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CENTRAL ASIAN REGIONALISM: LESSONS FROM EAST ASIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA²

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РЕГИОНАЛИЗМ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: ОПЫТ ВОСТОЧНОЙ И ЮГО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ

*Cognition comes through comparison
Все познается в сравнении*

УДК: 32+327.3

Central Asia...?! For many scholars, policy-makers and the general public in different parts of the world, Central Asia remains an unknown region. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Central Asia emerged as a separate region comprising five newly independent states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.³ This article aims to present regional integration efforts in Central Asia by comparing with integration schemes in East Asia and Southeast Asia. Such a comparative analysis allows for insightful reflections on the cases of Asian regional integration. It allows learning about and from regional integration experiences in Asia.

Центральная Азия?! Для большинства специалистов, политиков и широкой общественности в различных частях мира, Центральная Азия остается малоизвестным регионом. С распадом Советского Союза в начале 90-х прошлого столетия, Центральная Азия появляется как отдельный регион, состоящий из пяти новых независимых государств: Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан, Туркменистан и Узбекистан¹. Цель данной статьи рассмотреть усилия стран Центральной Азии по региональной интеграции в сравнении с интеграционными схемами в Восточной и Юго-Восточной Азии. Такой сравнительный анализ позволяет лучше понять природу Азиатской региональной интеграции. Можно больше узнать не только об опыте региональной интеграции Азии, но и вынести определенные полезные уроки.

Introduction

The topic of Central Asian regionalism emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Central Asia presents many challenging questions and issues for integration studies. For instance, within the identity dimension of regional integration, there are such questions as: where to include Central Asia? Is it part of Asia? If yes, what are the indicators? Generally what can we call Asia? Where does it start and end? These are questions which trigger thoughts on the nature of Central Asia. Some believe that norms, values and politics - not geography - differentiate West from East, Europe from Asia. "The West is about values and politics, not about geography."⁴ At the same time, most of Central Asians looks like typical Asians; does that imply that the commonality of appearance is a result of the common historical and geographical realities and challenges? Perhaps, it can also be true that the appearance may be misleading, and that the historical experience of being a part of the Russian Empire and

Soviet Union has impacted Central Asia in a very unique and significant way.

Central Asia needs to develop a model of regional integration. At the global level, European integration is perceived to be the model. However, the regional integration in East Asia and the Southeast Asia (SEA) has presented a different form of regional integration. The East Asian model could have certain features which may be emulated in Central Asia. These features must be studied. There is no intention to say that Central Asia is a part of Asia and has to orient itself eastwards, or to imply "asianization of Central Asia." There is also no intention to deny it. The intent is to study available models and to draw positive policy lessons. The European integration scheme is often called the "institution-driven" regionalism, while East Asian regionalism is believed to be the "market-driven" one. Regionalism in Southeast Asia and East Asia shows that "it is possible to have high levels of cooperation with low levels of institutionalization."⁵

Within this study, regional integration and regionalism are used as interchangeable concepts, and defined generally as "set of policies whereby state and non-state actors cooperate and coordinate strategies within a given region."⁶ As for the concept of "regionalization," the definition given by Paul Evans as "expression of increased commercial and human transactions in a defined geographical space"⁷ is employed. The concept of "region" is also a very loose notion. Regions can be constructed and re-constructed. The "region" is meant to outline certain group of countries which are united by common interests, threats or vision. The fundamental point of "regions" is the logic of inclusiveness and exclusiveness. Today, the geographical understanding of regions does not necessarily correspond with their political margins.

The study thus is organized around two case studies: Central Asia and the broader post-Soviet space and East Asia including the sub-region of Southeast Asia. To compare regions, the desktop research through the study of available official, academic and scholarly materials was accomplished. Several insightful interviews with leading experts and scholars on regional integration were conducted; interviews on East Asian and SEA regionalism were conducted among scholars residing in Japan, and

those relating to Central Asian regionalism were conducted among scholars residing in Kyrgyzstan.

Locating and defining regions

Post-soviet space/Central Asia

The post-Soviet space refers to the 15 former Soviet republics. Generally, the space can be divided into 5 groupings. Each grouping is characterized by the commonality of geographical, socio-cultural and historical factors and specific relations with Russia.

The post-Soviet groupings:

- Baltic (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania)
- Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine)
- Transcaucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia)
- Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan)
- Eurasia (Russia)

Central Asia is located in the heart of the Eurasian continent, and fairly considered to be the region at the crossroads of civilizations (Western/Christian, Islamic, Chinese...) As mentioned above, since 1993 Central Asia is defined as a group of five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Previously during the Soviet Union, the region was called the Middle Asia and Kazakhstan (*Srednaya Azia i Kazakhstan*).

East Asia/Southeast Asia

East Asia is a vast region and when it comes to analyzing regional cooperation in East Asia it is necessary to differentiate such areas as Northeast Asia (China, the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, Mongolia and the Russian Far East), Southeast Asia (the ten ASEAN member-states) and East Asia (ASEAN+3 and some other countries of Northeast Asia or Asia Pacific).⁸

The combination of political and geographical definitions of Southeast Asia results in 11 states, 10 of which are member-states of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). These are Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and East Timor (not a member of ASEAN).⁹

Success story

Southeast Asian regionalism is a case of sub-regionalism in relation to the East Asian regionalism. The role of Northeast Asian states- especially of Japan in the early stages of cooperation and of China later on- has been critical to the development of Southeast Asian regionalism. The regional processes in Southeast Asia and generally in East Asia are closely interrelated. Nowadays, when East Asian regionalism concentrates on ASEAN+3 and the East Asian Summit (ASEAN+6) formats, the role of ASEAN seems to be one of the decisive factors shaping East Asian cooperation.

ASEAN was established in 1967, when five of the pro-western states in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) decided to create an intergovernmental organization. Back then, they did not have much in common except problems and threats. Similar to the current states of Central Asia, the founding states of ASEAN

"disputed territorial and ethnic issues with each other, and there were no common factors promoting regional cooperation, other than their mutually shared anti-communist stance."¹⁰ In this view, two important features of ASEAN must be highlighted; these are the principle of non-intervention and the arrangements for a dialogue with external powers. 1) Mutual respect to sovereignty and 2) the ability to create a dialogue platform with the external powers: the combination of these two conditions made it possible to talk about the success of regional cooperation efforts in Southeast Asia.

Not yet success story

With the collapse of the Soviet state regional organizations have emerged in the post-Soviet space aimed at providing different formats for inter-state cooperation which are quite compelling for the land-locked countries of Central Asia. The first organization was the Commonwealth of Independent States established in 1991, which signified above all the collapse of the Soviet Union and the need for facilitation the disintegration of the former Soviet republics, and their re-integration into newly defined bases. The case of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) clearly shows the post-Soviet realities - the parallel processes of disintegration and integration. This is the fundamental and specific characteristic of the post-Soviet regional process.

Another important point to make about regionalism in Central Asia is the absence of a regional institution which unites only the Central Asian states. There were several attempts to create Central Asian Union or Central Asian Cooperation Organization, but none have yet been successful. President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan tried to revive the idea of re-establishing the Central Asian Union in April 2007, but only Kyrgyzstan expressed its support, while the other states of Central Asia remained skeptically anticipating. How to understand such skepticism? Some scholars argue that the skepticism is a result of:¹¹

- Escalating intra-regional disputes over non-demarcated inter-state borders and transnational water resources management;
- Ethnic clashes which are rooted in pre-Soviet and Soviet periods such as the one which took place between Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks in southern of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010;
- The disruptive geopolitical impact of the major external powers such as Russia, China and the USA;
- The inability to share a common history as in the case of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in its dispute over the Samarkand and Bukhara, and the absence of direct flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe;
- regional leadership competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan;
- and perhaps the most important limiting factor is the divergent political-economic paths and strategies by each of the regional states, leading these countries into different directions and destinations.

Story of a not yet benign external power

The prominent feature of the post-Soviet integration is the issue of regional leadership or hegemony by Russia. Due to the historical domination of Russia over Central Asian lands for more than a century (since the middle of the 19th century until 1991) and the civilizational importance of the Russians and the Russian language in the development of Central Asian societies and states, the interrelationship of Russia and the Central Asian states is extraordinarily important and quite complicated. Russia still feels responsible for the region, especially in view of the numerous ethnic Russians living in the region. Russia's leading role in such regional organizations as the Commonwealth of Independent States, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Community and even the Shanghai Cooperation Organization where Russia's leadership is balanced with China, is unquestionable. Russia is viewed by some Central Asian states as the only "security manager" in the region, and Russia in turn gives strong incentives to be viewed as that. The positive and negative meanings of Russia's being the "security manager" in the region have certain implications to the regional cooperation in Central Asia and its impact will depend on the leaders and leadership policies of Russia.

Story of a benign external power

Japan is perceived very differently in Southeast Asia and East Asia. From one side, Japan's role in the economic success of most Southeast Asian states and Northeast Asian states is undeniable. The Japanese origin MNCs' activities as well as FDI, ODA, and the technology transfer to these regions were crucial for the development of Southeast Asia and East Asia.¹² When discussing the regional leadership role of Japan in East Asia, one has to consider the politics and policies of the United States, the super power with long-lasting interests and leverages in the region. The close security, political and economic relations of Japan and the United States created conducive conditions for effective regional cooperation. On the other hand, Katzenstein argues that the attitude of the United States towards a regional integration in Asia was not supportive to multilateralism by indicating that "after 1945 the United States enshrined the principle of bilateralism in its dealings with Japan and other Asian states."¹³ At the same time, this firmly established bilateral approach with regard to the security alliance between the USA and Japan allowed Tokyo to concentrate on economic development rather than to worry about its security (an insight from the interview)¹⁴.

Conclusion

Briefly summarizing the above arguments, thoughts and suggestions, one can say that the regions in question have some commonalities and differences. Some observable commonalities relate to the common challenges, while differences relate to the difference in ways of addressing those challenges.

One of the important recommendations which can be learned from SEA regionalism is a kind of

"functionalism in the ASEAN way." In other words, it is the ability to be practical and functional even though not always in a formal and institutionalized way. It is very important to be aware of and visualize not only the necessity to cooperate but the benefits which such cooperation can bring. Early in Southeast Asia's development, as well as later in Central Asia, the sovereignty issue was fundamental; both regions have been preoccupied by the task of nation-building and were often led by authoritarian leaders. But, authoritarian regimes in SEA were able to arrive at common ground and find ways for cooperation for the sake of remaining in the office and enjoying the people's legitimacy by means of good governance targeted at economic development. Most of the Central Asian regimes are willing to remain in power at the expense of creating a "client" society and the corrupt system of government which seriously hinders the development of each and all member states.

Today, there is no 'iron wall', and no Cold War; today is the world of globalization and open borders, including the formerly closed areas to the east (China and East Asia) and south (South Asia). New options are now open; and new dimensions for cooperation are available. Central Asia has been given an opportunity to return to itself and act according to its nature, if done with a sense of urgency. But in order to do this it must unite; for only through regional cooperation can Central Asia finalize the post-Soviet disintegration and further advance its regional re-integration.

Literature

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