

Book Review

Conflicting Identities: Travails of Regionalism in Asia

Anurag Sharma

*Edited by Rabindra Sen, Anindya Jyoti Majumdar,
and Bhagaban Behera, India, Manohar Publishers
& Distributors, 2019, 272 pp., ISBN 978-93-88540-23-0*

This is a comprehensive source for understanding the complex phenomenon of regionalism in Asia. Through its 11 chapters the authors examine the challenges facing regionalism and offer possible solutions. Today, the idea of 'One Asia' is more a fiction than a reality. However, to promote better global governance, several efforts have been made to promote regionalism in different parts of the vast continent. The results have been uneven. The efforts in South Asia in particular have not been favourable so far. With India focusing its attention towards strengthening its ties with East Asia and the Pacific under Prime Minister Modi's Act East Policy and the BIMSTEC emerging as New Delhi's preferred regional organisation in place of SAARC, a new interest in regionalism is visible within the academic community. The book under review is an important contribution to this discourse.

Anindya Majumdar in his opening Chapter *Regionalism and Security: Bridges over Fault-lines*, presents a different lens to understand the phenomenon of regionalism by defining it as a strategy of states facing by external conflicts or tensions to enhance their security without compromising vital national interests. The author has rightly pointed out that the security mechanisms and considerations for embracing regionalism vary among States. For example, "often regionalism is an anti-hegemonic strategy to control and restrain States that are relatively powerful within a regional set up" (pp. 25-26). The concept of regionalism as a security arrangement was reflected in the idea of establishing Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (NWFZs), in which the security parameters would not only move states to surrender its nuclear ambitions but also act as guarantee from a nuclear State against threatening the other members of NWFZ. However, with China, India and

Anurag Sharma, Research Associate, Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi.

Pakistan possessing nuclear weapons and given the tensions in their relationships, a NWFZ clearly is not feasible in South Asia. The security management in the region therefore poses enormous challenges. A constructive process of regionalism and integration, however, could create a more positive security environment, though this is not easy to achieve as the failure of SAARC underscores. Even if the States build bridges in the region, invisible fault-lines always pose risks to the prospects successful regionalism.

Author G.V.C Naidu brings out the importance and growth of Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) as one of the potential drivers of global trade, in his Chapter *Regionalism in Asia-Pacific: Role of APT and EAS*. As the name suggests, the RTAs are agreements between two or more States to encourage free movement of goods and services across the borders. The author may have assumed that the reader(s) have a complete knowledge of the RTAs and there is no need to discuss the various forms of RTAs, such as Preferential Trade Area (PTA), Customs Union, Common Market, Economic Union, and Full Integration. The chapter looks at the complex challenges to Asian regionalism given the conflict of interest between the China-backed ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and ASEAN-India-Japan-US supported East Asian Summit (EAS) that highlight the tensions among the leading States on how regional affairs are to be organised and the appropriate institutions for it. The phenomenon is reflected in the on-going "trade war" between the United States and China. The intense efforts of China to be the dominant power in South Asia and South-East Asia region are quite visible and a cause for concern for other States in the region. The author believes that strengthening the EAS would help to constrain China's growing assertive approach in the region, and to provide much needed political and economic stability in the region.

Purusottam Bhattacharya in his Chapter: *Genesis and Evolution of Regionalism in Europe and South Asia: A Comparative Analysis*, has carefully conducted a theoretical and comparative analysis of the concept of regionalism in Europe and South Asia. The author argues that despite of many similarities, such as diversity of languages, nationalities, and cultural heterogeneity between the regions (Europe and the South Asia), the example of European regionalism does not "fit in the boots" of South Asia, where it is a tedious task to construct a common market or a customs union. The non-operation of SAARC reflects the consensus that it has not been able to meet the expectations from it at the time of its inception in 1985. The reasons behind the inactivity of SAARC are well narrated in the chapter. The success of SAARC depends on the relations between India and Pakistan, which, unfortunately have not been cooperative.

Chapter 7: *Rethinking Regionalism in South Asia* visualises an ideal region where people-to-people contacts, improved connectivity, soft borders, and growing Maritime connectivity, create a new process of regional cooperation. The author, A. Subramanyam Raju, recommends that the South Asian nations must emphasise on promoting connectivity in the region, regional energy trade, and collectively address the common challenge of climate change. The author also compares many aspects of the EU and SAARC, which, in my understanding, is not necessary here as Purushottam Bhattacharya's chapter has already covered the theme in detail. He is hopeful that the cultural connectivity among the South Asian countries would help overcome the insecurity and mistrust. "*South Asia is not a poor region, but people of the region are poor due to policies of South Asian countries*" (p. 139), she argues.

In Chapter-9: *(Re)Evaluating Regionalism in West Asia*, author Sanjukta Banerji Bhattacharya has rightly brought-out the fact that in the post-Cold War era, there has been a lack of new initiatives in building cross-national economic and security organisations to meet the challenges of modern era. The author explains the response of States in the West Asia or the Middle-East region to the rise of the Islamic State (IS)—a notorious terrorist organisation. Trying not to distract from the theme of the book, the author manages to elaborate on the Islamic State and the events that followed after its emergence in 2014. However, I do not agree with the author when he states that "*even as the organisation expanded its territorial control in 2014 and into the next year, before losing some ground in the later months of 2015*". In fact, the Islamic State's territorial shrinking began in mid or late 2016 and peaked with the loss of its stronghold in Baghouz area in Syria in early 2019.

This book could have been of greater reference value if the indexing would have been more extensive. For example, there is a good description about the Islamic State and how it emerged in the post-Arab spring in 2011; but other than ISIS, keywords, such as #terrorism, #extremism, #Wahhabi, and #Salafi, are missing from the index section.

To conclude, the book is a useful contribution on regionalism in South Asia on which there is a dearth of good literature and comparative studies. The authors, who are known scholars in their respective research areas, have managed to achieve the aim of the book--to provide a much-needed understanding of the patterns of contemporary issues through the lens of the regionalism to the wider policy community, and not limited only to scholars and students of international politics.