

## Interregionalism: empirical and theoretical perspectives

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**Abstract** *This paper explores the phenomenon of – international – interregionalism from empirical as well as theoretical perspectives. First, it provides a short overview on existing interregional arrangements by distinguishing three types: (a) relations between regional groupings; (b) biregional and transregional arrangements; (c) hybrids such as relations between regional groupings and single powers. Second, it offers a theoretical explanation of current interregionalism in the context of globalisation and regionalisation, informed by a combination of realist and liberal-institutionalist approaches. It concludes that, during the past decade, interregionalism appears to have become a lasting feature of the international system. Thus, it may be expected that a wide array of forms and types of interregionalism will continue to coexist, thereby further enriching (and complicating) the emerging multi-layered system of global governance.*

**Keywords** *Globalisation, new regionalism, interregionalism, Triad, international relations*

## **Introduction**

Most comparative analyses of regionalism focus on the internal functioning of particular regions.<sup>1</sup> However, as theorists of regionalism have long argued, regions are also structured by the way they relate to the outside world. The role of external factors in the development of regional cooperation, such as “external cogency” (Nye 1968) or “external federators” (Schwarz 1971), has been widely acknowledged in the traditional literature on regionalism. Accordingly, extra-regional states, superpowers in particular, may have a positive or negative impact on the development of intra-regional cooperation. As an illustration, the post-war policy of the United States towards the Western European integration process is generally viewed as an important factor of positive external cogency, whereas the perceived threat posed by the Soviet Union is considered as an element of negative external cogency. Besides external powers, other regions or regional subsystems may also play a role as external factors of regionalism. The impact of regional groupings on the development of regionalism elsewhere has been studied mainly in the context of the phenomenon known as “extra-regional echoing”, which by and large refers to European prototype of regionalism serving other world regions as a model, either to be imitated or the be avoided (Zimmerling 1991).

Beyond the “extra-regional echoing” phenomenon, however, the role of interregional interactions has often been neglected in the literature on regionalism as some authors have noted.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, apart from Kaiser’s (1981) study on the interaction of regional subsystems, the relevant literature is conspicuously silent about the relationship between regionalism and interregionalism. This may be explained by the systemic bipolarity of the Cold-War period which left little room for interregional relations beyond transregional alliances and, therefore, caused little scholarly interest in the subject matter. Indeed, in the Cold War period, interregional relations were largely confined to the European Community’s so-called group-to-group dialogues with other regional groupings. Since the end of the Cold War, however, interregional relations have come again to the

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<sup>1</sup> These introductory remarks draw on Hänggi (2000), pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Russett (1967), Cantori and Spiegel (1973) and Kaiser (1981).

attention of scholars and practitioners alike against the background of “new regionalism”<sup>3</sup> and the consequent proliferation of interregional relations beyond the traditional EU<sup>4</sup> dominated group-to-group approach. Though the EU is still the major actor in the expanding network of relations between regional groupings, the number of interregional arrangements beyond the EU’s external relations has been increasing. Furthermore, new forms of often multi-layered interregional relations have appeared as a corollary of “new regionalism”. The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) processes are a good case in point. In recent years, similar arrangements have been established such as the Europe-Latin America Summit (1999), the Africa-Europe Summit (2000) and the East Asia Latin America Forum (EALAF) which is expected to be formally launched at a ministerial meeting in 2001.

This paper explores the phenomenon of interregionalism from empirical as well as theoretical perspectives. First, it provides a short overview on existing interregional arrangements by distinguishing three types. Second, it offers a theoretical explanation of current interregionalism in the context of globalisation and regionalisation.

### **Forms of interregionalism (empirical perspective)**

The expanding network of interregional relations appears in a wide array of manifestations. In order to categorize existing interregional arrangements, three different forms can be distinguished:

- (a) relations between regional groupings;
- (b) biregional and transregional arrangements;
- (c) hybrids such as relations between regional groupings and single powers

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of “new regionalism” has been introduced by Palmer (1991). For comparisons of “old regionalism” and “new regionalism” see Yamamoto (1996).

<sup>4</sup> The acronym EU is used in this paper also for the pre-1993 European Community (EC).

*(a) Relations between regional groupings*

The EU's traditional group-to-group dialogues can be considered the prototype of interregional arrangements, a relationship that is closely linked to "old regionalism". These dialogue relationships have gradually evolved since the 1970s to cover almost all world regions (Regelsberger 1990). The long-standing dialogue partnership between the EC and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is considered by some authors to be a model of group-to-group interregionalism (Mols 1990; Lukas 1989). Given the fact that the EC was the most advanced regional organization and due to the absence of interregional relations among the EC's partner organizations, the interregional network of the Cold War period appeared like a "hub-and-spokes" system<sup>5</sup> gravitating around the EC. The dominant position of the EC in group-to-group interregionalism made it more than just a model that influenced other regions by way of "extra-regional echoing". The Community actively used interregional relationships as an instrument to promote intra-regional cooperation among the dialogue partners (Nutall 1990: 146). With the emergence of "new regionalism" and the end of the Cold War, the global network of group-to-group relations expanded beyond the EU dominated "hub-and-spokes" system. Regional groupings in other world regions such as Latin America, Southeast Asia and Oceania began to establish relations among themselves. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) became a primary mover behind this development, but other regional schemes such as the Mercado Comun del Sur (Mercosur) and the Australia-New Zealand Closer Economic Relations (CER) Arrangements also began to establish relations with other regional groupings.<sup>6</sup> These relationships are usually based on more or less regular meetings at the ministerial and senior officials' levels and the launching of joint projects and programs. They usually concentrate on the exchange of information and cooperation in specific issue-areas, in most cases in the economic sphere, often on trade and investment. In the case of the European Union, however, group-to-group relations always include a political element such as dialogue on human rights and

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<sup>5</sup> This term was coined in the context of the United States' bilateral alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>6</sup> ASEAN's network of bilateral group-to-group relations now includes linkages with ANCERTA or CER, ECO, GCC, Mercosur, Rio Group and SAARC, apart from its traditional relationship with the EC/EU.

democracy. In some cases, interregional relations are based on framework cooperation agreements (e.g. EU-ASEAN 1980, EU-Mercosur 1995).

**Tab. 1: Relations between regional groupings<sup>7</sup>**

	Europe	East Asia	South & West Asia	North America	Latin America	Africa	Oceania
Europe		EU-ASEAN			EU-Mercosur EU-Andean Community EU-RioGroup EU-CAIS	EU-SADC	
East Asia	ASEAN-EU		ASEAN-SAARC ASEAN-GCC		ASEAN-Mercosur ASEAN-Rio Group		ASEAN-CER ASEAN-SPF
South and West Asia		SAARC-ASEAN GCC-ASEAN					
North America							
Latin America	EU-Mercosur EU-Andean Community EU-RioGroup EU-CAIS	ASEAN-Mercosur ASEAN-Rio Group					Mercosur-CER
Africa	EU-SADC						
Oceania		CER-ASEAN SPF-ASEAN			CER-Mercosur		

***(b) Biregional and transregional arrangements***

Biregional and transregional relations are a rather recent phenomenon in international relations. Interregional arrangements of this kind emerged in the context of the new Triad,<sup>8</sup> the triangular relationship between the major three world economic regions: North

<sup>7</sup> Relations between subregional groupings in the same region – e.g. the Mercosur-Andean Community link – are not considered here as interregional relations.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of the Triad has its roots in the trilateral relationship between the USA, the EU and Japan, the three leading powers of the world economy. The concept underwent an expansion to embrace the Triad regions (North America, Western Europe and East Asia) as a consequence of several factors: the end of the Cold War, the appearance of “new regionalism” and the emergence of East Asia as the third center of the world economy. It was further strengthened by the establishment of interregional relations among the Triad regions in the 1990s. By the mid-1990s, the new Triad concept had become a major feature in the discourse about the emerging international order (Hänggi 1999).

America, Western Europe and East Asia. But this phenomenon has spread to other world regions in recent years. Membership in these rather heterogeneous arrangements is more diffuse than in traditional group-to-group dialogues; it does not necessarily coincide with regional groupings and may include member states from more than two regions. Therefore, states participate in an individual capacity, although there may be some degree of regional coordination (Rüland 1999: 2). Up to now, five biregional or transregional linkages have been established between the Americas, Europe, East Asia, Oceania and Africa:

- APEC, launched in 1989, is a transregional arrangement, which includes 21 Pacific rim countries including, *inter alia*, 15 East Asian economies, the three North American and two South American countries (Chile and Peru);
- ASEM, launched in 1996, is a biregional arrangement, which includes ten East Asian countries and the 15 member states of the EU;
- the Europe-Latin America Rio Summit, held in June 1999, is a biregional endeavor which links the 33 Latin American and Caribbean states with the 15 member states of the EU;
- the Africa-Europe Cairo Summit, held in April 2000, is also a biregional endeavor which links the 15 member states of the EU with 52 African states, all member states of the Organization for African Unity (OAU), with the exception of Morocco;
- the East Asia-Latin America Forum (EALAF), to be officially launched in 2001, is a transregional arrangement, which includes 13 East Asian countries and Australia/New Zealand as well as 12 Latin American countries.

Europe, represented by the EU, Latin America and East Asia are each covered by three biregional or transregional arrangements. These relatively large arrangements (21 to 67 member countries) are based on more or less regular high-level meetings (summits and ministerial meetings) and a number of joint projects and programs. So far, APEC is the only such arrangement that has developed a modest infrastructure (a small secretariat in Singapore). All these schemes have in common that their agenda concentrates on economic issues, but those schemes which include the EU member states usually follow a

three-way approach that also includes political dialogue and cooperation in other fields such as socio-cultural and development cooperation.

**Tab. 2: Biregional and transregional arrangements**

	Europe	East Asia	South & West Asia	North America	Latin America	Africa	Oceania
Europe		ASEM		<i>TAFTA?</i>	Europe-Latin America Summit	Africa-Europe Summit	
East Asia	ASEM			APEC	EALAF (APEC)		(APEC)
South and West Asia							
North America	<i>TAFTA?</i>	APEC			<i>FTAA?</i>		(APEC)
Latin America	Europe-Latin America Summit	EALAF (APEC)		<i>FTAA?</i>			(APEC)
Africa	Africa-Europe Summit						
Oceania		(APEC)		(APEC)	(APEC)		

***(c) Relations between regional groupings and single powers***

Finally, there are relations between regional groupings and single powers in other world regions. These relationships are hybrid forms, which may come close to interregional relations in those cases where the single power has a dominant position in its own region (e.g. the United States in North America; India in South Asia). Furthermore, relations between regional groupings and single powers may constitute an important component of biregional or transregional arrangements (e.g. EU-China/EU-Japan and ASEM). The EU and ASEAN are the only regional groupings, which have a tradition of external relations with single powers. The relationship between the EU and the USA constitutes an important element of the global interregional network.

**Tab. 3: Relations between regional groupings and single powers**

	<b>Europe</b>	<b>East Asia</b>	<b>South &amp; West Asia</b>	<b>North America</b>	<b>Latin America</b>	<b>Africa</b>	<b>Oceania</b>
<b>Europe</b>	EU-Russia	EU-China EU-Japan EU-Korea ASEAN-Russia	EU-India	EU-USA EU-Canada EFTA-Canada	EU-Mexico EU-Chile EFTA-Mexico		
<b>East Asia</b>	EU-China EU-Japan EU-Korea ASEAN-Russia	ASEAN-China ASEAN-Japan; ASEAN-Korea	ASEAN-India (ASEAN-Pakistan)	ASEAN-USA ASEAN-Canada			ASEAN-Australia ASEAN-New Zealand
<b>South and West Asia</b>	EU-India	ASEAN-India; (ASEAN-Pakistan)					
<b>North America</b>		ASEAN-USA ASEAN-Canada					
<b>Latin America</b>	EU-Mexico EU-Chile EFTA-Mexico						
<b>Africa</b>							
<b>Oceania</b>		ASEAN-Australia ASEAN-New Zealand					

**Explanations of interregionalism (theoretical perspective)**

For many years, the theoretical discourse in international relations has focused on the two powerful schools of thought, realism and liberal-institutionalism. In recent years, however, both traditional schools were challenged by a new theoretical perspective, i.e. social constructivism (Hänggi 1998). What have these schools of thought to offer when it comes to the theoretical explanation of interregionalism? One could imagine that realist approaches would focus on the dynamics of rival regionalism and the balancing games among different regional actors. In contrast, liberal-institutionalist approaches would

highlight the need for cooperative efforts in order to manage complex interdependence on an interregional level. Finally, the social constructivist approaches would refer to the identity-formation through interregional interaction (Rüland 1999: 3-7). In the following section, this paper offers a systemic explanation of interregionalism in the context of the new Triad (Hänggi 1999) by way of combining realist and liberal-institutionalist perspectives (Roloff 1998).<sup>9</sup>

Globalisation and regionalisation are widely seen as the major factors restructuring the Post-Cold War international system. Ongoing debates notwithstanding, a consensus appears to emerge that views globalisation and regionalisation as by and large complementary processes. This is most evident in the international economic system. The structure of the international economy suggests that globalisation is not really global. Indeed, the process is characterized by an unevenness in terms of geographical scope (Holm and Sörensen 1995), which is illustrated by the growing concentration of economic activity in North America, Western Europe and East Asia. The Triad regions account for three-quarters of global trade and provide 90 per cent of global foreign direct investment flows, and their combined share of total world GNP is nearly 85 per cent. Although it may appear contradictory, the process of uneven globalisation is accompanied by a parallel process of uneven regionalisation of economic, political, and societal activities. The end of the Cold War helped pave the way for the emergence or resurgence of regional awareness and an increase in intra-regional cooperation on a global scale (Hurrell 1995).

Despite its global reach, however, regionalisation just as globalisation is most advanced in the Triad regions and their peripheries. Intra-regional economic transactions have been increasing since the 1960s in all Triad regions, particularly in East Asia. The combined forces of uneven globalisation and uneven regionalisation have resulted in a tripolar configuration, or in a 'Triadisation' (Ruigrok and van Tulder 1995: 151), of the world economy with three more or less equally powerful regions in terms of accumulated GNP, and the huge 'rest of the world' which is left at the margins of the international economy.

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<sup>9</sup> The following section heavily draws on Hänggi/Régnier (2000), pp. 3-6 and Hänggi (1999), pp. 62-69.

The Triadization process may have been slowed down by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 because the third and most recent pillar of the world economy has been weakened. But the basic structure of a Triadic world economy remained unchanged.

The processes of globalisation and regionalisation, which are largely economic in nature, tend to undermine the political control of nation-states and limit their policy choices. According to Roloff (1998), globalisation and regionalisation can be viewed as external challenges that encourage nation-states to engage in regional cooperation in order to reassert their political control on a higher level but also to jointly manage the increasingly complex global interdependence (liberal-institutionalist explanation) and to balance off regionalist challenges from other world regions (neo-realist explanation). Indeed, since the late 1980s, we have been witnessing an upsurge of regionalism, either through a widening and deepening of existing regional cooperation schemes such as EU and ASEAN, or through new forms of wider and looser arrangements such as APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Against the background of 'Triadization', it does not come as a complete surprise that this so-called 'new regionalism' has taken firm roots in the Triad regions and their peripheries:

- Western Europe witnessed a deepening and a widening of the European Union which has become the major focus of attraction in Europe and is increasingly representing Europe in world affairs, particularly in interregional relations.
- North America witnessed the USA embrace regionalism in the mid-1980s which finally led to the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), encompassing Canada, Mexico and the USA, and to the project of an even wider Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) covering the Western Hemisphere. However, unlike the EU, NAFTA does not appear as an actor in its own right.
- East Asia has seen the rapid development of *de facto* economic regionalisation, but contrary to the two other Triad regions, the political response has been informal or 'soft' regionalism due to considerable constraints on regional cooperation such as intraregional conflicts and dependence on the USA. Regionalism evolved mainly around subregional (e.g. ASEAN) or transregional schemes (e.g. APEC, ARF). Nevertheless, East Asian countries have cautiously begun to act as a *de facto* group,

particularly so in the interregional ASEM framework and more recently in the regional East Asian Summit (EAS), or ASEAN-plus-three, framework.

In retrospect, the rapid economic emergence of East Asia, the launch of the European Single Market program in 1985 and the Canada-USA Free Trade Agreement (CUSFTA) in 1988 appear to have been the main causes for the regionalist “chain reactions” (Yamamoto 1996: 34) in the sense that an increase in regionalism in one region led to similar reactions in other regions. But these “chain reactions” did not result in the much-feared creation of closed regional blocs. On the contrary, as a consequence of globalisation, “new regionalism” turned out to be rather open to other regions; hence the parlance of “open regionalism”, a concept which has been developed in the context of Asia-Pacific regionalism (Soesastro 1998).

In order to manage and balance relations among themselves, the Triad regions increasingly began to engage in interregional relations. While interregional relations in the past had been limited to the EU’s group-to-group dialogues with other regional organizations, interregionalism in the context of “new regionalism” took different forms of loose, informal and multi-layered arrangements with more diffuse membership. Such arrangements first emerged in a Triadic context:

- The APEC forum was created in 1989 in order to manage transpacific economic relations. Though intended by its initiators to be “mega-regional” scheme (Yamamoto 1996), APEC was widely perceived as an interregional link between North America and East Asia.
- The New Transatlantic Agenda of 1995 and the Transatlantic Economic Partnership of 1998 between the USA and the EU as well as the proposals for the creation of a transatlantic link in form of a Transatlantic Free Trade Area (TAFTA) reflect the growing interregional network between North America and Western Europe.
- Finally, the ASEM process launched in 1996 was aimed at bridging what was perceived to be the ‘missing link’ in the Triad, i.e. the relations between Western Europe and East Asia.

Furthermore, Western Europe and East Asia began to establish new interregional links with non-Triadic world regions such as Latin America and Africa. While the formal link between the EU and Mercosur was established as early as 1995, other arrangements such as the Europe-Latin America Summit, the Africa-Europe Summit and the EALAF are of more recent origin.

These new forms of interregionalism can be explained by two major causes: first, the need to manage the increasingly complex interdependence in a world of Triadic globalisation (liberal-institutionalist explanation), and second, the need to balance regionalism in other regions as well as interregionalism between other regions (neorealist explanation) (Roloff 1998). Both motivations combined led to a interregionalist chain reactions in the 1990s:

- The USA saw in APEC a safeguard against the creation of a regional bloc in East Asia whereas East Asians valued APEC as kind of guarantee against possible negative effects of the completion of the European Single Market and the creation of NAFTA.
- The strengthening of the transatlantic relations was partly born out of the mutual fear of East Asia's economic emergence. Furthermore, the Europeans were very concerned about being left out of APEC. However, the TAFTA proposal was not put into practice.<sup>10</sup>
- The mutual fears of Europeans and East Asians of being left out of APEC and of transatlantic arrangements respectively, led to the creation of ASEM, the third link to complete Triadic relations.

The establishment of interregional links between Triadic and non-Triadic regions had different reasons. Latin America had become attractive for interregional links as a consequence of the US-sponsored FTAA project whereas Africa feared it would be

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<sup>10</sup> There are various reasons why the transatlantic link has not been institutionalized in the form of TAFTA. Rival regionalism between the two dominant economic blocks may be one factor (neorealist explanation). Other factors may be that transatlantic relations are already based on strong institutional links in various issue-areas, which provide enough instruments for the management of complex interdependence (liberal-institutionalist explanation); and that transatlantic relations are characterized by a high level of all kinds of transactions which have led to the formation of some sort of common identity (social-constructivist explanation). I am grateful to Wolfgang Buecherl for his suggestions on this issue.

marginalized in the context of the emerging interregional network. Given its geostrategic location and its relative economic weight, Latin America was wooed by European and East Asian countries to establish interregional links with them. African States, however, had to ask the Europeans for equal interregional treatment.

### **Concluding remarks**

To sum up, the 1990's have seen the formation of a Triadic structure in the international (economic) system. This has been caused by the joint forces of globalisation and regionalisation which led to a Triadization of the international economy and triggered off state-led responses to this challenge in the form of regionalism and interregionalism in a Triadic context, but with spill-over to non-Triad world regions. In other words, the causal factors of interregionalism, and of regionalism alike, are the ongoing processes of globalisation and regionalisation. Thus, interregionalism appears to have become a lasting feature of the international system. It may be expected that a wide array of forms and types of interregionalism will continue to coexist, thereby further enriching (and complicating) the emerging multi-layered system of global governance.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As an illustration, Rüländ (1999, p. 1) distinguishes five levels of policy-making in the international system: bilateral, subregional, regional, interregional, and global multilateral levels.

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