rationale for establishing an African Economic Community, it acknowledges the historical context of African unity and development, emphasising the importance of economic integration for the continent's progress. (OAU, 1991).

Socioeconomically, African nations are predominantly categorised as developing economies characterised by overreliance on primary commodity exports, under industrialisation, limited productive capacity, and insufficient capital and foreign investment. The burden of substantial debt has exacerbated these challenges, leading to declining national and per capita incomes (Ashour, 2007, 2022). According to the United Nations data, 33 of the 46 countries classified as least developed are African, including those recently added to the list, such as South Sudan in 2012, and oil-producing nations like Angola since 1994. The durable presence of many African countries in this category necessitates an investigation into the underlying causes and potential solutions (UN, 2021).

While there are various factors contributing to Africa's economic underperformance and marginalisation in the global economy, the competitive and fragmented nature of its economic systems has been a primary constraint on growth and development. For example, fragmented markets often limit economies of scale, discourage cross-border investments, and increase transaction costs, making intra-African trade accounts for less than 13%, which is significantly lower than in other regions. (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023). In response, based on the theoretical potential of integration to address these systemic challenges, by fostering unified markets, reducing trade barriers, and strengthening Africa's collective bargaining power, African governments have increasingly recognised regional integration as a strategic imperative choice to pursue (de Melo et al., 2018).

Regionalism in Africa was not exclusively motivated by material interests but was often imbued with distinct ideological convictions that reflected the dynamic evolution of national, regional, and occasionally, global rapports. For example, Pan-Africanism—initially launched as an ideological movement opposing colonial domination and emphasising unity among African peoples—persisted as a central tenet of African regionalism. Even when the Cold War prompted a shift towards economic concerns, the concept of African unity and Pan-Africanism evolved into a strategy for collective self-reliance and a unifying intellectual framework for continental and sub-continental economic integration projects. Consequently, regional economic communities became emblematic of a nascent regional African identity (Hout & Salih, 2019).

Political motivations have also been significant. The relative weakness of African states, often products of the colonial era, has amplified the appeal of regionalism. Hostile relations and regional ambitions among some African countries, as well as poor relations between some African leaders and their peoples, have led some to see regional integration as a means to bolster their sovereignty and legitimacy (Ashour, 2022; Hout & Salih, 2019).

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the apparent ascendancy of Western economic and liberal principles aggravated the vulnerabilities of African states, paring down their capacity to manoeuvre and operate on the global stage. Simultaneously, this new geopolitical context incentivised regional cooperation as a strategy to address domestic challenges and enhance collective bargaining power. The dissolution of ideological blocs and the subsequent adoption of market-oriented reforms by many African states further facilitated the possibility of regional integration due to ideological convergence, which, according to Brada et al. (1993), is a prerequisite for the success of regional integration efforts. Furthermore, the establishment of regional blocs in Africa can help in achieving social and political stability, providing a framework for settling costly conflicts, transforming conflict zones into areas of common interest by creating a broader entity that accommodates narrow primary affiliations (Ashour, 2007).

Regional Integration and Regionalism in Africa: Stages and Achievements

It is worth noting that efforts towards continental economic integration in Africa began with the Lagos Plan of Action, adopted by the Organisation of African Unity in 1980. This early integration phase largely fell short of its objectives, as newly independent states grappled with consolidating independence and were hesitant to cede aspects of sovereignty for broader integration. Consequently, except for integration within the franc zone, these efforts did not result in free trade agreements or deeper integration organisations (Ashour, 2022; Hout & Salih, 2019). A decade later, the Abuja Treaty of 1991 aimed to establish the African Economic Community,

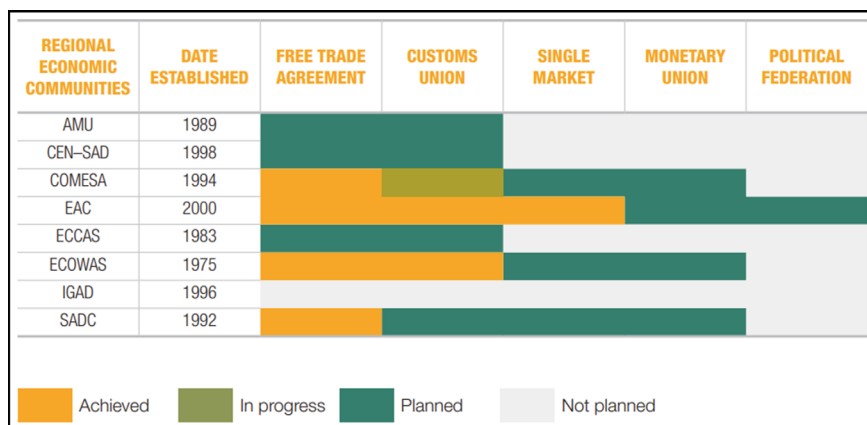


Fig. 1 Progress towards economic integration in Africa. (Source UNCTAD (2019b, p. 173))

progressing through six phases over a span of 34 years, from its entry into force in May 1994 till 2028. These phases focus on removing barriers to the movement of goods and services and achieving full integration of the continent (OAU, 1991).

Drawing on reports from the African Union Commission's (2019) expert committee on *The Status of Regional Integration in Africa* and the African Union's (2021) *Making Freedom of Movement the Centre of Continental Integration*, it is evident that the performance of regional organisations in attaining their objectives has been inconsistent. No regional bloc has advanced beyond the third stage of integration, which focuses on establishing a customs union by implementing common external tariffs and harmonising trade policies (see Fig. 32.1). Instead, they have selectively implemented components of subsequent phases, such as protocols on freedom of movement and infrastructure development, deviating from the phased trajectory outlined in the Abuja Treaty.

Regional economic groups in Africa, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Economic Community, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have implemented various social integration policies targeting health, gender, migration, and education. These initiatives include job mobility programs and efforts to combat diseases like HIV/AIDS and COVID-19, alongside promoting gender balance. ECOWAS, for instance, has taken significant measures to benefit youth and combat unemployment through its strategic framework, which emphasises community-based participatory approaches to policy development and decision-making at all levels. This framework ensures transparent mechanisms for presenting community and national programs and projects, prioritising policies and projects that provide better opportunities for the region's people to engage in productive social, political, and economic activities (African Union Commission, 2019).

For its part, COMESA has made social integration and women's empowerment a priority through its *50 Million Women Speak Out* program and its Social Charter. Its

social Charter includes a statement on the importance of women's roles in regional integration, the challenges they face, and ways to address them (COMESA, 2018). In terms of freedom of movement, while recognising the gaps and disparities in the scope and implementation of that freedom, regional economic groups have achieved remarkable and varying progress. ECOWAS leads in this area, with citizens of West African countries enjoying the right to move without restrictions, achieving a 100% compliance rate with the African Multidimensional Regional Integration Index (AMRII), followed by the East African Economic Community (96%). In contrast, the compliance rate of other organisations, including SADC and COMESA, is less than 65%. Although SADC adopted a protocol to facilitate the movement of natural persons and gradually eliminate obstacles, it has not yet entered into force (African Union, 2021).

Regarding productive integration and infrastructure, the 2019 report indicated that all regional economic groups strive to ensure effective productive integration, which is critical for creating a more diversified and resilient economic base in the face of shocks. This includes building human and institutional capacities to add value to goods and services while increasing individual incomes. For example, the East African Community developed a draft framework to enhance cooperation in the acquisition, development, transfer, and marketing of technology for innovations and intellectual property frameworks. Similarly, COMESA has undertaken notable initiatives to encourage investment in the regions of its member states.

The 2019 report also highlighted efforts to develop infrastructure and connect Africa's capitals and commercial and production centres through high-speed railways in accordance with the African Union's 2063 plan. SADC adopted a framework and vision for infrastructure development for 2027, aiming to facilitate smooth and cost-effective cross-border infrastructure projects. However, the 2021 report emphasised the weak performance of various regional organisations in this aspect and the general lack of commitment to regional integration requirements, revealing the depth of the infrastructure problem in Africa.

Trade integration represents another dimension of assessing the effectiveness of regional organisations in Africa. Both reports agreed that most regional organisations have succeeded in increasing overall exchange rates among member states and advancing integration efforts. However, the 2021 report, based on the multidimensional scale, pointed out the performance distinction of ECOWAS, COMESA, and the East African Community compared to others, based on the clear steps these organisations have taken in establishing and enhancing free trade areas, adopting uniform customs tariffs as reflected in the index indicators.

It is worth mentioning that all member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement. When the agreement entered into force on May 30, 2019, trade under it was scheduled to begin in July 2020. However, it faced some delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic (African Development Bank Group, 2020).

In 2020, SADC and the East African Community achieved the best performance in monetary integration, as highlighted by the Multidimensional Integration Index. This success is attributed to their progress in establishing preparatory institutions

such as the Monetary Institute and the Committee for Harmonisation of Convergence Criteria. Various regional economic groups have taken measures to enhance financial integration, including cross-border banking transactions, updating monetary policy frameworks, and developing codes of conduct for market makers in government securities to promote efficient market practices (African Union, 2021).

COMESA's stock exchange is a notable example of financial market integration. Furthermore, regional bodies have outlined strategies for monetary union, such as the SADC's plan for a central bank and the shared currency of the West African Monetary Zone. The East African Community has also initiated steps towards a unified currency (African Union Commission, 2019).

Global environmental and human rights developments have significantly influenced Africa's regional integration agenda. Regional organisations have incorporated environmental concerns into their frameworks, as is exemplified by SADC's environmental management protocol. However, substantive progress in this area remains limited. In contrast, fiscal and political integration, representing the highest levels of integration, face substantial obstacles. Despite initial efforts by organisations like SADC and COMESA, overall advancements in these areas remain stagnant, indicating a lower priority among member states and a need for substantial foundational work (African Union, 2021).

Regionalism and Regional Integration in Africa: Obstacles and Challenges

Despite concerted efforts by African regional economic communities to align with the continent's integration objectives as outlined in the Abuja Treaty and Agenda 2063, the realisation of these goals is impeded by a complex array of challenges. This section explores these obstacles, examining their multifaceted nature and implications for regional integration.

Political and Security Obstacles and Challenges

Political and security obstacles are the most significant barriers to African regional integration. Key issues include: the top-down character of regionalism efforts, lack of political will, and limited commitment to the integration process by African countries (Ashour, 2007). Despite programs promoting empowerment for youth, women, and civil society, ultimate authority remains with government entities, making civil organisations' roles complementary and donor-driven (Chingono & Nakana, 2009). A trust gap among member states and prioritisation of short-term national interests over collective goals also hinder progress (de Melo et al., 2018). Additionally, states often fail to fulfil their financial contributions to regional organisations,

viewing membership as a means to enhance national legitimacy rather than achieving organisational goals (Chingono & Nakana, 2009).

Political factors further complicate integration efforts, as national and regional interests frequently conflict. For instance, Nigeria's border closures in 2020, driven by smuggling and security concerns, significantly obstructed intra-regional trade (Kwarkye & Matongbada, 2021). The rigid adherence to national sovereignty, coupled with the delayed harmonisation of domestic policies with regional frameworks and the resistance to the delegation of authority to supranational entities, constitutes a significant barrier to economic integration. Furthermore, the continent's resurgence of unrest, coups and violence, and its repercussions, as exemplified by recent secessions from ECOWAS, exacerbate these challenges and undermine regional cohesion (Green, 2023).

External dependency, particularly on European markets and multinational corporations, represents another major challenge. The CFA franc's pegging to the French franc exemplifies how such dependencies hinder regional cooperation. Moreover, the influence of multinational corporations, often aligned with local elites, prioritises global market integration over intra-African collaboration (Ashour, 2022).

Legal and Administrative Obstacles

Regional organisations in Africa face challenges in achieving consensus on decisions due to the need to avoid conflicts and ensure commitment, leading to lengthy decision-making processes and loose outcomes. This issue is linked to the dilemma of choosing between *depth* or *breadth* integration, where the former enhances coordination among fewer members, while the latter addresses narrow markets (de Melo et al., 2018). It also highlights that a lack of political will, where leaders prioritise national interests over regional commitments, often hinders progress. To address these challenges, the African Union introduced the Minimum Integration Programme (African Union, 2009).

Despite improvements in infrastructure projects in transportation, communications, and public health, most regions still lack adequate infrastructure to support regional integration. Complications also arise from differences in accounting and administrative systems, a shortage of technical personnel, and favouritism in staffing. Geographic distribution often outweighs competence in appointments. Additionally, the lack of necessary statistics and information, unclear roles between the African Union and RECs, and multiple memberships in various organisations hinder progress. The African Union has acknowledged this challenge and called for the development of clear standards to assess the effectiveness of regional organisations in achieving integration goals, in accordance with the Abuja Plan and Agenda 2063, a measure that has been implemented and enforced since 2018 (African Union, 2021).

Economic and Social Obstacles

Regional integration in Africa encounters substantial economic and social obstacles. The adoption of integration models, such as the European Union framework and functional theory, often proves inadequate due to their misalignment with the unique and diverse contexts of African nations (Chingono & Nakana, 2009). This misalignment results in what is referred to as the *capacity trap*, where the replication of successful models from other contexts does not align with the necessary conditions for effective implementation in Africa (de Melo et al., 2018).

Economic barriers are pronounced, with significant deficiencies in transportation and communication infrastructure exacerbating challenges. Development disparities among member states and variations in GDP levels within regional communities like ECOWAS, SADC, and COMESA further complicate integration. The high degree of GDP variation and the predominance of primary commodity production among member states foster competitive rather than cooperative dynamics, leading to protective measures that undermine collective economic progress.

Additionally, inconsistencies in monetary and fiscal policies, such as exchange rate distortions and divergent fiscal approaches, negatively impact the investment climate. Despite regional organisations' efforts to harmonise policies, their achievements remain insufficient (de Melo et al., 2018).

Socially, border regions, frequently marginalised and lacking essential services, face significant health and security challenges. These areas, shaped by artificial borders and ethnic distributions, become centres of both formal and informal networks that may obstruct integration efforts to protect localised interests.

Conclusion

The experience of regional integration in Africa provides valuable lessons that are applicable to regional initiatives more broadly. Among these lessons is realising that the full potential of regional integration requires addressing a range of interrelated issues through a multifaceted approach. Central to this effort is the necessity for strong political commitment. Integration initiatives without genuine backing often stagnate or fail. Empowering regional institutions with adequate resources and clear mandates to coordinate and enforce agreements is essential. Harmonising economic policies to remove trade and investment barriers, alongside substantial investments in infrastructure, is fundamental for facilitating regional trade and movement.

Economic diversification is also critical. Regions reliant on a narrow range of commodities face limitations in fully benefiting from integration. Promoting broader economic activities and reducing dependency on external actors can enhance the effectiveness of regional integration. Additionally, ensuring equitable distribution of integration benefits is vital to prevent disparities that could undermine support and generate tensions.

Political stability and good governance are foundational for successful integration. A stable political environment fosters cooperation, while effective governance ensures transparency and accountability. Engaging the private sector and civil society is also important, as these stakeholders can drive innovation, entrepreneurship, and public support for integration efforts.

A flexible and incremental approach to integration, which allows for adjustments based on evolving circumstances, can make the process more manageable and sustainable. Continuous monitoring and evaluation are necessary to identify challenges, measure progress, and refine strategies.

Despite the challenges, there are encouraging signs. The gradual shift away from rigid national sovereignty towards greater acceptance of regional interventions indicates a move towards more collaborative regional efforts. The reduction of ideological differences in favour of common interests and improvements in trade and economic growth further support this positive trajectory.

To advance regional integration, it is crucial to support and enhance the efforts of regional organisations like the African Union, ensuring precise standards for measuring progress. While external support remains valuable, it must be viewed as a shared commitment to mutual interests. Regional integration, particularly in Africa, showcases how regions can address common challenges such as migration, security threats, and economic instability, contributing also to solutions for global issues like food security and climate change. By fostering cooperation, reducing barriers, and creating unified markets, regions empower nations to act collectively and amplify their influence on the global stage. In sum, and as the COVID-19 crisis has proven, sound and efficient regions can play a vital role in saving the world, creating a more interconnected, resilient, and stable global system. A prosperous and integrated Africa, for instance, strengthens its ability to engage on equal footing and collectively tackle challenges that transcend national and continental borders.

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Essay 33: Referee, Player, or (Only) Trophy? Africa in Contemporary Global Geopolitics and Global Governance



Timothy A. Balag'kutu

Introduction

In contemporary global relations, Africa has experienced the worst of humanity: racist dehumanisation, destructive plundering, greedy exploitation, and eventual marginalisation in world affairs. Africa involuntarily sacrificed land and people for the development and comfort of some parts of the world. The peoples, societies, and states of the region continue to contend with exploitative global interests. Yet, Africa remains resilient and poised to partake in progressive global development processes.

Africa's history of subjugation and peripheralisation in contemporary global affairs is part of an experience that has attracted animated scholarly discussion, especially in the humanities and social sciences. A notable development in the field of international relations (IR) is the non-Western theory movement (Acharya & Buzan, 2009). This critical, advocatory, and emancipatory scholarly movement underscores the imperative to accentuate the voices and agency of all world communities in knowledge creation. Diversity of worldviews is essential and enriches the discipline dedicated to explaining and understanding the world. Diverse knowledge about the world enhances global relations, too. Africa's significance in contemporary world affairs is reflected in the region's positionality, long-standing and complex history of global engagement, as well as diverse cultural heritage and dynamic social orientations that provide important knowledge to and about the world.

Given the significance of Africa (and other regions) in contemporary global relations, the regional concept is essential for appreciating, understanding, interpreting, and hence governing the growing multiplex politico-economic world order. Regions and regional organisations are key political entities, policy platforms, and essential scholarly phenomena in the contemporary global environment. Regions present a rich diversity and uniqueness to the story or stories of the world. The unique and

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diverse cultural heritage, complex, deep and wide historical experience, and extensive knowledge (re)sources of the world's regions collectively drive and enhance the new global multilateralism.

Africa occupies a central position in the world, literally and politically, which makes the region a key global actor. Africa is a strategic and potentially influential global force whose role is critical to saving the world from self-destruction. However, Africa is yet to demonstrate power and/or exert influence in contemporary world affairs. In six paradoxes, Ali Mazrui (1980) presents a diagnosis of this historical condition of Africa in global power relations. Global geopolitics has transformed tremendously since Mazrui's diagnosis over five decades ago. Africa has yet to cure this paradoxical condition.

The transformation in global geopolitics includes an aggressive effort to woo Africa—whole and in parts—into ideological alliances and development partnerships. Various global actors have established partnership forums and other mechanisms to attract Africa (Soulé, 2021). The trend puts Africa in the light of the proverbial beautiful bride or handsome suitor, attracting several competing interests. Africa, the (still) passive object of global interest, is like an attractive suitor or bride and/or coveted trophy for which the rest of the world competes. In this renewed scramble, the region is drawn into divisive interstate competition for friendship and partnership. Africa also mainly receives and consumes the world's development ideas and models, and even products—hardly producing, proffering, or advancing any. Moreover, despite being centrally located and a repository of vast resources that support the world's powers, Africa remains at the margins of the world. Thus, Africa is central at the margins and marginalised in the centre of world affairs.

Africa's apparent acceptance of the paradoxical marginalised centrality in world affairs raises questions about the region's preparedness to assertively engage in global governance and influence global geopolitics. Is Africa (still) only a trophy that other players contest for, or can Africa be a proactive player and even an influential referee in contemporary world affairs?

Building on a brief exposition of Africa in global affairs and highlighting the region's unique positionality in the world, this think piece discusses the importance of regions and regional cooperation in contemporary world affairs. The premise of the discussion is that regions can save the world from its current destructive trajectory, and Africa is potentially an influential force in the direction of geopolitics and global governance. Beyond a (mis)perception of Africa as a passive and helpless trophy, the region possesses the capacity to influence global political economics and champion global governance, especially for justice, peace, security, and the global common good.

Of Global Actors and Interactions

In symbolic representation, the reality of global interactions can be understood in terms of a game, and the actors are represented by key elements: referee, player, and trophy. The *referee* represents a mediator or regulator of international relations, with moral authority to make value judgements and possibly influence global geopolitics. *Player* represents an active participant in shaping world affairs, and often a major contender in global geopolitics, pursuing an interest, agenda and/or ideology. *Trophy* represents a passive object of competition between and among players.

In the context of global regionalism, regions and/or regional bodies bound by ideology and/or specific interests embody these categories of the game of global reality/relations.

Power Dynamics and Hierarchy in Actor Categories

Relationships across the three categories are an interplay of power dynamics that define global relations. Power emanates from and manifests in observable actions that establish a hierarchy in the following descending order: referee, player, trophy. Referees have a high moral authority to mediate interactions. Political and economic muscle, as well as soft power sources, enhance the authority and influence of a referee. The power of a player is in the capacity to advance specific political, economic or social interests, and/or ideology with the desire to dominate, often through regional and/or ideological blocs. The trophy is a passive and seemingly powerless but attractive object of competing players' interests that necessitate refereeing. Despite its passivity and perceived powerlessness, the trophy possesses an important (indirect and implicit) power that underlies, triggers and manifests in the active competition among (observable or perceived) powerful interests. Thus, despite the hierarchy, each category possesses an integral source of power in world affairs, making each important and potentially influential in geopolitics and global governance.

Africa in Global Power Dynamics

As a region and regional entity, Africa's place in the characterisation of global affairs is complicated, and somewhat in a flux—from a mix of external and internal attitudes. In traditional international relations scholarship and practice, Africa is often perceived as a powerless recipient and target of competitive global capital and political ideology—a geopolitical and economic trophy. Indeed, in global alliance and partnership politics, all actors are (potential) trophies. However, with Africa's high supply of industrial resources and markets, and central positioning in the world, the

region has the most pronounced global trophy status and attraction. An internalisation of the perceived placement by Africa reinforces the (mis)perception of the region as a trophy (only) in world affairs and geopolitics.

Yet, from a critical, post-colonial, and post-imperial global governance lens, the reality of Africa's place in world affairs transcends a trophy (only) status. Africa's global positionality—consisting of attractiveness to divergent global interests, human and industrial resource endowment, and strategic location—enhances the region's potential as a player and referee in world affairs. Indeed, in various representative elements, Africa participates in world-shaping global governance processes through key intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations and its agencies, the World Trade Organisation, and platforms of regionalism.

Africa's unique positionality provides an important and influential mediatory leverage—i.e., a referee—in world affairs. This positionality affords Africa the capacity to influence decisions and actions of other old and new/emerging competitive interests in the region's resources, friendship and partnership. Besides, without an avowed contentious global ideology and with a history of state-level ideological swinging, Africa presents a hopeful alliance opportunity to global ideologues. Moreover, whereas all actors are potential targets in alliance politics, Latin America, Asia, and Africa have been key targets of the (undying) liberal Western capitalist and Eastern socialist ideological alliance contest. Increasingly, development interests from Latin America and Asia also pursue partnerships with and in Africa—competitively. For Africa, this wide attraction and growing competitive global wooing constitutes an important source of mediatory leverage in geopolitics. In addition, Africa possesses tremendous soft power resources in the arts, sports, and entertainment that can enhance global leverage. With these power resources, Africa may not need the traditional coercive muscle to be an influential referee in the affairs of the world—especially for peace, human rights, climate security, and justice.

Hence, in varying degrees and in different perspectives, Africa possesses all three representations of the game in global power relations—if even still latent in some cases. The world needs Africa—to survive. Africa needs the world, too. However, Africa's positionality—wide attractiveness, endowment, and strategic location—is a key player and referee power source in the current multiplex world order. The world's competing economic and political interests need, and even depend on, such leverage to avoid destruction. Geopolitically, therefore, Africa is an important and potentially influential regional force in the world.

Nonetheless, Africa is yet to actively express power and leverage in the world. Certainly, the history of denigration, exploitation, and marginalisation has caused significant scarring and disempowerment to the region. The reality of this history continues to drive the region's (self-)imposed resignation to the margins of world affairs. Indeed, even in continental development processes, dependent expectation of assistance from the *international community* is commonplace in Africa; often too, such notions of the international community exclude Africa. For instance, reference to the international community in Ghana hardly perceives an inclusion of Burkina Faso, Togo, or Côte d'Ivoire, the immediate neighbours, or other African countries, for that matter. This widespread continental mindset raises concerns about Africa's

recognition and understanding of its place in the world, and hence readiness to assertively uphold and utilise its positionality to advance the global common good. A confident and united African front in the world is essential to enhance the power and potential leverage of Africa's positionality in world affairs.

African Unity, Regionalism, and Global Peace and Security

Africa's progress and potential leverage rest on a common regional purpose and global presence without disruptive interference. Kwame Nkrumah, the avid Pan-African and Ghana's founding President, asserted that the mid-twentieth century was for Africa's two objectives then: independence today, and unity tomorrow (Nkrumah, 1958). In his opening remarks to the 1958 All-African People's Conference, Nkrumah challenged his audience on these two tasks. Unity then was necessary to foster a strong and respected African presence, and hence Africa's survival in a world that was still seething with imperialist ambitions. Africa has achieved some political (not yet the needed economic) independence. Continental unity remains, and with complex challenges that many nonetheless believe are not insurmountable.

African unity is especially relevant in the current global context, and not only for the survival of the region, but also because the world depends on it. Echoing this fact and the Pan-African credo, Kwesi Kwaa Prah asserts that "...I don't think Africa really has any chance of doing anything in the present world without unity" (2006). Growing trends in global politics and economics, and now also environmental concerns, highlight the importance of continental unity. The African Union's *Agenda 2063* (AU, 2013) echoes this conviction. Besides, global cooperation and world peace depend, in large part, on African unity. Given the extent and nature of the multiplex global geopolitics, a strong and influential neutral force is necessary and (perhaps, the only) assurance of the possibility of global security and hope for peace. As Condoleezza Rice (2024), former US Security Advisor, observes, the world is inching threateningly toward total nuclearisation, signalling a real danger of nuclear security breakdown. Africa, as a united regional entity, can be the necessary neutral mediating force with leverage in the ensuing nuclear politics that threaten global security and peace.

African unity also underscores the relevance of regions, regionalism, and interregionalism in contemporary global development efforts. Security, climate change, and sustainability are pressing global development issues that require concerted policy effort and governance commitment. However, finding common ground on and/or total commitment to such global challenges is elusive at global intergovernmental forums. Self-interest, suspicion, and enduring statist power politics interfere even with pressing global development processes. Regions and regional organisations could provide promising alternative policy platforms. The African Union has demonstrated this promise with the adoption of the Common African Position (CAP) on Climate Change, Peace, and Security (AU, 2024). The gesture came ahead of and in

anticipation of the UN Conference of Parties 29 (COP29), a contentious and sometimes controversial global platform. A decade earlier, the regional body adopted a Common Position on post-2015 development, focusing on Pan-African development priorities that are critical to realising the vision of *Agenda 2063* (AU, 2014). These instances show the potential of unified regions and regional organisations in global policymaking, especially on such critical human-centred development issues as climate security.

Nonetheless, Africa continues to grapple with continental unity and regional integration, mainly due to state-centred political and economic challenges that often threaten existing platforms of integration.

Of Confident Personality and People-Centred Unification

A rethink of the nature of and approach to continental unification in Africa is crucial. The history of continental African unification is replete with challenges emanating from domestic and international politics and economics that undermine statist efforts. The trend in self-interested inter-state relations, especially in the current geopolitical environment, poses an even tougher challenge and may preclude total state-level commitment to continental unity. Thus, important as African unification is, an exclusive statist approach is problematic.

People-centred unification would be a more promising alternative than persistent state-centrism. People are the nerve and core of any society. The people of Africa are the region's most valuable and enduring geopolitical and economic resource. The success of any common regional position on the world stage depends on active and informed popular support. In his epilogue to Walter Rodney's (1981) *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, Babu reiterates the timeless imperative for continental unity and emphatically concludes that "the people must answer" (p. 288) the call to unite—from within and across states.

Answering includes committed action on pertinent regional development challenges. Security, traditional and critical, is especially compelling and requires unified regional popular commitment. In Africa, destructive inter-ethnic contestation is a major security challenge that has defied statist policy measures. The continent's contentious and porous border system, as well as fragile border politics, also pose worrying security concerns that test state-level policy and inter-state governance efforts. Increasing intra-continental migration due to climate insecurity and violence worsens the situation. A people-focused and driven regional security policy targets the very nerve and agency of such testing regional development setbacks as ethnic contestation, migration, and border politics.

Informed and unified on a common continental purpose, the people will energise and serve as an enduring conduit to continental unification. Indeed, Aspiration 7 of *Agenda 2063* hints at the centrality of the people, but only in *development*—a concept that attracts several interpretations. While people-driven development is essential, a strong and informed popular involvement in continental unification is

even more imperative. People-centred unification undergirds and necessarily propels people-driven development. Thus, in addition to existing statist processes, efforts in continental unification should re-focus on and directly target and involve the people.

Also, and in furtherance of (people-centred) continental unification, it is important to have a confident African personality in the world. Slavery, colonialism, neo-colonial imperialism, and cold war politics have scarred Africa and, hence, debased the African personality in the world. In the context of Cold War politics, for instance, Africans were not only subjected to hot battles on behalf of and for the benefit of competing ideological interests, but also, Cold War narratives characterised African states as *satellites* of the *great* powers. Africa was the quintessential and literal battlefield for proxy wars of competing power interests. Resistance to ideological trappings to neither face east nor west, but forward, as Nkrumah put it to sum up the idea and object of non-alignment, attracted violent disruption to the continent's independent political and economic mission. Consequently, Africa endured widespread and protracted post-independence instability, experiencing several coups even within the very decade of continental independence. These violent experiences left a lingering negative impact on the confidence of African peoples, societies, and states. Worse, Africa (perhaps unconsciously) persistently internalises this inferiorisation across levels.

Rebuilding a confident African personality means fundamentally rejecting inferiorisation by exploitative world interests. The African region needs to communicate to the people the vision and essence of a confident African personality in the world. Communication should include concerted and coordinated action through the AU, regional economic communities, state institutions and educational systems, the arts industry, as well as societal and especially indigenous/traditional leadership structures to execute deliberate and targeted measures that boost popular confidence.

Popular economic confidence is especially essential for transforming Africa into the influential economic powerhouse that Agenda 2063 aspires to be. Africa requires economic muscle, or at least, independence that further requires, among others, two key people-centred measures. First, facilitating intra-continental economic mobility and activity is imperative. Ironically, intra-continental travel is easier for non-Africans than for most Africans. States appear content with the irony. Governments often either try to avoid the subject or use it as electoral capital. Both attitudes only worsen challenges to intra-continental movement and rising securitised migration. Africans' ability to move freely within Africa facilitates regional economic integration and potentially boosts and expands economic activity, which helps to build the necessary regional economic muscle. Second, and perhaps more important, is to inculcate a producer (as opposed to consumer) economic attitude and culture. Africa is a huge market, but mainly for products from other regions, including food, even while it is home to about 65% of global arable land. Despite its great entrepreneurial spirit and potential, Africa currently has an even stronger proclivity to consume, which obviates the flourishing of needed entrepreneurship. African societies commonly celebrate consumption as success: the ability to buy stuff, or spend money, mostly unproductively, is generally perceived as the celebrated measure of

success. That is consumption—which is unproductive and economically disempowering. Purchasing power is important, but its utilisation is much more so. Most people relish spending hard-earned or ill-got financial resources on consumer goods; very few invest in productive ventures. Moreover, Africans generally have a higher preference for and confidence in non-African products and services, regardless of quality, durability and/or impact on environmental sustainability. Other producer-oriented economies then exploit Africa's consumer economics to dump, disrupt productivity and production, and even bait elements of the region into underhanded partnerships with exploitative agendas. This unproductive economic culture, which helps to enrich other regions at the expense of Africa, results from and reflects a pervading low self-esteem and confidence in the African, in African production and products. Commonplace consumer culture and limited intra-continental mobility are inimical to the Agenda 2063 economic vision and, indeed, continental prosperity.

A natural projection of the African personality and a sense of purposeful oneness in the world will emanate from and reflect in the capacity to address the persistent and debilitating intra-continental development challenges that retell and perpetuate the continent's unfortunate global experience. Besides, with a united and confident presence in the world, Africa will be an influential force in global geopolitics and global governance. Informed, confident, and unified people will make confident and unified states, and hence a formidable Africa in world affairs. The success and indeed significance of Africa's quest for representation in the UN Security Council rest on the presence and support of a confident, united, and informed populace. The people, and more so than states, will make Africa the "strong, united, resilient, and influential global player and partner" the Agenda 2063 envisions in Aspiration 7. The world needs that Africa—not a divided, timid, self-deprecating, and consumer-oriented one.

Africa, Regionalisms and New Global Multilateralism

As demonstrated, Africa's positionality is strategic and potentially influential in world affairs. Africa's role, too, will be central in saving the world from self-destruction. Nonetheless, Africa engages the world in interdependent and inter-regional multilateralism, in which partnership is key, especially for global governance. Africa's own growth and survival require partnerships and alliances, which also enhance the region's leverage and potential influence in global geopolitics and global governance. While welcoming partnerships, however, Africa must dedicate considerable attention to developing a strong people-centred united front.

Africa must not just be a partnership-attracting trophy, but an active and forceful actor in world affairs—a player and referee. Various observations reaffirm this sentiment and underscore the importance of Africa's active presence in the world:

"Africa should be a platform for international cooperation, not an arena for competition between major countries" (RFI, [2023](#)); and

“Africa is a major geopolitical force. It’s one that has shaped our past, it’s shaping our present, and it will shape our future” (United States Department of State, n.d.).

The truth of these observations is timeless. What remains is for Africa to grasp and internalise the fact. Equally imperative is Africa’s refusal of imperial attitudes of the continent as one to be “captured” (Lebovic, 2024, p. 2). Africa has a choice to make and uphold. More importantly, Africa, as a regional entity and continent of independent states, needs a well-thought-out strategy of engagement with the world’s partnership-wooing interests. This is necessary to avoid continued exploitation and capture—as a trophy. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is as blunt as he is emphatic that it’s up to Africans “not to allow that kind of treatment” (quoted by Tsitsi Dangarembga in Russel, 2024).

Besides, in partnership with other regions and in the context of the new global multilateralism, Africa has a significant role in shaping the direction of global geopolitics and global governance. By leveraging the continent’s attractiveness and positionality, and with a confident and unified global presence, Africa can become an assertive player and a necessary referee in dangerously polarising global geopolitics. The region must champion and advance the common good in the new multiplex global order, demonstrating a willingness to be an assertive player and influential referee in the affairs of the world.

Conclusion

Regions can be a positive influence on the direction of global geopolitics. With a people-centred unified global presence, each region or regional body provides essential agency—as referee, player, and even trophy—for cooperation, stability, and security in the world. Open and connected to each other, all regions are strong and unique building blocks for a new trend of global multilateralism. Regions and regional bodies represent less divergent and contentious geopolitics, compared to states that are self-interested a priori. As demonstrated by the African Union on security, peace, and climate change, regional organisations facilitate convergence and coalescence of state interests and can contain and/or discourage self-interested statist power contests.

Regions and regional bodies hardly constitute a (source of) threat to global stability, except when they are closed off to and strongly suspicious of each other. Appropriate regional governance measures would channel similar societal socio-cultural expressions and political histories to foster intra-regional cohesion and collaboration. Then, progressive regional collaborative trends will inform and reflect interregionalisms in the global arena. Cooperative regionalism will, in turn, strengthen the influence of regions on global relations and the direction of global geopolitics and global governance.

Thus, as key global actors, regions can indeed save the world. Africa is especially positioned to champion the common good and saving of the world, but Africa, the

region and continent, must establish a confident people-centred unified presence in the world, without which Africa's strategic positionality is lame and meaningless.

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Essay 34: The Role of Science Diplomacy in Consolidating the Global Resonance of EU External Action



Zane Šime

Introduction

The evolving multipolar world order has a high propensity for regionalisation. This enduring process of region-building enables the geopolitical heavyweights to form their geographic, digital, and intellectual spaces of like-mindedness and mobilise resources beyond their borders for a joint vision and compelling plans for the future. And this regionalisation gains an increasingly dense civilisational context. Regional societies need regional thought leaders. For the regions to thrive, legitimacy counts. Otherwise, regions risk evaporating into oblivion shortly after their promotion during a high-level political statement. For regions to be accepted and considered as given or natural by the majority of their constituencies and civically active individuals, intellectual investment needs to be made in articulating the region's crucial historical milestones, its present standing, and its ambition for at least some years to come. Collegial bonds among expert circles in the respective region are crucial. The way the academic community conducts its theoretical scoping of regions has a major role in providing that meaning to the public and, more importantly, to the future staff members of various public, private, and non-governmental entities who will implement the regional integration plans and conduct external relations of their respective region, such as engaging in inter-regional relations. This essay aims to articulate some of the key features of the way science diplomacy remains instrumental in promoting the epistemic prominence of the European Union's (EU) global ambition. The Union's international standing as one of the few prevailing growth poles with strong and constructive links to the many parts and regions around the world is an intellectual construct and a composition of practical activities that needs to be

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articulated, explained, and contextualised by region-builders, meaning the region's thinkers and doers. It is a dynamic context, not a static positioning exercise.

A substantial investment in this process of building institutional memory, cooperation *reflex*, and bonding is attested by the burgeoning domain-specific European colleges, academies, and institutes (Borghoff et al., 2023, p. 4). Additionally, the European House of History deserves to be mentioned as one of the most accessible and least selective spaces of EU meaning-making (Ostojski, 2023, p. 101). The entrance to this establishment does not require a specific institutional affiliation or academic credentials. To provide one such enabling input to the intellectual *reservoir* on the EU's intellectual standing, this think piece elaborates on three crucial points for the future of EU science diplomacy. Firstly, it should be more than the sum of the national parts. Secondly, it should be an integral part of EU geoeconomics. Thirdly, it should offer a sense of some clarity concerning the challenging aspects of the 4th Industrial Revolution. Science diplomacy has the potential to strengthen the overall confidence of the EU when transforming its relations and functional links to various parts of the world during the 4th Industrial Revolution.

A True Science Diplomacy of an *Ever-Closer Union*

The EU is a post-Westphalian entity that stands for more than just a sum of its national economies, cultural heritage, and water basins. A truly supranational science diplomacy is much more than an acknowledgement that member states can agree to respect each other's uniqueness and embrace diversity while maintaining some degree of shared commitment to a certain level of coherence in the Union's interest articulation. The EU science diplomacy is an excellent fit for forging a more consolidated view of what the EU stands for in the domains of science, advanced research, and innovation. Science diplomacy is one of the newest statecraft resources (Afilalo & Paterson, 2012, p. 303). Thereby, science diplomacy contributes to the common market stabilisation and solidification policies tailored for the sustained economic performance of the Union. Through such functionality, the EU science diplomacy holds the potential to serve as one of the strongest jointly cherished reference points among the EU inhabitants and those who strongly relate to the EU values in other parts of the world.

The recent science diplomacy efforts of some of the most avid proponents, such as France, Spain, and especially Barcelona, are noteworthy. Nevertheless, the EU science diplomacy should be more than an accumulation of such locally and nationally fostered initiatives. Instead of looking at specific places for inspiration, it might be more fruitful to look at the currently EU-maintained specific governance architectures for science, advanced research, and innovation, such as the European Research Area (ERA), including the European Strategy Forum for Research Infrastructures (ESFRI), and the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT), among others. Each of these supranationally fostered structures builds on some existing local strengths and *pockets of excellence*, in other words, noteworthy research-intensive

frontrunners (Sinkovics et al., 2021, p. 12; Visram et al., 2020, p. 180), to bring additional value to the societal challenges prioritised by the EU. Through pooled expertise and the exchange of geographically specific know-how among an international circle of fellow experts, an interactive process is put in motion that surpasses mere advanced research enquiry. This is a routine process that intrinsically conveys EU values and goodwill to make scientific expertise as easily accessible as possible.

Moreover, this contemporary EU openness to partners across the world has nothing to do with colonial extractionism. Those are episodes of the past with thorough lessons learnt. In the contemporary age of geoeconomics, EU science diplomacy operates on values-based principles without replicating former routines of resource management amassed in other parts of the world (Sparke, 2024, p. 2). The economic rationale has dramatically changed, as has a long list of values and norms that guide EU engagement worldwide.

EU Geoeconomics in a Multiplanetary Age

Much of the science and innovation produced in Europe is marred by the *technological valley of death* (Ellwood et al., 2022). In other words, the EU and its member states, regions, cities, and enterprises fund quite a lot of promising research. Nevertheless, the commercialisation, scaling up, and introduction to the market of products with internationally unparalleled competitiveness qualities is a rarity due to overall risk-averse funders and other issues (Muscio et al., 2023, p. 4630). This challenge does not discard the importance of acknowledging that EU science diplomacy is part and parcel of EU geoeconomics. The space sector, with such descriptive terms as *economic space diplomacy* discussed in the overall science diplomacy context, is one example of a prominent manifestation of EU geoeconomics (Cross & Pekkanen, 2023, pp. 198–199). A considerable share of the existing literature, such as Chiu (2023, p. 359), with her intermingling of space with three founding science diplomacy taxonomies, refers to states and their articulation of interests concerning space. However, the regional dimension deserves more attention.

The EU geoeconomics is part of the overall global “hub-and-flow imaginaries” (Moisio, 2024, p. 4). The most prominent terminology of the Union’s engagement to increase its own nodality is framed through *connectivity* (Gaens et al., 2023, p. 219; Karjalainen, 2023, p. 309). Reliable links to crucial locations of vital resources are a historically prominent point of consideration (Mallin & Sidaway, 2024, p. 7). However, today, geoeconomics is increasingly linked to the progress of the leading powers in reaching gradually more ambitious milestones in the new frontier—space. Considering the latest EU foresight thinking (European Parliament et al., 2024, p. 11) and reflections on the future of the Single Market (Letta, 2024, pp. 76–77), space is among the increasingly prominent reference points for the future of the EU statecraft. The European interest has outgrown its global scope. Space is not an academically romanticised sociotechnical imaginary. By now, it is more than obvious that the European interest is and will remain multiplanetary. This should be properly depicted

in the successor framework document to the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. While being busy with building the necessary institutional backbone and dual-use functionalities (Muñoz & Portela, 2023, p. 8; Pavesi & Wouters, 2023, p. 1215), the EU is a multi-planetary entity in the making, next to a line of other technologically prominent and capable Earthly region-builders.

To concisely contextualise, another example is China's readiness to support more cooperation concerning space within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Maoming, 2022). The United Nations-affiliated Regional Centre for Space Science and Technology Education in Asia and the Pacific (RCSSTEAP) hosted by Beihang University in Beijing, offers training mostly to individuals selected by the member states of the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organisation (APSCO) to promote peaceful, safe, responsible, and sustainable use of the outer space with sufficient consideration paid towards the developing countries' specific constraints (van der Heiden et al., 2015, p. 52; Yan, 2019, p. 55; Yan, 2020, pp. 605–607). To put it simply, Earthly regions have amassed the necessary political weight and policy competence to reach extraterritoriality in space and build their emerging integral dimensions there.

Even more interesting from the supranational governance point of view is that this dimension of contemporary region-building is closely linked to governance and corresponding capabilities in the digital realm. What happens in the cyber domain and in space has direct and intrinsic implications for the regionality and geoeconomic weight of the EU on the Earth. Moreover, the EU, as a naturally inclined geoeconomic power to create common areas with joint rules of engagement, is steadily building closer connections between space and the ERA. A telling example is the call to officially endorse the EU fifth freedom. This EU freedom is aimed at catalysing advancements in space (and a range of other technology domains) through a more pronounced alignment of research, innovation, and education with the evolving steering of the Single Market (Letta, 2024, p. 6). In such a manner, the EU acts not simply as a *spacifier* with its distinct interests towards space as one of the most prominent *global spaces* (Gstöhl & Larik, 2023, p. 1116; Gstöhl & Schunz, 2023, p. 1251). Without undermining the worth of the overall research direction outlined by Schunz (2023, p. 1176), the example mentioned in this think piece does not require cross-cases or cross-spaces analyses of the EU's defended stance concerning each of them. Far beyond that, the EU enables the merger of several integrated spaces governed by its rules that are attuned to the peace and prosperity of mankind. Through the cyber realm, the EU incrementally builds closer connections (if not an outright merger) between space and the ERA. In sum, this is an act of triple *spacification* involving space, the cyber domain, and the ERA. This triple intertwining comes with (at least) threefold commitments that are expected to be upheld by all non-EU entities that are involved in EU-conducted space activities.

Considering that the EU mutual assistance clause (Article 42(7)) applies to space (Clapp & Evroux, 2023, p. 6), the extraterritoriality of an *ever closer union* is a given. Extraterritoriality is not something to be considered in addition to the existing post-Westphalian architecture. Looking at this observation from the inception of

the EU external action that dates back to the work of Catherine Ashton, this three-fold *spacification* is an opportunity for the EU to enhance its prowess in using its instruments “in a strategically coherent and effective manner” (Kantemnidis, 2020, p. 66). As indicated in the EU’s Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade and the European Union Space Strategy for Security and Defence, the contemporary technological intricacies simply require doing so.

Fourth Industrial Revolution

The ongoing twin (green and digital) transitions undertaken by the European Union (EU) capture major transformations in the way contemporary societies will operate in the upcoming decades. Automation and robotisation as part of the overall green industrialisation, ongoing fine-tuning of the deficiencies identified in many over-hyped artificial intelligence, and solutions and attempts to address some aspects of the uneven digitalisation are some of the examples of a longer list of intricacies. These transformations need to be combined with an adequately evolving understanding of public goods, measured and responsible data curation, as well as the next generation of human rights linked to the evolving emerging technologies’ context (O’Connor & Searle, 2023). For the 4th Industrial Revolution to be a success and a moment of intellectual uplifting for Europe, together with many like-minded partners across the world, this period of major changes has to be human-centric. A technological advancement must work in favour of a human being who is grounded in a democratic society. There can be no true gains in efficiency and productivity if those do not translate into a better living standard and a higher quality of life among Europeans and those individuals who join the European initiatives from other parts of the world.

Digital space proves itself to be an area of invention and honing of societal models represented by various regional integration models. The digital space captures various ways in which solutions based on emerging technologies are applied to serve these multilateral endeavours. Governments display some propensity towards repositioning their hosted technology giants as national champions at the service of specific national or regional purposes (Babic, 2023; Diesen, 2021, p. 84). Technological and industrial might gain appraisal for their geoeconomic worth (Breslin & Nesarurai, 2023). Closer cooperation between Russia and China is among the emerging models cushioning certain Eurasian visions (Diesen, 2021, p. 80). Its implications will be a compelling topic of enquiry in the years to come.

The European model, with its democratically grounded regulatory power, has its own distinct characteristics and intellectual appeal. The European aspirations tied to the 4th Industrial Revolution refer to creative brilliance and the historical tradition of internationally excelling inventiveness. However, the human capital factor does not work in favour of European geoeconomic weightlifting. The ageing population and the prevailing westward brain drain of technology-savvy talent are matters of continuous concern and contemplation (Arenal et al., 2020, p. 14; Gaens et al., 2023, p. 221). Talent retention in Europe remains politically salient (Letta, 2024, pp. 21,

78). It is not a narrow human resources matter. Talent retention refers to how Europe evolves as an advanced society.

Conclusion

Helmers (2021, p. 29) claimed that history-writing in early modern Europe “was one of the most prominent kinds of public diplomacy.” Consequently, the contemporary analysis of those sources and occasional references to them is a reiterated rite of a somewhat implicit public diplomacy writing within a new epistemic context. This essay attests to the capacity of the science diplomacy perspective to onboard the latest societal challenges. It remains to be seen whether science diplomacy will become the most resourceful term associated with the best-tailored responses to the societal challenges brought by the increased activities of regions in space and the management of the 4th Industrial Revolution’s transitions.

Coming back to the earlier referenced remarks of the inaugural High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the future resonance of science diplomacy depends on the capacity of associated thinkers and doers of region-building to craft a well-concerted set of actions and complementarities across the supranational instruments. The right fine-tuning of the EU science diplomacy interventions should showcase what exactly this intellectual thought delivers in the present-day setting. To have a more thorough understanding of what science diplomacy stands for, it is useful to dwell in more detail on some outstanding historical episodes. Several EU-funded science diplomacy initiatives have already accomplished that. However, historical accomplishments crafted in completely different geoeconomic contexts and societal governing models are not the most convincing argument for the present-day resonance of the EU’s post-Westphalian science diplomacy. For it to remain relevant as a policy anchor, the EU science diplomacy must prove itself today and tomorrow through specific supranationally maintained instruments, intervention logics, and mutually upheld actions of designated region-building thinkers and doers. This is not a call for self-appointment among volunteers. Over the past years, the European science diplomacy circles have proven their pronounced bottom-up advocacy zest. Looking beyond this intellectual civic activism, a well-integrated approach to science diplomacy across the full multi-level governance spectrum is key to making it a constituent part of a broader EU toolbox of external action practice.

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Essay 35: Regionalism in South Asia: Trajectories, Achievements, and Potentials



Akash Pandey

Introduction

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 to integrate the South Asian economies. Previously discussed at the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, the Baguio Conference in 1950, and the Colombo Powers Conference in 1954 (Malik, 1993), the idea of South Asian Regionalism was ultimately advanced with the proposal put forward by the then-president of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, in 1980 (Iqbal, 2006). Founding members of SAARC include Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Pakistan, and the Maldives, while Afghanistan joined the forum in 2007.

Since its inception, SAARC has undertaken numerous initiatives to forge regional cooperation. To date, SAARC has convened eighteen summits. Hailed as a promising force to promote regional interdependence and peaceful relations, the organisation received widespread criticism after the 2016 India–Pakistan conflict thwarted the regionalism efforts. Discourses are framed around its failure or alternatives, labelling it a complex regional body (Chakma, 2018). In this paper, I challenge such dominant narratives set around SAARC and discuss its relevance in the current multi-polar world. While undoubtedly the organisation has experienced inertia, it does not completely suggest it is a *dead* regional body. The macro-level tensions have indeed affected SAARC's functioning; one should not forget the past achievements and the future potential that SAARC holds in the rapidly changing international relations system, where its importance is realised at its utmost.

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Using a critical inquiry lens, I first discuss the five main cooperation areas of South-Asian regionalism—social, economic, cultural, security, and environmental—and make a critical analysis of the revival of SAARC.

Revisiting SAARC Cooperation and Achievement

The South Asian region shares similar trajectories of poverty, inequality, and development (Rama et al., 2015). The region's current Human Development Index (HDI) stands at 0.672 (United Nations Development Programme, 2025), with around 402 million people classified as multidimensionally poor (United Nations Development Programme & Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2024). The concrete steps towards addressing such shared socio-economic vulnerabilities were initiated with the formation of the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty in 1991, the adoption of the Social Charter in 2004, and the establishment of the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) in 2010.

One of the key mechanisms identified to address the region's socio-economic issues is the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) (Gayen et al., 2024). Having based its secretariat in Thimphu, the fund began its operation with an initial capital of USD 300 million, along with voluntary support from the United States and China (Ahmed, 2016). Having prioritised the implementation of the SAARC Social Charter, the SDF, so far, has funded over a hundred regional projects (SAARC Development Fund, 2024). Among its recent initiatives is the approval of around USD 7.7 million to assist the national government in its pandemic response (SAARC Development Fund, 2020). What has become evident from this intervention is the SAARC's capacity to respond during a crisis, regardless of the upheaval, and the immense potential that SAARC could seize by utilising instruments like SDF to address common regional issues like poverty and unemployment. While the region made significant strides in reducing poverty from 536 million in 1990 to 216 million in 2015 and improving the HDI from 0.454 in 1990 to 0.672 in 2023 (United Nations Development Programme, 2025; World Bank, 2022), it still lags far behind in human security and overall development. When compared to the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), this progress is modest. However, what is hugely missing is the contextualisation aspect. Given SAARC's capacities, resources, and overall trajectories, it is unwise to equate it with the EU and ASEAN. The tendency to compare SAARC with the established regional bodies has thus fuelled scepticism towards South Asian regionalism.

From its outset, SAARC has exhibited an apparent eagerness towards intra-regional economic cooperation. In 1993, the adoption of the South Asia Preferential Trading Agreement (SAPTA) laid down the groundwork for economic integration. Later, in 2004, the adoption of the SAARC Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) further liberalised regional trade.

Aiming to make South Asia a tariff-free trade region, the signing of SAFTA was viewed as a major milestone (Dubey, 2005). UNESCAP (2016) estimated

that the intra-regional exports of South Asia could more than double by 2020, reaching up to USD 172 billion. However, poor implementation (Iqbal, 2012), high trade costs (World Bank, 2016), the India–Pakistan conflict, and COVID-19 constrained progress. As a result, 70% of the regional trade potential remains untapped (Ali & Hussain, 2021). In light of these challenges, member countries have shifted their focus towards alternatives like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal), BCIM (Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor), and SASEC (South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation) (Chakma, 2018, p. 213). Under this pretext, the question that remains critical is whether these new forms of economic regionalism have produced better outcomes than SAARC or if it is a Pakistan-minus approach, as noted by Chaudhury (2016).

Beyond social and economic cooperation, regional organisations leverage cultural diplomacy as a soft power to maintain a shared identity. Amid the bilateral tension that has stalled formal cooperation, SAARC has utilised cultural diplomacy to preserve the South-Asian identity. As of 2024, the South Asian region accommodates over 1.68 billion people, representing over 45,000 anthropological groups (Dokuru et al., 2024; World Bank, 2024). Acknowledging this rich diversity, the SAARC Cultural Centre was established in 2011. Since then, the cultural centre has organised cross-cultural dialogues, lectures, festivals, and research seminars. Even when COVID-19 affected SAARC's initiatives, the centre organised online discussions to keep cooperation intact. Likewise, academic institutions like the South Asian University (SAU) have facilitated knowledge generation and people-to-people relationships. With five faculties and seven departments, the university currently caters to around 2,000 South Asian students and researchers (SAARC Secretariat, 2025). Despite the financial challenges induced by political turmoil, the institution continues to serve diverse backgrounds under a common educational umbrella. Together, the cultural centre and SAU have preserved everyday regionalism despite the tensions at the macro level.

In the security realm, other than the non-traditional threats compounding the region, the volatile armed conflict between India and Pakistan dominates the traditional security architecture. Fraught with conflict for over seven decades, the South Asian giants have often prioritised confrontation over cooperation. Liberalist scholars argue that the unwillingness of these two parties is a major reason for the SAARC tragedy (Paul, 2020). Yet, in several instances, the SAARC summit brought together the conflicting parties, such as following the 1984 Siachen Glacier conflict, the 1999 Kashmir conflict, and the 2001 Indian parliamentary attacks (Venkkat & Bhat, 2022). Now, with the forum suspended for nine consecutive years, all possible formal communication channels remain closed. Additionally, the recent conflict, after the Pahalgam attack, further intensified the situation. This is why the organisation's prospects to emerge as a meaningful regional body remain bleak.

Given the environmental vulnerability of the region, SAARC has also given paramount importance to environmental cooperation. The 2022 Global Risk Inform Index places four out of eight South Asian countries in extremely high- or high-risk zones (Inter-Agency Standing Committee & European Commission, 2022). Over a

decade, natural disasters have displaced around 61.4 million people in South Asia (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022). The imperative to respond to these shared issues has prompted SAARC to adopt the Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management in 2005, the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disaster in 2011, and establish the SAARC Disaster Management Centre in 2006.

Particularly, the SAARC Food Bank is regarded as one of the most effective disaster response mechanisms (Rahman et al., 2018). Intended to ensure essential food supplies during emergencies, the mechanism was pivotal in helping Nepal in its response efforts during the 2015 earthquake. Though conducted without a standard operating procedure, such instances reflect the region's underlying sense of collectiveness. Still, critics contend that the SAARC response tends to be reactive in the wake of a crisis but passive in the normal period (Bose, 2024). It is worth noting that, during normalcy, SAARC has engaged in disaster preparedness training and knowledge-sharing activities through South Asian Disaster Management Exercises (SDME) and the South Asian Disaster Knowledge Network (SADKN). This does not suggest that SAARC's disaster governance is without problems; rather, it has more to do with geopolitical issues. Nonetheless, the solidarity observed during COVID-19 suggests potential for rejuvenating cooperation in disaster management.

Conclusion

Affected by the regional hegemon conflict, SAARC offers a unique case of regionalism in international relations scholarship. The purpose of regional organisations is to cater to context-specific solutions, and regional bodies like SAARC are equipped with the resources and institutions key to addressing the regional issue. Member states' political discord and waning interest have left the potential untapped. Undeniably, the macro-level tensions have sabotaged the regionalism process, yet grass-roots efforts such as the South Asian University and SAARC Cultural Centre keep the cooperation alive.

Now, SAARC stands at a crossroads with two options: to shut down or to revitalise. If the current situation persists, discourse on SAARC as a failed region will continue to flourish. On the other hand, shutting it down would not only question the very essence of regionalism but also further induce divisions among South Asian countries. Moreover, the four-decade-long regionalism legacy in South Asia will come to an end. For India, the reinvigoration of SAARC may not be fruitful, as it has limited economic opportunity to seize (Pattanaik, 2020). That is why it has explored other alternatives. In this context, China's inclusion in SAARC could be instrumental (Ahmar, 2011). New Delhi, however, expresses serious reservations when it comes to admitting Beijing. For smaller countries like Nepal and Bhutan, the SAARC stagnation reflects broader regional power hierarchies and hegemony, with no choice but to comply with the Indian way.

Whether associated with or forming a new regional body, conflict is inevitable. But this does not necessarily indicate the closure of the regional forum. Scholarly

and policy debate needs to go beyond the binary narrative and must critically rethink the common thread that binds the region. Moving beyond the SAARC is a way to escape responsibility, not a rational approach, and such behaviour will be subject to normative scrutiny. The Pakistan minus approach will not circumvent the tension but exacerbate it. For any regional organisation to grow, a strong sense of *we feeling* is crucial, which, however, is lacking in the present context of South Asia. But it should be noted that it was *we feeling* that wove the region in 1985 despite inter-state tensions and intricacies.

Recent conflict, after the 2025 Pahalgam attack, between India and Pakistan, further obscures the South-Asian regionalism. Instead of taking it as a challenge, member states, specifically Nepal, should take it as an opportunity. Having maintained an amicable relationship with both India and Pakistan, Nepal must utilise its position to facilitate the dialogue between adversarial parties and take proactive diplomatic efforts for the 19th SAARC Summit. Conflict resolution mechanisms are significantly missing in the SAARC; therefore, the key focus should be on introducing the SAARC's model, instead of relying on external actors' diplomacy. It is an opportunity for smaller countries like Nepal to showcase their diplomacy in the complex international governance system. Doing so would not only demonstrate the essence of small states' soft power but also may lay the ground for the potential revival of SAARC, as well as offer valuable lessons for other regions.

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Essay 36: Regionalism and Border Management: The Case of the India–Myanmar Free Movement Regime



Palak Maheshwari

Introduction

The concepts of regionalism and borders, or more precisely, border management, are deeply intertwined. If we think from a regional lens, it encourages us to scrutinise borders at a granular level, appreciating the daily realities and nuances that borders create. Thinking nationally would perhaps encourage us to see borders as just lines on a map, which need to be protected from external forces at all costs. Both approaches have their own merits, but here we will try to understand what regionalism, regional integration, border management, and community connections mean and how these dynamics ensue in the borderlands of postcolonial nations.

At a conceptual level, *regionalism* denotes both the subfield of IR that studies regions and also the formation of regions itself (Costa Buranelli & Tskhay, 2019). This formation can occur via economic, social, or political processes. *Regional integration* refers to how effectively these processes are arrayed and implemented in a region, especially at a cross-border level. Border management, as the name implies, refers to the regulation of an international border. For this to effectively occur, multiple countries have to be involved in policy formulation and implementation.

Regionalist dynamics play a significant role in giving borders a political and practical meaning (de Souza, 2018). Effective regionalism or regional integration is inherently dependent on efficient border management. Effectively managed borders are the cornerstone of regionally integrating populations that may not share the same nationality (Mouthaan, 2022). This process necessitates a thorough examination of the minutiae of borderland life, whose cultural, social, and economic interactions may differ significantly from other parts of a nation. Regional integration allows for the re-evaluation of borderlands from merely being zones of separation or *buffers*. They are also spaces of interaction and negotiation where varied communities engage in daily exchanges, transcending national boundaries.

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Borderlands exist due to the existence of borders. But the delineation of borders is a contentious issue, particularly in postcolonial contexts where lines drawn by colonial powers have often failed to reflect the cultural and ethnic realities on the ground (Leake, 2021). Using the example of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in Mizoram, India and the challenges associated with this borderland, I will attempt to assert two broad points through this essay: first, the Westphalian understanding of sovereignty does not account for the realities of borders in postcolonial states, and second, complications may occur when ethnic and cultural identity put regions in conflict with their central regimes. I will also aim to illustrate how creative border management, consensus-creation, and negotiations between regional and diplomatic considerations are essential for regional stability.

Historical Context

Much of India's present-day northeast was under Burmese occupation until the British, expanding their empire, forced them out in the nineteenth century. The Treaty of Yandabo, signed in 1826, formalised the current boundary between India and Burma (later renamed Myanmar). This arbitrary demarcation, dictated by colonial politics, divided people of the same ethnicity and culture without their consent. The Kuki-Chin-Mizo communities found themselves split between two countries (Chanchinmawia & Sharma, 2024).

In contemporary times, there have been attempts to strengthen diplomatic ties between the two countries. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in 2018, part of the Indian government's Act East Policy (Majumdar, 2020). This bilateral agreement between India and Myanmar allows residents on either side of the border to travel up to 16 kms into the other country without a visa. Besides being a recognition of the historical and cultural linkages between the communities, the FMR was also a practical measure to promote localised border trade through customs stations and designated markets (Karmakar, 2024).

Competing Interests

The tensions between security concerns and humanitarian imperatives were highlighted by two incidents that led to cascading effects, leading to the announcement of the suspension of the FMR by India's Home Ministry (PIB, 2024).

The first incident was the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which led to widespread unrest in the country and a refugee crisis in India. Thousands of refugees fled into Mizoram in India's northeast region, seeking safety and support. The state government largely welcomed them due to their shared ethnic affiliations. The Mizoram government also advocated for more funds from the centre to support these displaced individuals, asserting that they should only be sent back once the situation in

Myanmar stabilises. Even when the central government in New Delhi, wanting to maintain friendly ties with the new military regime in Myanmar, wanted to send a majority of these refugees back, the Mizoram state government refused (Kaushik, 2021).

The second incident was the conflict that erupted on May 3, 2023, between the majority Meitei and the tribal Kuki-Zo communities in the Manipur state of India. Over the past decade, the Manipur government has been expressing concern over the influx of Myanmar nationals. These concerns intensified following the recent ethnic conflict, which coincided with a few hundred Myanmar nationals seeking refuge in Manipur to escape the civil war in their homeland (Jangu, 2024).

While the state government of Mizoram welcomed refugees, only citing a lack of funds and facilities as a problem, the government of Manipur actively opposed them. These competing interests point to the tenuous border management situation in India's northeastern region. The central government's emphasis on security and immigration control clashed with the cultural and historical realities experienced by local communities.

(Creatively) Managing Borders and Borderlands: Beyond Westphalia

With the suspension and imminent scrapping/revision of the FMR, India is set to lose a creative form of border management practice that acknowledged the non-applicability of arbitrary colonial borders and respected the nuance of cross-border ethnic and cultural connections.

The Westphalian model, originating from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, established the principles of territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. This model has dominated international relations for centuries, underpinning the modern nation-state system. These territorial principles are formally regarded as fundamental prerequisites for both internal and international peace and stability (Zaiotti, 2011). The situation in Mizoram challenges this conventional understanding of sovereignty and national borders, which typically emphasise rigid territorial integrity and state control.

Even though it is in flux right now, Mizoram's approach is not isolated; other regions in the Global South have also adopted innovative border management practices that reflect local realities. For instance, in West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has implemented protocols that facilitate free movement across member states (Mouthaan, 2022). "The aim of the Community is to promote cooperation and integration, leading to the establishment of an economic union in West Africa in order to raise the living standards of its peoples, and to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations-among Member States and contribute to the progress and development of the African continent" (ECOWAS, n.d.). The countries that are in ECOWAS include Benin, Côte d'Ivoire,

The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sénégal, and Togo. This alliance formerly included Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali—the three announced their withdrawal from the ECOWAS in 2024. The alliance had suspended these countries after military governments took power in all three, and heavy sanctions were levied on Mali and Niger (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Similarly, in Latin America, the Andean community has established mechanisms for the free movement of people in the form of the Andean Community of Nations (CAN). This is a four-country agreement between Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, aimed at strengthening regional ties and economic integration (European Parliament, 2014).

During the Soviet era, borders in the Ferghana Valley (straddling Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) were administrative, allowing for fluid movement among ethnically intermixed communities. These internal boundaries became international borders after the dissolution of the USSR, disrupting the historical mobility and integration of the region's populations. Ethnic enclaves, such as the Tajik exclave of Vorukh in Kyrgyzstan, became flashpoints of contention, complicating everyday life for residents. Recent bilateral agreements, like the 2017 border deal between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, represent efforts to manage borders while balancing local ethnic concerns, though many contested zones still remain (Eurasian Research Institute, 2021).

Closer to home is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). This seven-nation regional grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, established in 1997, is another example that aims to deepen regional cooperation among the communities related to the Bay of Bengal (Marwah et al., 2023).

A similar example of negotiated cross-border mobility can be seen along the India–Nepal border. Governed by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, this open border allows citizens of both countries to move freely, live, and work on either side without requiring visas. This arrangement reflects longstanding historical, cultural, and familial ties, particularly among communities like the Madhesi and Tharus, whose social worlds span both sides of the border. (BBC News, 2016).

In all these regional examples, the Westphalian model's emphasis on strict territorial boundaries could have exacerbated conflicts and hindered effective governance. The move away from this understanding into creating unique systems of border management is what probably worked more effectively for these regions.

Conclusion: Will Regions Save the Borderlands?

We have just seen from the above examples that global or national regimes are often not well-suited to regulate borderlands or even littoral spaces. In contrast, regional approaches offer far more promising solutions by, among other things, not limiting the stakeholder base to just citizens of one nation. Because of the connections amongst border communities (often citizens of more than one nation), regions are better placed

to formulate policy considering the cultural and ethnic connections that transcend national borders.

As seen in the case of ECOWAS and CAN, regions often also serve as natural economic units, where cross-border trade and cooperation can drive local development. Even security challenges in borderlands are often transnational, requiring coordinated responses.

Despite India's decision to suspend the FMR, experiences of border communities have shown that strategies that fall within what I like to call *bottom-up regional integration* have had better results and proven more satisfactory in borderlands. This form of regional integration emphasises the role of local communities and grassroots initiatives in shaping border management policies. This is exemplified by a few examples from around the world.

Lake Titicaca, situated on the border between Peru and Bolivia, is managed jointly through the Binational Autonomous Authority of Lake Titicaca (ALT), established in 1996. The ALT is responsible for overseeing water resources and environmental management in the transboundary basin. Another example is the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation Program, initiated in 1992 with the support of the Asian Development Bank. It aims to enhance economic relations among the six countries sharing the Mekong River. The program focuses on infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and cross-border economic zones to promote regional integration and development (Nguyen et al., 2020).

This is heavily contrasted by state-imposed solutions, which might take a bird's-eye view of the situation but often do not understand the finer details. By prioritising local needs and perspectives, bottom-up regional integration ensures that border management policies are practical, culturally sensitive, and widely accepted.

This is not to say that the bottom-up approach is perfect. The ALT has faced challenges related to political and institutional factors, including legal constraints and limited resources, which have hindered effective governance and implementation of its mandate (IUCN, 2010). Similarly, for the GMS, challenges remain in achieving coordinated policies and equitable benefits among member countries.

However, what is worth appreciating here is how cross-border regions create unique forms of state-making, which are not just post-colonial but almost post-national (Sparke, 2002). This takes a certain perspective, the ability to create consensus *amongst* border communities, and eventually derive value *for* them. The regional eye is certain to have a better view of this plane. That does not preclude the state's role but simply advocates for more dialogue and consultations with the grassroots. A combination of strategy from the region(s) and implementation from the state(s) is the need of the hour.

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Essay 37: China's Influence on the Conceptual Transformation of Economic Regionalism as a Tool for Development and Balance of Power



Adriana Chavez and Changgang Guo

Introduction

The International System of the twenty-first century is characterised by growing economic interdependence, the emergence of new global players and the reconfiguration of power dynamics. In this context, economic regionalism has acquired a central role as a tool for promoting development, geopolitical stability, and the construction of a new world order.

The rise of China as an economic power and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have transformed the concept of regionalism, challenging traditional Western models. This essay examines how the regional initiatives of China, the European Union (EU), and the United States, along with the G7, are redefining the global geopolitical and economic landscape, and asks the question: Are regional blocs structural entities that balance power and stabilise the global geopolitical system?

Economic regionalism, as cooperation between countries, has deep historical roots. The Silk Road connected China with Europe, the Middle East, and Africa since the second century BC, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures. It was a pillar of China's economic and cultural projection until the Ming and Qing dynasties. China's economic opening under Deng Xiaoping in the late twentieth century resumed its central role in world trade. The BRI marked a milestone in regionalism by promoting global connectivity through investments in infrastructure, energy, and trade. In response, the EU and the United States launched the Global Gateway and Build Back Better World (B3W) initiatives as alternatives to the BRI.

The three initiatives reflect an economic competition and a struggle to define the principles of the international system of the twenty-first century. This essay analyses

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how these initiatives reshape economic regionalism and their impact on geopolitical stability and global governance. In a multipolar world, the study of economic regionalism and its impact on global geopolitics is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of the future international system.

Economic Regionalism and the Old Silk Road

Economic regionalism has a rich history, shaped by diverse economic, geopolitical, and social factors. One of the most significant historical examples of regionalisation is the ancient Silk Road, a vital trade network connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. For centuries, it facilitated the exchange of goods, cultures, ideas, and technologies, thus laying the foundations for economic regionalism and significantly influencing global economics and geopolitics.

The Silk Road, which originated during China's Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), stretched for thousands of kilometres, linking cities such as Xi'an with Rome, Byzantium, and Alexandria. Trading centres and city-states flourished, exchanging goods such as silk, spices, and gold, as well as knowledge, technologies, and cultures. This continuous exchange fostered early economic regionalism, integrating diverse regions through trade and cooperation. Merchant caravans established networks and alliances that transcended political and cultural boundaries, effectively creating an early global economy (Liu, 2010).

Historically, the Silk Road shaped economic regionalism in several ways. It promoted economic interdependence, as regions depended on each other for unique goods and resources, fostering cooperation and trade alliances (Frankopan, 2015). It also facilitated the spread of technological and cultural innovations, such as gunpowder, the compass, and the printing press, from China to Europe and the Middle East, along with agricultural techniques, trade practices, and philosophical ideas. In addition, the Silk Road fostered regional specialisation; China became famous for silk production, while India specialised in spices and precious stones. This specialisation improved the economic efficiency and prosperity of the participating regions.

Beyond its economic impact, the Silk Road had important geopolitical implications. Empires and kingdoms, such as the Chinese, Persian, Roman, and Byzantine, emerged along the trade routes, competing for control and protection of these vital corridors, often leading to conflict. However, alliances and treaties were also forged to promote stability and cooperation (Beckwith, 2009). Control of the Silk Road conferred strategic and economic advantages. In addition, the route facilitated the spread of religions and ideas, such as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Christianity, fostering tolerance and cultural exchange. Consequently, the Silk Road was much more than a trade network; it was a bridge between civilisations that profoundly influenced world history.

The ancient Silk Road laid the foundation for economic regionalism by promoting interdependence, specialisation, diversity and cooperation between distant regions. Its geopolitical impact was equally significant, shaping the power dynamics and

international relations of the time. Ultimately, the Silk Road was a bridge between civilisations that left a lasting imprint on human history.

BRI: Western Reactions and Alternatives

In recent years, economic regionalism has continued to evolve in response to changing global dynamics, characterised by growing economic interdependence, the emergence of new global players and the reconfiguration of power dynamics.

China's economic rise is one of the most significant phenomena of the twenty-first century. Since the implementation of economic reforms in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China has experienced unprecedented economic growth, transforming itself from an agrarian economy to an industrial and technological powerhouse (Yueh, 2007). This growth has been driven by a combination of open trade policies, investment in infrastructure, and strong government support for education and technology.

Among the most notable contemporary trends is the Belt and Road Initiative, launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI, also called the New Silk Road, seeks to revive ancient trade routes and build infrastructure in more than 150 countries around the world. The BRI has even been described as an alternative globalisation to that created by the United States, with new economic, political, and cultural ideas.

A notable feature that has strengthened the regionalism model promoted by China through the BRI is its prioritisation of South-South cooperation. This mode of cooperation is based on principles of non-interference, mutual respect, and shared benefits, and has been particularly attractive to developing countries in the so-called Global South. Unlike traditional relations with the countries of the Global North, which often involve strict conditionalities and internal interference, South-South cooperation through the BRI offers an alternative model of development.

The Chinese alternative allows the nations of the Global South to diversify their economic and diplomatic relations, reducing their dependence on traditional partners. This strengthens their position on the international stage and gives them a greater voice in global decision-making. In addition, cooperation under the BRI framework fosters the creation of strategic alliances and collaborative networks, which in turn promote political and economic stability in the participating regions.

Although one of the strengths of the BRI has been the support of the regions of the Global South, the BRI promotes an equitable and inclusive development model, respectful of global diversity, which aims to integrate all participating countries into a global network of infrastructure and trade.

The Global South's endorsement of the BRI has had significant repercussions on global regionalism, as many non-developed countries have opted to strengthen their economic relations with China. This shift has altered the global economic and political balance of power, generating concern in Western countries.

The model of economic regionalism proposed by China with the BRI has influenced the creation of new regional initiatives focused on the Global South for cooperation and the pursuit of development. These initiatives seek to counter the influence of the BRI and reshape the global geopolitical and economic landscape.

Recognising the increasing impact and influence of the BRI on the global stage, the Western G7 countries, led by the United States, introduced their own initiative in June 2021 to counterbalance China's growing influence. This initiative, known as Build Back Better World (B3W), aims to mitigate the strategic influence of China and reaffirm U.S. leadership, as detailed in the introduction to the White House white paper: "Today President Biden met with G7 leaders to discuss strategic competition with China and commit to concrete actions to help meet the tremendous infrastructure need in low- and middle-income countries." (The White House, 2021).

B3W is presented as an alternative to the BRI, which has been a dominant force in global infrastructure since its launch in 2013 (Zhao, 2021). China's re-emergence as a global power is seen as reshaping the global order built after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, which could define the world for decades to come.

In December 2021, the European Union also launched its own initiative, the Global Gateway, as a strategic countermeasure to China's BRI. This initiative aims to bolster the EU's global presence amidst an economic and geopolitical landscape predominantly influenced by the United States and China. In this way, the EU is showing its interest in establishing its own position in the world, without aligning itself directly with either the United States or China.

Global Gateway and BRI share similar goals of improving global connectivity and promoting economic development. The Global Gateway focuses on promoting sustainable and high-quality investments, respecting the highest social and environmental standards. In contrast, the BRI has been criticised by the West for its lack of transparency and for raising concerns about *debt traps* in recipient countries (Soler, 2024).

The assertion that the BRI entails a *debt trap* has been studied and refuted by scholars such as Deborah Brautigam and Meg Rithmire (2021). They argue that the debt trap narrative is inaccurate and misrepresents both Beijing and the developing countries that engage with China. For example, a comprehensive study by the China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University found that many African countries have benefited from Chinese loans, using them to improve infrastructure and spur economic growth. Consequently, the use of the term *debt trap* in association with the BRI can be viewed as a geopolitical strategy by Western powers to hinder the expansion of this initiative.

The Global South's approach to initiatives such as the BRI, the Global Gateway, and the B3W is not limited to their economic or infrastructure offerings, but is also influenced by ideological implications and historical factors. The BRI, led by China, promotes a model of South-South cooperation based on non-interference and rapid economic development, which resonates with countries with colonial experiences that are wary of Western conditionalities. This approach contrasts with the EU's Global Gateway and the US and G7's B3W, which emphasise transparency,

democracy, and sustainability, but are perceived by some developing countries as an extension of Western influence.

The policies of each initiative reflect their differences: the BRI offers flexible financing without strict policy conditions in key strategic sectors for development, while the Global Gateway and B3W link their projects to high-quality standards and even private sector-backed financing. However, their access to funding resources is not as flexible as that of the BRI.

Beyond the policies and offerings of each initiative, historical factors, such as colonial legacies and dependency relations, shape the preference of some countries for the BRI, which is seen as an alternative to the Western-dominated order. Hence, the choice of the Global South is not solely economic, but also a manifestation of political-ideological alignment and a quest for autonomy in a multipolar international system. Furthermore, the geopolitical rivalry between the West and China provides an opportunity for developing countries to negotiate better terms and diversify their economic and political relations.

Collectively, these three initiatives demonstrate not only a commitment to development but also a profound impact on global regionalism. By advancing numerous cooperation projects, these initiatives are reshaping regional and global dynamics, fostering new modalities of integration and collaboration that encompass both economic and ideological dimensions.

Geopolitical Dynamics: Reshaping Global Power Structures

The Belt and Road Initiative, Build Back Better World, and Global Gateway have transcended their roles as mere instruments for development promotion. Each of them has evolved into a strategic tool with the potential to influence the restructuring of the global order and international governance significantly.

In this context, the three initiatives, representing the major economic axes of the world, embody distinct objectives and interests. Simultaneously, they play a crucial role in establishing a new phase of regionalism, where regional blocs act as stabilising elements of the global geopolitical system and contribute to the construction of global governance. This phenomenon reflects the economic and ideological competition between the West and the East, and how these strategic projects are reshaping the dynamics of global power.

The BRI proposed by China in 2013 initially emerged as a national strategy rather than a global initiative. It was a direct response to the United States' *Pivot to Asia* strategy (Goldberg, 2016), which sought to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region. This American strategy, introduced by President Obama at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in 2011 and further elaborated by Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta at the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue, aimed to deploy a high percentage of U.S. warships to the Pacific. In contrast, China's BRI aimed to strengthen its economic and political influence across Asia and beyond.

The transition from referring to the BRI as a *strategy* to an *initiative* during the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017 (Zhang, 2018) reflects a significant shift in China's vision of global governance and economic regionalism. Official media and Chinese academia embraced this change to emphasise the BRI's role in promoting international cooperation and development without the hegemonic undertones often associated with Western approaches.

Despite Western framing of the BRI as a strategic plan for global influence, China argues that the initiative is not intended to establish a new hegemonic model. Instead, the BRI seeks to offer alternatives for development and reduce dependency ties that developing countries have faced for years. This perspective has resonated with many countries in the Global South, which view China and the BRI as a viable alternative to traditional international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank, known for imposing stringent economic and political conditions.

In terms of global regionalism, the BRI has redefined the dynamics of cooperation between countries. While the BRI is a tool for achieving development, it has also become an instrument for balancing power against the geopolitical influence and economic power of countries such as the United States and the European Union. The support of countries such as the Global South reflects the desire to diversify alliances and adopt their own models of cooperation.

The pursuit of a balance of power and equity promoted by the BRI is not a recent phenomenon in the world; it has deep historical roots. The 1960s hold crucial significance in the history of human societal development. It was during this decade that the expansive Third World, also known as the Global South, embarked on a concerted effort to alter the global order dominated by Western societies and to redefine the ideological system constructed by the West. This collective struggle shared a common and ultimate goal: the formation of a *global consciousness*. This consciousness aimed to challenge the prevailing power structures, cultural systems, and everyday life practices (Dubinsky, 2009, pp. 5–6).

In theoretical terms, this movement emerged through post-colonialism, orientalism, and similar theories, rejecting the theory of modernity, Eurocentrism, and the Western model. Historically, the quest for equity and development has been crucial to creating a global balance. Various initiatives and movements have attempted to rectify the inequalities imposed by dominant systems, striving for a more equitable world order.

A significant geopolitical factor is the economic impact of BRI worldwide. With investments exceeding USD 1 trillion since 2013, Western initiatives have struggled to match this scale. Consequently, the West has reoriented its geopolitical objectives, positioning initiatives such as B3W and Global Gateway not only as mechanisms for economic development but also as promoters of distinct values. This reorientation creates a framework for global regionalism characterised by a dichotomy between what can be considered Western and non-Western values.

Among the core values promoted by China, the BRI mainly reflects Confucian values such as harmony, equity, and justice, which are fundamental to China's foreign policy. These values promote international cooperation based on mutual respect, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and mutual benefit, while

Western initiatives have focused on promoting their own values as well, focusing on democratic values, transparency, and sustainability.

The European Union has primarily focused its strategy on promoting the Global Gateway as an alternative that emphasises the values of environmental responsibility and sustainability through the implementation of sound environmental practices. Additionally, the EU has sought to distinguish itself from the other two initiatives by encouraging private sector investment participation, rather than relying solely on state funding to finance its projects. The Global Gateway aligns with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the Paris Agreement on climate change (European Commission, n.d).

The B3W initiative predominantly promotes and embodies the ideology of Western democracies, advocating for democratic values. Furthermore, the B3W emphasises transparency in project financing and execution. Additionally, it champions gender equity, social inclusion, and the fight against corruption, ensuring the efficient use of funds (The White House, 2021).

Each of the values and approaches promoted through the three initiatives also seeks to impact the construction of a new World Order. In the case of China, its approach is based on cultural and philosophical aspects that reflect its vision of a balanced and peaceful global power. This perspective not only aims at economic development and international cooperation but also at promoting harmonious coexistence and mutual respect among nations.

China's Community of Common Destiny aims to revive a modern version of its ancient vision of *All Under Heaven* (天下) from the Qin Dynasty, emphasising harmony over uniformity. Supported by Confucianism, as stated in the Analects: *noble men aim at harmony, but not at uniformity. Little men aim at uniformity, but not at harmony* (君子和而不同, 小人同而不和), modern Chinese foreign policy collaborates with various political systems without ideological bias. This vision allows nations to join China's economic and cultural sphere without conforming politically or ideologically. In contrast, Western liberalism values uniformity over harmony. The Democratic Peace theory, originating from Kant, argues that democracies avoid war with each other due to ideological uniformity, while non-uniform countries are perceived as less trustworthy and more prone to conflict (Yu, 2021).

In addition to the Belt and Road Initiative, China has introduced three subsequent and complementary *Global Initiatives*: the Global Development Initiative in 2021, the Global Security Initiative in 2022, and the Global Civilisation Initiative in 2023 (Shiming, 2023). Moreover, China has emphasised the concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Humanity. At the heart of this vision is the assertion that the World Order should not be based on hegemonism, that no civilisation, particularly Western civilisation, should consider itself superior to others, and that social development and modernisation should not be confined to a singular model, namely Westernisation.

China advocates that interactions between civilisations and nations, including regional organisations, should be based on principles of equality, complementarity, and mutual benefits. This approach underscores the importance of respecting diverse development paths and fostering cooperation that transcends traditional hegemonic paradigms.

China has stressed the need to respect global diversity, as reflected in its latest initiative, promoted in March 2023, the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), which is consistent with the values promoted within the BRI. The GCI promotes several key principles. As Xi Jinping (2023) pointed out in his speech, advocates respect for the Diversity of Civilisations by promoting equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusion. It also advocates the common values of humanity, such as peace, development, justice, and freedom. It stresses the importance of the heritage and innovation of civilisations, promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional cultures. It also promotes people-to-people exchanges, building a global network of dialogue and cooperation among civilisations.

In the context of today's geopolitics, the GCI stresses the urgent need to strengthen self-reliance, especially in the Global South. This self-reliance is essential if emerging economies are to free themselves from the cultural domination imposed by their former Western colonisers. Historically, this myth has been largely fuelled by the prevailing Western narrative that only Western-style democracy can achieve economic development, relying on the technological superiority of the West. This narrative has prevailed in much of the world for decades, until China emerged as an economic powerhouse through its reform and opening up.

The new GCI and BRI underscore the economic and geopolitical relevance of regional initiatives. The BRI introduced a non-typical model of economic regionalism, focusing primarily on the Global South, that inspired initiatives such as B3W and Global Gateway. And now China also influences global value creation, promoting peaceful economic development and respect for the diversity of civilisations, fostering mutual support and learning without conflict.

Conclusion

This essay has explored how China, through the BRI, has influenced the conceptual transformation of economic regionalism as a tool for development and balance of power. The BRI not only promotes economic development through infrastructure and connectivity projects but also seeks to redefine power dynamics at both regional and global levels. By positioning itself as an alternative to Western initiatives, the BRI has particularly resonated with Global South countries, which view it as an opportunity to reduce their dependency and establish more equitable relations.

The ancient Silk Road, which connected China with Europe and other regions, serves as a precursor to the BRI. This historical network not only underscores China's importance in global trade and connectivity but also reinforces its cultural and traditional approach to seeking a balanced and peaceful global power. This historical legacy is fundamental to understanding how the BRI presents itself as a modern effort to revitalise and expand ancient trade routes.

In conclusion, we see that regional blocs are indeed structural entities that balance power and stabilise the global geopolitical system. By fostering cooperation and integration among countries, these blocs allow for a more equitable distribution of

power and provide a counterbalance to existing hegemonies. The BRI, along with the Global Gateway and B3W, exemplifies how regional initiatives can contribute to global stability and balance through the mobilisation of development resources and the promotion of specific values.

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Essay 38: New Asian Regionalism and Global Governance



Pasha L. Hsieh

Introduction

Global governance is facing complex and pressing challenges. Armed conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, escalating US–China tensions, and the lack of consensus in multi-lateral trade and environmental negotiations have undermined the post-war neoliberal order. A fundamental question is whether regions can save the world or, at the very least, construct building blocks for geopolitical stability. The emergence of new Asian regionalism provides valuable lessons to this inquiry. New Asian regionalism can be defined as the new normative integration process that underpins Asia's ascending economic and political power. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Six framework forms the core of new Asian regionalism, which has ensured regional stability and shifted the world's centre of gravity to the Asia–Pacific. In contrast to the Eurocentric view, innovative normative initiatives embedded in regional economic agreements hold significant potential to address the deadlock in global negotiations, especially in the realm of sustainable development.

It is critical to understand new Asian regionalism in the global context. Neither the Washington Consensus nor the Brussels effect, which are used to explain regionalism in the Global North, offer comprehensive answers to Asia–Pacific integration. New Asian regionalism arose in the most recent wave of global regionalism, propelling the transition from the New International Economic Order (NIEO) to the New Regional Economic Order (NREO). The soaring collective power of developing countries has fortified the influence of the NREO. Furthermore, as exemplified in Asia, the NREO should not be seen as parochially an intra-regional process. The Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) reinforce their policy priorities in Asia and underscore the significance of interregionalism. Against this backdrop, the goal of this essay is to demonstrate the key features of new Asian regionalism in the context of evolving global governance. It argues that the critical

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milestones of regionalism will help *save the world* by providing normative building blocks for multilateral endeavours currently obstructed by isolationism and populism.

Global Challenges and Regional Approaches

Following World War II, US hegemony led to the establishment of the Bretton Woods system, which aimed to safeguard peace through stable global trade and finance. In tandem with the development of multilateral frameworks, there are three waves of global regionalism. The first wave, which Jagdish Bhagwati called the “First Regionalism,” occurred in the 1950s and 1960s (Bhagwati, 2008, pp. 29–39). In this era, Washington showed little interest in trade agreements. The European Economic Community marked the inception of regionalism. It inspired the founding of ASEAN as the precursor to Asian regionalism. Unlike the economic objective of the European initiative, ASEAN was primarily formed as a loose security alliance because of Southeast Asian countries’ worry about Chinese communist expansion.

In the *Second Regionalism* between the 1980s and 1990s, the creation of the EU and the conclusion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were notable endeavours. In Asia, ASEAN and the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) functioned as twin engines for regional integration. The ASEAN Free Trade Area signifies the shifting focus of the bloc on economic regionalism. As for APEC, its nature and structure are unique. It is a dialogue platform rather than an international organisation or a free trade agreement (FTA). Based on the soft-law principle, APEC is technically not a forum where economies *negotiate* FTAs but serves as an incubator for these agreements. Although APEC resolutions are non-binding, they reflect the best practices of participating members. As APEC includes global powers such as China, Russia, and the United States, it has also become a venue for discussing global non-trade matters, including counterterrorism, food security, and ocean conservation.

Between the first two waves of global regionalism, the efforts of the Global South to advocate for the NIEO culminated but eventually failed (Hsieh, 2022, pp. 18–21). The coalition of developing countries known as the Group of 77 included Asian states that were members of the Non-Aligned Movement. They advocated for the United Nations (UN) to pass the 1974 General Assembly Resolution on the NIEO. Their objective was to strengthen sovereignty over natural resources and call for preferential trade rules. While they succeeded in incorporating special and differential treatment provisions into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the NIEO movement quickly deteriorated in the 1980s. Debt crises of various developing countries and the trans-Atlantic partnership’s refusal to accept additional demands compelled the South to accept neoliberal trade rules shaped by the North (Thomas & Trachtman, 2009, p. 9). Since its founding in 1995, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has been criticised for neglecting development needs. To address the perceived unfairness of international trade regimes, the WTO Doha Round, influenced by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), represents a multilateral effort. Nonetheless, in reality,

the impasse of the WTO talks has hindered the realisation of the Doha Development Agenda.

This backdrop gave rise to the *Third Regionalism* from the 2020s to the present. Different from US or EU-led regionalism, new Asian regionalism surfaced as the most pivotal development to reinforce the NREO movement (Hsieh, 2022, pp. 15–21). The NREO shifts its focus away from requesting affirmative actions under the NIEO to constructing a new trade-development roadmap using the collective power of the Global South. The trajectory of Asia's share of global gross domestic product (GDP), expected to reach nearly 60% by 2030, will further the region's influence (World Economics, 2024). The rapid and flexible approaches to finalising multiple economic agreements manifest NERO as an alternative to the Washington Consensus. The NIEO also diverges from the Beijing Consensus, which emphasises the role of state-owned enterprises in infrastructure-based investment aimed at enhancing the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes.

There are at least three fundamental paradigm shifts in Third Regionalism. First, from 2000 to the present, FTAs have increased more than seven times (WTO, n.d.). Beyond trade in goods and services, modern FTAs tend to be more comprehensive, covering issues such as e-commerce, environmental protection, and labour standards. The rise of South–South agreements and mega-regional trade agreements is also pivotal. In 2015, ASEAN formed the ASEAN Community comprising the ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and the ASEAN Political-Security Community. Externally, ASEAN has pursued the concept of *ASEAN centrality*, which places the bloc at the hub of the regional architecture. Powers including China, the EU, and the United States have explicitly recognised ASEAN centrality, thus making ASEAN's middle-power status essential to global governance.

From a security perspective, the expansion of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia to include more than 50 states, such as Ukraine, is significant. Despite the absence of enforcement power, countries' accession to the treaty reflects the value of ASEAN centrality. From an economic aspect, the ASEAN Plus Six framework has constructed new Asian regionalism. The framework is based on the trade agreements that ASEAN concluded with six major Asia-Pacific economies. The *ASEAN way* of pragmatic incrementalism in negotiating trade deals differs from the Western preference for a single undertaking format. EU and US negotiators often stress a *take it or leave it* stance, whereas Asian counterparts prefer to *have a deal first* by establishing a framework agreement, which provides a basis for negotiating subsequent sector agreements. Critics of the arguably low level of liberalisation of ASEAN agreements often overlook that they are an evolving process. To illustrate, the ASEAN-China FTA is the most significant South–South agreement in Asia, and both parties are presently engaging in Upgrade Negotiations 3.0.

More importantly, ASEAN's external pacts laid the normative foundation for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Accounting for 30% of global GDP, the 10-party RCEP is the world's largest FTA by economic scale (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.). The RCEP's harmonisation of

different rules of origin and regional cumulation provisions will consolidate Asia-Pacific supply chains. Another mega-regional trade agreement is the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (CPTPP), which was based on the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the TPP frustrated Asian allies. His *Make America Great Again* ethos symbolised US unilateralism and relinquished US leadership in Asia.

A milestone for the CPTPP is the accession of the United Kingdom (UK) as the 12th party in 2024, increasing the share of global GDP from 12 to 15% (United Kingdom Parliament, 2024). China, Taiwan, Ukraine, and three Latin American countries have formally applied to join the CPTPP. Although the CPTPP text states that it is open to "any State or separate customs territory," various stages of the accession process require consensus among members. As the 2024 Chair of the CPTPP Commission, Canada will need to deal with the politically intricate accession issues. In the long term, both the RCEP and the CPTPP are potential pathways to the Free Trade Area of Asia-Pacific that connects 21 APEC economies.

Secondly, interregional frameworks and exogenous influences from Brussels and Washington have enriched new Asian regionalism. The EU and ASEAN are arguably the most comparable regional blocs, and ASEAN is key to the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy. Brussels' 2015 *Trade for All* policy articulated "an ASEAN strategy based on individual agreements" that will form the ASEAN-EU FTA. Under this building-block approach, the EU has signed trade and investment agreements with Singapore and Vietnam. The EU has ongoing negotiations with Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Notwithstanding the EU's economic sanctions against Cambodia and Myanmar, existing and forthcoming bilateral agreements with other ASEAN countries will strengthen interregionalism. On the US side, FTAs with Australia, Singapore, and South Korea, as well as Trade and Investment Framework Agreements with ASEAN and selected countries, form the interregional mechanism with Asia. Pursuant to the Biden administration's new Indo-Pacific strategy, Washington launched the 14-party Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). Owing to domestic politics, the IPEF is claimed as a *non-traditional* trade agreement without market access. The IPEF consists of four pillars, and three of them—agreements on a clean economy, a fair economy, and supply chain resilience—have been signed. Needless to say, Donald Trump's second U.S. presidency will determine the future of the IPEF.

Finally, the sectoral agreements, whether in hard-law or soft-law form, have become the new normal. These agreements are signed on a plurilateral or bilateral basis and are devoted to specific issues rather than seeking to be comprehensive. At the WTO level, a notable example is the Information Technology Agreement, which eliminates tariffs on selected export products crucial to technologically advanced Asian countries such as Taiwan and Korea. Outside the WTO arena, Asia is playing a leadership role in utilising sectoral agreements to promote digital trade. Other than Singapore's bilateral digital economy agreements with Australia, Korea, and the UK, the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement was concluded between Singapore, Chile, and New Zealand. In 2023, South Korea acceded to the agreement, and

its parties are now working on Chinese accession (Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry, n.d.). Furthermore, negotiations are currently underway for the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement. These binding agreements go beyond the scope of digital trade or data protection in FTAs and extend cooperation into new areas, including artificial intelligence and cryptographic algorithms.

As for non-binding agreements, the Indigenous Peoples Economic and Trade Cooperation Arrangement (IPETCA) exemplifies a new approach for inclusive trade. Built upon the efforts of APEC's Inclusive Trade Action Group, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan inked the IPETCA in 2021. The primary objective of the agreement is to promote indigenous trade and investment. It encompasses a non-derogation clause to guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples under laws and policies. In 2024, the US observer status in the Partnership Council of the IPETCA bolsters the normative influence of the pact. These instruments shed light on how regional initiatives embedded in new Asian regionalism could serve as building blocks for the global system.

Environmental Sustainability as the New Frontier

A key policy challenge involving environmental sustainability may be better addressed by regions rather than international organisations or nation-states. Since the 1970s, sustainability and climate change have become central to the global development agenda (Hsieh, 2024, pp. 174–175). Proliferating environmental and climate pacts under UN auspices have utilised trade measures for enforcement, but their actual effectiveness remains controversial. A critical WTO initiative is the plurilateral WTO Environmental Goods Agreement (EGA). Nevertheless, the fact that the EGA negotiations commenced in 2014 but broke down in 2016 illuminates the challenges (Benson, 2023). The participation of just three developing economies—China, Costa Rica, and Turkey—in the talks hindered the legitimacy of the EGA. Parties could not even reach a consensus on the EGA coverage. An ironic instance is the EU and US opposition against the inclusion of bicycles in the list due to the potential influx of China-made bicycles.

Complementary to environmental goods, environmental services such as solid waste management and water treatment are paramount to environmental protection. Liberalising environmental services has been under the auspices of another plurilateral Trade in Services Agreement negotiated among 23 WTO members. Like the EGA, there have not yet been meaningful outcomes. Given these obstacles, selected WTO members are only engaged in structured discussions on trade and environmental sustainability.

In the Third Regionalism, a new trend that can be coined as “green regionalism” is in response to the incapacity of global negotiations (Hsieh, 2024, pp. 173–176). There are multipolar frameworks for green regionalism. Domestic pressure from civil society and parliaments has mandated that US and EU negotiators enhance the

enforcement of environmental provisions in trade agreements. The Trump administration negotiated the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), which integrates the NAFTA and the side agreement on the environment into the main text. The USMCA subjects the environment chapter to the general dispute settlement mechanism (DSM). Conventionally, EU FTAs such as those with Singapore and Vietnam include only chapter-specific DSMs for the trade and sustainable development chapters. In line with the US approach, the latest EU–New Zealand FTA became the first EU deal that applies the general DSM to these chapters.

Besides enforcement dimensions, US and EU initiatives cover market-oriented approaches. In line with the IPEF Clean Economy Agreement, IPEF members held the inaugural Clean Economy Investor Forum in Singapore in 2024 (Singapore Ministry of Trade & Industry, 2024, pp. 1–2). The objective of the forum was to mobilise sustainable infrastructure funding for innovative start-up companies. In addition, the EU–New Zealand FTA includes an annex of environmental goods and services, as well as commitments on reforming fossil fuel subsidies.

Green regionalism in the Asia–Pacific also witnesses rapid growth. In contrast to US and EU approaches, Asian deals tend to focus more on market-related incentives rather than enforcement. To accelerate the objectives of the Paris Agreement, Australia and Singapore concluded the world's first Green Economy Agreement in 2022. A comparable pact known as the Agreement on Climate Change, Trade, and Sustainability was also completed among four small states in 2024 (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2024, pp. 1–2). These agreements encompass the reference lists of environmental goods and services, rules on green finance, fossil fuel subsidies, and eco-labelling. They are hard-law, binding agreements, but difficult to enforce due to the lack of DSMs. Other similar, but narrower, soft-law instruments include Singapore's arrangements with Malaysia, Vietnam, and the UK, as well as the Taiwan–UK Enhanced Trade Partnership. The soft-law arrangements may eventually transform into a hard-law mechanism. Pivotal to the realisation of SDGs, these innovative schemes not only underscore the importance of green regionalism in new Asian regionalism but also demonstrate how regions contribute to global rulemaking.

Conclusion

Can regions save the world? Providing a holistic yet succinct answer is never easy. Most sensible governments prefer multilateral solutions to global challenges. However, volatile geopolitical realities have hindered optimal choices and prompted diverse regional approaches to global problems. The analysis of new Asian regionalism provides compelling evidence for how regions can contribute to stabilising the global geopolitical system. The evolution of Asian regional integration, particularly through ASEAN Plus Six frameworks and mega-regional trade agreements like the RCEP and the CPTPP, demonstrates that regions can serve as effective building blocks for a new form of multilateralism.

Regional actorness has evolved significantly, as demonstrated by ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific architecture. ASEAN's *pragmatic incrementalism* in trade negotiations offers an alternative to the Western *single undertaking* approach. This evolution of regional actorness extends beyond mere economic integration to shape identities and governance models that reflect Asian values and practices.

The essay reveals that regions prove more effective than both nation-states and international organisations in several key areas. Environmental sustainability stands out as a prime example, where regional frameworks have achieved concrete progress while global negotiations remain deadlocked. The emergence of green regionalism through innovative agreements like the Green Economy Agreement showcases how regions can pioneer new approaches to pressing global challenges.

As global challenges become more complex, regions appear increasingly capable of providing practical solutions where both nation-states and international organisations have struggled. New Asian regionalism demonstrates that regions can indeed help *save the world*, not by replacing global governance structures, but by providing essential building blocks for a more stable and effective international order.

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Essay 39: ASEAN's Presence in Regionalism: Challenges and Possibilities in Indo-Pacific Geopolitics



Hidetaka Yoshimatsu

Introduction

Southeast Asia has promoted regionalism under the core regional organisation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN has successfully enhanced internal integration to the extent of creating the ASEAN Community with three pillars in political-security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. The association has also extended its reach from Southeast Asia to East Asia and the Asia–Pacific by building multiple architectures for regional cooperation. ASEAN has developed political and economic connections with its dialogue partners, including those with greater material capabilities. ASEAN's presence as the linchpin of regionalism constitutes one of the key characteristics of international relations in East Asia and the Asia–Pacific. In the late 2010s, ASEAN faced a new challenge to manage regional affairs and promote regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, a vast and diverse area encompassing the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The challenge is particularly serious as the Indo-Pacific concept has developed in geostrategic contestation between China and the United States. This essay confirms the role and function that ASEAN has performed in the process of regionalism in East Asia and the Asia–Pacific. It then examines ASEAN's possible reactions to the intensifying geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, which may function as a building block for stabilising the global geopolitical system.

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ASEAN in Regionalism in East Asia and the Asia–Pacific

ASEAN has played a prominent role in leading economic integration. The association has developed integration in Southeast Asia from the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 2002 to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015. The AEC, which aimed to form a single market and production base, constitutes one of the three pillars of the ASEAN community, alongside the political-security community and the socio-cultural community. Concurrently, ASEAN became a key node in the development of broader free trade networks. ASEAN played a central role in transforming ASEAN + 1 networks into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), which came into effect in 2022. ASEAN has also assumed a prominent position in the development of multilateral mechanisms for political and security cooperation. In 1997, the association created the ASEAN + 3 forum with China, Japan, and South Korea, which has functioned as the main vehicle to achieve the building of an East Asian community. In 2005, the East Asia Summit was established as a premier leaders' forum to discuss a wider scope of issues, including strategic and security affairs. In the security domain, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was created as the first multilateral forum to discuss security affairs in the Asia–Pacific. In addition to this foreign ministers' forum, ASEAN created the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). ASEAN has taken the driver's seat in managing these regional mechanisms by assuming the chair and holding meetings in cities across Southeast Asia.

In response to growing concern with the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in June 2019, formulated under Indonesian leadership. The Outlook proposed practical cooperation in four key areas: maritime cooperation, economic cooperation, connectivity, and sustainable development. The ASEAN Concord IV, issued in September 2023, positioned the *Implementation of the AOIP* as one of the three action programs to ensure ASEAN's presence in the Indo-Pacific region (ASEAN, 2023). ASEAN has also issued joint statements on cooperation on the AOIP with its major dialogue partners.

ASEAN has developed regional cooperation under normative engagement, as represented by the ASEAN Way (Acharya, 1997). The ASEAN Way is comprised of two key principles—consensus and non-intervention in internal affairs—and other principles such as peaceful solution of disputes and informal consultation. The ASEAN Way has been applied to the process of developing internal integration and cooperation in Southeast Asia as well as managing ASEAN-led regional mechanisms in East Asia and the Asia–Pacific.

ASEAN's emphasis on a normative approach is evident in the principles embedded in the AOIP. The AOIP includes “building strategic trust and win–win cooperation”. The terms *strategic trust* and *win–win cooperation* have been advocated by Chinese political leaders as ideational means to develop a regional partnership. The AOIP aims at “upholding the rules-based regional architecture” as a way of “the maintenance of peace, freedom, and prosperity”, underscoring respect for international law and

freedom of navigation and overflight. These principles have been underlined by the United States and Japan for managing maritime affairs, and a reference to them could be interpreted as a thinly veiled caution to China (Yoshimatsu, 2023). The AOIP principles associated with both Chinese and US diplomatic practices represent ASEAN's hedging strategy of not taking sides between Beijing and Washington and their blocs (Kuik, 2016).

Based on institutional and normative frameworks, ASEAN has sought to embed its dialogue partners, including the United States and China, in these frameworks. Through this strategy, ASEAN has maintained autonomy by avoiding overdependence on great powers. In the new millennium, ASEAN has underscored ASEAN centrality, which is defined as "the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive" (ASEAN, 2023). ASEAN centrality has functioned as a tool to de-escalate tensions and disagreements among member states or their external partners (Denison, 2023). ASEAN has sought to assume a pivotal position in complex strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific by emphasising ASEAN centrality in the AOIP.

ASEAN's Eclipse in Great Power Politics in the Indo-Pacific

China has implemented comprehensive diplomacy toward Southeast Asia, with ASEAN members being deeply involved in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). When China held the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, eight out of the ten members sent the heads of government or state to the forum. The ASEAN members sought to draw economic benefits from BRI projects, particularly through support for infrastructure development. China has also developed dense diplomatic channels with ASEAN. The two parties have frequent meetings to implement practical cooperative projects and confirm shared interests in these projects. Unlike the United States, China's leaders have not skipped ASEAN meetings, which reflects China's emphasis on relational partnerships. China has also employed positive economic statecraft to use its economic resources to gain support for its diplomatic stance from some ASEAN members. This effectiveness is evident in the behaviour of Cambodia and Laos, which have adopted pro-China stances on regional affairs, including the South China Sea dispute. Furthermore, China has implemented pragmatic diplomacy toward Southeast Asia. China has accommodated ASEAN's approaches by changing its stance, which is evident in its use of the term *Indo-Pacific*. In September 2023, ASEAN and China issued the Joint Statement on Mutually Beneficial Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Despite the above cooperative and accommodating postures toward ASEAN and its members, China has not shown compromising postures on regional affairs connected to its vital interests. This was typical in its aggressive diplomatic postures and military operations in the South China Sea. Beijing has steadily enhanced control of the sea by constructing artificial islands on major reefs. This action is linked to the

military strategy of developing its Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities as part of its national defence strategy (Liu, 2020).

In addition to extending economic arms to various parts of the world under the BRI, China has consolidated its political presence through proactive engagement in multilateral institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), both of which have expanded membership to major countries in the Global South. The United States and its allies have sought to counter China's presence by launching the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) as a banner to maintain a liberal international order. The FOIP then became a key diplomatic vision guiding the development of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, among the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, whose first consultation meeting took place in November 2017. Southeast Asia, located between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, became the locus of strategic competition between China and the United States.

The United States has attempted to consolidate its partnership with ASEAN. The Biden administration held the ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit in Washington in May 2022 and agreed with ASEAN to elevate their relations from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership in November 2022. Concurrently, the U.S. diplomatic strategies have contributed to eclipsing ASEAN centrality. The United States advanced minilateral frameworks, the Quad and AUKUS, partly out of frustration that ASEAN-led regional architectures have not met regional security challenges adequately. The Quad leaders have referred to consistent and unwavering support for ASEAN centrality in their joint statements. However, the development of the Quad and AUKUS naturally undermines the relative importance of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region, and several ASEAN leaders posed questions about AUKUS (Choong & Storey, 2021).

Some of the U.S. foreign policies have contributed to undermining ASEAN unity. When the U.S. government organised the Summit for Democracy in December 2021, it invited only three countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines—out of the ten ASEAN members. Singapore, which has a political system similar to Malaysia's and has concluded the Strategic Framework Agreement with the United States, was not invited to the summit. This selective invitation of members sent a negative message to ASEAN unity and U.S.-ASEAN relations (Shoji, 2023). The Biden administration intensified its engagement with the Mekong region by organising the first Mekong-U.S. Partnership Ministerial Meeting in September 2020. In developing the partnership with the Mekong region, the United States did not pay attention to ASEAN's special position, as the ASEAN Secretariat was positioned as a member of the Friends of the Mekong observer group in parallel to other countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

ASEAN's Reactions to Challenges in Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

In September 2023, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the UN, expressed expectations that ASEAN would play a role in “building bridges of understanding” in his speech at the opening of the ASEAN-United Nations Summit (United Nations, 2023). It is highly challenging for ASEAN to be a building block for establishing a global geopolitical system by managing the escalating great power contestation. With increasingly difficult political climates such as the Ukraine War and the Myanmar Civil War, some Western members have started to boycott attending ASEAN-led sub-meetings (Koga, 2022, p. 6). This tendency implies that ASEAN centrality has eroded despite the association's repeated appeals. Even in such conditions, ASEAN needs to continue standing as an autonomous entity by pursuing ASEAN centrality; otherwise, Southeast Asia will become a battleground for regional power struggles. A retreat to a narrow focus on internal affairs may highlight potential intra-regional conflicts by making ASEAN members more receptive to external affairs. External engagements are necessary to maintain regional autonomy and prevent intra-regional confrontation.

ASEAN can enhance its position as a juncture for regionalism through two routes. First, ASEAN can bundle middle power engagements to keep its presence in the Indo-Pacific. The association has underscored stable relations with middle powers by relying on diversity and inclusivity. The middle powers have strong interests in maintaining regional stability by resorting to multilateral institutions and normative arrangements (Jordaan, 2003). While the AOIP's neutrality contributes to collecting support from broad external partners, its lack of a strategic thrust hampers its ability to manage external threats. ASEAN has forged comprehensive strategic partnerships with India, Japan, and Australia, in addition to the United States and China. Based on these closer connections with middle powers, ASEAN can develop a strategic thrust.

Several regional middle powers, such as India and Japan, have sustained ASEAN Indo-Pacific initiatives. In November 2019, the Indian government launched the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI), which underscores maritime cooperation by establishing seven tangible pillars. The IPOI was in line with priority areas in the AOIP as a cooperative effort to translate principles for the Indo-Pacific into tangible measures. In September 2023, the Japanese government announced the Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Connectivity Initiative to promote connectivity in six areas, such as transport, supply chains, and maritime. This initiative is positioned as a tangible program to sustain connectivity, one of the four areas for cooperation under the AOIP. Thus, India and Japan complement ASEAN's Indo-Pacific initiative by presenting concrete initiatives in connectivity and maritime cooperation, the two core areas for cooperation under the AOIP. The AOIP has been criticised as lacking strategic and substantive elements, being broad, rudimentary and ambiguous (Lin, 2022). Given these characteristics of the AOIP, the provision of concrete initiatives relevant to sensitive areas by middle powers supplements the Outlook.

Second, ASEAN can take advantage of the network of regional organisations. Not only do these regional organisations attempt to promote internal unity, but they also hope to draw the great powers' positive engagement for regional stability. In September 2023, ASEAN promoted institutional cooperation with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) by concluding a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the secretariats. The institutional connections with the IORA and PIF imply that ASEAN is leveraging its geographical position in the middle of the Pacific and Indian Oceans to become a node of inter-regionalism in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN also emphasises its pivotal position as a potential model of regionalism in the developing world and encourages great powers to pay attention to the interests of countries in the Global South.

To effectively perform the role of a regional juncture, ASEAN needs to act as both a practical and ideational focal point for regional cooperation, demonstrating its unique approach to regional actorness and integration. The practical role is evident in ASEAN's engagement in the Indo-Pacific. The AOIP showed no substantive progress in its implementation until November 2022, when ASEAN leaders adopted the Declaration on Mainstreaming Four Priority Areas of the AOIP within ASEAN-Led Mechanisms. Indonesia, as the 2023 ASEAN chair, offered new impulses to advance actions for the implementation of the AOIP. In September 2023, the ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum (AIPF) was held in Jakarta, and 93 projects worth US\$38.2 billion were endorsed as AOIP projects (Lin, 2024). Each project has a proposal country from ASEAN members and a cooperative country from ASEAN dialogue partners. The projects cover supply chain networks, digital economic frameworks, green infrastructure, and so on. These practical projects that produce tangible outcomes can attract renewed commitments from ASEAN's external partners.

The AOIP embodies ASEAN's diplomatic approach towards regionalism, based on long-term experiences of regional cooperation and institution-building. The Outlook includes the phrases, "ASEAN's Community building process" and "a greater sense of community". The reference to community-building represents a key component of ASEAN's regional enmeshment, looking forward to furthering discussions on the Indo-Pacific concept. The community model can be regarded as a distinct "third way" of regionalism apart from the U.S. alliance system and the Chinese institutional network (Wilkins, 2020, p. 5). This model, which values consensus-based consultation, peer pressure, and consideration for equitable development, has been a key feature of ASEAN internal regionalism. The model emphasises inclusiveness, mutual respect, and trust, pursuing plus-sum benefits. It may offer opportunities for dialogue partners to engage in practical cooperative outcomes, deepen mutual understanding through cooperation, and understand their expected roles in maintaining regional order. Chinese political leaders, who have been eager to use the narratives of the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and a China-ASEAN Community of Common Destiny, seek to employ ASEAN's community approach to maintain and expand their regional influence. The United States, which has intensified minilateral frameworks such as the United States–Japan–Korea or the United States–Japan–Philippines arrangements in addition to the Quad and AUKUS, is less willing to endorse ASEAN's community approach to regionalism. ASEAN must

navigate regionalism in the Indo-Pacific under challenging geostrategic conditions by adhering to its position as an honest broker, maintaining neutral ground where involved parties are given equal and fair opportunities to sustain regional cooperation.

Conclusion

Amid the intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, ASEAN's role as a building block for stabilising the global geopolitical system is accompanied by significant uncertainty. However, ASEAN's history of integrating great powers into its initiated regional frameworks provides it with a legitimate foundation to lead regionalism and foster regional cooperation. To strengthen its position, ASEAN must develop multilateral arrangements that encourage the practical involvement of its dialogue partners, thereby reducing great powers' reliance on bilateral or minilateral approaches to maintain regional influence. Additionally, ASEAN can enhance its regional presence by coordinating the regional engagements of middle powers in the Indo-Pacific and serving as a crucial node of interregionalism, especially given the increasing prominence of the Global South.

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Essay 40: Rethinking Regionalism: The ASEAN Way's Impact on Global Cooperation



Arianne Joy Fabregas

Introduction

In an era of shifting power dynamics, ASEAN has become a linchpin in forging peace and cooperation in Southeast Asia and beyond. ASEAN has evidently played a significant role in shaping regional and global governance and has offered various alternatives to Western liberal approaches (Stubbs, 2008). Throughout the years, the organisation has evolved from its initial focus on political stability to promoting economic integration and addressing regional challenges (Campbell, 2021). As ASEAN's approach is rooted in Asian cultures and historical experiences, it also emphasises neutrality, sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, and non-interference (Stubbs, 2008). While the organisation faces challenges such as differing national priorities, limited enforcement mechanisms, and varying levels of commitment among member states, ASEAN has adapted by adopting a more flexible *multilateralism 2.0* system, which emphasises pragmatic cooperation and consensus-building (Reddy, 2020). Further, it is undeniable that the organisation's influence in global affairs has increased, particularly through its strengthened relationship with China and well-known developed states (Stubbs, 2008). Central to this essay is the argument that ASEAN's regionalisation model offers a broadly acceptable alternative to the rigid structures of other international organisations, providing a template for inclusive and flexible multilateral cooperation (Campbell, 2021). Further, it can offer valuable lessons for other regional organisations, such as managing regional diversity and fostering cooperation without compromising national autonomy (Jetly, 2003).

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Regional Integration of ASEAN, EU, and MERCOSUR

When it comes to regional integration, ASEAN's approach differs significantly from other frameworks like the EU, AU, and MERCOSUR (see Table 1: ASEAN's Flexibility in Implementing Agreements). While the EU has achieved deep economic and political integration through supranational institutions and the delegation of sovereign powers (Li, 2024), ASEAN's integration is shaped by its traditional *ASEAN Way*, economic diversity among members, and a lack of supranational enforcement mechanisms (Luu, 2012). ASEAN's normative influence focuses on managing great power intervention, contrasting with the EU's aim to shape the political preferences of neighbouring states (He, 2016). Although ASEAN has attempted to model some structures after the EU, such as the Committee of Permanent Representatives, replicating the EU's consensual decision-making process remains challenging due to fundamental differences in regional contexts and goals (Murray & Moxon-Browne, 2012).

The ASEAN Way, defined by informal processes, non-interference, and pragmatic flexibility, has been central to maintaining regional peace and cooperation (Tekunan, 2014). For example, ASEAN's non-interference principle was critical during Indonesia's political crisis in 1998, allowing the country to navigate its democratic transition without external pressure. Similarly, ASEAN's informal diplomacy played a key role in managing tensions during the Temple of Preah Vihear dispute between Cambodia and Thailand, facilitating dialogue that helped avert escalation (Phan, 2014). This approach, which favours consensus over binding agreements, accommodates Southeast Asia's political diversity without imposing rigid compliance, contrasting with the EU's formal structures and the AU's interventionist peacekeeping (Poole, 2015). This fosters a trust-based environment that allows for collaboration without infringing on member states' autonomy.

However, as 21st-century security challenges emerge, ASEAN faces calls to recalibrate its informal processes to enhance institutional responsiveness (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). The ASEAN Charter aimed to formalise a legal framework, yet significant changes remain contingent on traditional norms. Efforts to adopt preventive diplomacy in the ASEAN Regional Forum, for instance, have encountered resistance due to rigid interpretations of non-interference, limiting proactive security measures (Emmers & Tan, 2009). Despite these critiques, ASEAN's unique model of diplomacy has proven effective at fostering regional unity and cooperation, providing a resilient alternative to more structured regional frameworks (Tekunan, 2014).

The Table presents a comparative analysis of ASEAN alongside the EU, AU, and MERCOSUR, illustrating distinct attributes such as ASEAN's emphasis on consensus-driven decision-making, the EU's supranational governance structures, the AU's focus on continental unity, and MERCOSUR's prioritisation of trade integration. This highlights how ASEAN balances regional cohesion with national sovereignty by emphasising non-interference and flexibility in implementing agreements.

Table 1 ASEAN’s flexibility in implementing agreements

Aspect	ASEAN	EU	AU	MERCOSUR
Institutional structure	Informal, relies on consensus and non-binding agreements Tekunan (2014)	Highly formalised with legally binding institutions and supranational governance Li (2024)	Formal structure with mechanisms for peacekeeping and intervention Poole (2015)	Structured but less formal than EU, focused on economic cooperation
Conflict management approach	Consensus-based diplomacy, non-interference, preventive diplomacy limited by norms Emmers and Tan (2009)	Formal mechanisms, institutionalised frameworks for conflict prevention and crisis management	Peacekeeping and intervention mechanisms for regional stability	Minimal focus on political conflict management
Policy on sovereignty	Strong emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference Luu (2012)	Delegated sovereignty to supranational bodies, binding regulations	Conditional sovereignty allows intervention in crises	Sovereignty is maintained, primarily economic cooperation
Decision-making process	Consensus-based, voluntary compliance, no supranational enforcement Murray and Moxon-Browne (2012)	Majority voting, enforceable agreements, and supranational bodies with legal power	Institutionalised decision-making with options for intervention	Intergovernmental, focuses on consensus with limited binding authority
Primary focus of cooperation	Political stability, economic cooperation with flexible integration Caballero-Anthony (2022)	Deep economic and political integration, regulatory harmonisation	Conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and economic integration	Economic integration, primarily trade-focused

Source Author’s elaboration

ASEAN’s Impact on Global Cooperation

We now proceed with how ASEAN has had an impact on global cooperation in terms of interregionalism, multilateralism, and global influence.

Interregionalism

ASEAN's engagement with other regional organisations has been a subject of significant research. The EU-ASEAN dialogue serves as an important model for interregional cooperation (Gilson, 2020). ASEAN's interactions with the EU have enhanced the actorness capabilities of both organisations, although there are limits to institutional changes due to entrenched normative underpinnings (Mattheis & Wunderlich, 2017). ASEAN's potential cooperation with MERCOSUR faces challenges due to the *Spaghetti Bowl* effect of overlapping trade agreements, but ASEAN could learn from MERCOSUR's more advanced intra-trade model (Mulyaman et al., 2023). The ASEAN-EU relationship has evolved since the 1970s, with interregionalism serving functions such as balancing, institution-building, and agenda-setting (Rüland, 2011). These interregional forums contribute to global governance, although questions remain about their effectiveness in creating a coherent international institutional structure (Rüland, 2011).

Further, this inter-regional dialogue has become an important model for cooperation, although changing multilateral landscapes and intra-regional crises have altered its relevance (Gilson, 2020). Now we see that ASEAN's approach to regionalism, characterised by loosely codified, informal, and norm-driven multilateralism, has proven durable and robust (Aris, 2009). The organisation's patient, gradual approach to deepening relations among member countries has prepared the ground for more substantial future cooperation and integration, offering valuable lessons for other regional blocs seeking to establish effective interregional cooperation (Blomqvist, 1993).

ASEAN's Inclusivity in Multilateralism

ASEAN's participation in multilateral institutions like the United Nations has evolved in response to global changes, prompting institutional adaptation to address representation and cohesion issues (Wunderlich, 2012). However, ASEAN's meta-regime, based on strict non-interference, has hindered effective cooperation on regional issues such as trade liberalisation and environmental protection (Aggarwal & Chow, 2010). As ASEAN emerges as a significant regional player, its conduct in global affairs becomes increasingly important (Molthof, 2012).

ASEAN's approach to multilateralism is characterised by a *hedging utility* rather than a *multilateral utility*, emphasising sovereignty protection and non-interference (Rüland, 2011). This *ASEAN Way* has shaped regional organisations, promoting consensus and voluntary enforcement of decisions (Simon, 2008). While this approach has limitations in mediating conflicts and regulating great power relations (Goh, 2018), it has proven effective in fostering inclusiveness and institutionalising

small state voices (Goh, 2018). ASEAN-led multilateralism has demonstrated advantages in addressing non-traditional security threats, as evidenced by the coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

ASEAN's Global Influence Today

ASEAN's diplomatic practices offer an alternative model to Western-centric approaches in international relations. The *ASEAN Way* emphasises neutrality, sovereignty, non-interference, informal negotiations, and peaceful dispute settlement (Stubbs, 2008). This approach, rooted in Asian cultures and historical experiences, challenges Western liberal paradigms of global governance (Stubbs, 2008). ASEAN's institutional divergence from Western models has evolved through different periods, influenced by geopolitical dynamics and theoretical developments (Ba, 2014). The organisation's diplomatic environment exhibits both change and continuity, with formal codes remaining traditional while informal practices evolve (Davies, 2016). The principle of non-interference is crucial in maintaining regional peace and cooperation, although some observers question ASEAN's effectiveness (Tekunan, 2014). Despite criticisms, ASEAN's unique diplomatic engagement has contributed to its longevity and relative success in maintaining regional stability, presenting a potential alternative for other multilateral organisations (Tekunan, 2014).

Western Theoretical Foundations of Regionalism vs ASEAN's Way of Regional Integration

It is also important to recognise that regional integration theories explain the development of regional organisations and cooperation between states. Western studies emphasise that neoliberal institutionalism emphasises formal institutions for collaboration, while constructivism focuses on shared identity and norms (Caballero Santos, 2009). Further, key theories include intergovernmentalism, which views national governments as primary actors, and neofunctionalism, which argues that integration creates spillovers beyond governmental control (Schimmelfennig, 2018). However, postfunctionalism suggests that integration can lead to backlash and potential disintegration due to identity-based politicisation (Schimmelfennig, 2018). Constructivism and Critical Theory challenge mainstream theories by considering non-state actors and the influence of identity on behaviour (Weber, 2007). These approaches provide different perspectives on regional integration, with constructivism promoting ideas of identity and culture to better understand processes like MERCOSUR (Caballero Santos, 2009).

Thus, the ASEAN approach to regional cooperation challenges these traditional Western theories of international relations. ASEAN's emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference, and informal diplomacy contrasts with neoliberal institutionalism's focus on formal institutions (Stubbs, 2008), offering a distinct model that highlights the role of norms, trust-building, and consensus in fostering regional cooperation. This approach contributes to theory building on regionalism by demonstrating how non-Western practices can successfully achieve stability and integration, challenging the universality of Western-centric frameworks and encouraging a broader, more inclusive understanding of regional dynamics. While constructivism has been used to explain ASEAN's focus on regional identity and norms, it may not fully capture the *ASEAN Way* (Narine, 2006). The English School offers an alternative explanation, highlighting ASEAN's symbolic importance in representing Southeast Asia's commitment to national sovereignty (Narine, 2006). However, some scholars argue that European integration theories like neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism can still provide insights for ASEAN integration (Kim, 2014). Despite attempts to inject democratic norms into the ASEAN Charter, the organisation has largely maintained its traditional principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention, reflecting the tension between reformist and authoritarian member states (Heng, 2009).

The challenges in theorising ASEAN stem from the dominance of Western-centric approaches in regionalism studies. The ASEAN model, characterised by informality, sovereignty-consciousness, and non-interference, presents an alternative paradigm to Western liberal governance (Stubbs, 2008). This should lead to calls for developing new or hybrid theoretical frameworks that better capture ASEAN's distinctive features (Spandler, 2020). The debate surrounding ASEAN theorisation reflects broader questions about the universality of regionalism theories and the importance of considering cultural and political differences in their application (Chong, 2007; Stubbs, 2008). As ASEAN's global influence grows, particularly through its relationship with China, the need for more nuanced theoretical approaches becomes increasingly apparent (Stubbs, 2008).

Rethinking Global Regionalism: Traditional Comparative Research and Methodology, not Compatible

From the mentioned key points above, the debate on regionalism theories underscores the limitations of existing frameworks, such as their Western-centric assumptions, in accommodating diverse regional approaches. For example, ASEAN's informal and consensus-based practices challenge the formal institutional focus of neoliberal institutionalism, illustrating the need for frameworks that integrate non-Western models and perspectives to fully capture the variety of regional experiences. Acharya (2004) introduces the concept of *norm localisation*, *emphasising* how local agents reconstruct foreign norms to fit their cognitive priors and identities. This process explains

the varying acceptance of transnational norms in ASEAN. Acharya (2011) further advocates for broadening IR theory by incorporating non-Western perspectives and experiences, suggesting avenues like studying diverse regionalisms and integrating area studies with IR. Spandler (2020) traces the evolution of research on Southeast Asian regional organisations, noting the shift from Western-centric approaches to more critical and indigenous perspectives. Ba (2014) examines ASEAN as an alternative model of regionalism, highlighting the interplay between theoretical developments and geopolitical contexts, particularly the influence of US preoccupations and the EU's institutional trajectory on ASEAN's theoretical conceptualisation.

Further, comparative research on regionalism faces challenges due to fragmentation and a lack of systematic debate on fundamental issues (De Lombaerde et al., 2010). However, it offers opportunities to study the proliferation of regional organisations and their similarities in institutional design (Jetschke & Lenz, 2011). Researchers emphasise the need for conceptual rigour, theoretical eclecticism, and improved empirical methods to bridge divides in the field (De Lombaerde et al., 2010). A diffusion-oriented approach is proposed to analyse regional organisations as interdependent phenomena (Jetschke & Lenz, 2011). Comparative regionalism should focus on three key questions: outcomes of regionalism, drivers of regionalism, and internal effects of regionalism (Börzel, 2011). Methodologies for studying diverse regions include qualitative case studies and quantitative integration measures (Söderbaum, 2009). Despite progress in specific areas, the field lacks a systematic debate on comparative fundamentals, highlighting the need for a more cohesive research agenda (Börzel, 2011; Söderbaum, 2009).

The progress of ASEAN, along with IR, emphasises the importance of methodological regionalism in Southeast Asian studies, highlighting the need for interdisciplinary approaches and flexible research methods. Thompson (2013) argues for the value of regionalism as a counterweight to methodological nationalism, while Grant et al. (2011) discuss various regional frameworks and the interplay between formal and informal regionalism. Lorenzo (2021) applies the New Regionalism Approach to examine ASEAN's influence on cross-border research in Philippine higher education, revealing both opportunities and challenges. Hamayotsu (2015) reviews a volume addressing the tension between disciplinary and area-specific knowledge production in Southeast Asian studies, emphasising the importance of context-sensitive research practices. This essay collectively stresses the need for methodological tools that can account for ASEAN's unique characteristics, such as informal diplomacy and consensus-building (Lorenzo, 2021; Thompson, 2013), while also acknowledging the value of ethnographic and other social science approaches in studying the region (Hamayotsu, 2015).

Conclusion: ASEAN as a Blueprint for the World in the Future

ASEAN plays a crucial role in shaping regional identity and fostering interregional cooperation in Asia. Further, its engagement with other regions, particularly the EU, has enhanced its actorness capabilities and stimulated regional identity formation (Mattheis & Wunderlich, 2017). ASEAN's collective identity, rooted in shared norms, values, and multilateralism, influences security politics and regionalism in the Asia-Pacific (Acharya & Layug, 2012). The ASEAN-EU dialogue on human rights has been contentious but has contributed to ASEAN's collective identity formation and created a regional space for human rights discourse (Manea, 2008). However, challenges remain in constructing a shared ASEAN identity. Strategies are needed to transition citizens from nation-state mentalities to regional citizenry, empower diverse populations, and foster social capital (Jones, 2004). Education and civic empowerment are crucial in this process. Despite limitations, ASEAN's evolving identity continues to shape regional cooperation and its engagement with other regions.

In addition, ASEAN's advancement has employed a strategy of balancing external influences from major powers like China and the US while fostering a regional identity based on consensus and inclusivity. This approach, termed a *balance of influence*, involves military, economic, institutional, and ideational dimensions (Ciorciari, 2008). ASEAN invites competing powers to participate in regional affairs, creating stakes in Southeast Asia's stability (Ciorciari, 2008). The organisation leverages its norms and principles, such as transparency, openness, and non-intervention, to maintain neutrality and centrality (Ayu, 2023). ASEAN pursues omni-enmeshment of major powers and a complex balance of influence, resulting in a hierarchical regional order with the US as the dominant superpower and China as a regional great power (Goh, 2008). Despite challenges to unity from Sino-American competition, ASEAN continues to shape regional interactions through diplomacy, collective voice, and regional norms that influence great power behaviour (Ciorciari, 2017).

Ultimately, ASEAN's approach to collective leadership strengthens consensus-building and ensures balanced, inclusive decision-making, inspiring other regions to adopt similar frameworks (Srisangnam, 2023). Economic integration efforts like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) demonstrate ASEAN's commitment to regional prosperity, providing a blueprint for others (Kimura et al., 2022). Additionally, ASEAN's mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), promote regional stability and address security challenges globally (ASEAN Regional Forum, 2022). In the future, ASEAN's adaptability to changing dynamics ensures its continued relevance, setting a precedent for resilience and cooperation in a rapidly evolving world that can be a blueprint for other regions.

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Essay 41: Caribbean Regionalism and the Broader Geopolitical Backdrop: A Two-Case Analysis



Nand C. Bardouille

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) and the United States have taken on renewed attention in the context of Caribbean regionalism, reinforcing the widely held view that this preeminent international organisation and top-tier superpower feature prominently in Caribbean Community (CARICOM) member states' thinking and diplomatic action in international relations. Focussing on two cases, this essay sheds light on: (i) CARICOM's diplomatic stance on UN Security Council (UNSC) reform, which is a top priority for the bloc; and (ii) why Donald Trump's return to the presidency has raised the prospect that, over the next four years, the Caribbean's playbook regarding its longstanding relations with the U.S. will be tested as never before. The two Caribbean-related cases presented here, in turn, are followed by some conclusions that contribute to our further knowledge about the *regional concept* for understanding international politics. This concept, which is one of several themes that frame this edited volume, is analysed from the vantage point of 14 mostly Anglo-phone sovereign Caribbean nations that gained independence from the 1960s to the 1980s (Bardouille, 2018).

This essay, with modifications, combines two articles (i.e. Bardouille, 2025 and Bardouille, 2024a) originally published by Global Americans.

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UNSC Reform and CARICOM

UNSC Reform: A Fundamental CARICOM Interest

CARICOM member states have long stood as advocates of UNSC reform, setting their sights (Bardouille, 2024b) on “connect[ing] foreign policy priorities to the UNSC agenda” (Bardouille, 2024c). CARICOM and like-minded states have already made significant progress in the direction of UNSC reform—as the United States recently threw its weight behind a Small Island Developing States (SIDS) seat at the UNSC table. This high-level foreign policy-related positioning is an instructive road marker on the long march of progress relative to the international order, whose advent had everything to do with the West’s interests. As for many of today’s Global South countries, including those of CARICOM, they were still Western metropolises’ colonial possessions when the Liberal International Order came into being—under the aegis of the West’s intellectual authorship (Bardouille, 2023a).

The post-World War II international order is, therefore, the subject of stark assessments, which is hardly surprising, considering that developing countries are keen to leave their mark on an international order that—from their vantage point—is not in tune with the times. Put differently, insofar as the Global South has assumed an expanded role in geopolitics (Shidore, 2023), the “[g]lobal governance architecture [is] not fit for purpose” (Mia, 2024). Barbados’ Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley has reaffirmed this very point (Mottley, 2024)—which connects to the following question: What’s driving CARICOM’s thinking on UNSC reform? As I argue for *Global Policy* (Bardouille, 2024b), these states approach this reform process in a holistic manner—i.e. *the general calculus*. But they also have three other compelling, specific interests in mind.

This CARICOM member states-driven diplomatic stance unequivocally signals a return to form in Caribbean multilateral diplomacy, hearkening back to Caribbean diplomacy of a bygone era vis-à-vis the multilateral realm. Of note, in the 1970s, in hopes of transforming their developmental prospects in relation to the international environment, bloc members Guyana and Jamaica were at “the forefront of the demand for a New International Economic Order” (Demas, 1978, p. 243). Yet the most striking, diplomatically salient climb up the international pecking order for CARICOM in recent decades is informed by its leading role in the international community on climate action. The reality is that the bloc’s members have garnered a well-deserved, historically impressive global reputation in that regard (Foley et al., 2023).

COP29 is a pertinent, topical example. With regard to CARICOM’s preparation for this latest iteration of the annual UN climate meeting, which the regional grouping billed as a high-profile diplomatic opportunity to further advance advocacy for SIDS-related climate action, emphasis was placed on “coordinated messaging” and “Ministerial Champions for key negotiation areas” (Caribbean Community Secretariat, 2024a). In (human) security terms, climate-related priorities have predominated for CARICOM member states (Caribbean Community Secretariat, 2024b). Broadly, as

small states (Sutton, 2011), more conventional concerns on the security front have always held sway (one need look no further than the Guyana-Venezuela border controversy (Bardouille, 2024d)). In either respect, these states want to lower the odds that their interests will not be well served in respect of the UNSC. Reform of that body—long a diplomatic guardrail of protection for CARICOM member states—is the linchpin of such an effort.

On balance, CARICOM member states are now intent on pushing back harder still on the UNSC status quo (Bardouille, 2023b). Diplomatically, such an approach marks another attempt to actively shape the said reform's scope and trajectory. It can also be interpreted as serving, in its own right, as a crucible to rejig the international order. After all, given the centrality of the Security Council to international politics, this kind of institutional reform—were it to bear fruit—would certainly have an impact on the international system (that system turns on status and hierarchical international relations). With the foregoing in mind, a key question that arises is as follows: Among key Permanent Five (or P5) actors—which are atop the aforementioned hierarchy—what is the reception like regarding this kind of thinking?

Securing CARICOM's Future in an Ever-More Complex, Great Power World

In the case of the United States, former President Joe Biden's administration cultivated the perception of strategic empathy toward CARICOM member states.¹ Washington has a strong hand in these relations, with Biden's one-term presidency playing it to good effect. That the region comprises thriving democracies, which are grounded in a shared commitment to democratic traditions and institutions, has a lot to do with it. This is in a context where—in rhetorically and strategically framing the international environment—Biden emphasised the binary “struggle between democracy and autocracy, [and] his administration has set out to support democracy globally as a major foreign policy priority” (Carothers & Brown, 2024).²

However, the real issue is that in calling out aspects of the international order, CARICOM member states have hardly created a sense of unease for the United States. For one thing, with regard to their capacity to be system-level disruptors,

¹ The United States has especially deepened bilateral relations with Guyana (Insanally, 2023), whose oil boom has provided the impetus for a more nuanced foreign policy thrust that includes shoring up this emergent petrostate's security-related capacity relative to Venezuela (U.S. Embassy in Guyana, 2024). Venezuela is perhaps the clearest example of an anchor for Beijing-led diplomatic efforts to exercise influence in Latin America (Costello, 2024), considering that Caracas' close relationship with Beijing affords the latter leverage on security engagement (Ellis, 2024).

² These Caribbean states took advantage of this foreign policy moment (U.S. Embassy to Barbados, 2024).

great power threats—along with the new BRICS + balancing—dominate Washington’s geopolitical concerns.³ These concerns have only intensified as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia are now more aligned than at any point since the end of the Cold War, owing to their *no-limits* partnership. From the United States’ perspective, competing visions of the international order are most troublesome at this level. Yet also concerning is how CARICOM member states calling out structures that perpetuate the global governance-related status quo can feed into what Washington conceives (at least under the Biden administration) as more extreme foreign policy narratives, as well as their associated power dynamics.

Of course, Beijing and Moscow are keeping a close diplomatic eye on CARICOM member states’ UN-based multilateral diplomacy. The PRC, which maintains diplomatic relations with most CARICOM member states (in a context where a handful of them back Taipei), has seized on the opportunity to wield influence (Serrano-Moreno, 2024). Indeed, as Taiwan’s backers in the Caribbean dwindle (Henry & Ellsworth, 2023), the PRC’s influence in the region has never been greater. This is certainly not the case for Russia, which is all too aware that—across the Caribbean Basin (Cuba and some others excepted), stemming from the Ukraine war—it has lost goodwill and been dealt a blow regarding its moral authority qua leadership role in the international community.

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, within CARICOM, there is a sense of uneasiness with Moscow. In this regard, member states have hardened policies on Russia. For example, on October 21st, 2024, Guyana again called Russia out on its war on Ukraine (United Nations, 2024)—providing a window into regional thinking on the Kremlin’s international security-related narrative (Le Monde with AFP, 2024). As Ukraine recently marked 1000 days since Russia’s full-scale invasion in respect of the Russo-Ukrainian War, clearly, this narrative has little regard for the UN Charter and even less interest in international norms and law. Perhaps most significantly—albeit years in the making, although solidified by the Ukraine war—Russia is now the PRC’s junior partner in the scheme of things. This point (and the worldview it exemplifies) is not lost on CARICOM member states, which were also in geopolitical crosshairs during the Cold War.

CARICOM’s Read of the Security (Council) Situation

This geopolitical situation belies this question: How much has the idea of a new Cold War à la balance of power politics vis-à-vis a more multipolar international system penetrated the Caribbean? Some analysts conclude that a shift is underway from a period characterised by regional states’ relative disinterest in great powers to one dubbed “a new Cold War in which a global rivalry between the United States and

³ Given his stated foreign policy priorities in the realm of high politics (Gienger, 2024), Donald Trump’s second-term foreign policy will likely be far less concerned than his first-term in office about CARICOM (Jamaica Gleaner, 2020).

China is acted out regionally” (MacDonald, 2022). Today, CARICOM member states are engaged in a balancing act—one that is not without risk. In fact, with an eye to the aforesaid border controversy, CARICOM’s leaders underscore that the Caribbean must remain a Zone of Peace. They are mindful, too, of the wider implications that the Ukraine war and Israel’s war in Gaza (as well as instability in the Middle East) pose to international security. The chapter now turns to the second case.

Trump 2.0 and the Caribbean

High on the Regional Agenda

In just under a fortnight (as of this writing: first week of February 2025), CARICOM leaders will meet in Barbados for a regularly scheduled summit. It is their first summit since Donald Trump, now serving as the 47th U.S. president, returned to the presidency on January 20. And it takes place at a moment when the reality of the *America First* approach to foreign policy has begun to set in for the Caribbean—just like it has for the rest of the world. That reality will likely weigh heavily on the summit’s agenda, which partly deals with “climate change and the climate finance agenda; the ongoing challenges in Haiti; security issues; digital resilience; external relations matters” (Caribbean Community Secretariat, 2025). All of this, seen from the broader perspective of political capital, is meant to move the needle on CARICOM member states’ long-term strategy of amplifying their voice qua negotiating power on the international stage.

Some Initial Foreign Policy-Related Reverberations

With the advent of the second Trump presidency, the high-level meeting in question takes on added significance. This is because some of Trump’s political ends have the potential to undermine this bloc’s foreign policy interests. Of note, with a view to upending Biden-era domestic and foreign policy moorings, among the flurry of executive orders that President Trump signed shortly following his assumption of office was one pertaining to the withdrawal of the United States from the landmark Paris Climate Agreement.⁴ It is a global framework that the Caribbean regional grouping deems to be pivotal to coordinated, concerted multilateral action to address climate change, which is an existential threat to such SIDS.

In 2017, during his first term in office, Trump also withdrew the United States from that accord; a directive that the Biden administration subsequently reversed.

⁴ His administration also informed the UN of this decision, whose blow was not softened any as the United States has since reneged on its previous multi-billion dollar pledge to the Green Climate Fund.

At the time, and in response, CARICOM voiced its dismay and disappointment in respect of Trump's decision (Caribbean Community Secretariat, 2017). It is likely that this time around, too, such sharp disagreement will be forthcoming. That Trump privileges unilateralism over multilateralism, then, is also at issue for CARICOM's leaders. Then there are other dynamics at work that Trump 2.0 also ushers in, and much of this impacts CARICOM in geopolitical terms.

Test of a Diplomatic Playbook

Trump's worldview places an emphasis on "securing America's borders, stopping illegal and destabilising migration, and negotiating the repatriation of illegal immigrants" (U.S. Department of State, 2025). This has a bearing on Caribbean countries, as regional media houses have recently reported (Jamaica Gleaner, 2025). Some foreign policy analysts have also rightly pointed to the link between the "disruptive nature of climate change [and] large-scale migration flows" (Mihm, 2023). The case of Haitian migrants, who continue to flee Haiti bound for the United States (in the context of a years-long and multifaceted crisis in Haiti), is yet another example of the complexity of migration-related push factors. In fact, Trump has not let up on his well-documented concerns over Haitian migrants, even though as President-elect, he shifted his gaze yet again to another Caribbean country—The Bahamas. Trump's proposal to deport certain migrants to the Bahamas (among other countries)—which Nassau roundly rejected—offered some telling clues of Washington's now securitised, zealous approach to delivering on the *America First* approach to foreign policy (America First Policy Institute, n.d.).

This is particularly true of what U.S. National Security Advisor Mike Waltz recently dubbed Monroe Doctrine 2.0—a facet of which is seemingly geared towards undermining Panamanian sovereignty on account of Washington's concerns over *China's presence* around the Panama Canal (Waldenberg & Rios, 2025). This leaves open the possibility of Washington becoming more hawkish about the People's Republic of China's (PRC) growing Belt and Road Initiative's footprint in CARICOM member states.⁵ As I noted for *India's World*: "the PRC is now an important lever in the Caribbean's developmental trajectory, while CARICOM leaders themselves are a growing, vocal presence in calls to rethink the 'West-led' international order" (Bardouille, 2024e).

And as the bloc's leaders continue to figure out the wider implications of Trump 2.0 for their respective countries, drawing on their varied foreign policy experiences relative to his first term (Jamaica Gleaner, 2019) and the post-January 20 measures highlighted above, they have a good read on what to expect from Trump's electoral return to the White House. And more significantly, for now (not even a month into Trump's second term), things aren't getting any better for CARICOM. Washington

⁵ This has to be taken into account in light of the high-stakes geopolitical manoeuvres of the moment (Bardouille, 2023c).

has put a stop to funding for the UNSC-approved, Kenya-led Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti. From its outset, this Mission has faced challenges, which are now only likely to worsen. And the stakes are high. Haiti likely cannot withstand the Mission, ultimately falling short in operationalising its mandate. Instructively, the UN continues to express concern over the human rights situation in Haiti. For their part, CARICOM leaders have consistently voiced the view that a strong bloc needs a strong Haiti.

It is also noteworthy that the Trump administration's stance on negotiations to end the Ukraine war raises serious questions surrounding Russian territorial gains at the expense of Ukraine. A host of concerns arise for Guyana and its sister CARICOM countries, which have taken an active interest in the war (Bardouille, 2023d), as the former state grapples with a border controversy that pits Georgetown against Caracas. In addition, Trump's so-called *Gaza takeover plan* is a cause for concern, against a backdrop where all 14 independent CARICOM member states support the two-state solution as a diplomatic vehicle for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, the Trump administration's pivot to "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid" and, allied to this, the administration's efforts to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development have sent shock waves through Caribbean policymaking and civil society circles. Historically, the United States has "provided considerable foreign assistance to the Caribbean"—complemented by security, economic, and other ties (Runde et al., 2021).

What's more, CARICOM finds it troubling that international organisations are in the Trump administration's crosshairs. After all, by and large, such intergovernmental organisations undergird UN-anchored multilateralism. They also have an outsized place in this bloc's diplomatic playbook, which leverages the web of UN institutions to a significant degree. To be sure, in part, the foregoing foreign policy *démarches* of the Trump administration signal the deeper shift from the foreign policy aims of former President Joe Biden's one-term presidency (which succeeded the first Trump presidency); namely, "bring[ing] a state of normalcy to U.S. foreign policy, rejoin[ing] treaties and alliances the previous administration abandoned, and restor[ing] the country's standing in the world" (Levingston, n.d.). The Trump administration's departure from Biden-era U.S. foreign policy positioning is coming at the rest of the international community fast and furious, with some associated actions (sketched above) constituting a wake-up call for all concerned.

Conclusion

To conclude, in part, this essay illustrates how, as it is currently configured, the UNSC has fallen short in keeping pace with the systemic level transition from U.S.-hinged, post-Cold War unipolarity to multipolarity. To this point, another age of great-power competition has arrived. It is gumming up the UNSC's ability to give effect to its mandate—churning up far greater risk (even unintended consequences)

for and posing a serious challenge to CARICOM's security (Caribbean Community Secretariat, 2024c). Accordingly, Security Council reform is a top priority for the Caribbean. Alongside this, the chapter contends that at the highest level of Caribbean governments, Trump 2.0 looms large relative to Caribbean regionalism. At their upcoming summit (as of this writing), then, CARICOM leaders will no doubt assess this nascent period of Trump 2.0. More importantly, they will have to review the bloc's own past playbook relative to relations with the U.S., with an eye to calibrations over the next four years per their respective countries' interests. In doing so, at the outset, wary may well be the watchword. Yet the greatest uncertainty in the same vein comes from not concretising a Trump 2.0 strategy, which diplomats and officials are hard at work fashioning for their political directorate. At their 48th Regular Meeting, CARICOM Heads of Government have an important opportunity to make headway in that regard.

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Essay 42: Digital Regionalism in the Caribbean: The Reason and Facilitator for ICT Development



Rachel Joseph

Introduction

With approximately 67% of the world's population having access to the internet, the same report from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2023) states that the Americas region, which comprises the United States of America (US), Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean, shows internet coverage of 87%. Internet use is closely connected to a country's level of development and while the data also reveals the disparities in the lack of access to ICTs, it is clear, through the various efforts to promote and incorporate ICT development to facilitate ease in trade and business transactions as well as access to government services, that the Caribbean region, with 66% internet penetration (Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2023), is concomitantly moving towards national and regional digital transformation. Caribbean regionalism has been the undercurrent as both the reason and the facilitator for these efforts through regional intergovernmental organisations like the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU), the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF), and the Inter-American Development Bank, which have been at the forefront of supporting Caribbean nation-states towards the CARICOM Single ICT Space.

Traditionally, regionalism takes the form of political and economic cooperation among several states and non-state actors within a particular geographic region to advance regional identity and interaction (Roach et al., 2014). Historically, the Caribbean has been making strides to foster closer ties either through state-led efforts or through external entities that are making collective decisions in the region. While several studies have been conducted on Caribbean regionalism (Bardouille, 2018; DeLoughrey, 2001; Niblett & Oloff, 2010), more attention is needed in exploring digital regional integration as these countries navigate the fourth industrial revolution.

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The CTU is credited as the first of its kind in addressing advancements in telecommunications and ICT development at a regional level. Since its inception in 1989, it has asserted itself as the foremost authority in supporting Caribbean governments in developing the policies and infrastructure needed to address national goals and needs. However, there has been a convergence and overlapping of regional efforts by other intergovernmental organisations in addressing technology developments, which is further compounded by the role of non-state actors.

This essay supports the view that regions can be building blocks for multilateralism by exploring the liberalist notion of digital integration in the Caribbean. It emphasises the management of regional dynamics of states' independence, interdependence, and internationalisation in consolidating digital transformation and whether Caribbean countries are progressing towards true digital integration or if they are opting to operate primarily within the realm of digital cooperation.

Dynamics of Digital Regionalism in the Caribbean

Hurrell (1995, p. 39) asserts regionalisation as “the growth of societal integration within a region...the often undirected processes of social and economic integration.” Implicit in this definition is the level of interaction and formalised arrangements among states, hence the distinction between regional integration and cooperation. While regional cooperation operates as limited arrangements on particular issues, regional integration goes a step further by removing barriers that impede countries' interaction, subject to common rules (Best & Christiansen, 2023). However, elements of both cooperation and integration are often present in scenarios of regionalism.

At the national level, Caribbean states have understood the need to build digital resilience by empowering their citizens with digital literacy programs and implementing e-government platforms that enable ease of access to information and public sector services. National governments have invested in building the necessary ICT infrastructure, such as broadband networks, data centres, and internet access points. Also, several national committees and agencies responsible for various aspects of national ICT development have been established to focus on building technology capacity through incubators and accelerator projects, which are being rolled out to encourage not just the use of technology but the ability to foster innovation and problem-solving. These range from internet societies, telecommunications task forces, and even coding academies and robotics clubs.

While these initiatives are praiseworthy, Caribbean governments still have to grapple with the sovereign responsibility to protect their digital citizenry while navigating a borderless open market space. Fratini (2024) makes the distinction between traditional roles as independent sovereign nations and digital sovereignty. The former is based on the Westphalian worldview, where a country exercises its supreme authority over a territory. Nevertheless, cyberspace is a global infrastructure and not a territory for any country to claim. In fact, states are dependent on transnational ICT actors to utilise technological applications to support their public

services. It is therefore critical to formulate a strategic negotiation of terms with technology firms for mutual provision of services as well as protection against data surveillance and other forms of cyber violations and attacks. One way is the pooling of sovereignty and delegation of powers to a supranational organisation that has autonomous decision-making and the ability to guide member states on certain decisions (Abbott et al., 2000; Moravcsik, 1998).

The role of regional organisations such as the CTU is therefore rationalised by the need for Small-Island States (SIDS) to build consensus as one negotiating group and also to formalise relations with similar regional organisations and other international entities, thus consolidating regional identity and actorness in ICT international affairs. Its role in techplomacy allows it to serve as a bridge connecting governments, civil society, and tech companies through diplomatic relations and dialogue, addressing global digital policy and emerging technological issues. CARICOM's Single ICT Space initiative is a prime example. This initiative aims to harmonise ICT policies, legislation, and regulatory frameworks across member states, creating a more integrated and efficient digital environment. By standardising these aspects, the region can attract more investment, foster innovation, and ensure that digital services are accessible and secure.

Regional cooperation has also been instrumental in strengthening digital infrastructure in the Caribbean. The Caribbean Regional Communications Infrastructure Program (CARCIP), supported by the International Development Association of the World Bank, aims to improve connectivity and ICT infrastructure across the region. By pooling resources and expertise, Caribbean nations can build robust digital infrastructure, including high-speed internet, data centres, and cloud services, which are critical for digital transformation. The CTU was tasked to spearhead this initiative together with the Eastern Caribbean Telecommunications Authority (ECTEL). Grenada, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines are the three participating countries in the first phase (CTU, n.d.). Through a public-private partnership agreement with Digicel, new Government Wide Area Networks (GWANs), educational networks for academic institutions, libraries and community centres and a new submarine cable connecting the islands, were achieved. Digital cooperation at this magnitude was made possible by the first joint tender by the three participating countries for such digital infrastructure in the region. This resulted in countries benefiting from economies of scale, which would not have been possible if they had sought to negotiate separately as individual countries.

In the same way, national ICT development cannot be done in isolation from the region, and Caribbean digital regionalism exists among global actors. This interrelationship between regional arrangements and the rest of the world raises the question posed by Bhagwati (1991) on the dynamics of internationalisation as *building-blocks-or-stumbling-blocks*. An easier way to dichotomise is by examining if these regional arrangements promote multilateralism and liberalisation or reveal competing interests and incompatibility of regulatory and legal frameworks. The convergence of hemispheric goals and the transnational pervasiveness of ICT propels Caribbean regional bodies to develop partnerships with other regional blocs, such as Latin America, in addition to global intergovernmental organisations such as the United

Nations. This extends to include business and technology giants such as Google, Apple, and Huawei, which are also important contemporary agents of internationalisation, because they adopt global market strategies and engage with governments, societies, and institutions around the world.

As in the aforementioned example with CARCIP, regional cooperation may mean broadening opportunities to collaborate with private sector companies and international organisations. International organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) can provide necessary funding and investment for large-scale ICT projects. These organisations also offer technical expertise and consultancy to help design and implement ICT projects that adhere to global best practices. They have further supported regional organisations and Caribbean countries in capacity building through training programs, workshops, and knowledge transfer initiatives. Another benefit is research and development, which provides data, statistics, and insights that Caribbean nations can use to inform their ICT strategies.

The CTU, as the multi-level governance body for telecommunications and ICT development, uses its network to advocate and represent at international fora, which informs organisations like the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) on the effectiveness and status of Caribbean nations adopting global ICT standards to ensure compatibility and competitiveness. It is critical to note here that non-governmental organisations like the International Standards Organisation (ISO) also play a key role in providing technical guidance, such as ISO/IEC 42001, which is the world's first AI management system standard designed to ensure responsible development and use of AI systems. ITU's Partner2Connect Digital Coalition, also known as P2C, is another example of multistakeholder collaboration that is aligned with the UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The marginalised communities in the Caribbean region, such as Small Island Developing States (SIDS), are included in P2C's focus to foster meaningful connectivity and digital transformation globally.

On the competitive internationalisation side, digital integration and cooperation face numerous competitive technology challenges in today's rapidly evolving digital landscape. One primary challenge is maintaining cybersecurity amidst growing threats from cyber espionage, ransomware, and state-sponsored hacking. Nations must invest heavily in cybersecurity infrastructure and expertise to protect sensitive data and critical infrastructure from breaches. Another significant challenge is the race to achieve technological superiority, particularly in emerging fields like artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, and biotechnology. Countries are competing to develop and deploy these technologies, as they hold the potential to transform economies, enhance military capabilities, and provide strategic advantages (Bernardo & Mèrcher, 2019). This raises the question of the balance of powers in the international digital space, with the possibility of unipolarity from the US in the Western Hemisphere, in controlling and setting the rules regarding data ownership, as well as being the country of origin for some of the major tech companies.

Furthermore, technological dependency poses a risk, especially for Caribbean SIDS. Relying on foreign technology for critical sectors such as telecommunications, defence, and energy can expose countries to vulnerabilities if geopolitical tensions arise. Consequently, many nations are striving for technological self-sufficiency, which requires substantial investment in domestic research and development (R&D). The global talent pool for advanced technologies is also fiercely contested. Nations must attract and retain skilled professionals in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields to stay competitive. This often involves educational reforms, incentivising innovation, and fostering a conducive environment for tech start-ups. Lastly, regulatory and ethical challenges arise as countries navigate the implications of new technologies. Striking a balance between innovation and regulation, particularly regarding privacy, data protection, and AI ethics, is crucial to maintaining public trust and international cooperation.

Conclusion

Caribbean regionalism is a powerful catalyst for digital transformation in the region. Through collaborative policies, strengthened infrastructure, enhanced cybersecurity, digital literacy initiatives, innovation encouragement, and facilitated trade, the Caribbean is poised to harness the full potential of the digital age. Key regional intergovernmental organisations like the Caribbean Telecommunications Union and CARICOM, in facilitating these efforts, have also faced the challenges of countries having to manage the dynamics of countries' independence, interdependence, and internationalisation, in cementing digital cooperation and integration, which are complex issues that are not easily addressed. Creating a unified approach in a digital space with so many transnational actors requires coordinated strategies.

The Caribbean region, even as a unified bloc, represents a comparatively small percentage of global internet consumption. Therefore, partnerships with other regions, such as neighbouring Latin America, are ways to bolster their negotiating voice at the global level. Furthermore, international institutions and several developed countries have pledged to assist in bridging the technology gap through financial and technical support. This support needs to be well-coordinated in order to maximise its impact in helping countries of the Caribbean region reach their sustainable development goals and develop their societies and economies by building robust and sustainable ICT infrastructures. Overall, it can be seen that digital regionalism in the Caribbean would encompass more than countries coming together; it will take the efforts of the global village.

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Essay 43: The Role of Regional Agreements in the New International Scenario: The Andean Region Case



Alan Fairlie

Introduction: International Panorama and Global Challenges

The international context has become increasingly complex in recent decades. Digitalisation, climate change, food security, the energy transition, and shifts in global trade are some of the factors that have characterised this period. Growing geo-economic fragmentation and the reduced dynamism of transnational trade and investment flows have also emerged as significant challenges (International Monetary Fund, 2024a). This situation has been exacerbated by the rising risks associated with dependence on a small number of economies for certain products, highlighting the vulnerability of global value chains to trade tensions and global crises (International Monetary Fund, 2024b).

This panorama demonstrates that the world is currently experiencing a period of interconnected and cascading crises, whose effects are long-lasting and indicative of a permanent state of crisis (World Economic Forum, 2023). Countries worldwide face both shared and unique challenges across a wide range of areas: environmental, social, economic, health-related, and political, compounded by ongoing conflicts and wars that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable sectors of society (Torkington, 2023).

Estimates from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) indicate that high global economic uncertainty and low growth expectations have resulted in higher inflation and a slower recovery of employment in the region (United Nations, 2022).

The challenges for economic reactivation in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are significant, particularly poverty and inequality (ECLAC, 2022a). This situation fosters informality, reduces economic efficiency, and exacerbates food insecurity, which affects 40% of the population (FAO et al., 2024, p. 15).

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Despite these challenges, the region has opportunities to respond: increasing agricultural productivity, improving energy integration, and promoting investments through public–private partnerships (CAF, 2023).

Given this scenario, it is also necessary to reaffirm the global commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2023a). The United Nations acknowledges that the world is likely to fail to meet this commitment. In fact, political instability could worsen, economies could become destabilised, and irreversible damage could be inflicted on the environment (United Nations in Peru, 2023).

It is estimated that by 2030, 575 million people will still be living in extreme poverty, and 84 million children and youth will remain without access to education. Global warming has increased temperatures and is expected to reach or exceed the critical threshold of 1.5 °C by 2035 (United Nations, 2023b).

In the context of the SDGs for 2030, with five years remaining, less than a fifth of the proposed targets (17%) have been achieved, nearly half show minimal or moderate progress, and more than a third are stagnant or regressing. Faced with this discouraging outlook, the United Nations (2024) urges the development of financing mechanisms and massive investments, as well as partnerships in areas such as food, energy, social protection, and digital connectivity. It also calls for ensuring peace and security, given that the number of displaced persons and civilian casualties due to conflicts has reached unprecedented levels (United Nations, 2024).

Latin America: Multiple Challenges

Addressing the aforementioned challenges is even more complex in Latin America. This is not only due to the need to drive short-term economic recovery but also because of the structural problems that remain unresolved, despite the implementation of various development strategies over the past decades. Thus, in a scenario of international crisis and the decline of multilateralism, Latin America faces these global challenges with greater difficulty compared to other regions due to its structural weaknesses:

Low productivity and competitiveness are primarily attributed to deficiencies in key sectors such as education, limited competition, and the prevalence of labour informality (International Labour Organisation, 2024). Low investment in science, technology, and innovation, as well as in human capital and physical and digital infrastructure, are factors that have contributed to this problem (World Bank, 2024).

Territorial and productive heterogeneity. Structural heterogeneity refers to the slow and uneven spread of technical progress at the international level, which helps explain disparities in the development of countries (Cimoli & Porcile, 2013). Both are characteristics of the region, highlighting productive fragmentation, high informality, and significant disparities between sectors and regions, which are also reflected in territorial disparities (Mazzucato, 2022).

External Constraint. This concept can be analysed through the relationship between the centre and the periphery, and the way in which external sector tensions and balance of payments crises have been persistent over time, reflecting a vulnerable economic structure (Mazzucato, 2022; Ocampo, 2011).

Vulnerability and Social Inequality. This issue is not limited to disparities in wealth, net assets, or income; it also encompasses life expectancy, access to basic services, and the enjoyment of rights (United Nations, 2019).

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (United Nations DESA, 2016) notes that disadvantaged groups suffer a disproportionate loss of income and assets (physical, financial, human, and social). Furthermore, certain sectors exert greater influence over decision-making, which weakens the democratic process and the achievement of the SDGs (United Nations, 2019).

Social vulnerability in the region is exacerbated by these structural disparities. High labour informality, coupled with persistently high levels of unemployment, disproportionately affects the most vulnerable, including women and indigenous populations (Mazzucato, 2022).

Deficient Infrastructure and Underdeveloped Logistics Systems. According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) will need to invest at least 3.12% of its GDP in sectors such as water and sanitation, energy, transportation, and telecommunications by 2030 to expand and maintain the infrastructure necessary to meet the SDGs (Brichetti et al., 2021).

The region's logistics matrix is characterised by the predominance of road transport (85% of domestic cargo movement). Although its participation is limited, rail transport is concentrated in a few countries, primarily for freight and mining, with generally reduced or low-quality infrastructure. Maritime transport, along with river transport, handles 95% of the region's international trade (Calatayud & Montes, 2021).

Weak institutional capacity in the public sector, both at the national and subnational levels, limits governments' ability to implement effective policies and provide quality public services, undermining citizen trust (Mazzucato, 2022).

Limited fiscal space has also constrained public investment in key sectors such as research and development (R&D), infrastructure, and essential public services (Mazzucato, 2022). Additionally, persistent issues such as tax evasion and avoidance, which account for approximately 6% of GDP (ECLAC, 2022b), a weakened personal income tax system, the predominance of indirect taxes, and the absence of direct taxes on wealth and inheritance exacerbate the situation. The problem is further aggravated by high rates of informality, self-employment, and simplified tax regimes (Morán, 2024).

In summary, the persistence of these interrelated structural challenges underscores the urgent need for industrial policies and development strategies that address these complexities comprehensively in LAC. Overcoming the described challenges requires a sustainable and inclusive development strategy, composed of transformations aimed at increasing productivity, enhancing value-added, promoting productive diversification, and fostering a new international integration, where regional integration plays a significant role (Fairlie, 2021).

Regional Integration: An Instrument for Sustainable Development

South American integration processes constitute key tools for cooperation, and efforts should be made to coordinate and converge the various integration frameworks that coexist in the region. Through the creation of platforms that facilitate the joint management and resolution of common problems and agendas, these processes should promote regional development. In recent decades, they have advanced significantly by addressing new dimensions such as intellectual property, the environment, labour investment, and digital transformation in a more robust and comprehensive manner (Fairlie, 2021).

ECLAC (2023) recognises this as a multidimensional process that includes initiatives of cooperation, convergence, and deep integration, with the capacity to provide solutions not only in economic and trade areas but also in political, social, cultural, and environmental spheres.

Moreover, these mechanisms play a crucial role in the economic recovery of Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly in a context of shrinking trade flows. According to the 2023 Trade and Integration Monitor presented by the IDB, the importance of regional integration as a tool to mitigate declines in global trade and to advance toward greater economic cohesion in the region is underscored. Additionally, it allows intraregional flows to gain a larger share of total trade, reinforcing their relevance for sustaining economic growth and improving competitiveness in an increasingly challenging international environment (Giordano et al., 2023).

In Latin America, there are integration mechanisms with a long history that have provided tangible benefits to the region (Andean Community, Central American Common Market, and Mercosur).

The Andean Community (CAN) is composed of Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia. With 55 years of history, it is the oldest integration mechanism in South America. It was established with the purpose of promoting market openness, economic integration, and commercial and social integration. Progress in the region has varied, with the existence of an Andean integration system that includes extensive supranational legislation with direct application, establishing itself as a benchmark in the region. One of the most significant achievements is the completion of a Free Trade Zone, with manufactured products accounting for the majority (80%) of intracommunity exports.

Currently, efforts are focused on areas such as trade facilitation, culture, migration, telecommunications, agricultural health, transportation, electrical interconnection, support for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, social security, intellectual property, cooperation, disaster prevention, and illegal mining, among others.

Among its main actions, notable progress has been made in promoting trade through agreements and policies aimed at reducing tariff barriers and facilitating the exchange of goods and services among member countries. One of its latest initiatives to boost trade is the implementation of the Community Interoperability Project *INTERCOM*, which enables the exchange of customs and foreign trade data between

the information systems of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. This reduces costs and time for both customs authorities and operators, streamlining foreign trade and making it more agile (Andean Community, 2023).

Similarly, the CAN has promoted the development of cross-border productive chains to strengthen regional competitiveness. Initiatives such as productive development corridors have facilitated cooperation between businesses and local governments to improve the efficiency and quality of exportable products. An example of this is the exchange of experiences between coffee producers in the Peru-Bolivia border region, in cooperation with the European Union (Andean Community, 2017).

Furthermore, the CAN has been integrating sustainability into operational value chains and productive linkages in the region. Specifically, in recent years, it has fostered green value chains to promote sustainable industrial practices and reduce the environmental impact of productive activities. This effort has been strengthened by the adoption of significant environmental commitments, such as the Andean Pact for the Defence of Nature. Through this pact, support has been increased for governments and communities in member countries to address the current severe environmental crisis—characterised by global warming, soil erosion, and the loss of ecosystems and biodiversity—in a coordinated and timely manner (Congress of the Republic of Peru, 2021).

Parallel to the Environmental Agenda adopted by this integration mechanism, the Digital Agenda has also been promoted. This agenda seeks to ensure equitable access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and improve the efficiency of public and private services. It addresses themes such as digital government, digital transformation, infrastructure and connectivity, digital talent, the digital economy, and new technologies for sustainable development (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2022). These are all crucial for building a more inclusive common future and a more resilient economy, as they constitute key components for reducing the digital divide, fostering the development of 21st-century skills, and promoting technological innovation in strategic sectors such as e-commerce and distance education.

The contribution of the Andean integration mechanism to sustainable development and the social, economic, and environmental resilience of the region is significant, despite its limitations, and clearly aligns with global efforts for the 2030 Agenda:

1. By facilitating trade through agreements and policies that reduce tariff barriers, this mechanism directly links to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).
2. The implementation of the Community Interoperability Project *INTERCOM* directly contributes to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).
3. The development of cross-border productive chains, such as productive development corridors and the exchange of experiences between coffee producers in Peru and Bolivia, promotes regional competitiveness, aligning with SDG 8 and SDG 9.

4. The promotion of green value chains to foster sustainable industrial practices and reduce environmental impact aligns with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).
5. The adoption of the Andean Pact for the Defence of Nature and the Andean Environmental Charter reinforces support for governments and communities to address the environmental crisis, tackling SDG 15 (Life on Land).
6. The promotion of the Digital Agenda, by improving service efficiency and reducing the digital divide, contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 9. Similarly, it fosters technological innovation for sustainable development and a more resilient economy, also supporting SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

These are some of the multiple actions undertaken in recent years, and there is potential for Latin American integration processes to incorporate new regional challenges, as well as the global challenges previously mentioned, into their agendas.

There is growing momentum to develop public–private initiatives that promote the development of regional public goods, both tangible (such as energy or transportation infrastructure) and intangible (digital infrastructure). This would result in the agile flow of people and the trade of goods and services across the region, contributing to SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).

Additionally, the potential re-entry of Venezuela and Chile into the CAN is being considered, which would bring significant benefits to regional trade flows and strengthen the overall regional integration process (Fairlie, 2024; General Secretariat of the CAN, 2023). Unfortunately, recent political crises and circumstances have temporarily hindered progress in this direction.

Conclusion: Emerging Agendas and Public Policy Recommendations

As anticipated, the region faces significant challenges¹ in achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda and advancing in productive integration, as well as in the Digital Agenda. The development of digital infrastructure, such as semiconductors, and the implementation of emerging technologies like blockchain are gaining increasing importance worldwide. However, the region still confronts obstacles in leveraging this new trend, including a deficit in digital skills, low spending on R&D (0.75% of GDP), and risks in the protection of personal and financial data. To address these issues, it is recommended that educational and training programs be implemented to reduce the digital skills gap and increase investment in R&D to meet international standards. Simultaneously, efforts already underway to promote integration through the digitalisation and automation of trade processes should be maintained, while providing advanced tools to exporters to enhance competitiveness. These measures

¹ Facing these challenges, it is valuable to adopt the public policy recommendations proposed during the cycle of dialogues among young academics and professionals in Latin America, an initiative promoted by the IDB-INTAL (Peixoto & Tussie, 2025).

will support efforts to increase value-added across all productive sectors and explore non-traditional markets, fostering sustainable economic development in the region.

Within the framework of the Environmental and Climate Change Agenda, productive transformation is key to adapting to new international demands, which increasingly require stricter environmental standards. The region has considerable potential in renewable energy, biodiversity-derived products, and biotechnology, which should be harnessed to advance sustainability. Therefore, it is advisable to create regional public goods and transition productive systems toward sustainable practices, while strengthening value chains and supporting micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

Complementarily, it is essential to continue consolidating strategic alliances to ensure equitable agreements that not only benefit the region but also strengthen its position on the international stage. At the same time, it is crucial to address structural biases, particularly in terms of gender equity and interculturality, to ensure that the benefits of these agreements are distributed fairly and equitably among all sectors of society.

In summary, the region faces complex challenges due to persistent structural problems and the demands of the new international environment. However, regional integration, despite its limitations, can play an important role in addressing these challenges. The agenda of the Andean integration process is moving in this direction, and it is essential to seek channels of convergence with other regional integration agreements.

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Essay 44: Navigating Change: The Role of Latin American and Caribbean Regionalism in Shaping Social Policy in an Uncertain Global Order



Andrea C. Bianculli and Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann

Introduction

Social policy challenges, such as providing health, education, gender equality and climate change, are mostly addressed at the national level. Still, International and Regional Organisations have historically addressed international cooperation in these matters. In the case of the United Nations (UN), functional organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Women, and UN Environment Programme (UNEP) are examples of spaces in which state and non-state actors have discussed norms, policies, and agendas in these areas.

The intensification of globalisation and regional integration processes in the 1990s contributed to the definition of a new sub-field in the literature, namely, Global Social Policy (GSP). A key scholar to the consolidation of this research agenda, Bob Deacon, summarised the impact of globalisation on social policy as (a) setting welfare states in competition with each other, (b) bringing new (international) players into the making of social policy, (c) raising the issues with which social policy is concerned to the supranational level, (d) creating a global private market in social provision, and (e) encouraging "a global movement of peoples that challenges territorial-based structures and assumptions of welfare obligation and entitlement" (Deacon et al., 2007, pp. 9–10). Regional organisations have also fostered cooperation in social policies to mitigate the negative effects of economic globalisation and the challenges

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to domestic welfare systems. In this essay, we discuss how Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) regionalism has addressed social policy challenges and explore the potential future role of LAC regional organisations.

We draw on the literature on GSP and comparative regionalism and our previous work (Bianculli & Ribeiro Hoffmann, ; Ribeiro Hoffmann et al., 2024). In particular, we use the four axes we have derived from Deacons' analysis and applied to the comparative assessment of regional organisations (Bianculli & Ribeiro Hoffmann, 2016a, p. 5): (1) *Regional redistribution mechanisms* include regional banks and funds and aid from third parties; (2) *regional regulations* can comprise the setting of standards to avoid a race to the bottom and the regulation of private social services; (3) *regional social rights* can be assured in regional treaties and legal regimes; and (4) *regional intergovernmental cooperation* incorporates technical cooperation, capacity building and harmonisation.

In the following sections, we discuss how and to what extent LAC regionalism has approached social policy in gender and climate change. Based on these illustrative cases and current and previous work, we argue that LAC regionalism has addressed social policies, but unequally in terms of agendas and specific regional organisations, and not always with positive results. However, we consider that the regional level is an important and necessary space for discussing and defining norms and policies in the social realm due to the interdependent and transboundary nature of social problems, and the historical weaknesses of nation-states in the region in handling these issues.

Gender and Women's Rights

Regionalism has been a prevailing theme in the history of LAC. Studies have primarily emphasised regional efforts and organisations formed after the Second World War, particularly focusing on trade and market development. Furthermore, these studies have often overlooked whether and to what extent political and social issues were involved in these initiatives, including earlier efforts under Pan-Americanism (Bianculli, 2022; Deciancio, 2016). Still, gender has been regionally addressed since 1928, when the first regional intergovernmental agency was created to promote women's rights and gender-related issues: The Inter-American Commission of Women (known by its Spanish acronym, CIM) under the Pan American Conference, the predecessor of the Organisation of American States (OAS). For nearly a century, gender has been addressed through various regional instruments and policy frameworks. This is evidenced by the initiatives highlighted below based on the 4 Rs analytical framework.

First, *regional redistribution mechanisms* are part of regional development banks (RDBs): The Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), and the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) were established between 1959 and 1970. The role and engagement of development banks have "always been controversial in review and uneven in practice" (Bazbauers, 2023, p. 1).

The IADB's first Operational Policy on Women in Development dates back to 1987, while its Gender and Diversity Division was created in 2007 to formulate strategic documents and new projects, develop loan and technical cooperation programs, and promote gender mainstreaming. The CDB integrated gender equality as a cross-cutting theme in its first document, published in 2005. CAF's Gender Equity and Inclusion Unit was established in 2015 to provide gender training and awareness. A recent study on regional development banks indicates that initially their gender agenda and thus their projects focused on women and development and how women could be better integrated into economic structures, yet, over time this approach was followed by a conceptual narrowing by focusing on women and girls as "potential private entrepreneurs" (Bazbauers, 2023, p. 2). Also, RDBs collaborate with regional organisations, as in the case of the CAF and CIM's joint project on women's economic rights and financial inclusion, or the Regional Strategy to Combat Trafficking and Smuggling of Children and Adolescents for Sexual Exploitation in the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), funded by the IADB. Even if MERCOSUR has established a Fund for Structural Convergence (FOCEM), this policy instrument has not included a gender agenda, as shown by the regionally funded projects presented on its institutional webpage. Funding from third actors was key. In this respect, the Spanish AECID has funded various regional initiatives: the *Institutional strengthening and the gender perspective in MERCOSUR*, the creation of the Network of Andean Women's Mechanisms (REMMA), which in turn, triggered the establishment of the Andean Council of High Authorities for Women and Equal Opportunities (CAAAMI) of the Andean Community of Nations (CAN), and the setting up of the Technical Secretariat of the Council of Women's Ministers of Central America (COMMCA) in the Central American Integration System (SICA).

Second, regional regulations comprise setting rules to promote gender equality in the labour market within MERCOSUR. Since the late 1990s, but especially in the early 2000s, the bloc has adopted rules regarding gender equality, non-discrimination, work, labour conditions, and women's role in the economy. Yet, the lack of budget allocation or coordination between public institutions (Espino, 2016) hinders their implementation. Over time, MERCOSUR moved towards adopting Recommendations, which are not binding for member states, on gender equality (Ribeiro Hoffmann, 2014), gender-based violence, human trafficking and care, among others. The CAN approved an Integrated Social Development Plan in 2004 that did not cover labour rights, while the Gender Rights and Gender Equality Programme passed by the CAAAMI in 2011 lacks concrete measures (Cánepa, 2011). Similarly, following the creation of COMMCA, SICA approved the Regional Policy on Gender Equality and Equity (PRIEG) in 2013. Yet, this is a regional policy that requires the development of normative, along with technical, informative and formative tools to guide articulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as technical support (Rivas Peña, 2014).

Third, regional social rights have been incorporated into the OAS through the Office of the Rapporteur on the Rights of Women, one of eight specialised rapporteurships within the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). Since 1994, this special Rapporteurship has enhanced the efficacy of the OAS human rights

bodies (Friedman, 2009). The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) has been at the forefront of international jurisprudence on issues such as femicide, discrimination, violence, and access to reproductive rights (Espinosa Sánchez, 2024). In December 2024, the IACtHR issued a landmark ruling in the case of Beatriz vs. El Salvador. The judgment held the Salvadoran state responsible for violating Beatriz's rights to personal integrity, privacy, judicial protection, a life free of violence, and health, as well as the personal integrity rights of her family. The IACtHR affirmed the state's responsibility for violating the American Convention on Human Rights and the Convention of Belém do Pará. This decision has long been regarded as a significant opportunity for advancing sexual rights in the region (Amnistía Internacional, 2023). Additionally, both the CIM and the IACtHR have promoted coordination, information sharing, and the joint monitoring of all legislation about the status of women in the hemisphere, measures to address existing discrimination, enforcement of laws that benefit women but are not being complied with, and the progress made by member states and regional organisations (CIM, 2000). The most significant example is the CIM-sponsored and ground-breaking feminist law: The Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women, also known as the Convention of Belém do Pará. It was adopted in 1994 and uses the IACtHR as its "court of appeal" (Friedman, 2009, p. 358).

Fourth, regional intergovernmental cooperation, which is technical cooperation, capacity building, and harmonisation, has been in place through the Regional Conference on the Integration of Women into the Economic and Social Development of Latin America since 1977. Led by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), it has become the main regional intergovernmental space on women's rights and gender equality. Governments and women's and feminist organisations participate in these meetings, which, based on regional consensus, trigger intergovernmental agreements. These have broadened in time to include achieving sustainable development with a gender perspective and the care economy, while also establishing links with other regional obligations, as in the case of the Belem do Para Convention and the Escazú Agreement (see next section). As put by a feminist academic and practitioner, "ECLAC has been very important in advancing the gender agenda in general in the region, and promoting some specific dimensions of the women's economic agenda."¹ The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) has also sought to promote regional cooperation on gender, as evidenced by several declarations (2014, 2017, and 2021). In 2016, CELAC approved the gender strategy of its 2005 Plan for Food Security, Nutrition, and Hunger Eradication (Plan SAN-CELAC), which is the most important regional agreement in the fight against hunger. However, gender has recently been acknowledged as an outstanding challenge in the CELAC space, leading the Forum to adopt a Special Declaration on the Promotion of Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality.

¹ Interview of one of the authors, Buenos Aires, July 2023.

Climate Change

Based on the research of several authors, the edited volume recently published by Ribeiro Hoffmann et al. (2024) concluded that “Latin American countries have increasingly addressed environmental concerns and climate change in their domestic policies and their participation in global multilateral institutions over the last years, but that Latin American regional organisations have felt short of including these matters in their priorities” (p. 186). The lack of epistemic communities and the strong lobby of agribusiness sectors in most LAC countries are among the key factors that have hindered the incorporation of stronger environmental and climate change agendas at the regional level. Climate negationism, especially during the government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019–2022) and so-called *circuits of disavowal*, i.e. the implementation of ineffective responses notwithstanding ample contrary evidence and recurring failures, such as policies involving the extraction and use of natural resources that feed the green energy transition but also have negative effects (lithium, liquid hydrogen, fracking oil and gas) have also been major factors in the last years (Sandrin, 2024).

That said, some initiatives were discussed and implemented, so, despite the rather poor historical trajectory of LAC regional organisations in tackling climate change, a different approach is possible and desirable, since the case of the scaling of social policies from the domestic to global and regional levels is straightforward, given the intrinsic transboundary nature of the *problems*. We highlight below some of the main initiatives and perspectives following the *4 Rs* analytical framework:

First, regional redistribution mechanisms—the LAC region includes several RDBs, such as the CAF and sub-regional distribution mechanisms such as FOCEM. FOCEM projects approved and underway fall under the following programmes: electricity transmission, sanitation, and access to drinking water, construction, and rehabilitation of roads and railways, housing, improvement of educational infrastructure with the remodelling of schools and building laboratories, incentives for competitiveness, productive sectors, partnerships, and scientific research (MERCOSUR, 2023, p. 6). Despite the relation of some of these areas to climate change, it has not prioritised it directly. CAF, in turn, has the promotion of sustainable development as a key objective and aims to be the region’s green bank; moreover, it includes eco-efficiency and sustainability criteria in all its operations (CAF, 2024). CAF has the greatest potential to act as a regional redistribution mechanism in the area of climate change in the region, given its dimension and mandate. Third-party regional banks, such as the European Investment Bank (EIB), can also be relevant supporters of climate change initiatives in LAC. Griffith-Jones and Carrera (2024) show how the EIB has been a key player in the EU approach to climate change and the implementation of the EU Green Deal, and argue that the Bank could contribute to LAC since 10% of its lending goes to emerging and developing countries, and, since 2020, 35% of EIB lending to emerging and developing countries goes to climate finance.

Second, regional regulations—as summarised by Ribeiro Hoffmann in her assessment of the commitments on the environment and climate change in MERCOSUR,

the Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (PROSUR), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and CELAC: “regional organisations created in the first wave of regionalism such as MERCOSUR, and post-pink-tide such as PROSUR, have a pro-free trade agenda and did include strong (socio-)environmental impact assessments and mitigation mechanisms in their original normative” (2024, p. 37). The infrastructure agenda fostered by MERCOSUR, the Regional Infrastructure Integration in South America (IIRSA), and UNASUR in the context of post-hegemonic regionalism did not foresee such mechanisms either, but these organisations created some norms and institutions related to climate change over the years, especially more recently. MERCOSUR created a Ministerial Meeting in 2003, the Working Subgroup on the Environment (SGT6) and has addressed the topic of Climate Change more directly in a Declaration from 2017; PROSUR added a sixth objective in its agenda and a sound Sectorial Plan to tackle Climate Change in 2021. CELAC has included references to global-level commitments such as the SDGs, the Agenda 2030, and the Paris Agreement, and encourages synergies among the different regional forums. In addition to the above-mentioned regional organisations, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (ACTO), established in 1995 to further institutionalise the Treaty signed in 1978, has also contributed to the discussion of environmental regulations. ACTO’s member states met in August 2023 to revive the organisation with a strong agenda on the topics of deforestation, illegal mining, oil production, and protection of indigenous peoples and local communities in the region with a direct effect on climate change.

Third, regional rights—LAC regional organisations have not incorporated a rights-based approach to environment and climate change, unlike, for example, the emphasis on health and rights in UNASUR. However, discussions on these topics have taken place, particularly driven by countries like Ecuador, which included the rights of nature in its 2008 constitution. One initiative that has promoted a rights-based approach is the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation, and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, concluded in the city of Escazú, Costa Rica, in 2018, and known therefore as the Escazú Agreement. It was not drawn up in the context of a regional integration organisation, but is a multilateral regional agreement open to all LAC countries, with the technical support of the ECLAC Secretariat. The agreement entered into force in 2021 and aims to provide full public access to environmental information, environmental decision-making, and legal protection and recourse concerning environmental matters. It also recognises the right of current and future generations to a healthy environment and sustainable development, and it is the first in the world to include provisions on the rights of environmental defenders, particularly relevant given that the LAC region has a higher number of assassinations of environmental defenders in the world (Global Witness, 2023). Another example is the role of regional courts of human rights, such as the IACtHR, which also covers North America and has expanded jurisprudence in matters related to the property rights of indigenous peoples over their traditional lands, territories, and natural resources, with a direct (positive) link to the protection of sociobiodiversity and forests (Fuentes, 2023). Finally, also interesting is the discussion by Teixeira and Jardim (2024) about the

links that can be made between climate change, food systems, and food and nutrition security from the perspective of a human rights-based approach to development and the Food and Nutrition Security approach. They advocate that the right to adequate food must be placed at the centre of the strategies to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

Fourth, regional intergovernmental cooperation—as seen above, LAC regional organisations and institutions have promoted initiatives involving technical cooperation and capacity building, such as ECLAC's support of the Escazú Agreement and ACTO's projects, such as in the area of water resources, which includes training of member-states' technicians from the water agencies and support to structure a monitoring network for water quality information (Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (ACTO), n.d.). Other examples are scientific cooperation (Tokatlían et al., 2023), and the activities fostered by the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean, which was established in 1982 in the context of UNEP and connects the regional and global environmental agendas (United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), n.d.).

Conclusion

Our analysis has examined how gender and climate change have been addressed at the regional level in LAC, offering empirical evidence to enrich the discussion on the role that regional organisations play in tackling social policy challenges within an uncertain global order.

Based on these two cases, we can draw three main insights regarding the role of the regional level of governance in addressing social policy challenges. First, the regional level is important to consider when discussing social policy challenges since it contributes to the establishment of regulations, distribution mechanisms, social rights and cooperation.

Second, the analysis highlights the need to move away from categorical definitions of policy issues (Bianculli, 2018). Gender and climate change intersect at various levels with other policy areas such as human rights, health, and the fight against hunger. This is demonstrated by the CELAC Plan on Food Security, as well as the approaches of the Escazu Agreement and ACTO.

Third, while this understanding calls for more integrated and cross-policy analyses, from a practical and policy perspective, our findings also demonstrate that regional mechanisms should be understood at the intersection of domestic and international regulatory developments. Moreover, this assessment should extend cross-regionally to capture the mutual dynamics between different regional mechanisms. This is illustrated by the case of the ECLAC Gender Conference and the collaboration and coordination between regional organisations, from the CIM to RDBs. In these cases, traditional LAC regional organisations coordinate their activities with other regional institutional mechanisms and organisations, such as the OAS and UNEP.

To conclude, regions cannot *save the world* alone, but they are an important level of governance, in conjunction with the national and global levels. In the case of the analysed social policies, it was seen that they are essential when they involve biomass, such as river basins or forests, since nature knows no political boundaries, nor do natural disasters, such as hurricanes and fires. Even when regional organisations lack strong actorness, they play a decisive role in facilitating coordination and cooperation between countries and societies. However, in the current international context of fragmentation and differentiation, for regions to fulfil their potential, they cannot be an end in themselves; they must build bridges with other regions and remain inclusive, both internally and externally.

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Essay 45: Health and Regional Governance in Latin America: New Perspectives in a Transformative Regionalism Context



María Belén Herrero and Santiago Lombardi Bouza

Introduction

Health and regional governance in Latin America have gained increasing relevance in light of recent crises such as the 2009 swine flu pandemic and the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation has highlighted the importance of regional cooperation and the need to strengthen integration and health governance, especially in a context where regionalism in Latin America is undergoing several transformations. This essay aims to explore recent global health crises against the background of weakening blocs like UNASUR and the search for new cooperation mechanisms through CELAC and MERCOSUR. Although cooperation efforts have been significant, responses to the pandemic in South America were disjointed, reflecting political fragmentation and the prioritisation of national interests (UN News, 2023). This limited the capacity of regional structures to provide an effective response (SEGIB, 2017, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a noticeable trend in South-South cooperation (SSC) toward bilateral agreements, with 18.6% of health cooperation focused on this modality, compared to 4.4% in the regional modality, underscoring the lack of political cohesion (SEGIB, 2022). This disarticulation is compounded by a pre-existing scenario characterised by poverty, informal labour, and fragmented health systems, which exacerbated the crisis (García et al., 2020). Studies have emphasised the importance of integration mechanisms for addressing health emergencies (Buss & Tobar, 2020; Davies & Wenham, 2020).

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In this context, the pandemic has prompted the need to rethink health governance, integrating critical and decolonial approaches that challenge Eurocentric narratives. Health can be seen as a nexus between development, governance, and social well-being, promoting a more inclusive and equitable approach (Board, 2020; Buss et al., 2020). This perspective opens up opportunities to create a governance framework that responds to local realities and values epistemic diversity on health policies.

This essay reflects on how these experiences of cooperation and governance can contribute to transformative regionalism in Latin America, bringing experiences on coordination in Africa, Asia, and Central America and the Caribbean during the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented an opportunity to reconfigure regionalism towards a more inclusive and resilient approach. In South America, building fair and accessible health systems requires strengthening regional mechanisms like CELAC and MERCOSUR, fostering institutional capacities, and promoting political dialogue to address inequalities and prepare for future health crises.

Health as a Driver of Integration and Regional Cooperation in Latin America

Historically, Latin America has been viewed from a neoliberal perspective as part of a system oriented toward the North and economically linked to it (Grugel, 1996). Regionalism focused on trade integration, reflecting a hegemonic political order. Neoliberal policies exacerbated health inequities and social exclusion, leaving vulnerable groups without adequate access to care and medication. However, in the twenty-first century, the rise of leftist governments in the region represented a reaction against the commodification resulting from neoliberal reforms (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012). This shift allowed for a redefinition of regional dynamics, promoting autonomy and the synchronisation of policies in a new regionalism that transcended U.S.-led trade integration.

This new approach fostered more horizontal and solidarity-based international cooperation, advocating for Latin America to cease being merely a recipient and to become a contributor in the South-South cooperation framework (Vance et al., 2016). Regionalism is now conceived as a structure of opportunities for political commitments and social activism (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2018). Furthermore, it does not limit national autonomy but rather strengthens it through institutional building (Deciancio, 2016).

In this context, health has emerged as a key sector for international cooperation and the consolidation of regional sovereignty, providing multilateral negotiation spaces that other sectors do not have (Herrero & Tussie, 2015). Health has been fundamental in the formulation of public policies and collaboration in the Americas, with historical achievements and successful experiences (SEGIB, 2017). The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) exemplifies how health can serve as a driver of innovative and collective regional integration and cooperation.

UNASUR was created in 2008 to foster regional cooperation across multiple areas beyond trade, including defence, infrastructure, energy, and health. In its brief existence (2008–2018/19), UNASUR was notable for its intervention in political crises, such as those in Bolivia (2008) and Ecuador (2010), and for promoting an inclusive and progressive health agenda (Herrero & Tussie, 2015; Riggirozzi, 2014). The South American Health Council (CSS) was established, comprising health ministers from member states, and technical groups were created to address areas such as health surveillance, universal health systems, and access to medications. The CSS integrated efforts from other regional mechanisms like MERCOSUR and the OTCA.

In the health sector, UNASUR promoted regional health sovereignty to strengthen national policies and reduce external dependence. This initiative led to the establishment of the South American Institute of Government in Health (ISAGS), aimed at critical reflection on global health and regional cooperation (Vance et al., 2016). Furthermore, the bloc advocated for common positions in international forums, such as intellectual property rights over medications and the implementation of a Drug Price Bank (Narea & Benzi, 2021).

During the H1N1 pandemic and the dengue epidemic, UNASUR organised joint responses, demonstrating the value of cooperation in public health emergencies (Buss & Tobar, 2020). Additionally, its critical stance toward the Universal Health Coverage promoted by the WHO and PAHO became a commitment to universal and public health systems. UNASUR also aimed to develop regional industrial capacities to reduce technological dependence in health.

Despite these achievements, the disarticulation of UNASUR started in 2015, due to political changes in the region, leaving an institutional void not filled by other regional organisations like CELAC or MERCOSUR. The lack of effective coordination hindered a cohesive regional response to the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the persistent shortcomings and challenges in health integration (Vance et al., 2016). Thus, the global health crisis exposed the need for robust mechanisms of regional integration to ensure cooperation in the face of health emergencies, a challenge that remains for South America.

Regional Responses to the Pandemic

Coordination, Health Autonomy, and Challenges in Africa and Asia

Africa and Asia, together representing three-quarters of the world's population, accounted for only 30% of COVID-19 cases, despite possible underreporting (Balfour et al., 2022). The responses to the pandemic in both regions reflect historical lessons and advancements in technical and institutional resources. Asia had previously faced SARS (2002), H5N1 influenza (2005), and H1N1 (2009). In Africa, the

Ebola crisis of 2013–2014 led to the establishment of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (ACDC) under the African Union (AU) in 2017.

In 2020, African countries quickly coordinated their efforts. The AU issued a Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19, led by the ACDC, and created the Partnership to Accelerate COVID-19 Testing (PACT). Additionally, a COVID-19 Response Fund was established, and in August 2020, the African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT) was launched. Despite criticism from foreign donors regarding its overlap with the COVAX mechanism, AVATT secured 400 million doses of Johnson & Johnson vaccines, while COVAX delivered only 30 million doses to 44 countries, failing to meet its goal of 350 million. In February 2021, the AU supported the patent suspension proposal at the WTO put forth by India and South Africa. Furthermore, in 2022, a statute was approved allowing the ACDC to declare regional public health emergencies without the intervention of the WHO. All together, these policies have strengthened regional health self-sufficiency.

In Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) utilised pre-existing structures to coordinate its response. In April 2020, the ASEAN Coordinating Council and the Meeting of Health Ministers initiated the first regional actions, and in November, the COVID-19 Response Fund and the Regional Medical Supply Reserve were established. Vietnam, as the president of ASEAN and the UN Security Council, led a meeting that resulted in Resolution 2532, calling for a global ceasefire to facilitate humanitarian assistance.

However, ASEAN failed to achieve significant results in joint vaccine procurement, as its members opted for bilateral agreements. To address these limitations, the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) was established in 2021, with financial support from Japan and Australia. Future challenges include financial sustainability and health disparities among member countries (Rollet, 2022).

Effective Health Response: Pandemic Management in Central America and the Caribbean

Central America and the Caribbean have both demonstrated positive experiences in regional health diplomacy during the pandemic. The Central American Integration System (SICA) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) have shown a coordinated approach that contrasts with the difficulties of coordination seen in South America. Despite structural vulnerabilities and political divisions, as evidenced by Nicaragua, the supranational dimension was strengthened to tackle the pandemic.

SICA quickly activated its regional institutional framework to manage the crisis. On February 20, 2020, the Council of Ministers of Health of Central America and the Dominican Republic (COMISCA) and the Regional International Organization for Animal Health (OIRSA) convened quickly and formulated the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE) committed to USD 2.36 billion to finance

emergencies, support central banks, and acquire rapid testing kits (Parthenay, 2021). The plan also included mechanisms for joint procurement of medicines and an emergency fund. Ecuador even requested to join this mechanism.

The Coordination Centre for Disaster Prevention in Central America and the Dominican Republic (CEPREDENAC) supported COMISCA in articulating responses. Additionally, SICA secured financing from Taiwan, the European Union, and Germany to support small businesses. Regional coordination extended to the financial sector, where the Executive Secretariat of the Council of Ministers of Finance (SE-Cosefin) negotiated with the IMF and the World Bank for a temporary debt suspension for Honduras and Nicaragua (Parthenay, 2021).

In the Caribbean, CARICOM, through the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), responded swiftly to the crisis. On January 21, 2020, CARPHA activated its Incident Management Team and convened the Regional Coordinating Mechanism for Health Security. CARPHA led meetings with CARICOM health ministers, developed technical guidelines, and coordinated with agencies such as the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA). Furthermore, it negotiated funding loans with the European Union, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (Ferreira & Melo, 2020). The Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) also acquired medical equipment, resulting in the Caribbean region having a COVID-19 mortality rate three times lower than the rest of the Americas (CARPHA, 2022).

Failure or Missed Opportunity? Regional Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in South America

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted South America, a region marked by deep political fragmentation that hindered a coordinated and comprehensive response, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. Despite representing approximately 5% of the global population, South America accounted for nearly one-fifth of COVID-19 cases and over 26% of global deaths (Ortiz-Pineda & Sierra-Torres, 2022). The weakening of regional governance limited the capacity to carry out collective actions that would ensure a better allocation of resources, more effective intersectoral cooperation, and a stronger negotiating power with international actors.

Historically, South America has achieved some minimal consensus on regional policy, especially in spaces like UNASUR. However, the conservative wave that began in 2015, marked by the rise of right-wing governments and the political crisis in Venezuela, obscured these initiatives. The creation of the “Forum for the Progress of South America” (PROSUR) aimed to address the Venezuelan crisis but left the construction of regional health architecture in the shadows. The dissolution of the

South American Health Council, the only body mandated to convene health authorities, culminated in a fragmented institutional scheme, where coordination was limited to isolated efforts among organisations like MERCOSUR and ORAS-CONHU.

MERCOSUR, despite its potential to coordinate health and trade policies, had a discreet role during the health crisis (Tobar & de Souza Minayo, 2021; Álvarez, 2022). Although an Emergency Fund of USD 16 million for equipment and materials was approved, the actions taken were insufficient. The establishment of a Border Epidemiological Observatory and an Ad Hoc Committee for the productive capacity of medicines did not manage to create a joint vaccine procurement mechanism, which was crucial in the context of scarcity and inequality in access to immunisations. For its part, PROSUR failed to generate concrete results, despite convening virtual meetings among heads of state (Álvarez, 2022). This balkanisation of regional health diplomacy resulted in disjointed and often contradictory national responses to the pandemic. Differences in border closures and entry requirements, along with a lack of negotiating coalitions, revealed the fragility of the system.

The denialism of Jair Bolsonaro's government in Brazil, which criticised the WHO and refused to acquire Chinese vaccines, further limited regional cooperation. However, Brazil's singularity does not fully explain the lack of collaboration among the other eleven countries in the region. The dissolution of UNASUR has resulted in a significant loss of regional articulation capacity and has weakened health sovereignty in South America, contributing to its disintegration at the global level.

Legacies and Opportunities: Towards a New Approach to Health Integration in South America

As observed, Africa has demonstrated notable solidarity and adaptation based on past experiences, although it faces challenges in infrastructure. In Asia, there has been a proactive approach to innovation and rapid response, yet inequalities in access to health services persist. Central America and the Caribbean have benefited from regional cooperation, although economic dependency may limit their response. In contrast, South America presents a complex reality, with attempts at coordination hindered by political and social divisions (Table 1).

UNASUR could have played a crucial role in articulating strategies for epidemiological surveillance and response to COVID-19 during the pandemic, leveraging its experience in access to medications. Projects such as the price bank and joint negotiation of high-cost medications would have been valuable for increasing access to vaccines and treatments during the health crisis.

Despite the dissolution of UNASUR, the accumulated experience offers significant legacies, such as the defence of democratic values and the promotion of social participation in health policies (Campos, 2017). This experience opens the possibility of revitalising concepts such as *epidemiological shield* and *health sovereignty* to build a framework for regional integration in South America.

Table 1 Actions, weaknesses, and strengths of each region (Africa, Asia, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Region	Main actions	Weaknesses	Strengths
Africa	- Creation of regional response platforms - Use of digital technologies for tracking	- Limited resources in health systems - Lack of medical infrastructure	- Previous experiences with epidemics (e.g., Ebola) - Solidarity among African countries
Asia	- Rapid development of vaccines and treatments - Effective containment strategies	- Inequalities in health access in less developed countries	- Technological innovation - Experience in managing health crises (e.g., SARS, MERS)
Central America	- Creation of cooperation networks for information exchange - Implementation of protocols	- Limited response capacity due to fragmentation of health systems	- Regional cooperation and dialogue initiatives - Interest in strengthening regional integration
Caribbean	- Alliances for joint vaccine procurement - Effective communication among countries	- Dependence on tourism affects the economy and health - Limited resources	- Rapid mobilisation capacity - Experience in interregional cooperation
South America	- MERCOSUR initiatives to coordinate responses - Creation of ad hoc committees	- Fragmentation of regional governance - Deep social inequalities	- Previous consensus on public health before the crisis - Capacity for social mobilisation

Source Own elaboration

Despite the efforts of other regional integration mechanisms, such as CARICOM and MERCOSUR, none successfully organised a coordinated network of national laboratories. More effective collaboration between these mechanisms could have facilitated the exchange of epidemiological data and joint vaccine negotiation. However, the lack of comprehensive articulation limited the capacity to respond to COVID-19, resulting in insufficient efforts to confront the pandemic.

Recommendations

The post-pandemic period presents an opportunity to reconstitute the foundations of South American health regionalism. Several recommendations are suggested to advance this process (Fig. 1).

It is essential to bolster institutional capacity and establish mechanisms for consensus and political dialogue that ensure the continuity of regional integration

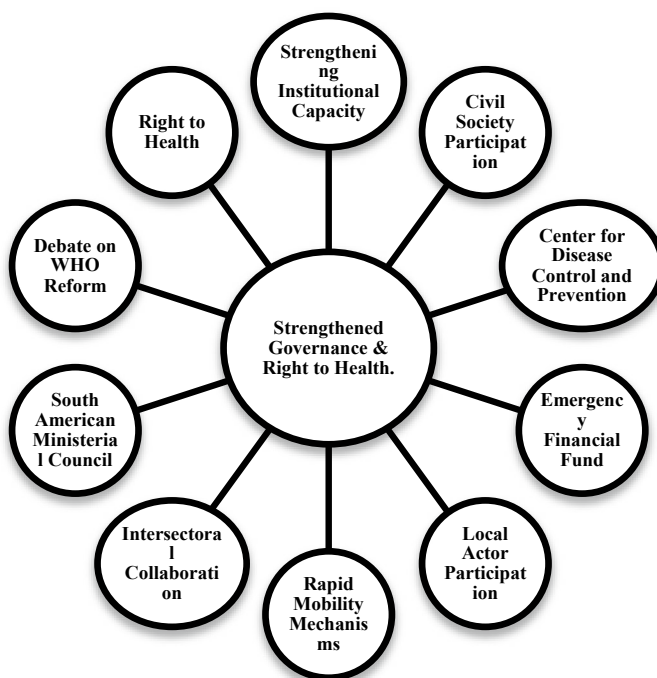


Fig. 1 Strengthening regional governance and right to health. Recommendations. (Source Own elaboration)

processes, even during periods of low political affinity. This will promote sustainable collective actions at the regional level despite political changes.

Leveraging experiences like UNASUR by complementing existing structures of Latin American and Caribbean integration is important. To strengthen capacities and share best practices, strategic alliances should be established with other regional and multilateral organisations, such as CELAC, SICA, CARICOM, the African Union, and ASEAN.

In the health sector, it is crucial to advance in the establishment of a Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, inspired by experiences from other regions.

This device should be interdisciplinary and multidimensional, supported by a regional surveillance network, information exchange mechanisms, statistical databases, and coordinated action protocols. The Centre would complement existing health institutions, strengthen disease surveillance and early warning systems, and promote the exchange of best practices and knowledge. The institutionalisation of a South American Emergency Financial Fund is also key to mobilising resources in times of crisis. This fund would complement health institutions and help manage health emergencies. Additionally, sustainable financing models should be explored to ensure the long-term viability of health programs, involving multilateral development banks and triangular partners.

Mechanisms for local actor participation, such as authorities, universities, and health institutions, should be established to identify and prioritise health issues. The inclusion of these actors is fundamental to building regional health sovereignty. The creation of monitoring and evaluation instances, such as a Regional Public Health Observatory, would allow for the assessment of the impact of health policies and actions.

The pandemic has highlighted the need to establish mechanisms for rapid mobility and exchange of the health workforce during crises. It is crucial to promote protocols for emergency management and resource coordination in the region, as well as to establish rapid response teams to support member states during health crises.

At the national level, articulation between health ministries and foreign affairs should be promoted, strengthening international health areas and increasing inter-institutional coordination.

The reinstatement of a South American Ministerial Council can be an initial step to strengthen preparedness and response to health crises. This could include a mechanism for the joint procurement of medicines and vaccines, as well as partnerships with regional banks to obtain readily available funds.

It is fundamental to mobilise the debate on reforming the World Health Organisation (WHO). The region must position itself regarding the negotiation of the treaty on pandemic preparedness and response, considering the needs of developing countries and preventing them from being marginalised in deliberations.

The right to health must be a public good guaranteed by states and multilateral organisations. In the context of geopolitical disputes and crises, countries in the region cannot continue to act in isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a missed opportunity, but a new chance presents itself to rebuild South American integration and address health-related challenges.

Conclusion

The world has emerged from the peak of the pandemic, but a context of weakened multilateral negotiations and ongoing geopolitical rearrangements continues to affect trade, production, finance, and access to strategic goods and technologies. In South America, the worst health crisis of the last century has left significant challenges regarding international health. The concerted positions in the multilateral arena and the reconstruction of institutional and material capacities are fundamental to addressing this reality. It is also essential to promote inclusive political dialogue that transcends current polarisation. The proposed recommendations, ranging from the creation of a Centre for Disease Control and Prevention to the institutionalisation of a South American Emergency Financial Fund, are crucial for rebuilding the foundations of health regionalism. Moreover, intersectoral collaboration and the mobilisation of civil society are essential to ensure a coordinated and effective response to future health crises. The urgency of revitalising regional integration and reforming institutions such as the WHO underscores the need for South American

countries to act together, thereby guaranteeing the right to health as a public good and facing current geopolitical challenges with a common agenda that prioritises health sovereignty and social justice.

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Essay 46: Regional Public Policies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Different Contexts: A Study of Theory and Practice in Mercosur and Europe



Gabriella de Camargo Hizume

Introduction

This essay analyses the contexts in which regional quality assurance processes in higher education emerged in Europe and Mercosur, including their elements, the actors involved, and their similarities and differences. It considers that the contexts in which public educational policies are inserted are co-constitutive elements, not merely neutral backdrops (Dale & Robertson, 2012). Thus, this essay aims to understand the relationship between the design of quality assurance processes and the regional arrangements in which they were developed, both from a theoretical and practical standpoint.

Initially, the turn of the twentieth century into the twenty-first century has brought elements beyond the university environment into discussions about higher education. It is seen as a tool for global competitiveness and a foundation for knowledge-based societies (Robertson & Dale, 2018). According to Crosier and Parveva (2013), higher education is at the centre of the global transformation from an industrialised knowledge society to a post-industrial one. Thus, higher education is no longer at the margins of social and political reality but becomes a key factor in the competitiveness and modernisation of states.

Dias Sobrinho (2005) notes that higher education is more than ever permeated by tensions and conflicts of interest that span the economic, political, and administrative spheres. Similarly, Nóvoa and Dejong-Lambert (2004) highlight that conventional

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explanations are too narrow to propose an adequate study of the emerging framework of higher education. Nóvoa (1995) emphasises that models of analysis that are not centred on the nation-state have gained ground.

Robertson and Dale (2011) claim that the national state is no longer the sole prominent actor in the education field. It is not merely a scale change, from national to global, but a metamorphosis beyond the reach of existing assumptions and forms of analysis. Considering this scenario, higher education would be linked to border flexibility and the international movement of people, goods, and services. Thus, transnationality is part of the matrix of public policies in education, driven by the mobility of academics and graduates.

One of the central factors in this reconfiguration would be the plurality of its actors and its spatial scope, even though public education policies are implemented in national territories. Antunes (2007) observes that intermediary bodies now carry out national regulation at various levels. In turn, Robertson and Dale (2018) note the role of the regional scale as a locus for addressing different educational issues that concern governments and higher education institutions.

In this context, comparability between higher education systems and their transparency have become fundamental elements, leading to the spread of quality assurance processes in regional integration projects. Dias Sobrinho (2005, p. 147) indicates that various aspects of higher education began to be standardised and homogenised, resulting in “the need for the establishment of more or less common standards and rules between countries, as well as the creation of supranational agencies to manage the convergence of systems and the recognition of degrees and diplomas.”

Overall, the first step in promoting the comparability of higher education courses, institutions, or programs would be establishing quality assurance processes to analyse whether they meet the predetermined indicators. As a rule, such processes are coordinated and carried out by evaluation and quality assurance agencies. In addition, they comprise evaluation procedures, usually self-assessment and external peer visits, followed by the certification process (Lamarra, 2012).

In regional contexts, the designs of quality assurance processes tend to vary. They encompass different forms of institutionality, actors, and technical terms, as well as their meanings and purposes, depending on the arrangements in which the processes are inserted. Such processes would favour the recognition of degrees issued between member states or state parties, since they would correspond to a collective public educational policy of recognition of quality and comparability endowed with transnational public trust. This would enable the mobility of graduate workers, teachers, researchers, and students, strengthening regional integration.

In this vein, as part of the Bologna Process of Higher Education Reform, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESGs) were adopted in Europe in 2005 and revised in 2015. In the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), the University Degree Accreditation System for the Regional Recognition of the Academic Quality of University Degrees in the Mercosur and Associate States (Arcu-Sur System) was established in 2008 as the first measure to enable the recognition of degrees in the bloc. Its Procedure Manual was revised in 2020 and 2023.

The ESGs and the Arcu-Sur System have similar purposes on the same level by establishing macro-regional parameters for the quality of higher education and adopting the social-cultural development rationale to strengthen regional values, even though they are part of integration architectures of different kinds. The European model represents the most comprehensive of its kind. Consequently, the Arcu-Sur System has been recognised as one of Latin America's most outstanding quality assurance systems (Lamarra, 2004).

This essay employs the term Europe (continent) to identify one of the regional contexts, as opposed to the Bologna Process (intergovernmental cooperation agreement with the participation of non-EU member states) or the European Union (a regional economic organisation), in comparison to Mercosur (a regional economic organisation). This choice is because the term is deemed more suitable, given the teleological, material, and spatial scope of the ESGs, in addition to the diversity of regional agreements in which they are inserted.

This essay considers that "one of the main characteristics of the study of regionalism is that regionalism means different things to different people in different contexts and time-periods" (Söderbaum, 2015, p. 5) and that "regions can be defined in different ways, depending on the research questions that are asked" (De Lombaerde, 2011, p. 677). In this sense, Hettne's (2005) definition of region was adopted, which refers to a limited number of states linked geographically and by a certain degree of mutual interdependence. Furthermore, Hettne and Söderbaum's (2007) definition of regionalism was adopted, which is considered the tendency and political commitment to organise the world into regions. Above all, based on Söderbaum (2016), regions are understood as social constructs that convey a certain historical moment and its conjunctures, shared values, identities, norms, and practices, indicating dynamic concepts of regionalism that can vary according to the period.

Thus, this essay analyses such periods based on Söderbaum's (2015) proposal, considering two main aspects. Firstly, the variety of regionalisms is driven by the global spread of regional initiatives in the most diverse geographical and cultural areas and historical contexts (De Lombaerde, 2011). Also, the origins, elaboration, and development of the ESGs and the Arcu-Sur System are considered to comprise distinct periods and circumstances. The author identifies four phases of regionalism: Early Regionalism, Old Regionalism, New Regionalism, and Comparative Regionalism. The approach based on Söderbaum (2015) implies comparing the development of higher education initiatives related to quality assurance processes to the phases of regionalism. Hence, the analysis focuses on the ESGs and the Arcu-Sur System in the New Regionalism and the Comparative Regionalism, and the essay is structured as follows. First, the origins of the regional quality assurance processes in Europe and Mercosur are showcased. Next, the specific contexts and creation of both quality assurance processes are analysed, and, finally, the conclusions are marked by reflections on findings within the framework of New and Comparative Regionalism.

The Origins of Regional Quality Assurance Processes in Higher Education in Europe and Mercosur

Regional quality assurance processes in higher education in Europe and Mercosur are contemporary. They are also situated in a specific moment linked to globalisation and the expansion of neoliberalism, which are projected in the dynamics of regionalism and higher education. The emergence of the free movement of people, services, and goods in the mid-1980s created endless possibilities in diverse sectors. This freedom of movement led to a reorganisation of the States regarding their interests and new forms of interaction among them and with other international actors. This period was characterised by the end of the Cold War and, in South America, the restoration of democratic regimes. In addition, this period presented diffuse and ambivalent movements. Such movements involved both resistance and progress toward economic globalisation and the proliferation of regional groups. Hettne (2005) stresses that, in this context, regionalism could represent both a part of globalisation and a political reaction against it.

According to Amaral Júnior (2012), governments began to seek more advantageous participation in the international environment by acting together. The author indicates the conjunction of the dissolution of the bipolar balance and the rise of globalisation as a factor in rethinking regional agreements. This moment enabled all parts of the world to experience regional integration, not only Europe, whose process began after the Second World War (Hettne, 2002). Söderbaum (2008, 2015) identifies the following characteristics in the New Regionalism phase: the proliferation of regional trade agreements, the emergence of anti-hegemonic initiatives by the regions, the participation of civil society actors, and a greater variety of agreement designs, no longer centred on trade and security cooperation.

Such a phase enabled the inclusion of social policies among regional issues, especially concerning higher education. This is a consequence of higher education being regarded as an instrument for economic and social development. Yet, the competence to regulate it remains with the State (Dale & Robertson, 2002). In this sense, the quality assurance processes in higher education that emerged at a national level have been rescaled at a regional level. Such processes focused on harmonising national education systems.

In the next section, the agreements that originated the ESGs and the Arcu-Sur System are discussed and analysed. The discussion assumes that region formation involves political and historical contexts that affect the organisational structure and the approach to issues on the regional agenda.

The Context and Creation of the Bologna Process and the ESGs

The origins of the Bologna Process stem from the rebuilding of Western Europe after the Second World War, in which a competitive Europe was envisioned. According to Charlier (2009), the proposal of the integration project, as well as the aim to foster a common culture and the movement of people, required compatibility and comparability among products of higher education. In this context, initiatives aimed at technically enabling mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications were launched by institutions such as the Council of Europe, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and the European Commission (Charlier, 2009).

According to De Wit and Verhoeven (2001), the first phase of European cooperation in higher education was between 1971 and 1983 and would have been marked by symbolic actions. The second phase, from 1983 to 1992, would have started due to legal-political motivations. These motivations indicated a change in the interpretation of the community's role in the field of education, which would enable action programs at a regional level. The third phase would have started with the 1992 Treaty on the European Union (Maastricht Treaty) and the European Dimension in Education. The reform of the European higher education systems occurred simultaneously through the Bologna Process. This happened even though the EU's efforts to redirect the paths of higher education were aligned with those of the Council of Europe and UNESCO and continued the Community trajectory in the educational field.

Ministers of education, based on the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and other documents from that period, signed the Bologna Declaration of 1999. They agreed to integrate the project to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The Bologna Declaration assumed the nature of an intergovernmental cooperation agreement aimed at building the EHEA and was consolidated in the Bologna Process. In addition to States, universities and European non-governmental organisations competent in the higher education field were included in the process. Melo (2016) considers this configuration to be a characteristic of informal regionalism, which could be connected to the emergence of New Regionalism.

The Bologna Process is governed by soft law and has been developed through periodic Conferences, based on its constant revision, by adopting the Open Method of Coordination. Following the first Conference, there were Conferences in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009), Budapest-Vienna (2010), Bucharest (2012), Yerevan (2015), Paris (2018), Rome (2020), and Tirana (2024).

At the 2003 Conference, stakeholders were requested to develop a set of measures and procedures focused on quality assurance. In Bergen, the ESGs were introduced and approved, giving continuity to the European quality assurance system. The ministers of education were committed to promoting them among the external national quality assurance agencies and adhering to the common guidelines and criteria. One purpose of adopting ESGs would be to provide a higher degree of

trust between national agencies and to increase cooperation between them to provide mutual recognition of the demands of quality assurance.

These measures were intended to make the EHEA, introduced in 2010, more appealing to other parts of the world. This has promoted the provision of quality cross-border higher education. A second version of the ESGs was approved under the guidance of stakeholders at the Yerevan Ministerial Conference in 2015. The scope of the process has been broadened as new demands have been identified to improve and consolidate it, and the ESGs are one of its cornerstones.

The ESGs facilitate the implementation of the 1997 Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications relating to Higher Education in the European Region, operationalising the activities of the National Academic Recognition Information Centre in the European Union (NARIC) and the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) in the European Region, demonstrating to be an essential element for the recognition of qualifications.

The Context and Creation of the Arcu-Sur System

Different from the European context, concerns about ensuring the quality of higher education in the Southern Cone have been on the Mercosur agenda since its inception. This was due to the historical moment in which the regional economic bloc was created, during the New Regionalism. Also, it was because of the expansion of the culture of quality assessment in Higher Education in Latin America.

The bloc was created by the 1991 Treaty of Asunción, signed by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Mercosur was part of a growing number of regional integration agreements that were confronted by the challenges of the end of the Cold War, the New Regionalism, and the beginning of globalisation. Mercosur was also not limited to economic agreements. The idea of using knowledge to improve the quality of life in the region was introduced in the Treaty's Preamble.

Also in 1991, the Meeting of Education Ministers was established, which opened the work of the Mercosur Educational Sector (Mercosul Educacional, n.d.). According to Amaral Júnior (2012), the real intention of the Treaty of Asunción was “to establish a customs union, characterised by the complete removal of customs and non-tariff barriers among member countries and by a common trade policy regarding other markets” (Amaral Júnior, 2012, p. 167).

Despite not being consolidated as a common market, Mercosur has its legal personality as an international organisation recognised by the 1994 Protocol of Ouro Preto. Mercosur is characterised as an economic bloc of open regionalism aimed at increasing trade relations between its members and exchanges with other trading partners (Mercosur, n.d.). Furthermore, this characterisation represents a change from the previous Latin American integration model, focused on the internal sphere (Söderbaum, 2015).

For Mera (2008), regionalism in South America is part of a broader project involving global and national change. This project influences the nature of the integration process. Moreover, its continuity is guided by the preferences and decisions of State actors. The concentration of power in the States would result in a variant of New Regionalism, as it does not comply with the pluralist, multidimensional, and bottom-up premises theorised for the post-Cold War era. In the Southern Cone, the State elites have directed its construction and development. The structure of Mercosur comprises formal intergovernmental bodies, which aim to increase the centrality of the State in the cooperation process.

Acharya and Johnston (2007) highlight other elements that influence the nature and institutional design of regional organisations, such as the stability of political regimes and the preservation of sovereignty. For the authors, “regional institutions in the developing world are more likely to possess design features that preserve sovereignty than challenge it” (Acharya & Johnston, 2007, p. 262). Based on this assumption, the authors theorise that the instability of political regimes is inversely proportional to the openness of regional institutions. This means that, in analysing the regional institutional design of developing countries, the aim is to preserve their sovereignty to the detriment of external influences. Thus, democratic regimes are more open than authoritarian regimes. The authors also propose that, in the developing world, regional institutions tend to preserve the sovereignty of states. Therefore, the orientation of international organisations, whose democratic regimes are not consolidated, is to maintain the fundamental norms of sovereignty, notably non-intervention and territorial integrity. Similarly, Tussie (2009) notes a few bottom-up initiatives in Mercosur. The author categorises this situation as an extreme type of intergovernmentalism, which she labels interpresidentialism. In practice, this situation would make Mercosur vulnerable, since its advancement would depend on internal agendas, as seen in progressive governments, or stagnation in conservative governments.

Despite some setbacks, Mercosur is the most consistent regional economic bloc in Latin America. It is a symbol of resistance to neoliberalism due to its eminently social orientation, and since it is one of the most successful examples of New Regionalism in the Western Hemisphere (Mera, 2008). After the Higher Education project of the bloc, a proposal was presented in 1998 to regulate the matter and define technical terms. This proposal considered that national educational and evaluation systems were very different. Thus, it was necessary to establish a degree of uniformity in the regional treatment of the matter, indicating the application of the Experimental Accreditation Mechanism for the Recognition of University Degrees in Mercosur Countries (Mexa) (Hizume & Barreyro, 2017). The Meeting of Education Ministers was responsible for defining which courses would be submitted to Mexa. The criterion adopted was the indispensability of a higher education degree for professional practice.

The Mexa design was drawn up by State representatives and individuals appointed by them to form Advisory Commissions, indicating the development of a top-down public policy centred on the member states. The Advisory Committees established indicators for each career considering the regional reality. Like Mexa, the University Degree Accreditation System for the Regional Recognition of the Academic Quality

of University Degrees in the Mercosur and Associate States (Arcu-Sur System) was created in 2008. This system is permanent and voluntary. It envisages the gradual incorporation of careers and their application in cycles. Initially, it promotes two quality assurance processes, one regional and one national.

However, the Arcu-Sur accreditation does not guarantee recognition of the degree in the member states. Currently, a system for the recognition of degrees is under development.

Conclusion

This essay found that discussions on higher education and the recognition of degrees in Europe and Mercosur have developed differently despite having the same subject and being set in the same historical period: New Regionalism. In Europe, the Bologna Process diverges from the traditional format of international organisations, as a typical institution of the New Regionalism, moving forward with Comparative Regionalism. This process is comprised of stakeholders and governed by soft law, although there is an institutional structure that coordinates it—the Bologna Follow-up Group. The proactive participation of stakeholders in the Bologna Process has been considered the hallmark of its quality assurance process since they were key factors in designing the European system and drafting the two versions of the ESGs (2005, 2015).

In turn, Mercosur was formed as part of the New Regionalism, hence its characteristic of an open regional formation. However, some factors would reinforce its inter-governmental character, namely the fact that the region underwent re-democratisation a few years before the creation of the bloc, with the 1991 Treaty of Asunción, and the instability of democracy that was established. This is reflected in its traditional institutionalisation and closure to non-state actors.

Thus, based on the context in which both regional quality assurance systems originated and have developed, it is possible to understand their specificities. The latter is reflected in the nature of their actors, their degree of flexibility, and their design. They can also be considered models devised for each case. Thus, the similarities between them can be due to some factors, namely the emergence of the culture of quality assurance in education, its processes and procedures, from the 1980s onwards, and its coordination at a regional level. This entails recognising regional quality assurance processes as an effect of the New Regionalism on higher education and its regulation at different scales, both for formal and informal regionalism.

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Essay 47: Beyond Borders: Exploring Amazonian Regionalism as a Model for Cross-Border Collaboration and Sustainable Development in Global Contexts



Efraim Parra and Juan Carlos Siuffi-Campo

Introduction

The Amazon Basin, spanning over 6.7 million square kilometres across nine South American countries, is a cornerstone of the planet's ecological framework (Moraes et al., 2021). Dominated by the Amazon rainforest, the world's most biodiverse terrestrial ecosystem, the basin also plays a critical role in global climate regulation, and it sustains countless local communities deeply connected to its health (Moraes et al., 2021). Despite its significance, the Amazon faces severe threats from exploitation and governance failures that overlook its socio-ecological complexity (Barbosa et al., 1996; Fernandes et al., 2023; De Araujo Barbosa et al., 2016; McGahan & Pongeluppe, 2021).

As climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation intensify, ecosystem restoration and conservation are urgent priorities. However, current regional initiatives remain state-centric, often sidelining indigenous and local communities whose traditional knowledge and practices are vital for sustainable management. This exclusion limits the effectiveness of conservation efforts and diminishes culturally sensitive solutions to environmental challenges.

This essay explores how regionalism and cross-border collaboration can enhance governance in the Amazon Basin. The first section examines the challenges of managing its ecosystems, arguing for integrated regional governance and bioregional approaches. The second evaluates the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation's limitations, proposing a shift toward multilevel governance that incorporates local and non-state actors for more adaptive, effective conservation strategies.

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Beyond Borders: The Challenge of Governing Ecosystems of the Amazon Basin

The Amazon Basin, spanning over 6.7 million square kilometres across nine South American countries (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, Bolivia, and French Guiana), epitomises unparalleled ecological importance and serves as a global lifeline of ecosystem services critical to both local populations and the broader planet. This vast region, primarily covered by the Amazon rainforest, stands as the most biodiverse terrestrial ecosystem on Earth, hosting approximately 40,000 different plants, 425 mammals, 1,560 butterflies, 1,300 birds, 2,406 fish, and almost 800 amphibians and reptiles (Guayasamin et al., 2024). This biodiversity, however, is unevenly distributed within the Amazon basin, which possesses unique ecological dynamics, showcasing varying levels of species diversity and endemism (Fig. 1).

Historically, the Amazon Basin has been perceived by states as a frontier for economic expansion and resource extraction, driven by a narrative of frontierism or *baldios* (wasteland) that prioritises economic growth at the expense of environmental sustainability and indigenous rights (Becker, 2016). This perception fuelled decades of land clearance for agriculture, logging, and mining, resulting in widespread deforestation, habitat degradation, and loss of biodiversity (Beuchle et al., 2023). As a result, not only were fragile ecosystems disrupted, but it also exacerbated social inequalities as marginalised indigenous communities who depend on ecosystems for their livelihoods and cultural identity.

Despite growing awareness of Amazon's ecological significance since the 1992 Earth Summit, current state-led planning and cooperation strategies have failed to address key drivers impacting the conservation of its biodiversity and vital ecosystem services. This is primarily because states often overlook the critical role of transnational private and local civic actors in conservation efforts. Effective regional governance requires polycentric, participatory, and networked approaches that engage diverse state and non-state actors in collaborative decision-making processes (Ostrom, 2015). Integrating varied perspectives balances environmental sustainability with socio-economic development, fostering resilient management of the Amazon's ecosystems (Berkes, 2007; Brondizio et al., 2009; Folke, 2004).

On the other hand, addressing sustainability and biodiversity tends to adopt a monolithic and unidimensional stance by states and governments, detached from the intricate socio-ecological systems that characterise the different Amazon regions. This approach overlooks the diverse and interconnected web of ecological processes, cultural practices, and economic activities that define the different regions within the Amazon, producing policies that narrowly encompass the broader landscape of human-nature interactions and the complex socio-economic dynamics at play. This fragmented approach hampered the effective management of transboundary resources, exacerbating challenges such as habitat loss, biodiversity decline, and climate change impacts. For example, the construction of the Balbina Dam in the 80 s, designed to strengthen Brazil's energy sovereignty, led to significant habitat



Fig. 1 The Amazon (River Basin, Biome, and Legal-Political-Administrative Limits). (Source Maretti et al., (2014)¹)

¹ © Text 2014 WWF.

destruction and the displacement of indigenous communities that extended beyond national borders as it impacted transboundary river systems and wildlife corridors (see Palmeirim et al., 2022).

Addressing these challenges requires a shift to integrated, adaptive regional governance that recognises ecological and human interdependencies. This involves redefining the traditional state-governed logic in the Amazon Basin, moving from vertical, boundary-based governance to more horizontal, networked arrangements free of political bias (Elliott, 2017). The concept of a bioregion responds to states' struggles to collaborate on shared environmental issues. Bioregions are defined by ecological rather than political boundaries, supporting management strategies that align with ecosystems' natural flows and community needs (Brunckhorst, 2000). This approach enables co-management of transboundary ecosystems, where neighbouring countries address environmental threats together through cooperative instruments, fostering regional ties and peaceful relations (Ali, 2007). Such frameworks promise more effective, resilient governance and sustainable development for the Amazon.

Although building bioregions has become a prominent strategy in transboundary conservation, it faces significant challenges towards its effective implementation. One major obstacle is the inherent complexity of translating the bioregional concept into practical governance frameworks, as it is not merely about scaling up existing protected areas. Instead, it requires the creation of different strategic bioregional projects that facilitate cooperation and articulation between all stakeholders, grounded upon shared interests and common goals over the Amazon Basin. The challenge to conserve the Amazon not only lies in creating new delimitations in accordance with ecological dynamics for the harmonisation of existing and future development policies, but also in establishing a comprehensive vision of Amazon's sustainable development that reflects the needs and dynamics within and between Amazon's bioregions. Building such a vision of the Amazon as a set of bioregions involves reconciling heterogeneous cultural perspectives with economic interests. For instance, while for indigenous communities biotic and abiotic elements are considered sentient beings with their own culture and knowledge (Descola, 2014; Parra, 2023; Viveros de Castro, 2013), for states and the private sector, nature is often seen as an object of use and commodification, providing resources for economic development.

Certainly, the current state of environmental degradation and the growing demand for sustainable development require a reevaluation of regionalism in the Amazon Basin. The socio-ecological complexities of the region, coupled with the impacts of globalisation and local community needs, underscore the need for more robust and adaptable regional cooperation mechanisms. In this sense, the following section will provide an in-depth analysis of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (ACTO), which has been one of the oldest regional mechanisms aimed at addressing the environmental challenges of the Amazon Basin. While the ACTO has the potential to address these challenges, its effectiveness has been hindered by an outdated model of governance.

Fostering Sustainable Development Through New Regionalisms: Cross-Border Efforts in the Amazon

Transboundary issues inevitably require governance, states—the primary actors in the geopolitical arena—sign international instruments to guide and support these efforts. However, many of these treaties lack enforcement mechanisms, and their effectiveness hinges on clear and precise terms (Hoffman et al., 2022). The 1978 Amazon Cooperation Treaty (ACT) sought to promote harmonious development in the Amazon, leading to the establishment of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (ACTO) in 1995 to strengthen its implementation. Nonetheless, its impact remains limited (Silva Junior et al., 2020). We believe that this is an issue in the governance model itself; regions can save the world if their models are innovative and inclusive.

Although ACT is a regional environmental governance effort, its initiatives often reflect international and national interests over local needs (Reyes Sarmiento, 2016). States face a significant challenge in aligning conservation goals with local priorities, as international agendas may conflict with specific community needs. This misalignment fragments regional efforts, creating policies that are either too broad or too rigid to address on-the-ground socio-ecological realities. As a result, conservation measures often fail to meet the diverse needs of Amazonian stakeholders, compromising the treaty's overall effectiveness and sustainability. As long as the integration model ignores that States are interwoven within numerous connections across various levels and must negotiate and work collaboratively with other actors and institutional tiers, the efforts will not hold (Christiansen, 1998; Hooghe, 1996; Marks, 1992).

ACTO's lack of a unified approach to land management and protection led to overlapping claims and competition for resources, further straining relationships between stakeholders. Consequently, the institution's ability to effectively manage and conserve the Amazon's ecosystem services is compromised, as varying interpretations and enforcement practices weaken collaborative efforts and hinder the achievement of shared conservation goals. This ongoing uncertainty calls for more precise and harmonised regulations to address these conflicts and enhance the overall effectiveness of regional conservation strategies (Froese et al., 2022). Yet, governance should not be thought of as a State-only matter.

The Amazon Basin's complexity requires a pluralistic, polycentric governance approach that involves various stakeholders and recognises non-state initiatives (Jonas et al., 2010). Grassroots organisations have effectively managed and conserved their environments, resisting state-led colonisation and oil exploration since the 1960s (Yashar, 2005). Integrating their contributions into broader governance frameworks can foster adaptive, resilient, and culturally relevant solutions, ensuring sustainable development aligns with the lived realities of local communities.

To meet the region's evolving challenges, a shift towards multilevel governance (MLG) is necessary, moving beyond mere intergovernmental relations (IGR) or neofunctionalism (Tortola, 2017). According to Alcantara et al. (2015), MLG fosters an inclusive process where governmental and non-governmental actors co-create

collective solutions—instead of simply being consulted or serving as advisors, they're recognised as an interconnected part of decision-making arenas (Tortola, 2017). This is a crucial approach for managing the complex socio-ecological systems of the Amazon Basin. Encouragingly, the empowerment of civil organisations and non-state actors indicates an emerging interdependent dynamic, signalling a shift in the geopolitical paradigm of conservation (Guevara, 2018). By recognising and funding different levels of governance in a region, we believe it is possible to save the world.

The Amazon Region Protected Areas Program (ARPA), led by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), exemplifies regional governance that steps away from IGR by incorporating non-state actors and new frameworks like Complex Interdependence Theory (Guevara, 2018; Martin et al., 2022). It has made substantial progress in reducing deforestation through funding for state and local community projects (Silva et al., 2021; Soares-Filho et al., 2023). Currently, 43.2% of Amazon is designated as protected or indigenous territory, contributing to the lowest primary forest loss rates (0.14–0.12%) as shown by Fig. 2. Indeed, collective rights and land/resource tenure facilitate the shift toward MSG governance and related models, such as Intercultural Polycentric Climate Governance. Examples of this transition can be seen in Brazil's State of Acre and Peru's Ucayali region (Bottazzi & Dao, 2012; De Wit & Mourato, 2022).

It is true that pressures from illegal activities show that these designations, while essential, are insufficient alone (Becker, 2016; Finer & Manami, 2023). However, it accounts for the fact that efforts by local communities and conservation organisations actively participating in decision-making have greatly contributed to preserving the forest's integrity, suggesting that incorporating diverse parties and economic growth can align with conservation goals.

While ACTO seeks to include non-state actors, its dependence on a shared member-state agenda results in unclear guidelines for managing protected areas and resources. Reyes Sarmiento (2016) argues that ambiguous language and conflicting member objectives weaken ACT's effectiveness, leading to inconsistent enforcement and exacerbating land tenure conflicts among indigenous communities, governments, and private enterprises. State-centred governance often becomes overly normative and bureaucratic, limiting non-state actor contributions due to the absence of a robust framework. However, ACTO still has the potential to embrace new governance models that better integrate diverse actors.

For example, its various work areas demonstrate a commitment to fostering knowledge exchange and inter-scientific dialogues with Amazon Basin communities, as well as efforts to preserve and incorporate traditional knowledge (Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation, 2018). Their projects, however, lack an institutional framework that integrates non-state actors. For instance, the Amazon Basin Project consists solely of national entities, such as Ministries of Environment and Water, National Water Authorities, and National Water Secretariats (Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation, 2024).

Initiatives like Citizen Science for the Amazon Project (CSAP), led by the World Conservation Society, exemplify ways to build governance relationships, especially in knowledge creation for decision-making. In these cases, participants are valued as

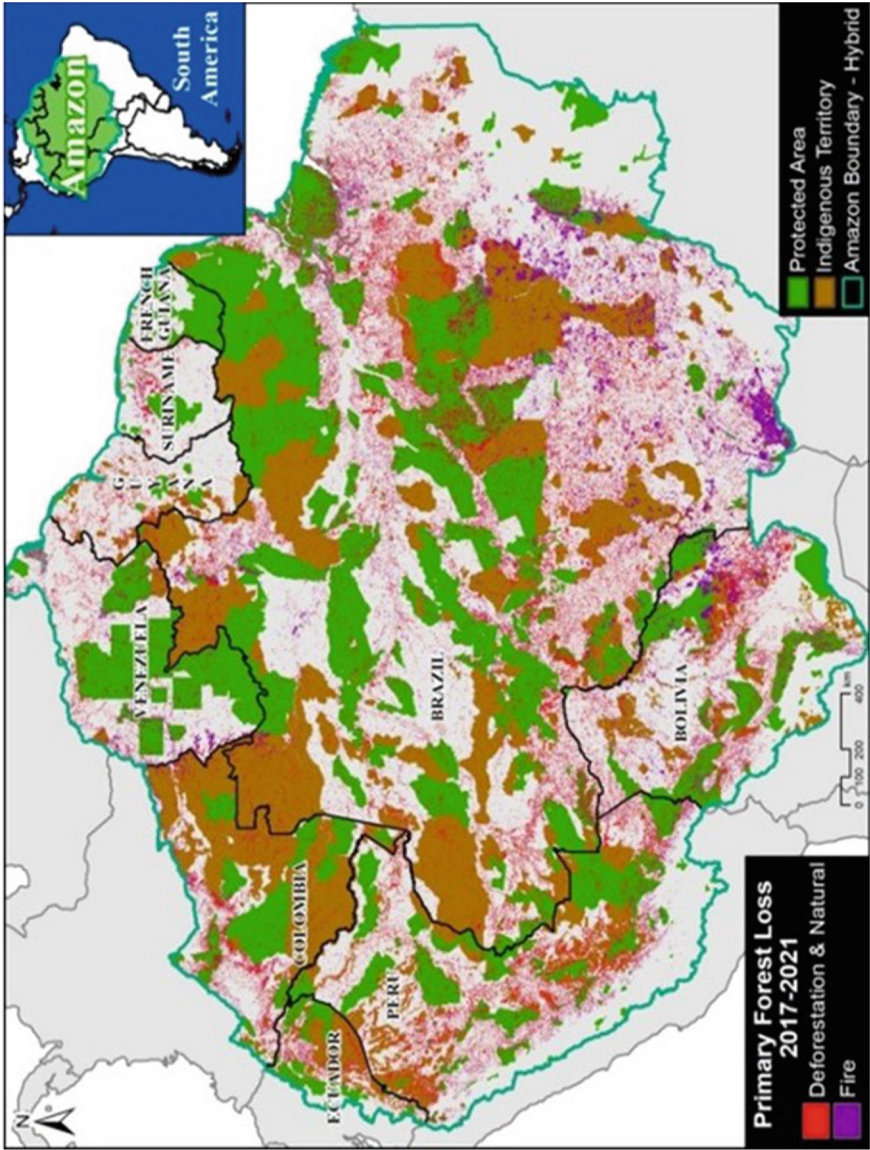


Fig. 2 Primary forest loss (2017–21) across the amazon, in relation to protected areas and indigenous territories. [2023](#) (Source: [Finer and Manami \(2023\)](#))

key knowledge holders, creating ample opportunities to engage with diverse knowledge systems that allow for solutions that are more comprehensive of the context where they are applied (Eyng et al., 2022). This would be particularly useful for the implementation of the Strategic Action Program for the Strategy for Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) in the Amazon Basin. Evidence shows that this is not solid enough to articulate cross-border efforts due to the lack of an operational legal regime, data creation mechanisms, and a more cohesive and leading role when speaking for the Amazon (Tigre, 2017, 2019; Paes, 2022; Martin et al., 2022). Not only working with the communities but also making them part of a governance regime would make cross-border efforts more effective and comprehensive.

Conclusion

The Amazon Basin, spanning nine South American countries, faces significant governance challenges due to its ecological complexity and geopolitical fragmentation. Traditional state-centric governance has proven inadequate in addressing deforestation, biodiversity loss, and indigenous rights, often overlooking the role of transnational, private, and local actors in conservation efforts. Initiatives like the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (ACTO) have struggled with top-down strategies that fail to align with local realities and ecological needs since their governance models are outdated.

A shift towards bioregional and multilevel governance (MLG) is essential. Bioregional governance, which emphasises ecological rather than political boundaries, fosters cooperation across state lines and engages diverse stakeholders, including indigenous communities and non-state actors. This approach better addresses issues such as biodiversity loss, habitat degradation, and climate change by aligning governance with ecosystem flows and local needs. By adopting a pluralistic, polycentric structure, MLG enables collaboration between governmental and non-governmental entities to develop and implement solutions.

Global examples, such as the *Great Green Wall* and the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, demonstrate the benefits of bioregional governance. In the Amazon, the Amazon Region Protected Areas Program (ARPA) integrates non-state actors into governance frameworks, showing progress in reducing deforestation and promoting sustainable land use.

To protect the Amazon effectively, regional cooperation must be more adaptable, integrating diverse perspectives and aligning conservation efforts with ecological and climatic zones. This paradigm shift, prioritising ecological and cultural diversity, can create resilient governance structures that safeguard the Amazon's future. By embracing inclusive, networked governance, we can enhance conservation efforts, bolster ecosystem resilience, and contribute to global environmental sustainability.

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