Whose Ideas Matter?: Agency and Power in Asian regionalism

Reviewed by Hal Hill

The author of this concise and extremely well-referenced study asks an important question: "Why do some emerging ideas and norms find acceptance ... while others do not?" The issue is examined with reference to "two puzzles" concerning Asian post-war institutional architecture: why there isn't a regional multilateral security organization and why Asia's regional institutions remain "soft." Amitav Acharya employs the concept of "constitutive localization" from international relations theory, referring broadly to the process by which international norms are adapted to suit local circumstances and actors.

The notion that Western style regional institutions would not work effectively in Asia is intuitively appealing. They need to take account of local identities, needs and capacities. As Mr. Acharya clearly shows, from the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in 1947 onward, Asian leaders have sought to establish their own version of cooperative relationships, independent of the colonial powers. Mr. Acharya is correct in his assertion that studies of Asian regionalism which fail to take account of the key actors and their interests offer little insight on the process and its outcomes.

There are numerous reasons why the Western international relations models and approaches have not been illuminating. Asia's early post-colonial leaders emphasized the importance of nonintervention in each other's affairs. Though committed to the United Nations and its philosophical underpinnings, they were hardly present at the 1945 drafting of the U.N. Charter. Besides West Asia and the Arab Middle East, the only Asian countries present were India, still a British colony at the time, and the Republic of China.

Great power rivalry during the rapidly escalating Cold War era further divided the region, and also enhanced the appeal of neutralism and non-intervention. Thus, for example, SEATO could never be an effective security agreement; though it attracted significant Asian membership, it was widely perceived as being an instrument of U.S. foreign policy.

If early Asian attempts at cooperation and U.S.-inspired initiatives were unsuccessful, what was the alternative by the late 1960s? Mr. Acharya takes us through the process of developing genuine Asian attempts at cooperation. Of these, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, formed in 1967, has been the most durable. Yet its central tenets—consensus-based decision-making, an aversion to legalization and the avoidance of any form of supranational bureaucratic structure—also explain its painstakingly slow progress. This so-called "Asean Way" may frustrate outsiders, but it is the key to understanding the organization's longevity.

Similarly, the process of broader Asia-Pacific cooperation, most especially centered on APEC, has been able to progress only as fast as all its member countries have permitted. It is an important achievement to have an annual summit of its leaders, but specific agreements have been thin on the ground. For example, the debate as to whether economic cooperation should take the form of a preferential, and hence discriminatory to nonmembers, agreement, or one emphasizing "open regionalism," has still not been settled even though the first APEC summit was held 20 years ago. Nor have the forums relating to defense and other matters proceeded very far. The attempt to create an Asian Monetary Fund in 1998 was still-born (though elements of it remain), while the initiative to provide emergency financial support during crises has not yet gained effective traction.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that there has been no progress. Mr. Acharya mentions a few examples of incremental movement: the growing frustration in Asean towards Burma; coordinated
responses to region-wide challenges such as the 2004 Tsunami and SARS; and the adoption in 2007 of an official Charter. Informal exchanges in business, education, the arts and much else are also progressing.

A former Indonesian foreign minister once remarked that the 700 or so Asean meetings each year are good for airlines and hotels. Who could disagree? There is a tendency for outsiders to dismiss these meetings simply as talk shows for underemployed bureaucrats. But there are no instant press-button solutions to building distinct regional identities and approaches among countries that were mostly at loggerheads less than two generation ago. Confidence building and trust are essential ingredients. It also matters that Indonesia, a dominant power in Southeast Asia, has been preoccupied with its domestic, economic and political challenges since 1998. Moreover, attempts at regional cooperation elsewhere in the developing world, notably in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, have not fared any better, and in most cases have lagged further behind.

Does it matter that regional initiatives are generally slow to develop and lack teeth? Providing that, first, the various forums contribute to greater regional harmony and understanding, second, that there is tangible evidence of some sort of progress, and third, governments get on with their main function, of reforming to provide better governance, then arguably the present arrangements are satisfactory. What is of concern, however, is the pace of policy reform almost everywhere has slowed over the past decade, and regional trade agreements have proliferated at the expense of the more important multilateral framework under the long-stalled Doha Round. It makes little sense for the region's leaders to be signing "free trade agreements," when they are not reforming at home and apparently have little intention to.

*Whose Ideas Matter* is a useful contribution to our understanding of the drivers of Asia-Pacific cooperation. It helps us appreciate why the institutional arrangements in Europe and North America have not been emulated in Asia. The volume is not, however, an easy read. The jargon may be the tools of trade of international relations specialists, but it will tend to deter the general reader.

We also don't get much practical guidance from the author as to how to move things forward more effectively. Take for example, the four big unresolved issues facing the world, at least in the view of this reviewer: the threat of nuclear proliferation, the need for coordinated action on climate change, the unfinished Doha Round and some sort of G20-based set of measures to prevent another financial crisis. Asia has a vital stake in all four, but Mr. Acharya's framework suggests that the region will not become a coordinating driver of change. In that case, it is surely the major challenge for Asian leadership. Photo ops, declarations, charters and summits will only go so far.

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