Engagement or Entrapment? Scholarship and Policymaking on Asian Regionalism

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While an interactive relationship between scholars and policymakers is generally regarded as mutually beneficial, there is also the risk of 'entrapment.' The latter occurs when scholars, once having proven their usefulness to policymakers and thereby earned their trust, become unwilling to offer dissenting opinions for the fear of risking their access and privileges. Using Asian regionalism as an example, this article argues that the development of regional institutions in Asia has benefitted from the ideas and input of the two main channels of such scholar-official interaction: epistemic communities and track two dialogues, especially during the formative stages of Asian regionalism (both economic and security). But after gaining access, scholars engaged with officialdom in developing regional institutions have found it difficult to dissent from the official line, and in challenging the shortcomings and failures of Asian regional institutions. In Asia, the danger of entrapment has been strong in authoritarian countries. In general, participation by Asian scholars in the policymaking process has suffered from the inability of scholars and think-tankers (especially the latter) to rise above the national interest and question the official position of their own governments, the ubiquitous presence and dominance of government-linked scholars or retired government officials in track two dialogues, the exclusion of social movements form many such dialogues, the presence and influence of non-specialists (in issue areas) in setting their agenda and outcome, and generational gatekeeping (failure to bring in new faces). As a result, the development of a genuine transnational regionalism has been stunted.

In this essay, I explore the linkages between scholarship and policy in the evolution of Asian regional institutions (here I include Southeast Asian, Asia-Pacific as well as East Asian institutions). I argue that while one can point to mutual learning and benefit between scholars and policymakers in the building of Asian regional institutions, the process has also created the risk of what I would call *entrapment*. Entrapment occurs when scholars, after having offered consequential intellectual input at an early stage of policymaking (for example institution-building), remain beholden to the choices made by officials and thereby unwilling or incapable of challenging officially sanctioned pathways and approaches for the fear of losing their access and influence. Although reflecting an Asian experience, the danger of entrapment is present universally where scholars and policymakers interact in a close and sustained manner.

International relations theory identifies two main frameworks through which the world of scholars intersects with the world of policy. The first is "epistemic communities," "a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowl-

edge within that domain or issue-area" (Haas 1992:3). The professionals may be from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds but are bound by shared normative and causal beliefs, shared notions of validating knowledge claims, and "a common policy enterprise—that is, a set of common practices associated with a set of problems to which their professional competence is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced as a consequence" (Haas 1992:3).

The other is "track-two dialogue" Kaye (2007:8) defines track two as "unofficial policy dialogues, focused on problem solving, in which the participants have some form of access to official policymaking circles." A key feature of the track two is the participation of government officials in a private capacity, a principle that supposedly allows for free discussion and flexibility (Wanandi 1995). Although there is often a thin line separating track two and what has been called "track one and half," the latter are usually meetings organized directly by governments with the participation of academics and outside experts, where track two is organized by a nongovernment institution (for example think tanks) with official or private support where government representatives participate in their private capacity.

Although often used interchangeably, there are important differences between the two. Track-two participants are not always endowed with authoritative knowledge, which is characteristic of epistemic communities. Track two attracts a range of participants, including subject experts from academia, but they may also involve people with a great deal of practical experience, as well as media, businesspeople, etc. Track two is thus a form of semiofficial interaction; the degree of official involvement and influence here is far greater here than in epistemic communities. It is distinct from "track three," or strictly nonofficial dialogues led by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements which challenge state dominance and present alternative policy perspectives and approaches. In this essay, I am concerned primarily with track-two dialogues.

What explains the ability of epistemic communities and track-two groupings to impact on policy? A crucial factor is their capacity to address the policymakers' knowledge needs. Policymakers need reliable information to assess the possible outcomes of different courses of action and to avoid uncertainty. "[P]oorly understood conditions may create enough turbulence that established operating procedures may break down, making institutions unworkable" (Haas 1992:14). I identify four ways in which transnational epistemic communities and track-two forums may impact on policy. The first is through policy *innovation* or generation of new policy ideas. Stone (1997:3) points to the role of think tanks in generating "new cognitive structures or causal frames of reference" for policy. A second role is the "*constitutive localization*" (Acharya 2009a): a process whereby local actors proactively build congruence between global norms and preexisting local ideas and practices. As part of this, they may serve as "*filtering*" mechanisms for approaches to cooperation developed in other parts of the world so as to make them locally applicable (Acharya 1998:76; Kaye 2007:8–9). Third, epistemic communities and track-two dialogues also serve as platforms for *validation* and *legitimization* of the ideas and policies of governments. Fourth, they can generate *dissent*; which while not be to the liking of policymakers, alerts them to alternative ideas and approaches out there in terms of which their own preferences will be benchmarked and assessed.

How Ideas Shape Reality

Both the institutions of Asian regionalism and the scholarly study of them are relatively new phenomena. The first viable regional institution (outside of externally funded regional development bodies such as the Colombo Plan, the Economic and Social Commission for the Asia and the Pacific and Asian Devel-

opment Bank), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), was formed in 1967. But it was only in the post-Cold War era that regional institution-building in Asia took off.

Yet, Asian regionalism has provided a fertile ground for interaction between scholars and policymakers in a process characterized by substantial mutual learning and progress. Institution-building has spurred, both proactively and reactively, considerable research and dialogue activity. Track-two dialogues on regional security issues, broadly defined, have especially proliferated, from less than 10 per year in 1989 to over 250 in 2008 (Ball, Anthony, and Taylor 2006:186; Japan Center for International Exchange 2009).

A group of Japanese and Australian scholars, from universities and think tanks, played an instrumental role in shaping the "Pacific community idea." Professors, think tanks and governments interacted closely, drawing ideas and inspirations from each other, with their representatives from Japan and Australia acting as vanguards, trying out different approaches and pathways to economic cooperation until a 1980 seminar paved the way for the creation of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC). These interactions identified and promoted institutional frameworks to promote free trade and "open regionalism" in the Pacific. From PECC, a tripartite body of scholars, businessmen, and officials, the momentum derived to establish the region's first intergovernmental body for economic cooperation, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989.

While the engagement of scholars and think tanks in economic institutions in Asia conforms more to the epistemic community model, in political-security institutions, the track-two framework applies. The ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), representing think tanks and research institutes from member countries (initially from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Singapore, but later expanding into all 10 ASEAN members), has sought to "encourage cooperation and coordination of activities among policy-oriented ASEAN scholars and analysts, and to promote policy-oriented studies of, and exchanges of information and viewpoints on, various strategic and international issues affecting Southeast Asia's and ASEAN's peace, security and well-being" (ASEAN-ISIS, 1991:1). This is typical of many other think tank groupings and dialogues in the region. ASEAN-ISIS provided a major impetus to multilateral security in the Asia Pacific, especially in "localizing" the idea of "common and cooperative security" originally developed in Europe (ASEAN-ISIS 1991; ASEAN-ISIS 1993; Acharya 2009a). These were crucial for the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), founded in June 1993, provides "more regularized, focused and inclusive" nongovernmental process on Asia Pacific security issues (Evans 1994:314). CSCAP holds regular meetings of its various working groups, as well as twice-a-year general meetings, publishing an annual security outlook, and preparing memorandums on various security issues in the region. Although not hugely influential in the policymaking world, it has generated some important ideas in the areas of confidence-building measures, maritime security, and transnational crime. For example, the official definition of "preventive diplomacy" adopted by the ARF was hammered out in its initial form at a CSCAP retreat in Thailand in 1999 (Acharya 2009b:235–236).

One major example of a theory-influenced policy initiative is the proposal for an ASEAN Security Community (ASC—subsequently renamed as ASEAN Political-Security Community"). The original concept paper for the ASC, drafted by the Department of Foreign Affairs (2003), Indonesia, was inspired by Karl Deutsch's idea of security community, reflecting the input of Indonesian academics such as Dr. Rizal Sukma (a member of the Jakarta-based think tank, Centre for Strategic and International Studies). It was also based on academic literature on the security community concept (Acharya 2001, 2009b:279–280).

Transnational social movements which usually champion human rights or social issues are yet to feature prominently in Asian institution-building, which remain state-centric and strongly wedded to national sovereignty. But such movements exist. Examples include the Asia-Pacific Coalition for East Timor (APCET) which campaigned against human rights violations and for the independence for East Timor when it was under Indonesian rule. The Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma) is a network of activists, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), academics and politicians that has championed human rights and democracy in Burma and challenged ASEAN's policy of 'constructive engagement.' Bangkok-based Forum-Asia, one of the most prominent CSO in Southeast Asia, champions the human security concept as an alternative to the national security framework (Forum Asia 1997). The Focus on the Global South, also based in Bangkok, campaigns against globalization and the exploitation of labor and environment by multinationals. These groups challenge state dominance and present alternative approaches to regional issues (Acharya 2003). As such, they have had a limited impact on a largely government-dominated Asian regionalism.

But Asia is witnessing a limited form of "participatory regionalism," involving contacts between government, track-two bodies, and civil society organizations (Acharya 2003). The ASEAN People's Assembly (APA), sponsored by ASEAN-ISIS, focuses on social justice, human rights and nontraditional security issues and seeks to make ASEAN more "people-centric." Another group, the Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA), was consulted in the process of making the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights (Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy, 2008).

Conformity versus Dissent

The autonomy of scholars engaged in policy discourse depends on the political system of a country. It is largely in Asia's mature democratic societies—especially Japan and India, and increasingly in countries that have made the transition from authoritarian rule, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, that one finds genuine diversity and autonomy. Asian governments may limit the freedom of think tanks and academic institutions by controlling their management (for example assigning retired civil servants to head think tanks and research centers), funding source, and faculty/staff hiring and retaining practices (using contract systems and denying tenure). In such cases, the role scholars and policy intellectuals is limited largely to providing background information to policymakers, rather than debating and advocating specific policy positions, or publicly contesting government positions. Track-two dialogues in Asia, dependent as they are "upon the consent, endorsement and commitment, often including financial commitment, of governments," (Harris 1994:390) suffer from a failure of their participants to rise above national sentiments and positions (Ball et al. 2006). Consequently, regional think tanks are constrained in exercising leadership and initiative. Other factors limiting the autonomy of think tanks is the exclusion of civil society, failure to draw in new blood, and limited involvement of people with epistemic background as opposed to retired civil servants and anyone enjoying government patronage.

Policy Discourse and Academic Progress

Has involvement in policy dialogues and advocacy compromised academic scholarship on Asian regionalism? Most academics are willing or keen participants in track-two dialogues, and some actively seek influence and government jobs through them. These scholars serve more as filtering and legitimizing platforms

for their governments than as dissenters. But the emergence of regional institutions has also led to a growing interest in the academic study of Asian regionalism across Asian universities and research centers independent of the involvement of their scholars in track-two activity. Of late, interest in the theoretical analysis of the international relations of the region, which had remained largely descriptive, is growing. This theoretical turn is led primarily by scholars who focus on regional institutions, where constructivism has been a major influence. Hence, there is a discernable dichotomy in the literature on Asian regionalism between writings that are mainly intended for circulation through track-two dialogues and institutions—such as the pamphlets and policy reports issued by ASEAN-ISIS and CSCAP, and edited volumes resulting from the annual Asia-Pacific Roundtable organized in Malaysia under the auspices of ASEAN-ISIS, and CSCAP's *Regional Security Outlook*)—and those which are intended for academic journals (such as *International Relations of the Asia Pacific, Asian Survey, Pacific Review,* and *International Organization*).

Engagement without Entrapment

In his famous distinction between "problem solving" and "critical" theory, Cox argues that

> Theory can serve two distinct purposes…One is…to be a guide to help solve the problems posed within the terms of a particular perspective which was the point of departure. The other is…to open up the possibility of choosing a different valid perspective…of creating an alternative world (Cox 1996, 88).

Walt (1998:29) argues that "Even policymakers who are contemptuous of "theory" must rely on their own (often unstated) ideas about how the world works to decide what to do." Theory thus potentially offers alternative prisms for policy analysis and action. Echoing Cox, Evans argues that "we need to think of theory in two ways—as international relations academics conceive it and as a practical device for framing foreign policy" (Evans 2010:1) Yet international relations theory is often seen as an idle and irrelevant academic pursuit, especially in government-controlled think tanks in Asia (despite the example of ASEAN Security Community mentioned earlier). Moreover, theory as a framework of action—as evident from track two—is distinctly lacking in the Coxian critical perspective. Close association with officialdom limits the ability of track-two scholars to shape fundamental reforms and transformation in the region, especially by overcoming the trap of nationalism, state sovereignty, and nonintervention. Adding a "critical perspective" in the Coxian sense would require rising above national positions and perspectives in track-two dialogues and debates. It would also require the emergence of genuine epistemic communities in functional areas, organized around knowledge, rather than official connection, and greater sensitivity to dissent and alternative voices from social movements. It demands nurturing and co-opting new generations of scholars. Asia's track twos' diplomacy is notorious for generational gatekeeping, which has often contributed to their impotence and decline. There is also a need for scholarly associations of Asian academics who study regionalism which are independent of government sponsorship. What the region needs is a free flow of policy ideas and agenda-setting for truly transformative cooperation.

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