Ideas, identity, and institution-building: from the 'ASEAN way' to the 'Asia-Pacific way'?*

Amitav Acharya

Abstract This article examines the extent to which the development of multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific region may be viewed as an exercise in identity-building. It argues that institution-building in this region is more of a 'process-orientated' phenomenon, rather than simply being an outcome of structural changes in the international system (such as the decline of American hegemony). The process combines universal principles of multilateralism with some of the relatively distinct modes of socialization prevailing in the region. Crucial to the process have been the adaptation of four ideas: 'cooperative security', 'open regionalism', 'soft regionalism', and 'flexible consensus'. The construction of a regional identity, which may be termed the 'Asia-Pacific Way' has also been facilitated by the avoidance of institutional grand designs and the adoption of a consensual and cautious approach extrapolated from the 'ASEAN Way'. The final section of the article examines the limitations and dangers of the Asia-Pacific Way. It concludes with the assertion that while the Asia-Pacific Way is an overgeneralised, instrumental, and pragmatic approach to regional cooperation, and there remain significant barriers to the development of a collective regional identity that is constitutive of the interests of the actors, it has helped introduce the concept and practice of multilateralism into a previously sceptical region and might have 'bought' enough time and space for regional actors to adapt to the demands of multilateralism.

Keywords: ASEAN; ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation; multilateralism; institution-building; cooperative security; open regionalism; soft regionalism; consensus.

The author is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, York University, Toronto, Canada.

Address: Centre for International and Security Studies, York University, North York, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3.

© Routledge 1997
Introduction

The emergence of multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific region raises a question of considerable theoretical and policy relevance to students of international relations: is the process of institution-building in this region different from that in other parts of the world? This question assumes particular importance in view of the rejection by some Asian policymakers of a European-style multilateral institution, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), and more importantly, the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as a possible model for their region. Moreover, Southeast Asian leaders and intellectuals speak of an ‘ASEAN way’ of regional cooperation, which is being promoted by them as the organizing framework of multilateralism at the wider Asia-Pacific regional level. Against this backdrop, can one speak of an ‘Asia-Pacific way’ of institution-building? If so, what are its essential characteristics, strengths and limitations?

This paper is an attempt to explore these questions with particular reference to the two principal multilateral institutions in the region, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The analysis focuses on four key concepts underlying the process of multilateral institution-building in the Asia-Pacific region: ‘open regionalism’, ‘cooperative security’, ‘soft regionalism’, and ‘consensus’. At least the last two of these are integral features of the ‘ASEAN way’, and together with the rest, they underscore the supposedly distinctive nature of Asia-Pacific multilateral institution-building. A specific aim of the discussion that follows is to ascertain the extent to which the development of Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions is being influenced by the ‘ASEAN way’ of regional cooperation, and examine whether the resulting process, despite its alleged uniqueness, can reconcile the divergent interests and perspectives of regional actors.

In identifying and examining the key concepts that underpin the emergence and evolution of multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific region, the paper pursues a theoretical interest in the interplay of ideas, cultural norms, and identity-formation in international relations. This approach extends the search for alternatives to rationalist and materialist explanations of cooperation to the study of regionalism (Acharya 1996). The paper advances the theoretical argument that ideas and cultural norms provide a crucial inter-subjective framework for interactions and socialization leading to the creation and maintenance of multilateral institutions even in areas which previously had no experience of such institution-building. But the impact of ideas and norms, especially if they originate from outside a given regional socio-political context, depends to a great extent on the self-defined identity of the local actors. Although a great deal of recent literature has dealt with the role of ideas, identity and cultural norms in shaping state behaviour (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Katzenstein 1996;
Wendt 1994) it has not highlighted the substantial tensions that may exist between supposedly universal ideas and norms on the one hand and aspirations for regional cultural, managerial and ideational autonomy on the other. Unless resolved, this tension can stymie the process of institution-building. The latter can only be advanced through a process of adaptation and 'indigenization' of ideas and norms of multilateralism.

The experience of multilateral institution-building in the Asia-Pacific region provides a clear illustration of the tension between universal and 'imported' models of multilateralism and the desire of Asian actors for 'regional solutions to regional problems'. As a result, early proposals for multilateralism, such as the 'common security' model of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) ran into considerable opposition from China and the ASEAN states. But the problem of reconciling the universal and the local has become increasingly manageable as a result of the deliberate construction of an 'Asia-Pacific way' based on an adaptation of the institutional mechanisms and decision-making processes of ASEAN. While it has invited substantial skepticism, the 'Asia-Pacific way' may be seen as a practical way of reconciling the universal principles with regional socio-psychological mind-sets. In this process, it has led to the localization of universal principles of multilateralism as well as the adaptation of regional/sub-regional concepts and practices of cooperation to a wider international context involving a number of Western actors who are members of APEC and ARF. This has generated a process of socialization and learning that will advance the prospects for multilateralism in the region.

The origins of multilateralism: structure versus process

What explains the relatively late development of multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific region? Although the framework of international order established under American hegemony after the Second World War was more conducive to multilateralism than any previous system, the Asia-Pacific region, in which the US has been a key player at least since 1945, had not been hospitable to multilateral institutions. Some analysts have explained this puzzle in terms of structural power and leadership. For example, Donald Crone argues that the absence of multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific region during the early post-war period was due to America's 'extreme hegemony' (a structural condition) (Crone: 1993). Then, America’s Pacific allies were so weak in relation to US power that regional cooperation added little to US capabilities and hence made little sense. On the other hand, bilateralism provided a more flexible framework of cooperation offering the US greater leverage and control over its allies. Thus, the US settled for a network of bilateral alliances that formed the basis of a security architecture that continues to this day. If this view is accepted, then the subsequent decline of US hegemony may be said to have facilitated the
creation of multilateral institutions. The US now sees the possibility of deriving concrete gains from regional cooperation, while the other regional actors view such cooperation as a means of assuring the continued engagement of the US which remains vital to their economic and security interests and needs in the post-cold war period. A related perspective is that the decline of the structural power of the US has opened opportunities for other actors, such as ‘middle powers’ like Australia, Canada, Japan and ASEAN as a group, to provide initiatives and ideas (intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership) and thereby facilitate the creation of multilateral institutions. From this perspective, the emergence of multilateral fora such as the APEC and ARF can be explained as a byproduct of shifts in structural power and leadership.

But the absence hitherto of multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific region could have been despite, rather than due to the lack of, official American interest. Indeed, US policymakers at various points of time expressed great interest in promoting multilateral institutions in this region. For example, the Truman administration considered the idea of a Pacific collective security system (Toru 1977:330), while the Eisenhower administration set up the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The Johnson administration encouraged greater Asian regionalism, while the Nixon administration’s official regional security doctrine, the so-called ‘Nixon Doctrine’ implicitly backed collaborative efforts by its Asian friends that would have reduced their dependence on US military support. But none of these policy frameworks produced viable multilateral institutions either in the economic or security arena.

I argue that the reason for this might have to do less with the nature and extent of American hegemony than with the economic, political, cultural, and security conditions and dynamic prevailing at the regional/local level. Indeed, it is the region’s extreme diversity, rather than America’s extreme hegemony, which might have inhibited the emergence of multilateral institutions in the immediate post-war period. The Asia-Pacific nations are remarkably different in terms of their political systems, cultural heritage and historical experience. Their economies were characterized by different degrees of openness to the global capitalist economy, while their outlook on national economic development was informed by a wide range of political and ideological perspectives. In the security arena, during the cold war period, Northeast Asian states were involved in cold war geopolitics in a much more direct way than their Southeast Asian counterparts (the Vietnam War notwithstanding). The former were far more preoccupied with external threats to their national security. States in Southeast Asia, in contrast, remained under colonial rule for a longer period of time and after gaining independence, their primary concern was with internal threats to their security and stability. The aligned status of Northeast Asian states contrasted with the official non-alignment of many states of Southeast Asia.
Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the only multilateral institution to thrive during the cold war period was an inward-looking subregional organization established in 1967: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Located within a more geopolitically compact space and more homogenous in their political and security outlook, including their common fear of indigenous communist insurgencies, ASEAN members gained collective international prominence through their diplomatic efforts to oppose the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and seek a political solution to the conflict. By the same logic, the development of multilateralism covering the entire Asia-Pacific region had to await a number of developments that would create a more interdependent regional setting and convergent economic and strategic outlook among the regional actors.

In the economic sphere, these developments include the widespread acceptance within the region of the market economy and a dramatic rise in intra-regional trade and investment through private sector networks. In the security sphere, a shared sense of uncertainty about the regional security climate in the aftermath of the cold war and concerns regarding the changing balance of the major powers have served as a common motivating factor. These developments have had a moderating impact on the region's diversity and anarchy, and facilitated institution-building.

The demand for multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific region is fuelled by three motivating factors. The first is a desire to build upon, exploit and maximize the pay-offs of economic liberalism and interdependence. While this has been a prime catalyst behind APEC, it has also encouraged security multilateralism which clearly hopes to benefit from the supposed effects of interdependence in reducing the danger of war. Second, multilateralism is conceived as a problem-solving exercise aimed at preventing and containing the risk of regional disorder posed by an array of historic and emerging regional disputes and rivalries. Third, multilateralism is seen as an insurance policy to cushion the region against the current flux in the global economic and security climate. In the economic arena, Asia-Pacific nations shared serious doubts regarding the future of the world trading system, (now removed by the successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round, but which was a substantial factor behind the initial interest in APEC), and the consequent fears regarding the emergence of discriminating regional trade blocs in North America and Europe, and trade tensions between the US and Japan. This is paralleled in the security sphere by anxieties regarding the relationship among the major powers. As a region which locates four of the major powers of the post-cold war period, the Asia-Pacific is especially vulnerable to an unstable balance of power.

It is instructive to note that ASEAN's support for the founding of APEC was based on expectations, as Singapore's trade and industry minister then put it, that it will be 'an useful informal group for the purposes of the GATT Uruguay Round, of like-minded countries with a common interest in a successful outcome of the Round' (Lee 1990:9). APEC was also welcomed
for its potential to ‘serve as a means to help reduce trade and economic tensions’ within the region and ‘provide a forum in which we could consult each other’ (Taib 1990:4). Another potential contribution of APEC was seen to lie in countering some of the uncertainties in the regional investment climate caused by developments in Eastern Europe; ‘At a time when Eastern Europe was attracting more attention from the developed countries, APEC would provide an extra incentive for Japan and other major regional economies to strengthen their ties with ASEAN’ (ibid).

In the security arena, the anticipated benefits of multilateralism have been less specific and more long-term. Multilateralism has been viewed as a necessary framework to engage China and integrate it into a system of regional order so as to reduce the need for provocative strategies of ‘containment’. While China may reject unilateral American demands for geopolitical restraint, it may find the political costs of non-participation and non-compliance in a multilateral cooperative security regime developed under ASEAN auspices too high. Security multilateralism has also been seen as a useful device to ensure the continued engagement of the US in the region’s security affairs, which in turn makes an independent Japanese security role, feared by most of its neighbours, unnecessary. Multilateral dialogues and institutions are also deemed useful in removing suspicions, building mutual trust and facilitating peaceful approaches to regional conflicts.

Yet while power based, rationalist and materialist explanations such as declining hegemony and the economic and strategic challenges of the post-cold war era, are important to an understanding of the emergence of multilateral institutions, they do not by themselves explain why multilateralism has found such a wide constituency in the region today. To a large extent, multilateral institution-building in the Asia-Pacific region has been process-driven. By avoiding institutional grand designs demanding firm obligations and reciprocity and focusing instead on the development of a slow-moving consultative process based on existing regional norms and practices, regional actors have grown comfortable with the idea of multilateralism. Multilateral institution-building in the Asia-Pacific region is thus a sociological and intersubjective dynamic, rather than a legalistic and formalistic one. It is an attempt to contrive and construct a regional identity through the development of a long-term habit of consultations. Creating and sustaining ‘the process’ have been more important than the realization of specific or concrete goals such as an economic community or a security community (although this will be important in the long term).

In defining what constitutes the ‘process’ in Asia-Pacific multilateral institution-building, four principles deserve particular notice: ‘open regionalism’, ‘cooperative security’, ‘soft regionalism’, and ‘consensus’. Together, these are referred to variously as the ‘Asia-Pacific way’, ‘Asian way’ or ‘ASEAN way’ (in this article, I will use ‘Asia-Pacific way’). Not all of these principles are unique to the Asia-Pacific region, but taken together they give institution-building in the region a somewhat distinctive character.
‘Open regionalism’ and ‘cooperative security’

Multilateralism in its most basic sense involves norm-based or rule-governed behaviour. As Ruggie (1992:568) puts it, ‘At its core, multilateralism refers to coordinating relations among three or more states in accordance with certain principles’. Caporaso (1993:54–5) refers to ‘generalized principles of conduct’, i.e. ‘norms exhorting general if not universal modes of relating to other states’ as being an essential property of multilateralism. In the economic arena, the key principle of multi-lateralism is non-discrimination.¹ In the security field, multilateralism involves the creation of a non-exclusionary setting for order-maintenance, conflict-regulation and peace. Both in the economic and the security arena, the primary objective of multilateral interactions is to discourage participating actors from discriminating against each other, promote transparency and mutual reassurance, and resolve contentious issues peacefully and constructively.

The principles of non-discrimination and transparency are enshrined in both APEC and ARF. The professed goal of APEC is ‘open and free trade and investment’ in the region by the year 2010, with the developing member economies achieving this by 2020. While the ARF lacks a precise ‘road map’, it is guided by the general objective of establishing a ‘more predictable and constructive pattern of relations for the Asia-Pacific region’.² Non-discrimination is one of the central guiding principles of APEC. As noted in a report by the Pacific Business Forum (later renamed as the APEC Business Advisory Council), a private sector grouping under the aegis of APEC, ‘The benefits of APEC’s trade and investment liberalization and facilitation programmes should be enjoyed by all APEC member economies on a non-discriminatory basis’ (APEC 1995a:10). But APEC’s concept of ‘open regionalism’ goes beyond the traditional notion of free trade areas which espouse non-discrimination within a given regional grouping. The concept of ‘open regionalism’, as outlined in APEC’s Osaka Action Agenda of November 1995, also stipulates that ‘The outcome of trade and investment liberalization in the Asia-Pacific region will be the actual reduction of barriers not only among APEC economies but also between APEC and non-APEC economies’ (APEC 1995b:5, emphasis added). The very notion of open regionalism articulates the concerns of APEC members regarding any prospective breakdown of the liberal international trading order and the emergence of exclusionary regional trading blocs in Europe and North America. While such fears have not been confirmed,³ they did serve as a powerful catalyst for APEC’s formation in 1989 when the future of the Uruguay Round of GATT appeared highly uncertain.

If APEC’s proponents talk of ‘open regionalism’, regional security cooperation and dialogues in the Asia-Pacific region have revolved around the notion of ‘cooperative security’. The key aspect of cooperative security is inclusiveness, or a commitment that ‘to the extent possible, dialogue must
involve as many relevant principal actors ... if there is to be membership, then in principle the club must not impose criteria for participation or for the agenda other than the acknowledged relevance to the defined region' (Dewitt 1994). While inter-governmental multilateral institutions in the region are yet to be fully inclusive (the ARF, for example, does not include North Korea or Taiwan), this has been offset to some extent by Track II dialogues and activities which have developed a wider membership. (CSCAP, for example, is trying to secure the membership of both China and Taiwan, and North Korea is already a member, while India has been granted associate membership status.)

It should be noted that 'inclusiveness' has not been a feature of all international institutions that have been branded as 'multilateral' in Western theory. For example, a great deal of recent writing by Western liberal institutionalist scholars speaks of and celebrates NATO as a multilateral organization, but this is highly misleading in so far as the principle of inclusiveness is concerned (Mearsheimer 1994/5). NATO has been multilateral only in a very narrow, subregional sense. Simply put, the principle of non-discrimination applies only to the relationship among the members of NATO, not to the relationship between the NATO members and those of the Warsaw Pact. While during the cold war NATO featured a more equitable relationship between its leading power and the rest of its membership than was the case with the Warsaw Pact, it was in essence an exclusionary collective defence organization set up to deter and defend against the Soviet threat. In this sense, the only truly European multilateral institution during the cold war was the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, now called the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) whose doctrine of 'common security' sought to develop military transparency and political understanding between the cold war adversaries in Europe.

Unlike NATO but like the CSCE (notwithstanding the aversion of most Asia-Pacific policymakers to this latter analogy), the ARF is unambiguously multilateral. In the words of Malaysia's foreign minister, Abdullah Badawi, the concept of ARF 'requires the development of friendship rather than the identification of enemies. The nature of security problems in the Asia-Pacific are such that they do not lend themselves amenable for management through the old method of deterrence by countervailing force' [sic] (Straits Times 23 July 1994:1). From the outset, the ARF has not been a grouping of the like-minded. It includes states whose interests and perspectives regarding regional security may differ significantly (Ho 1994). Thus, as a former foreign minister of Australia points out (Straits Times 4 August 1994:2), the purpose of ARF is to build 'security with others rather than against them'. Multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific context is defined in direct opposition to the 'exclusive bilateralism' of America's post-Second World War security strategy in the region which focused primarily on a balance-of-power approach maintained by a
regional network of bilateral military alliances. In the words of a senior US official, the ARF is ‘not a bloc forming against the common threat’ but rather a case of ‘potential antagonists talking to each other trying to clear up any misperceptions, give greater transparency ... [and] some sense of predictability’ (Straits Times 30 July 1993:34).

Commitment to transparency is another attribute that APEC and the ARF share with multilateral institutions elsewhere (including global multilateral institutions such as GATT/WTO). Both APEC and ARF share a commitment to this norm through the process of consultations, dialogue and the development of a habit of cooperation. APEC (1995b:5–6) envisages transparency of ‘respective laws, regulations and administrative procedures which affect the flow of goods, services and capital among APEC economies in order to create and maintain an open and predictable trade and investment environment in the Asia-Pacific region’. The Pacific Business Forum’s definition of transparency is more specific; it stipulates that ‘Programmes, rules, regulations, guidelines – all these must be clearly documented and easily accessible to all concerned. Guesswork, discretion, and double-standards should be eliminated. The transparency principle should be applied within individual economies’ (APEC 1995a:11).

The ARF’s proposals to develop transparency are outlined in a ‘Concept Paper’ circulated by ASEAN in 1995. It includes such measures as exchanging annual defence postures on a voluntary basis, increasing dialogues on security issues on a bilateral, sub-regional and regional basis, maintaining senior-level contacts and exchanges among military institutions and encouraging participation of the ARF members in the UN Conventional Arms Register. The Concept Paper envisages three types of security cooperation: confidence-building, preventive diplomacy and ‘elaboration of approaches to conflicts’. Among the various ideas contained in the ASEAN Concept Paper for further exploration are a regional arms register, prior notification of major military deployments, a regional peacekeeping training centre, dispatch of fact-finding missions and cooperation to enhance maritime surveillance and security.4

The fundamental goals and core organizing principles of multilateral institutions in the Asia Pacific are not peculiar to the region. Yet, as Paul Evans (1994:303) has argued, institution-building in the Asia-Pacific region, rather than following the pattern established in Europe and North America, is instead ‘emerging from unique historical circumstances and will likely evolve in its own particular way’. The origin of what is increasingly being referred to as the ‘ASEAN way’, ‘Asian way’ or ‘Asia-Pacific way’ of multilateralism is to be found in the conscious rejection by Asian leaders and policy elites (now echoed by many of the Western participants as well) of ‘imported models’ of multilateralism and in their call for multilateralism to conform to local realities and practices. Yukio Satoh, a senior Japanese Foreign Ministry official closely involved in the formative
stages of regional security dialogues, provided one of the most forceful arguments as to why ‘European concepts and processes would not fit the conditions of the Asian and Pacific region well’. He offered four reasons: 1) Asia lacked the strict bipolarity of Europe because of the presence and role of China and because many Asian states adopted a non-aligned foreign policy posture; 2) military conditions in the respective regions were quite different (Asian threat perceptions were more diverse, the structure of Asia’s alliances were more or less bilateral, and US and Soviet force postures in the region were more asymmetric, with the US forward deployment strategy relying on naval forces while the Soviet defence posture were more land-based); 3) Asia had a larger number of unresolved conflicts and disputes; and 4) while Europe during the cold war was preoccupied with nuclear war, Asia’s main concern was with economic development. Thus the primary aim of regional cooperation to date had been economic, not political or security (Satoh 1991:5–6).

Satoh’s objections to foreign models of multilateralism centred on differences in objective conditions between Asia and Europe. More recently, proponents of the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ have emphasized the more subjective domain of strategic culture and negotiating styles to account for the apparent uniqueness of institutional characteristics and decision-making processes within Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions.

‘Soft regionalism’ and ‘flexible consensus’

Defining the ‘ASEAN way’

It is in this respect that Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions appear to be closely influenced by the ‘ASEAN way’. The phrase refers to claims about a distinctive approach to dispute-settlement and regional cooperation developed by the members of ASEAN with a view to ensuring regional peace and stability. It is an evolutionary framework deriving from the experience of dealing with challenges that the regional organization has faced since its founding in 1967, including the challenge of regional economic cooperation, inter-state disputes such as the Philippine–Malaysia dispute over Sabah, the effort to counter the common external threat posed by the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia and find a political settlement to the conflict, and the concern to reduce the recurring danger of Soviet, Chinese and American intervention in the region’s affairs.

The ‘ASEAN way’ consists of a code of conduct for inter-state behaviour as well as a decision-making process based on consultations and consensus. The code of conduct incorporates a set of well-known principles, e.g. non-interference in the domestic affairs of each other, non-use of force, pacific settlement of disputes, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states, that can be found in the Charter of
the United Nations as well as regional political and security organizations elsewhere in the world. To this extent, the ‘ASEAN way’ is not an unusual construct. But where it can claim a certain amount of uniqueness is the manner in which these norms are operationalized into a framework of regional interaction. In this respect, the ‘ASEAN way’ is not so much about the substance or structure of multilateral interactions, but a claim about the process through which such interactions are carried out. This approach involves a high degree of discreetness, informality, pragmatism, expediency, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles which are often contrasted with the adversarial posturing and legalistic decision-making procedures in Western multilateral negotiations. The following section analyzes some of the key features of the ASEAN process.

Perhaps the most important feature associated with ASEAN’s approach to security cooperation is the preference for informality and the related avoidance of excessive institutionalization. A great deal of intra-ASEAN cooperation is based on inter-personal contacts, rather than on the strength of formal institutions. As Carlos Romulo, the former foreign secretary of the Philippines, once said: ‘We often find that private talks over breakfast prove more important than formal meetings’ (cited in Hoang 1996:67). The virtues of informality over structured, formalistic and legalistic procedures have been seen by decision-makers in Southeast Asia as an important feature of intra-regional relations. This applies as much to bilateral as to multilateral interactions, although it is in the latter (especially ASEAN context) that the importance of informality has been most highlighted. As J.N. Mak points out, the ASEAN dialogue process is ‘unstructured, with no clear format for decision-making or implementation’ and ‘often lacks a formal agenda, issues are negotiated on an ad hoc basis as and when they arise’. Informality raises the level of comfort among the participants and creates a flexible decision-making environment which allows room for shifts in national bargaining positions.

The preference for informality is evident in several areas of ASEAN’s approach to institution-building in the security arena. The ‘ASEAN way’ involves a commitment to carry on with consultations without any specific formula or modality for achieving a desired outcome. In fact, consultations tend to be open-ended rather than being tied to a specific timetable. In other words, in the ‘ASEAN way’, the process is always held to be as, if not more, important than the product. ASEAN multilateralism is process-oriented, rather than product-oriented. Process can be conceived independently of the product; it can be useful irrespective of the final outcome.

If institutions and procedures are to be devised at all, then they tend to be ad hoc, rather than permanent. To be sure, ASEAN is not without permanent institutional structures. The ASEAN process includes an annual meeting of foreign ministers, a formal summit of leaders every two years, and an informal summit in the intervening year. In addition, there
are numerous ASEAN-related meetings involving ministers, senior officials and parliamentarians. ASEAN coordinating bodies cover a large number of issue-areas, from the environment to shipping traffic. Indeed, every year, the grouping holds over 200 meetings under ASEAN’s auspices. Holding these meetings, as Michael Leifer points out, ‘has become part of an institutional culture that helps to avoid and control conflicts’ (cited in Hoang 1996:67). But, the ASEAN bureaucracy remains relatively small. The ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta, though expanding its staff and functions, is considerably smaller than its EU counterpart in Brussels. Moreover, much of its work focuses on non-security issues, especially economic cooperation. Most of the coordinating work in ASEAN is handled by national ASEAN secretariats located within the foreign ministries of each member country, especially the country hosting the annual ministerial meeting.

Thus, while ASEAN is not lacking in regularized ministerial and bureaucratic consultations, it has not embraced the idea of a centralized permanent bureaucracy with decision-making authority. This is not so much a cultural attribute as a conscious rejection by the organization of the EU brand of supranationalism. In the case of ASEAN, institution-building is about developing a regular but flexible framework of coordination and cooperation by national governments without delegating state sovereignty to a regional authority.

Next to informality and aversion to formal institutions, the ‘ASEAN way’ of security cooperation is characterized by the concept and practice of consensus. Although consensus is considered to be a common feature of decision-making in many Asian societies, in the ASEAN context, the term is usually traced to a particular style of decision-making within Javanese village society. In its Javanese conception, consensus or *musjawarah* is a way by which a village leader makes important decisions affecting social life in the village. As Herb Faith (1962:40) wrote, *musjawarah* means that ‘a leader should not act arbitrarily or impose his will, but rather make gentle suggestions of the path a community should follow, being careful always to consult all other participants fully and to take their views and feelings into consideration before delivering his synthesis conclusions’. The practice of consultations or *mufakat*, is therefore an important aspect of consensus-building.

Two aspects of the consensus-building process deserve notice. The first is the psychological setting of consultations, which must be non-hostile. As a former Indonesian foreign minister, Subiantoro, put it, negotiations in the *musjawarah* and *mufakat* way take place ‘not as between opponents but as between friends and brothers’ (cited in Jorgensen-Dahl 1982:166). J. N. Mak (1995:5) notes that in the ASEAN context, consensus means searching for ‘an amalgamation of the most acceptable views of each and every member’ in a socio-psychological setting in which ‘all parties have power over each other’. A related aspect of consensus-
building is the importance of the ‘comfort level’ as an important precondition for success in multilateral consultations and negotiations. Raising the comfort level involves avoiding open and public disagreement among the interlocutors. This is especially important during the early stages of cooperation-building. As Singapore’s prime minister once observed about the fledgling multilateral institutions in the Asia Pacific, the ‘institutions created are not yet mature enough for us to have a robust dialogue. For Asians, it’s not in our nature to want to disagree with people publicly’ (Asian Wall Street Journal 24 June 1994:1,6).

A second aspect is the distinction between consensus and unanimity. The former must not be confused with the latter. Consensus does not require 100 per cent agreement by all parties. Rather, it represents a commitment to finding a ‘way of moving forward by establishing what seems to have broad support’ (Straits Times 13 November 1994:17). As a Singaporean newspaper commentary notes, in a consensus situation, ‘not everyone would always be comfortable’, but they tend to ‘go along so long as their basic interests were not disregarded’ (ibid.).

Sensitive handling of intra-mural differences is a hallmark of the ‘ASEAN way’. While ASEAN members can debate and disagree on the merit of a particular position behind closed doors, they refrain from airing these differences in public, especially while dealing with the outside world. Even in situations where ASEAN members find it impossible to arrive at a common position, they nonetheless speak and act as though a certain level of unity has been achieved on that particular issue. There is a clear tendency to play down or give a positive spin to intra-mural differences. A great deal of care is always taken not to isolate or embarrass any individual ASEAN member in international fora. Even when an ASEAN member has advanced a position which is not acceptable to other members, the latter will refrain from acting in ways that may make the latter ‘lose face’ internationally.

The idea of consensus is not an abstract notion, but has proven useful in fostering regional economic and political cooperation in Southeast Asia. For example, the concept was applied to addressing the problem of hesitancy and indifference among ASEAN members toward intra-ASEAN economic cooperation, including ASEAN industrial joint ventures and tariff reductions. As Lee Kuan Yew observed in the context of ASEAN economic cooperation, (at a time when ASEAN consisted of only five members: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Singapore), ‘When four agree [to a certain scheme] and one does not, this can still be considered as consensus and the five-minus-one scheme can benefit the participating four without damaging the remaining one’ (cited in Irvine 1982:62). In this context, consensus was seen as a way of moving forward with regional cooperation schemes despite the reluctance of one of the members to participate in it. Lee Kuan Yew described the process in the following terms:
So long as members who are not yet ready to participate are not damaged by non-participation, nor excluded from future participation, the power of veto need not be exercised. ... when four agree and one does not object, this can still be considered a consensus, and the four should proceed with a new regional scheme.

(cited in Hogan 1995: 88)

Although the understanding that consensus need not involve unanimity imparts a great degree of flexibility to decision-making at the national and international setting, it is also clear that ASEAN-style consensus would be of limited effectiveness in dealing with issues that engage fundamental national interests, including issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Despite its flexibility, decision-making on regional or international cooperation based on a consensus approach remains hostage to the imperative of national interest. As Irvine (1982:50) points out, such an approach runs the risk of becoming 'a process of determining the realistically achievable objectives given the limits imposed by each member-country's interests'. Bilson Kurus (1995:405) has drawn attention to the fact that 'each and every action taken in the name of ASEAN must either contribute to or be neutral, but not detract from, the perceived national interests of the individual ASEAN member states'.

On the positive side, the consensus approach may facilitate security cooperation by stressing the fundamental importance of consultations in a non-threatening multilateral setting, guided by a shared commitment to moderation and accommodation. Such a process of 'stressing the positives' and 'sweeping controversial issues under the carpet' may create enough goodwill among the participants as to encourage restrained political and military behaviour. As Jorgensen-Dahl notes: 'a residue of goodwill based on feelings of brotherhood and kinship may serve the same purpose as oil on rough sea. They take the edges off the waves and make for smooth sailing'. Herman Kraft stresses the element of restraint generated by the consensus-building process:

... the issues that ASEAN gets involved with tend to be those that every member can agree upon. Controversial issues more often than not are shelved rather than confronted for fear of disrupting cohesiveness and unity. At the same time, it has been a factor in restraining the actions of ASEAN member-states. In more ways than one, ASEAN consensus has been used as a justification for conservatism on a number of controversial issues.

(1996: 6)

A final aspect of the 'ASEAN way' must be noted. Despite their strong commitment to multilateralism, bilateral modes of security cooperation
and conflict management remain an important feature of intra-ASEAN security relations. In some situations, ASEAN countries seem to adopt a policy of ‘thinking multilaterally but acting bilaterally’. This is especially true of situations in which bilateralism is seen as a more appropriate, flexible and practical approach to the conduct of regional inter-state relations. As a former foreign minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Mohammed Ghazali Shafie, put it in 1970:

... regional cooperation within a formal framework should not prevent countries of the region from trying to forge the closest possible links on a bilateral basis with one another. It may be, for example, that country X would be willing to establish such links on specific subjects and would be prepared to engage in consultations including exchange of information, etc, with country Y which she might not consider either appropriate or necessary to have with some other third country on a multilateral basis. Such bilateral contacts on any subject and at whatever level which may be mutually acceptable should be pursued as far as possible.

(Shafie 1982:161–2)

But it is important to bear in mind that the bilateralism practised among the ASEAN states is not ‘exclusive bilateralism’, but one that is compatible with multilateral goals. Bilateral linkages are undertaken within the overarching framework of multilateral norms, including such principles as pacific settlement of disputes and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. Thus, ASEAN officially recognizes bilateral defence cooperation as an important contributing factor to the spirit of regionalism. Moreover, in the area of dispute-settlement, ASEAN has a tradition of avoiding the discussion of contentious issues in the multilateral agenda. The fact that such disputes are ‘swept under the carpet’ does not mean that they are ignored, but are left to be addressed through bilateral channels which may be more practical and effective.

**Soft regionalism and consensus-building in APEC and ARF**

It is instructive to note that ASEAN’s support for the founding of APEC was based on expectations, as Singapore’s trade and industry minister then put it, that it will be ‘a useful informal group for the purposes of the GATT Uruguay Round, of like-minded countries with a common interest in a successful outcome of the Round’ (emphasis added). Thus, APEC is described as a ‘consultative mechanism’, rather than an ‘economic community’ (an Australian proposal to rename APEC as Asia-Pacific Economic Community was rejected by the Asian members in 1993), while the ARF is likened to a ‘dialogue forum’, rather than a multilateral ‘institution’. As Singapore’s former defence minister stated: ‘The ARF is not
a multilateral security mechanism but a forum where Asia/Pacific countries can talk with one another so as to better understand each other’s security concerns’ (Jane’s Defence Weekly 19 February 1994:52).

Asia-Pacific proponents of soft regionalism who had earlier rejected the CSCE/OCSE as a possible basis for Asia-Pacific security cooperation (as suggested in early Russian, Australian and Canadian proposals), may now feel vindicated by the recent difficulties encountered by the OSCE. Many of its institutions and mechanisms, such as the Conflict Prevention Centre and the Missions of Long Duration to Yugoslavia lack adequate human and material resources to carry out their functions and the sheer complexity of its official dispute-settlement mechanism, called the Valletta Mechanism for Peaceful Resolution of Disputes, has discouraged users. As Trevor Findlay (1994:238) puts it, the OSCE ‘has fallen into the trap of establishing mechanisms whose grand titles presage more than they can deliver’. Indeed, at a session of the ASEAN–UN Cooperation in Peace and Preventive Diplomacy, one Asian delegate described the OSCE as a ‘non-performing model’ (Acharya 1994:215–26), demonstrating the pitfalls of rapid institutionalization of nascent regional multilateral institutions.

A related feature of the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ is a preference for evolutionary non-legalistic methods and non-binding commitments. One Asian observer of APEC points out that the Asian approach to economic cooperation is ‘to agree on principles first, and then let things evolve and grow gradually’ (Soesastro 1995:8). This contrasts with the ‘American approach’ which is to ‘start with legally binding commitments covering a wide range of issues’, something that ‘scare many people in Asia’ (Mankusuwondo 1994). Thus, the process of trade liberalization undertaken within APEC is supposed to differ from that undertaken by other multilateral institutions. A Japanese official at the Osaka APEC Summit claimed that it was APEC’s aim to ‘kill Gatt-type negotiations’ (Hulme 1996:32). Non-Asians seem to agree. Canada’s international trade minister commented after Osaka: ‘the important point to understand is that this isn’t the Gatt; it’s not the World Trade Organization and it isn’t even the free trade of the Americas ... This is to a degree, an Asian approach ...’ (Far Eastern Economic Review 30 November 1995:15).

This avoidance of formal and legalistic procedures extends to dispute settlement mechanisms within APEC as well as ARF. For one thing, the very idea of a regional dispute-settlement mechanism has found conditional acceptance within APEC. The Eminent Persons’ Group was quite clear in recommending that any APEC role in this area should ‘supplement the WTO dispute settlement mechanism, which should continue to be the primary channel for resolving disputes’ (cited in APEC 1995c:12). APEC proponents clearly reject the need for a regional dispute-settlement mechanism based on the ‘highly legalistic’ procedures found in GATT/WTO (1995c:13). Instead, APEC’s Bogor Declaration calls for ‘a voluntary, consultative dispute mediation service’ (1995c:12, emphasis
added). It is important to note that the proposed APEC mechanism was to have ‘a mediation rather than arbitration’ function. ‘This approach’, according to recommendations by the APEC Eminent Persons Group, was intended to ‘offer an intermediate channel between bilateral negotiations and the “win or lose” confrontation of the WTO,’ and ‘would be in keeping with the growing sense of community in the region’ (1995c:13).

In the case of ARF, the commitment to soft regionalism has militated against the very idea of conflict resolution. The ASEAN Concept Paper which laid out the ARF’s approach to security cooperation initially envisaged three categories: confidence building, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution. But at the Brunei ARF meeting, the term ‘conflict resolution’ was changed to ‘elaboration of approaches to conflicts’. The change was made as a concession to China, which had found ‘conflict resolution’ too formal a category and opposed any such role for the ARF, at least in the immediate future. But China’s position would not be inconsistent with ASEAN’s own approach to intra-mural conflicts, which is better described as one of conflict-avoidance, rather than of conflict-resolution. Within ASEAN, there is a ‘tacit agreement to suppress sensitive and potentially destabilising issues, or to avoid discussing them’ (Mak 1995:6). Thus, contentious bilateral or multilateral issues are carefully and routinely kept outside of the agenda of formal ASEAN meetings. Many intra-ASEAN-conflicts have been ‘swept under the carpet’, rather than confronted directly and resolved (Djiwandono 1995:6-7).

But the Asia-Pacific notion of soft regionalism can be overstated. As Fred Bergsten notes, APEC has already undertaken ‘serious and successful’ GATT-style negotiations, which included a joint offer by APEC trade ministers in late 1993 to help move the GATT Uruguay Round towards a successful conclusion. Both the Bogor Declaration and the Osaka Action Agenda were ‘thoroughly negotiated’ documents, with the latter having been negotiated over nine months ‘with at least the intensity of Punta del Este [GATT Uruguay Round] and similar agreements’ (Bergsten 1996:63). Indonesia’s foreign minister, Ali Alatas, has accepted that: ‘APEC should become an organization with a secretariat and a codified set of rules and procedures in a gradual way like ASEAN’ (cited in Soesastro 1995:7). In this view, what APEC must avoid is not institutionalization per se, but hasty institutionalization. The Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohammed, a strong champion of soft regionalism and gradualism within APEC, continues to insist that APEC should not be formalized, ‘but if it is the wish of other members that it be strengthened, Malaysia would allow itself to be dragged along’ (cited in Soesastro 1995:7). While the ARF has no collective bureaucratic apparatus, such as the APEC Secretariat, it has followed APEC in developing a number of mechanisms, such as the Senior Officials Meeting (ARF–SOM) and ‘intersessional working groups’. The Brunei ARF meeting in August 1995 set up three such groups, one dealing with confidence-building measures
(chaired by Indonesia and Japan), another dealing with peacekeeping operations (co-chaired by Malaysia and Canada) and a third one on search-and-rescue cooperation (led by Singapore and the US). These groups are expected to play an important role in developing concrete steps towards greater security cooperation.

Nonetheless, Asian governments insist on informal and non-legalistic procedures within APEC and the ARF because they create a ‘non-threatening’ atmosphere for exploring ways of problem-solving. They constantly emphasize the importance of the ‘comfort level’ in multilateral gatherings. If the comfort level is lowered by incorporating contentious items, then these must be dropped from the agenda. A similar emphasis on negotiating and decision-making comfort is deemed essential to the smooth functioning of APEC. In the context of APEC’s plans for developing a regional investment code, Chia Siow Yue (1994) warns that such a code, in order to be workable, must not ‘coerce countries that are not yet ready’ and that it must not ‘punish, handicap or restrict’ members (Bora 1994).

Furthermore, from the perspective of some Asian policymakers, formal and direct measures of transparency and mutual restraint may offend local cultural sensibilities by assuming that an adversarial relationship already exists among them. In this view, identifying your adversary publicly goes against the grain of Asian culture. Thus, while many Asian countries harbour deep misgivings about China’s role, China is never described as a ‘threat’. In a similar vein, many Asian countries refuse to acknowledge the existence of an ‘arms race’ in the region, despite a dramatic rise in defence expenditures and arms purchases. A former Malaysian defence minister described regional ‘arms control’ issues as ‘non-issues’ (FBIS-EAS-91-151 6 August 1991:40). Yukio Satoh (1993:5) similarly dismisses the notion of ‘confidence-building’ in the Eastern Asian context because such measures, as developed in the cold war European context, can only apply to a relationship among ‘adversaries’, which is not the case in Eastern Asia where ‘Complex feelings and concerns which Asians hold toward each other are more ambiguous but more deeply rooted than a security concern which adversaries have toward each other’.

Apart from ‘soft regionalism’, perhaps the most important aspect of Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions is the concept and practice of ‘consensus’. This importance of the consensus principle within APEC was described by a Japanese Foreign Ministry official in commenting on Japan’s leadership role in organizing the Osaka APEC Summit. In the words of the official, ‘In American usage, leadership means one country decides and persuades others to follow. In Japan, it means working to form a consensus. That’s the Asian way’ (Hulme 1996:34). Similarly, the Osaka Action Plan on APEC states that a consensus approach highlights the sense of ‘mutual respect’ among all parties (APEC 1995a:10).

As understood in the ASEAN context, consensus does not require require total agreement among the actors. At Bogor, Ali Alatas, the
foreign minister of Indonesia, made it clear that 'consensus' is not to be confused with 'unanimity' (*Straits Times* 13 November 1994:17). His comments came as differences emerged among APEC members regarding an acceptable time-frame for trade liberalization. While Indonesia had proposed full trade liberalization by the year 2020, Malaysia objected and refused to abide by any binding time-frame. Indonesia found a solution to this impasse by invoking the notion of consensus, carefully distinguishing it from unanimity. Alatas asserted that consensus means finding a 'way of moving forward by establishing what seems to have broad support' (*Straits Times* 13 November 1994:17). In this view, objections by individual members need not be a crippling obstacle 'so long as their basic interests were not disregarded' (*Straits Times* 13 November 1994:17). It was indeed true that the target dates were not inconsistent with Malaysia's own policy. Despite insisting that any target dates for APEC's trade liberalization were only 'indicative dates' and 'non-binding' (Tarrant 1994), Kuala Lumpur had already planned to meet that target, especially when in October 1994 it announced a massive tariff-cutting exercise involving over 2600 items.

Although this leaves the possibility that consensus will only work in situations where differences among members are relatively limited, APEC protagonists have sought to legitimize the concept as a 'way out for those leaders who are not prepared to commit themselves firmly on issues like target dates and free-trade timetables' (Tarrant 1994:17). Before the Osaka Summit, the Pacific Business Forum came up with the notion of 'flexible consensus' which 'will allow those economies that are ready to move forward to do so and to allow other economies, which are not yet ready, to join later'. Such a procedure, it added, would promote 'mutual respect' among APEC members (APEC 1995a:10). The Osaka Summit introduced the notion of 'concerted unilateralism'. Accordingly, trade liberalization is to be carried out not through time-bound formal treaties, but through ‘collective peer pressure of action plans implemented by each economy at its own pace’ (Hulme 1996:32).

**Interests versus identity in the ‘Asia-Pacific way’**

To the extent that Asian policymakers stress the differences between Western and their own approaches to regional cooperation, it has a familiar ring to it. In recent years, Eastern Asia has witnessed the emergence of claims about a ‘Japan model’ of economic development, an ‘Asian view of human rights’, an ‘Asian model of democracy’, and the all-embracing notion of ‘Asian values’ (Awanohara 1987; Chee 1992; Ching 1993; Koh 1993). Claims about the Asia-Pacific approach to multilateralism, which may be termed as the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ fits well into the sense of economic, political, and cultural exceptionalism that has accompanied Eastern Asia's economic prosperity.6
It is worth noting that a similar belief concerning a distinctive Asian or Eastern Asian approach to multilateralism also underlies the Malaysian proposal for an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). In this sense, the development of multilateralism in the Asia Pacific is torn by two differing approaches to region-building represented respectively by APEC and the EAEC. Underlying APEC is a broader conception of the region based on the interdependence of security and economic interests on a trans-Pacific basis. The twin pillars of the APEC structure are the US security umbrella in the region and the rapid growth of trans-Pacific trade and investment flows. Against this, the EAEC idea seeks to build upon a de facto investment region created by the southward movement of Japanese capital. But while advocates of the EAEC point to the fact that the rapid growth of investment flows and the regionalization of production within Eastern Asia is set to overtake trans-Pacific economic linkages, a less explicit claim on the EAEC’s behalf may be the shared commitment among its members to those ‘Asian values’ that, in the views of some, undergrid Eastern Asia’s economic prosperity. In this sense, the EAEC idea is geared to an Asian identity.

If the EAEC emerges as a viable regional institution (an unlikely prospect in the short term, given the strong opposition from the US and the widespread reluctance in the region to embrace it), then it will lend further credibility to the existence of an ‘Asia-Pacific way’, to a much greater extent than APEC where the negotiating style of the Asian members is often challenged by the Western members. Indeed, the very persistence of the EAEC notion suggests, to a much greater extent than APEC, that the future of institution building in the Asia-Pacific region may turn out to be an exercise in ‘identity-building’ conditioned as much by historical, cultural and political self-conceptions and interactions as the hard neo-liberal logic of ‘market-led integration and open regionalism’ (Higgott and Stubbs 1995:532).

But claims about an ‘Asia-Pacific way’ of multilateral institution-building, whether it is embodied in APEC, EAEC or the ARF, do invite substantial scepticism. Some may question the extent to which slow institutionalization, informal and indirect bargaining and consensus-seeking will produce better outcomes than more conventional approaches. Multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific region have a long way to go in making a definitive contribution to economic prosperity and regional order. While a final judgement on the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ has to wait, it is useful to remind ourselves of the challenges that must be overcome if any particular approach to multilateralism, whether unique to the Asia-Pacific region or not, is to be judged successful.

Caporaso has argued that for multilateralism to work, participating actors must be prepared ‘to renounce ... the temptation to define their interests narrowly in terms of national self-interests’ (Caporaso 1993:56). But this ‘ideal’ type of multilateralism is unlikely to appear in the Asia
Ideas, identity and institution-building: the 'Asia-Pacific way'

Pacific region. While economic regionalism in the Asia Pacific is supposed to be 'market-driven', and hence relatively unconstrained by state action, the reality is that national interests and preferences remain a major determinant of the possibilities of economic cooperation within ASEAN and APEC. As Kusuma Snitwongse (1990:56) notes, 'For economic cooperation to move ahead, a model will be required that can be acceptable to all because it promises equal benefit, and, at the same time, a greater political will to sacrifice at least some national interest for the welfare of the whole is necessary'. Yet as she concedes, in the case of ASEAN, 'national interests ... have priority over regional ones'. If a truly multilateral model of economic cooperation is yet to be found within ASEAN, it is even less likely to be developed within APEC. Like ASEAN, APEC is unlikely to meet a fundamental requirement for multilateralism: the principle of 'indivisibility', or a situation in which the 'costs and benefits [of multilateralism] are spread geographically and functionally' (Caporaso 1993). While concerns regarding the unequal distribution of benefits are a major problem with respect to such South–South schemes as the ASEAN Free Trade Area and the supposedly 'market-driven' transnational production zones known as 'growth triangles', they are likely to be even stronger for an economic grouping with a North–South composition, as is the case with APEC. Despite a shared commitment to trade facilitation and liberalization, APEC members hold differing conceptions of the scope and pace of this process. A desire to protect weak and politically important domestic sectors has undermined the level of support for more ambitious proposals for an Asia-Pacific Economic Community. Furthermore, differing levels of economic development within the APEC membership has produced conflicting responses to trade and investment liberalization objectives.

As in the economic arena, Asia-Pacific multilateralism in the security field is constrained by the continuing primacy of state interests. Within the ARF, ASEAN's gradualist, informal and cautious approach has raised some doubts as to whether the institution is able to provide practical solutions to regional security problems. Most regional actors find bilateralism more useful in advancing their national economic and security goals, including bilateral defence relationships with major powers (such as the US alliances with Japan, Korea, the Philippines etc.), and bilateral modes of conflict management (which is a more common practice among ASEAN members than multilateral mechanisms). These are likely to retain their relevance and appeal because of the lingering doubts concerning the possibility of collective gain from a multilateral security order.

The conflict between multilateralism and state interests is true not just of the region's weaker actors, but also its stronger powers, particularly the US and China. Steve Weber (1993:235) points out that in dealing with smaller powers, great powers may prefer bilateralism over multilateralism because in the former, it 'becomes possible for the great power to demand
differential terms of alliance with each of the small powers, depending upon its strategic, economic, or political value'. Bilateral relationships are easier to dominate and control, while a multilateral forum could become an arena in which weak powers could ‘gang up’ against the interests and policies of major powers. The US, which initially opposed multilateralism in Asia-Pacific security as a ‘solution in search of a problem’, now welcomes the formation of the ARF. But it also insists that any new regional security structure must not be at the expense of its existing bilateral alliances. Washington’s efforts to strengthen bilateral alliances with Japan and Australia, and the encouragement of a more active Japanese security role in Southeast Asia further attests to this policy.

Like the US, China’s policy toward the ARF has become noticeably more positive, attesting at least partly to the effects of socialization and learning within the ASEAN-sponsored dialogue activities during the past several years. But Beijing is unlikely to embrace multilateralism when it conflicts with its interests and role as a rising power. It has discouraged the inclusion of the South China Sea and the Korean peninsula issues within the ARF agenda. While it accepts a peaceful settlement of the South China Sea territorial disputes and encourages the joint development of resources, it insists that this must be done bilaterally, rather than through a multilateral mechanism of the kind that Indonesia has promoted through its annually-held South China Sea talks. Beijing will continue to have misgivings about the potential of the ARF to develop into an anti-China platform, which could be used to put pressure on China to make concessions on territorial and other issues which are vital to its national interests. Moreover, from the Chinese perspective, the stability of the Asia-Pacific region may not depend so much on a multilateral framework sponsored by the region’s weaker states (such as ASEAN), but rather on a balance of power interaction between the major powers in the region. Although China’s opposes a great power concert system, Chinese commentators seem to believe that it is the relationship between the US, China and Japan (Russia is excluded for the moment because of its domestic and international weaknesses), and more specifically between the US and China, which is critical to regional stability. China is unlikely to embrace multilateralism when it conflicts with its interests and role as a rising power. Nonetheless, Chinese opposition to multilateralism will be tempered by a fear of regional isolation.

Against this backdrop, the best that can be said about the emergence of an ‘Asia-Pacific way’, as a distinctive approach to multilateralism in international relations is that it is an attempt to reconcile national strategies with multilateral norms and principles. In other words, Asian actors may find it useful to speak of an ‘Asia-Pacific way’ of multilateralism when their national interests and objectives come into conflict with multilateralist goals. This reflects lingering doubts among regional actors about the possibility of collective gain from multilateralism. It serves to rationalize
and obscure the (as yet) limited acceptance of multilateralism by actors who lack any significant previous experience in regional cooperation. Indeed, multilateral decision-making in Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions is based on the search for the lowest common denominator and the concept’s usefulness may lie in rationalizing the obstacles to multilateralism rather than in resolving them. Some analysts may wonder whether claims about an ‘Asia-Pacific way’ will amount to anything more than a convenient label under which many regional actors hide their unwillingness to engage in a serious effort towards compromise and moderation or place their collective goals ahead of national interests. The very fact that the need for consensus has been used to exclude important but contentious issues on the ARF agenda, or to slow down and reduce the pace and scope of APEC’s trade liberalization programme fuels such suspicions. Perhaps the most useful contribution of the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ is to remind us of the extent to which the commitment to multilateralism in the region remains constrained by egotistic state interests.

Adding to the scepticism about the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ is the tremendous cultural and political diversity that obtains within the region. It is difficult to sustain a cultural claim about Asia-Pacific multilateralism because the region, as already noted, is large and diverse enough to accommodate a range of negotiating styles and decision-making processes. If, as Richard Higgott points out, “There is little or no comprehension among APEC’s “true believers” that there is no single regional historical, political or cultural view of what constitutes “region” in the Asia-Pacific’(1994:92–3), then the very notion of an ‘Asia-Pacific way’ seems implausible except at the highest level of abstraction and generalization.

Differing conditions within individual subregions in the Asia-Pacific make it impossible to suggest that approaches developed within one subregion will be effective in another. This is evident from the problems of applying the ‘ASEAN way’ to Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions. ASEAN has consciously tried to impose the ‘ASEAN way’ of cooperation in both APEC and the ARF with a view to exercising a degree of influence and control over the development of Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions. In the case of APEC, ASEAN has not been able to maintain a strong hold on the agenda-setting process, a fact resented by many ASEAN leaders. But ASEAN has made clear its intention to be the ‘driving force’ behind the ARF. From ASEAN’s perspective, it offers an authentic and successful model of multilateralism for the ARF to emulate. But the possibility of multilateralism through the ‘ASEAN way’ of consensus-building invites some skepticism. Even at the Indonesian village level, the process of consensus-building requires the strong leadership role of a village chief who both guides the consultation process and defines the terms of the eventual consensus. Moreover, as Jorgensen-Dahl (1982:166) points out, it is difficult to transplant such a process from a village to an international setting; building cooperation at the interna-
tional level must overcome ‘problems and opposing interests of ... vastly increased intricacy and magnitude’, than those that are encountered at the national and community levels. Thus, ASEAN’s soft-power leadership may not always be adequate in the consensus-building process at the wider regional level.

Thus, whether the ASEAN model of subregionalism can perform successfully in the wider Asia-Pacific context is questionable. While ASEAN has developed a strong tradition of multilateralism in Southeast Asia, many Northeast Asian countries, notably China, lack any significant historical experience in multilateral security cooperation. ASEAN’s relative unity and longevity owes much to specific historical circumstances, particularly to its members’ common fear of communism and their shared security concerns arising from the decade-long Cambodia conflict. It is sustained by close inter-personal ties among ASEAN elites. Such commonalities and linkages are not present within the larger Asia-Pacific setting and are highly unlikely to develop in the future.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the Asia-Pacific region is witnessing a cautious, pragmatic, informal, gradualist and consensus-seeking approach to multilateral institution-building. While ‘indigenizing’ familiar and well-established multilateral principles, such as non-discrimination and transparency, APEC and ARF have both developed what appear to be distinctive institutional characteristics and decision-making processes to organize security and economic cooperation. This paper has highlighted several aspects of these, such as the aversion to legally-binding commitments, preference for weak organizational structures, and emphasis on consensus-building. Yet, as the foregoing discussion shows, there are risks of over-generalization inherent in claims about an ‘Asia-Pacific way’. Its more enthusiastic proponents disregard the difficulties involved in constructing a coherent set of general norms, principles and procedures out of disparate and competing regional identities. More importantly, it is clear that the Asia-Pacific variety of multilateralism, despite all its unique attributes, remains constrained by the primacy of state interests and conflicting conceptions of regional identity that have, in other regional theatres, frustrated cooperation among sovereign states.

Thus, the risk that the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ could legitimize the inability of the regional actors to push collective goals ahead of individual self-interest should be recognized and avoided. It seems possible that expediency, rather than shared politico-cultural attributes may be the real driving force behind the ‘Asia-Pacific way’. In some ways, it may be an over-generalized, instrumental and possibly counter-productive notion. It is over-generalized because it ignores important national, sub-regional differences. It is instrumental because it is used to justify deep-seated
reservations about multilateralism which may not be overcome. It could become counter-productive if it legitimizes the failure of states to rise above their national interests, and encourages them to adopt a minimalist and conservative approach to cooperation. A great deal of what passes for the ‘ASEAN way’ or the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ is simply a pragmatic and practical response to situations in which multilateralism is being constrained by individual state interests.

But it is possible to assess the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ in a somewhat different, and more optimistic, light. The real significance of concepts such as ‘open regionalism’, ‘soft regionalism’, or ‘consensus’, as discussed in the preceding sections, may lie in their value as ways of reconciling conflicting state preferences and finding a common ground out of differing economic, political and strategic priorities among members. In this sense, the ‘Asia-Pacific way’ may be seen as a highly deliberate and careful process of building regional cooperation and identity out of dissimilar and sometimes opposing interests and objectives. By obscuring and downplaying barriers to regional cooperation, such an approach has helped to buy enough time for regional actors to learn the benefits of cooperation and adapt to the demands of multilateralism.

To understand the emergence of multilateral institutions in the region, one needs to look beyond the material interests and rationalist utility-maximizing behaviour of the regional actors. The emergence of Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions is not just interest-driven, but identity-driven. The dialogue and institution-building processes involving ideas (both indigenous and imported), regional cultural norms, and the quest for a collective regional identity have played a crucial role in promoting the concept and practice of multilateralism. The ‘ASEAN way’, despite its practical limitations, has been a useful symbol for regional policy makers to advance their process of socialization. It has helped to define the character of regional institutions, helping us to understand not only why multilateralism is emerging in the Asia-Pacific region now, but more importantly, which type of multilateralism is emerging and will prove viable in the end.

Notes

*An earlier version of this paper was prepared for the Conference on ‘National Strategies in the Asia-Pacific: The Effects of Interacting Trade, Industrial, and Defense Policies’, organized by the National Bureau of Asian Research and the Center for Trade and Commercial Diplomacy, Monterey Institute of International Studies, 28–29 March, 1996, Monterey, California. The author would like to thank Richard Stubbs and Julia Bentley for help with research material and comments on an earlier draft.

1 As Ruggie (1994: 556–7) points out, ‘The [multilateral] principle in economic relations prescribes an international economic order in which exclusive blocs of differential treatment of trading partners and currencies are forbidden, and in which point-of-entry barriers to transactions are minimized’.
2 'ASEAN Regional Forum: A Concept Paper' (1995) document circulated at the Second Annual Meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum, Brunei, 1 August.

3 As Mush and Milner (1994: 274) argue, fears that the world economy is being fragmented into regional trade blocs are exaggerated. Recent evidence suggests that growth of intra-regional trade is not occurring at the expense of inter-regional trade, but that the two are growing together. For example while the volume of trade between the USA, Canada and Mexico has increased since the advent of NAFTA, so has trade between NAFTA countries and East Asia. Similarly, rising intra-EU trade has been accompanied by growth in EU's trade with non-EU European Free Trade Area countries.


6 Indeed, Singapore's foreign secretary, Kishore Mahbubani (1995: 116), argues that:

'The Asia-Pacific region is developing a unique "corporate culture" on regional security: an unusual blend of East and West. It combines both Western concepts (for example, of national sovereignty as well as regional organisation) and Eastern attitudes on managing differences. The best current model is found in South-East Asia.'

References


Bora, B. (1994) 'Investment cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region: the PECC Asia Pacific investment code', in New Directions in Regional Trade Liberalisation, Taipei: Taiwan Institute for Economic Research.


—— (1994) 'Third try at world order: America and multilateralism after the cold war', *Political Science Quarterly* 109(4).
—— (1993) 'The United States and Japan in the Asia-Pacific region', paper presented to the 84th American Assembly Meeting, 11-14 November.
Tarrant, B. (1994) 'Malaysia says it will take its own pace in APEC', *Reuters World Service Dispatch* 15 November.