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Explaining Surprises in
Asian Regionalism:
*The Japan-Korea-China
Trilateral Cooperation*

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Why has the scholarship on ASEAN Plus Three not anticipated the emergence of the trilateral cooperative framework among Japan, Korea and China? The trilateral 'dialogue' that in 2008 took shape in a format separate from ASEAN has become a key surprise in Asian regionalism. Given the direct link to ASEAN Plus Three (APT), I review possible explanations based on trends in APT as they have been described in the literature. The implications of this exercise are as follows. While too much weight has been attached to promoting scholarly 'labels' – Sino-Japanese competition, power of ASEAN to socialize, and economic focus in APT – far too little attention on the other hand has been afforded to note Korea's regional preferences, pre-existing contradictions, and varied roles of APT. To respond better to similar challenges in the future, the scholarship on Asian regionalism needs to attach more value to elaborating and testing of alternative scenarios.

Introduction

Our present crisis ... has been coming for a long time and we should have seen it coming. Naomi Oreskes, University of California, San Diego²

"ASEAN Plus Three" established in 1999 has been favored by many as the most important regional framework in East Asia. This attracted a great deal of analytical effort, especially at the onset of the 21st century, resulting in a substantial and widely quoted body of scholarship (Soesastro 2001; Stubbs 2002; Beeson 2003; Hund 2003; Terada 2003; Yoshimatsu 2005; Dent 2008). As a narrowly understood East Asia, the debate on ASEAN Plus Three (APT) has concentrated on the validity of this "region" – its chances to prevail against the competing, broader concept of the Pacific. In the course of this scholarship, however, strong notions have been produced and defended. Even as these notions give us a fuller idea of what APT is (a playground for competition), and what it is not (a coherent regional idea), they have also made the field very tight – to the point that new regionalist projects, so welcome on the conflict-prone Asian soil, are hard to accommodate by the scholarship.

The "Trilateral Cooperation" (TC) among Japan, South Korea, and China, initiated within APT in 1999 and established independently from it in 2008, is such a surprise in Asian regionalism. To borrow from the above quotation of Naomi Oreskes, we had not³ known that the TC "was coming." Once it emerged, it casts doubt on some of the key arguments about *ASEAN Plus Three*: the Sino-Japanese "rivalry", the driving force of ASEAN, reluctance of Japan toward Asia-only groupings, and so on. A pursuit of explanatory closure – any one or more from the above – has led to zero anticipation of the TC, hard to reconcile with the prevailing notions, as this is a grouping with only three Asian states, including China but

² Quoted in Robin McKie, "Attacks paid for by big business 'driving science into dark era,'" *Observer*, February 19, 2012, p. 20.

³ In my previous draft, I have mistakenly written "now"; this version has been corrected to "not" (7th January 2013).

excluding ASEAN. It makes us think about the direction that the scholarship on Asian regionalism, APT in particular, has taken. The price for calibrating research frameworks to zoom in on the *most salient* features of APT has been to lose track of the less prominent features that in effect proved consequential.⁴

The argument I advance is that the interaction among the *units* – nation-states – gave rise to the cooperative constellation of the Northeast Asian three (NEA-3).⁵ To move us toward the explanation, I first review competing approaches to APT, taking from them along the way any clues about the TC emergence. This extensive study brings me then to outlining the remaining developments that have been mere sideshows in the literature: Korea's regional vision (i); contradictory bilateral dynamics (ii); and the role of APT beyond economics (iii). I conclude with an agenda to make analytical frameworks on Asian regionalism more flexible, in this way conducive to a long-term study. The whole point here is to make our findings more durable and thus more useful to future generations of IR scholars. Then we might know where Asian regionalism is headed, and we might have foundations of a theory to explain those movements.

Explaining the Trilateral Case

There has been much scholarly concern about how to promote cooperation in an era of eroding US economic hegemony. Yet these issues have received little consideration in non-western and non-northern hemispheric contexts. Higgott (1993:290)

ASEAN, a Southeast Asian organization, has been the host of ASEAN Plus Three that embraces Japan, Korea, and China. In 1999, the Northeast Asian “three” held an informal breakfast meeting only among themselves.⁶ This was the beginning of the “trilateral cooperation,” which took an independent form in 2008 when the summit was held in Japan.⁷ The evolving separation reached a new level with the establishment of the trilateral secretariat in Seoul, a development that has permeated into some recent literature (Emmers and Ravenhill 2011: 17; Pempel 2011; Rozman 2011: 307; Terada 2011: 13).

⁴ Note the difficulty in making arguments running contrary to the common assumption. Unlike most studies on regional dynamics, Etel Solingen finds that the Japan-China competition argument “overplays” this presumed rivalry (2008).

⁵ TC denotes a new organization, and with NEA-3 I stress the set of three countries, Japan, China, and Korea.

⁶ Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi hold the first trilateral meeting of three states' leaders in ‘modern times’ at the sidelines of APT meeting in Manila (Yoshimatsu 2008:65).

⁷ Martin Fackler, “China, Japan and South Korea focus on economy at summit,” *New York Times*, 13 December, 2008.

The trend of downsizing the role of ASEAN started with “three plus ASEAN,” showcasing the symbolic order of power in favor of Northeast Asia.⁸ The role of the three in providing “primary initiative” led to this 3+10 term (Evans 2005:197, ft. 1). After the 2008 inaugural summit, the talk became of “three minus ASEAN” (*Economist* 2008; Weatherbee 2009), to showcase ASEAN’s actual exclusion. “As for the APT, ASEAN members initiated the regional grouping and each year the summit meeting takes place on ASEAN soil” (Eaton and Stubbs 2006:141).

In this paper I go back to APT-based arguments, keeping separation of the trilateral summit in hindsight.

Before ASEAN+3

Intergovernmentalism that stresses the role played by state leaders is one of the pathways to explanation (Yoshimatsu 2008). Having realized growing economic interdependence, three leaders revised their perceptions of regional cooperation:

“economic and industrial linkages between China, Japan and South Korea have gradually deepened since the late 1990s ... These evolutions since the late 1990s might change the perception of regional cooperation among the heads of state and government in Northeast Asia.” Yoshimatsu (2008:62)

This explanation is summarized as “awareness of regional interdependence,” a term at the crossroads of Liberalism and Constructivism (Goh and Acharya 2007:5).⁹

This explanation is weighed down with at least two problems. First, it treats China as a source of growing interdependence, a passive player, not necessarily the case: “...perhaps slightly overlooking the importance of how the APT framework also provides an opportunity to engage Japan and South Korea...” (Breslin 2010:728). Second, this explanation cannot provide a satisfactory answer concerning the set of countries. Yoshimatsu (2008) implies that particularly Japan and Korea were attracted to trade with China. But there is evidence to the contrary. ASEAN has already concluded an FTA with China, while Japan and Korea have a long way before possibly doing so.¹⁰ Convergence of foreign economic policies on China has been East Asia-wide rather than NEA-specific: “In fact, the uniforming impacts on some or all of the regional states have been so significant that foreign policy orientations among those

⁸ Yoshimatsu (2004:13), quoting Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s Senior Minister.

⁹ See Sterling-Folker (2000) for an article that promises to deal with the similarity between liberalism and constructivism.

¹⁰ But note the *concluded* negotiations on a new, trilateral investment treaty, “the first legal framework in the economic field among the three countries.” See <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/business/T120322005713.htm> (accessed March 25, 2012). The agreement was signed during the 5th Trilateral Summit in May 2012: http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2012/5/0513_01.html.

countries, including Japan, have converged on China” (Terada 2010:75). We find in the intergovernmental explanation no clue why Japan, Korea and China in particular, so we seek deeper into the meaning of convergence.

The convergence can be understood in terms of domestic policy preferences: “Convergence theories understand the dynamics of regional cooperation and especially regional economic integration in terms of converging domestic policy preferences among regional states” (Hurrell 1995:356). Despite the uniformity, there is a major difference in how scholars assess China-ASEAN and China-rest of Northeast Asia economic ties: “While China’s economic appetite has revived the high-technology economies of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, it has simultaneously sucked investment out of the largely technology-less economies of Southeast Asia” (Jones and Smith 2007:165). If Northeast Asia indeed differed from Southeast Asia over China, it would be a powerful explanation to why NEA-3 emerged. But a frequent reference is to divisions within Northeast Asia – the so-called “fractious Northeastern core” (Calder and Ye 2010:112) – rather than to a potential split to China’s north and south.

Catalysts

Northeast Asia through the crises: 1997 and 2008. After the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the global crisis of 2008 proved to be another turning point that encouraged scholars to focus on catalytic properties of major crises for regional cooperation: “In particular, the case of the trilateral relationship between China, Japan, and South Korea (ROK) is an indication of how such crises [2008 global crisis] can trigger pragmatic efforts for cooperation and deepened regional ties” (Sato 2009:107).

One view holds that the global crisis has spurred competition between China and Japan in financial affairs, and the inaugural trilateral summit in 2008 became a playing field for pursuing this competition (Terada 2010:88). Another view stresses the “regional-global” connection, where regional moves are a defensive response to challenges generated internationally (like in Sato 2009:107). Possibly, the crises appeared ‘auspiciously’ at a moment when support for Asians-only movement would otherwise flag.¹¹

The main caveat to the crisis explanation is that it is merely catalytic. The decision about the 2008 summit meeting was made already in 2007. The three countries announced separation of the trilateral summit on the occasion of the APT-based trilateral summit in

¹¹ Already in 1995 Japan’s interest in EAEC weakened (Yong Deng 1997:50-51); APT and thus trilateral meetings faced trouble in 2008 in the light of Thailand’s (host country) internal problems (Weatherbee 2009).

November 2007, Singapore: “The leaders of the three countries agreed to take turns hosting China-Japan-Korea Summit Meetings in each country, independently from other multilateral occasions such as the ASEAN.”¹² The *New York Times* wrote: “The summit meeting was originally planned months ago, before the turmoil in financial markets began in September, with the vague goals of building good will and establishing political dialogue.”¹³

Even before the 1997 regional crisis, important processes were already in place: “The seed of Northeast Asian regionalism was laid in 1993 and 1994, prior to the economic crisis in 1997, when the ASEAN countries (at that time only six) invited South Korea, Japan and China to join them in broader discussions” (Choi, YJ 2008:48-49). “There was no specific agenda for those meetings. Soon enough, this process attracted the involvement of heads of state” (Soesastro 2001:1).

“For historical reasons, China, Japan and South Korea have not had an easy time cooperating with each other. But ASEAN was hit hard by the financial crisis of 1997 and moved closer to these three countries on the pretext of receiving aid”.¹⁴ The 1997 Asian financial crisis urged the region to cooperate, with the call coming from ASEAN. The crisis highlighted a *relative* decline in ASEAN’s role (Calder and Ye 2010:186; emphasis added). Then, the global economic crisis in 2008 reestablished the ground for such cooperation, this time not just with ASEAN¹⁵.

East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), in particular, highlights the truth that ‘East Asian’ thinking was developed before the 1997 crisis hit; the crisis hit only against the background of existing regional processes and ideas. Only few accounts refer to ASEAN-Northeast Asia interaction prior to APT.¹⁶

Already in 1991, ASEAN made the decision to invite Korea as a “full dialogue partner,” and China as an observer (Ba 2009:197-198). These meetings were convened mainly in response to Mahathir’s proposal for EAEC, made in 1993 (Goh and Acharya 2007:2-3). Mahathir won Japanese, South Korean, and finally also Chinese support (Calder and Ye 2010:185). ASEAN foreign ministers endorsed this idea, and in 1994 three foreign ministers from Northeast Asia joined their Southeast Asian counterparts for the first meeting

¹² <http://www.tcs-asia.org/> .

¹³ Martin Fackler, “China, Japan and South Korea focus on economy at summit,” *New York Times*, 13 December, 2008.

¹⁴ Yoichi Iwamoto, “ASEAN seeks ways to retain regional initiative,” *Nikkei Weekly*, November 16, 2009 (accessed through *Factiva*, January 10, 2011).

¹⁵ My thanks to Professor Shaun Breslin for this observation.

¹⁶ See Chin Kin Wah (2009:24) for evolution from EAEC to APT.

in this setting, identical with APT membership (Yong Deng 1997:50; Ba 2009:198; Terada 2003:261-262).

While prior meetings are evidence of another explanation, they are not explanation in themselves.¹⁷ “But Mahathir’s proposal was also critically different because it was explicitly premised on the argument that ASEAN was no longer enough” (Ba 2009:145).¹⁸ “ASEAN is not big enough to carry clout. But if China, Korea, and Japan are with us, perhaps people would pay attention”.¹⁹ In this sense, the mid-1990s foreign ministers meetings spurred Asians-only thinking, before the Asian crisis reinforced the trend. In this way, EAEC is a bridge to the APT explanation.

APT as a Field for Trilateral Interaction

In essence, nobody really focused on the trilateral cooperation during the evolution of APT.²⁰ We, students of regional frameworks in East Asia – have good reasons to be taken by surprise more than anybody else by the emergence of TC. It is because the literature on ASEAN+3 – *the* framework from which the separate format of trilateral cooperation conspicuously emerged – has been pointing us in a different direction. It is at least puzzling that when one reads literature on APT from late 1990s/ 2000s, one could hardly deduce that Japan with Korea and China would *strengthen* cooperation! It is a useful exercise to go back to this literature with anticipation of some hints to Northeast Asian cooperation.

Support to the thesis that Japan, China and Korea show no common agenda in APT comes from the finding that Japan and China show little cooperation in their policies regarding ASEAN.²¹ It is reflected in the practicalities of APT meetings. When APT is held, ASEAN, Japan, Korea, and China each have their chairman. Only for finance, the three

¹⁷ I thank Professor Breslin for suggesting such a formulation.

¹⁸ It was Singapore to propose holding “more regular” meetings between Southeast and Northeast Asia (Ba 2009:198).

¹⁹ Abdul Jabar, a spokesman for the Malaysian Embassy in Washington, D.C., quoted in Ba (2009:145). Originally quoted in George White and Teresa Watanabe, “Asian Economic Unity?,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1991. There is an interesting parallel between this quote and the statement by the first secretary of the Korea-Japan-China cooperation, who said: “These are three already influential nations we are talking about. Can you imagine the extent of influence they will enjoy as one big group?” (Shin Bong-kil, quoted in *Korea Herald*, 13 June 2011).

²⁰ Thank you for this observation to Professor Shaun Breslin.

²¹ Interview, 2010, Japan. In this draft, I will refer to material from interviews as “interview, Japan, 2010” or “interview, Korea, 2011,” without referring to the specific interviewees (anonymity).

Northeast Asian members choose a common representative.²² APT has acted as a platform for competition rather than cooperation for the three Northeast Asian states.

Balancing initiative. The prevalent position on APT stresses Japan-China rivalry. Two features are common to this literature: 1) no room for Korean role, at times de facto leadership; and 2) a strong focus on FTAs as a predominant mode of regionalism. Two things combined, this approach centers on Japan-China 'rivalry' in concluding FTAs in the region; especially their attempts at outdoing each other in taking initiative. Balancing initiative has become a salient feature of regional trends: "Within APT, China is aggressively pushing a strong China–ASEAN axis, whereas Japan is seeking to *balance China's efforts* and step up its political and economic cooperative profile in the region" (Hund 2003:383; emphasis added).

"But the Realist-favored notion of balance of power can also be seen as having its basis in normative and social foundations, as evident in notions such as 'soft balancing' or 'institutional balancing'" (Acharya 2008:73). Soeya observes that "this competition between China and Japan is not of geopolitical nature but rather conceptual" (Soeya 2009:301). Power politics are played in institutions; it is "realist institutionalism" or institutional balancing.²³

By "balance of initiative" I mean a situation in East Asia where Japan and China compete by multiplying initiatives geared towards weaker partners. ASEAN most often acts as the weaker side. On rare occasions Korean position in the midst of this rivalry is acknowledged; unlike in the past, in present regional trends Korea is not the subject of Japan-China rivalry. Rather, as the third regional power, it also produces efforts to show initiative.

How does the balance-of-initiative proposition fits with the emergence of Northeast Asian initiative? Precisely, it is another attempt at generating initiative in the already "crowded market" for regional projects.²⁴ With Northeast Asian initiative in this way attributed to Japan, it is tempting to see it as an attempt to forestall a Chinese move in the style of a pre-emptive theory²⁵, or to set agendas where Japan retains competitive advantage. One would be hard-pressed to use balance of initiative to explain emergence of a cooperative framework featuring major regional rivals – importantly, featuring China. Yet, proponents of this interpretation *seamlessly* move from "tripartite intra-Northeast Asia divides" (Hund 2003:386) to origins of the Northeast Asian initiative. In the same article that ascribes to

²² Interview, 2010, Japan.

²³ Interview, 2010, Japan.

²⁴ This expression I owe to Professor Richard Higgott.

²⁵ I am thankful for such an apt label to Professor Takashi Terada.

Japan the role of “promoter of intra-Northeast Asian dialogue,” we read that “[c]learly, Japan is discouraging exclusively East Asian approaches” (Hund 2003:398, 394).

Sino-Japanese rivalry might bear fruit for region-building in the sense that it is reflected more in balancing initiative than balancing power. ‘Cooperation through competition’ results in multiplication of regional strategies on the part of both rivals. This view bridges the reality of Sino-Japanese rivalry with the parallel reality of building new cooperative forums (like the Northeast Asian one). In other words, rivals for regional influence end up in *the same* cooperative frameworks.

Overlapping initiatives bring puzzling consequences as NEA-3 springs up from “ASEAN Plus One” rivalries. Tendencies presented in the literature suggest robust development of ASEAN Plus One, in which each Northeast Asian state deals with ASEAN unilaterally, preferably outdoing its ‘competitors’ in promptness of ASEAN-aimed initiatives. In many ways, ASEAN Plus One(s) processes have eclipsed APT (Breslin 2010:724; also Ba 2006:163-164): “For fear of being overwhelmed by the ‘combined might’ of the Plus Three, they have undoubtedly found it advantageous for ASEAN to negotiate separately with China, Japan and South Korea” (Tay 2002, quoted in Webber 2010:323). A tripartite competition, where even Korea is pictured as one of “Japan’s rivals” (Terada 2010:87), does not make the task of explaining more *cooperation* easier. For example: “More countries are taking the initiative. China, Japan and South Korea, East Asia’s rival powers, will meet this year for a first 3-minus-ASEAN summit” (*The Economist*, 3 July 2008).

But *what* is the China-Japan “rivalry for regional hegemony” (as in Bae, GC 2003:89)? It is the simplest question that we need to answer. But the evidence of a struggle for “regional hegemony” between China and Japan is not compelling. First, it is not clearly understood what such a regional hegemony would be about. Second, at the regional level, one does not see signs of such a quest on either of the sides. Quoting China-ASEAN and a “reactionary” Japan-ASEAN FTAs is not evidence of any “quest,” but is rather based on an underlying flaw that ASEAN has been all that important. Pempel (2010a:217) writes: “ASEAN was able to take the lead in the APT largely by default.”

Field of communication. A contrasting line of analysis argues that East Asian cooperation stimulates a Northeast Asian one: “APT has contributed significantly to cooperation in East Asia *and* Northeast Asia” (Ye 2008:139; my emphasis). This literature takes a position that it is good for China, Japan and Korea to meet, as “[t]he East Asian cooperation process also helps to facilitate Northeast Asian cooperation” (Zhang, Y. 2005:74). Rather than rivalry, it tends to highlight that “APT remains an important mechanism for bringing regional elites together” (Breslin 2010:724). Here, APT is interpreted as a venue, a forum offering an opportunity for exchanges to those who otherwise would meet far less frequently, or not at all in a given configuration: “For the first time, China, Japan, and South

Korea are involved in a regional organization that allows for regular trilateral meetings” (Ye 2008:139). It also enabled them to develop intra-Northeast Asian channels of communication, notably in the form of personal networks among national leaders (Calder and Ye 2004:211-216). We can call this mode of cooperation a “regional dialogue” (Foot 1995:229).

Regional cooperation may involve the creation of formal institutions, but it can often be based on a much looser structure, involving patterns of regular meetings with some rules attached, together with mechanisms for preparation and follow-up. (Hurrell 1995:336)

APT has served as a moderately successful field of communication, but there are problems with this explanation. First, claims supporting it were largely made *before* the separation of Japan-Korea-China framework from the APT “umbrella”; thus, they did not have to face the research question of independent TC. Second, East and Northeast Asian trends have not always been compatible.

ASEAN/ Northeast Asia Divide

So far we have seen what APT has meant for interaction among the three. Both lines of analysis are correct; trilateral interaction has meant more competition and more communication. It is only lamentable that interaction between these two views is hardly considered; scholars generally choose one line of analysis – competition or communication/cooperation.

Now I shall treat Northeast Asia as one group within APT and analyze its position towards ASEAN.

Socialization of power by ASEAN. The research agenda of this literature revolves around “power of ASEAN” (see Eaton and Stubbs 2006) and the question: “Is ASEAN able to socialize the major powers in the region?” (Qin and Wei 2008:116). The source of the socialization hypothesis lies in the fact that Northeast Asian representatives were meeting on the ASEAN soil for more than ten years.

Its exponents note that the three countries launched “Trilateral Cooperation Vision 2020”²⁶, presumably following the example of “ASEAN Vision 2020” (Ong 2010). While the wording and the custom are deceptively similar, is it socialization - or rather copying of ready templates? It can be that NEA-3 at times behaves as if it had ‘learnt’ from ASEAN. When considered from a different perspective than constructivist, such evidence proves strategy rather than socialization. Jones and Smith (2007:182, 184) conclude that “norms are what strong states make of them,” as both Japan and China manipulate ASEAN’s norms to their own strategic advantage. Projecting power by either China or Japan would harm the

²⁶ FMPRC (2010), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t705962.htm>.

projector, making it more strategic for them to restrain; such behavior does not come from “acculturation” to ASEAN’s norms (Jones and Smith 2006:184). This simple argument against constructivism proves that other hypotheses must be tested before settling on a socialization account of the NEA-3 development. The evidence that constructivism interprets in one way can be also interpreted in another: “like dots that we can connect” to create one image or another (Katzenstein and Okawara 2001/02: 157).

This debate opens a broader question of whether smaller powers can socialize larger ones (Ba 2006:162). Even these accounts that are sympathetic to the socialization hypothesis, like Ba (2006) who discusses the ASEAN-China case of social learning, conclude that power differentials put limits to mutual socialization. While ASEAN was fairly successful in drawing China into cooperative arrangements, China was less proficient in convincing the weaker side of its benign intentions – especially what regards the long term (Ba 2006:170-171). By extension, this argument helps us understand why the three East Asian powers have become more efficient in establishing common ground; while Korea is still highly asymmetrical in power to China or Japan, they are the three most powerful states (in economic terms) in East Asia.

The fact that ultimately they decided to ‘escape’, even as they still hold occasional meetings on the fringes of East Asian groupings, is a significant input to the debate on whether ASEAN can “socialize” Northeast Asia – especially that APT was meant to revitalize ASEAN and reinforce its role in the broader region (Jones and Smith 2007:163-164). The actual development is headed in the opposite direction, with NEA-3 on the way to eclipse APT in global and regional significance (Weatherbee 2009).²⁷

Putative building of regional identity has shifted research agenda to ASEAN-centered cooperative processes, which gradually began to involve the core Asian powers. ASEAN approach can be credited for bringing attention to indigenous processes spreading through the region. Yet, in explaining the trilateral case of cooperation, this approach generates more questions than it can ever answer. “Why have the three states *separated* themselves from APT?” is the most important of them.

Dominance of “The Three” over ASEAN. Essentially weaker, ASEAN has good reasons to fear dominance by the three. Singapore’s Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew pointed out that the grouping can become “Three Plus ASEAN” (quoted in Yoshimatsu 2004:13). Contrary to Eaton and Stubbs (2006:141), not all scholars agree that ASEAN controls the APT agenda: “While the process has been and is essentially driven by ASEAN, the agenda

²⁷ Tang (2008:143, ft. 7) draws attention to the problem where citing one another’s work serves as ‘evidence’ not supported by collection of original data. A methodological argument against socialisation accounts involving ASEAN is that they favour “thick description” over hypothesis testing (Jones and Smith 2007:183).

setting was not controlled by ASEAN'; Korean and Chinese initiatives in 1998 (East Asia Vision Group) and 2000, respectively, prove it (Soesastro 2001:1). Despite the name and annual venues, the APT process has been essentially in control of the more powerful players. More simply, "[m]any Southeast Asian political authorities like to say that ASEAN economic integration is the key to region-wide integration, but this does not make sense" (Frost 2008: 207).

Contrary to what is generally believed, Jones and Smith (2007: 184) argue that the so-called "ASEAN norms" according to which APT is organized, facilitate – paradoxically – "the transformation of weaker states by stronger ones." By far the most ardent critique of ASEAN - and ASEAN scholarship in particular - that I have encountered, positions defended in their article are not contradictory to the reality of ASEAN/ Northeast Asia divergence that emerged later. This suggests that ASEAN is not entirely happy with the development in Northeast Asia, a notion reinforced by the following: "ASEAN countries had a mixed reaction to this new trilateral cooperation – on the one hand, they welcomed progress on expanding the CMI and better relations among their Northeast Asian neighbors; yet they quietly expressed anxious concern about being left out and potentially marginalized in discussions on regionalism among the three powers" (Searight 2010:3).

ASEAN/ Northeast Asia clash of interest. The presumed objective of APT according to Thailand is "narrowing the development gap within ASEAN and between ASEAN and East Asia" (Nabers 2003:127) - where 'East Asia' means the three Northeast Asian members of APT. ASEAN presumably wanted to "exploit" APT for obtaining economic and technical assistance from the three (Yoshimatsu 2004:13). This might not be the primary reason for which Japan, China or Korea got involved in APT. It leads us to the clash of interest hypothesis.

The original idea behind the EAS was to transform the APT into a more coherent and developed regional framework in which any APT member could host a summit, thus embodying a more holistic regional concept by conferring China, Japan and South Korea with a greater sense of ownership over the East Asia regional community building process. (Dent 2008:19)

Expansion of the regional process into wider East Asia via the East Asia Summit (EAS) does not change the fact that ASEAN acts as the "gatekeeper," deciding whom to invite. China, Japan and Korea accepted criteria set by ASEAN (Qin and Wei 2008:134).

What we need to keep in mind is that APT process has not been dismantled, and new Northeast Asia-only cooperation functions in parallel to APT (Zhang, Y. 2005:74). However, holding the dependent summit, "minisummits" (Pempel 2010a), is decided on a case-by-case basis; if the two happen to coincide closely in time, then the dependent summit is likely to be

cancelled.²⁸ Additionally, ASEAN+1+1+1 formula has not been dismantled either. Evidently in the face of “loose regionalism of the APT” (Weatherbee 2009), the three wanted to pursue closer cooperation. Japan, Korea and China in the first place joined ASEAN in the APT process because it was to benefit them: “For ASEAN+3 will be good for ASEAN as well as for its Northeast Asian partners – that is why they joined forces” (Alatas 2001).

ASEAN Plus Three has made advances in financial cooperation. The Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) of swap agreements was ‘multilateralised’ in 2010, it has become a binding arrangements for all its members. In 2011, ASEAN Plus Three Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO) was set up in Singapore. The director comes from China. The biggest beneficiaries are the poorer members of ASEAN, whose borrowing rights are their contribution multiplied by 5 (for richer ASEAN states it is 2.5; for South Korea 1). For China and Japan, their rights are slashed by half – they can draw only ½ of what they each contributed.²⁹ It is hard not to admit that China and Japan are benefactors of the scheme. Yet, how much self interest is there? When the rest of Asia sinks economically, the two suffer too.

Inefficiency of ASEAN. Another hypothesis within the spectrum of ASEAN/ Northeast Asia divide points to the inefficiency of APT in delivering results – or making progress. “Because East Asians value consultation, consensus by unanimity, and comfort level, many of the ASEAN and APT mechanisms are not highly effective” (Qin and Wei 2008: 121). In December 2008, internal problems in Thailand were responsible for postponement of the APT summit (Weatherbee 2009; Chin Kin Wah 2009:33). It is when the inaugural (independent) trilateral summit took place. Pempel (2010b:18) adds up to the argument that the three were “frustrated with the slowness of ASEAN and the APT.” As noted in Yoshimatsu (2004:13), NEA states prefer formal agreements. ASEAN is also seen as mistaken in interpreting its role as indispensable for Northeast Asian cooperation: “There had been an ASEAN assumption that the political differences among its East Asian partners were so deep that they could not be overcome in a cooperative arrangement without the neutral playing field of ASEAN” (Weatherbee 2009).

The ‘diplomatic glue’ provided by ASEAN (Alatas 2001) is not as powerful as it was believed to be (compare):

[T]he ASEAN+3 should, at least during the initial phase, continue to be “ASEAN driven”. This should not be seen as an ambition to assume leadership in the forum but as an *inevitable consequence* of the fact that the bilateral relationship between China and Japan (...) leaves us *with no better option*. (Alatas 2001; emphases added)

²⁸ Interview, Japan, 2010.

²⁹ See “A rather flimsy firewall”, *Economist*, April 7, 2012.

The view that only ASEAN can play this role, with Japan-China animosity leaving no room for a dose of ASEAN-free cooperation, has proven short-sighted. This would in turn suggest that the role of ASEAN has been taken over by Korea: “[T]he regional core triangle will be defined by serious rivalry, but that does not mean the third actor cannot try to soften it and find advantage in cooperation” (Rozman 2007:202). At the very least Korea has acted as a “meetinghouse of cooperation” (Armstrong, Rozman, Kim, and Kotkin 2006:145).

The “inefficiency of ASEAN” approach prescribes a new institution each time a new challenge surprises the existing ones, but it does not tell us why existing institutions have not adapted. A new powerful alternative is competition among institutions. Pempel (2010a) refers to it as “institutional darwinism”; Goh and Acharya (2007: 7) note it as “institution-racing.”

Security thesis. Following Hanamaka (2008), we could try to see whether varying preferences for membership depending on issues of cooperation are applicable to the case of APT/ NEA-3. If NEA-3 operates within different issue areas than APT, it could explain why a new framework was necessary. This is, however, contentious.

APT’s scope of activities is interpreted in many ways. Pempel (2010a:229) notes that NEA-3 is prepared to deal with *any* issue of interest or concern, while APT is financial in scope. Thus, he names NEA-3 as one of the few East Asian arrangements that combine economics and security on its agenda. Developments in October 2010 seem to confirm this: “President Lee and Prime Ministers Naoto Kan of Japan and Wen Jiabao of China discussed pending issues such as North Korean nuclear ambitions and currency conversion rates”.³⁰ However, according to Ye (2008:139), APT does have a broad issue agenda, “covering economic, social, diplomatic, and security areas.” Also Katsumata (2009:12) notes that “[t]he APT (...) is more than a framework for economic cooperation. Since its 1999 meeting, it has to a certain extent also served as an arena for security dialogue.”³¹ Yet, unpreparedness of APT to tackle the security agenda could be important for the emergence of NEA-3, especially relevant for Korea. Breslin (2010:724) contends that APT provides a collaborative forum for a “range of issues such as transnational crime, social welfare and development” – but it does not look like a hard security agenda.

A right path to trace divergence between ASEAN and Northeast Asia might be then to follow the security path: “For some time to come, it would not be realistic for the forum [APT] to venture into cooperation on political and security issues in view of the substantive divergences of policy on these issues among the East and Southeast Asian countries”

³⁰ Jun-kyung Oh, “Lee wraps up Vietnam trip for EAS, ASEAN,” *Korea.net*, <http://www.korea.net/detail.do?guid=51019> (accessed 10 December 2010).

³¹ Officially, “security issues like the nuclear safety” began to be discussed in 2002: http://www.tcs-asia.org/data/view.php?cat1=1&cat2=&tabs=&sT=&sF=&page=1&start_page=0&Idx=14.

(Alatas 2001). Also Chu (2007:170) ponders the question of NEA-3 as that of a security institution. Areas of most advanced cooperation in NEA-3 have been: investment, trade, environment³² – surely not security.

Emerging evidence seems to support the “security thesis.” Yet, its underlying premise—Northeast Asia’s common security concerns as opposed to Southeast Asia—misses to answer one important point. Is there something “new” in the circumstance that the North Korean problem concerns Northeast Asia more than Southeast Asia? The *change* in favor of the trilateral cooperation occurred in 2008; has there been any change in the security environment at that point? The security thesis seems to be more about a general situation in which Northeast Asia has common security concerns, unshared with ASEAN. Then, if the security thesis is to hold, it needs to show at least that a change over time occurred - either in the security environment, or in policymakers thinking on it. Otherwise, the claim sounds more like an afterthought: “Northeast Asian states have common security concerns, unshared with Southeast Asia, and *that is why* a trilateral summit emerged.” When put into a causal statement, its incompleteness is revealed. It does not explain why this security issue has not led to the trilateral cooperation earlier.

Korea as an Actor Underrepresented in Research

Korea’s active posture in APT, coupled with its interest in focusing cooperation on the Northeast Asian core, both make of Korea an active promoter of NEA-3. Korea has maintained an active participation in both APT and EAS, although neither of them responded directly to Korean concerns (Frost 2008:122). Presumably, already President Kim Dae-jung wanted to institutionalize the trilateral summit, but the conditions were not ripe for it (Lee and Moon 2008:44). Therefore, he concentrated his diplomatic effort on APT instead, in 1998 proposing an East Asia Vision Group (Soesastro 2001:1). Although the ‘leadership of East Asian regionalism is ascribed to ASEAN, the agenda-setting at some point at least was dominated by Korea.

It was Korea to propose launching of the TCCS (Trilateral Cooperation Cyber Secretariat), and a (physical) secretariat opened in 2011 was promised – unsurprisingly – to Korea.³³ In fact, the secretariat is located in Korea because President Lee proposed it; Korea drafted the treaty, and it will “organize and choose” location.³⁴ Contrariwise, “[t]he coordinating body for APT affairs has remained a unit within the ASEAN Secretariat, roughly at a foreign ministry desk level, till today” (Qin and Wei 2008:121). Officially, APT falls into

³² Interview, 2010, Japan.

³³ Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (2012): <http://www.tcs-asia.org/>.

³⁴ Interview, 2010, Japan.

the category of ASEAN's "external relations."³⁵ APT has made little progress to become a "codified institution" (Tang 2005:69). Arranging a secretariat for APT would be a problem, since the location could easily become "a fresh point of contention" (Bae 2005:89). Malaysia was willing to host the secretariat; Singapore and Indonesia preferred to keep it within the ASEAN secretariat, in Jakarta (Bae 2005:99). Korea was "informally" considering to host the secretariat, too (Bae 2005:99).

Korea's significant role in realizing the trilateral agenda goes against little attention paid to Korea's preferences in the literature, favoring Japan and China. As predicted, in a way, in Calder and Ye (2004), we see now Korea acting as an "institution broker" (217). This is more than a passive bridging of Japan's and China's differences; it is instead a responsive posture toward a new institutional opportunity. Even if the secretariat in Seoul provides bureaucratic support rather than generating a real momentum for the trilateral cooperation, it is still a development significant enough to be called a breakthrough, and a challenge to the scholarship that sidelines Korea.

Accommodating Contradictory Dynamics

Several features of East Asian regional interactions, as literature chooses to present them, stand in tension with the emergence of NEA-3. Bilateral ties among the three do not fit comfortably with the emergence of TC.

Explanations based on bilateral improvements, consciously or not, put Japan at the center of the analysis. It is Japan that has strained relations with both neighbors. For this reason, the bilateral argument is much more about Japan-China and Japan-Korea pairs, rather than the Korea-China side of the triangle. This line of reasoning points to Japan-Korea and Japan-China bilateral improvements to explain the necessary conditions for the emergence of the separate trilateral framework. Even those who want to focus on bilateral ties, however, have utilized 'hand-shaking' photos from trilateral summits to illustrate their logic (Okonogi 2010 on Japan-Korea ties, Fujiwara 2009 on Japan-China ties). Reasoning implying that Sino-Japanese (or any) bilateral improvement, at any point in time, was the cause of *trilateral* cooperation is not complete. Such argumentation remains silent on the argument that a bilateral improvement could be at best permissive.

Trilateral Logic

³⁵ (<http://www.aseansec.org/4918.htm>). See the category "external relations."

Trilateral idea might attract many people; it is in this sense a “political constellation.”³⁶ The following quotation proves that the presence of a third country covers the bilateral conflicts with a cooperative varnish:

Since the Senkaku Islands ship collision incident, media sensationalism has raged, and Japan-China relations have been greatly shaken. In the middle of this upheaval, which involved the cancellation of various Japan-China related events, I went to Beijing on September 26 to participate in the Japan-China-Korea Symposium hosted by the Chinese East Asia Forum. (Amako 2010)

From security to economics (finance and trade), this region has been labeled as a bastion of bilateralism. To a major extent, “countries of the region are all linked together, but the processes are bilateral” (Breslin 2010:724).

Our case, however, proves that trilateral relations can take a more promising course than a collection of regional ties. So far we have observed that the bilateral and the trilateral interaction seem to be governed by divergent dynamics. It is indeed a puzzle, but only insofar as we treat state interactions as belonging to one unitary sphere. Therefore, after Korea’s preferences and Northeast Asian security, what we should pay more attention to is the issue of separation; at its most modest, it is the separation of economics from security. The literature focusing on bilateral relationships ponders scenarios that have not materialized. It follows that a trilateral cooperation does not require a ‘spine’ of a strong bilateral agreement. What we can learn from this exercise is that regional trends, as depicted in literature on East Asian regionalism, are ambiguous in terms of explaining our case.

On the Quest for Real Answers

In a world of over-information, contradiction and extreme uncertainty, there’s something incredibly compelling about having a single-word answer to a question that, at best, has a definitively uncertain answer.³⁷

In our quest for true answers, we have started from the observation that in Asian regionalism, analytical frameworks are not constructed flexibly enough to welcome new developments. Such a development is the trilateral framework for cooperation among Japan, Korea and China. Statements such as “APT is the most important” do theory a disservice! They do not help us know what will happen, and when it’s coming, we will not see it. Analytically blinded, we will strive instead to reinforce the “truth” that we have once discovered.

Certainly, states in their actions are not obliged by holding APT the most important. “But even as governments and their representatives meet and learn to cooperate, the very process of interaction continues to reshape their agendas...” (Pempel 2005:265). Therefore,

³⁶ Interview, 2010, Japan.

³⁷ Ben Pentreath, an architect, in *Financial Times – How to Spend It*, November 5, 2011, p. 13.

APT mattered. The timing, however, matters too, and we must be prepared to look in new directions. At the moment when it was said that APT looked the most promising, we should already be on a quest for new directions in Asian institutions. Then we can be more fine-tuned to using any data—very little data, only indicative data—to build future scenarios – and subsequently test them. As David Tuckett, psychoanalyst at University College London, asked: “can we identify narratives when they are not yet at the surface? Can we learn about how they come and go?”³⁸, we need to ask ourselves too. So engrossed in encapsulating the present, we have not captured the future. Perhaps interactions within the “+3” countries were not at all studied in the scholarship on APT, known as “the most important framework” is East Asia.

To put it simply, if we have already decided that APT is the most important, our whole knowledge will collapse by allowing in the TC—a welcome new development on the Asian soil, but a ‘crack’ in APT. We may want instead to quickly switch our “anticipatory gaze” in the new direction.³⁹ To assist us in this aim, adding up “small” pieces of truth that we have encountered along the way might prove helpful; if we link everything back to theory—even if only the theory of Asian regionalism—conclusions from studying one institution will add up to studying the next.⁴⁰ Practically, this may translate into something as simple as building testable hypotheses.⁴¹ The benefit of this is as follows: it will allow us to keep the most ‘expensive’ core of the analytical structure we have erected, and carefully rebuild the less ‘expensive’ rest, step by step. The assumption is that for IR, the most durable part, but also the most costly to construct, is theory. The whole structure of our conclusions on what Asian regionalism is, and where it is going, must be more flexible, taking example from the new San Francisco bridge that sways when the earth trembles.⁴² Then every shake to our established knowledge – every new challenge – will only make us, the discipline, stronger. In this light, we *can* have a theory of Asian regionalism. Rather than complaining what such a theory will not have, we shall consider what it would tell us; at least, it could tell us more about the development and the future of Asian institutions.

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³⁸ Sam Knight, “School for Quants,” *FT Weekend Magazine*, March 3-4, 2012.

³⁹ Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, “Why Bilinguals Are Smarter,” *International Herald Tribune*, March 20, 2012.

⁴⁰ We make this argument in more theoretical terms with Yong-Soo Eun in: Pieczara and Eun (2011, manuscript).

⁴¹ I owe this suggestion to Professor T.J. Pempel.

⁴² Henry Fountain, “A Bridge Built to Sway When the Earth Shakes,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2012.

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