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The rise of regionalism

With an international order under pressure, regional diplomacy is offering a chance to pursue mutually beneficial cooperation

In 1979, the English diplomat and journalist Peter Jay penned anessay on regionalism for *Foreign Affairs* as he was concluding his service as the British ambassador to the United States. He opened with the line, '[g]ood regionalism is good geopolitics; and bad regionalism is bad geopolitics.' Although the spectre of the Cold War undoubtedly fuelled the impetus behind these words, they offer more than merely context; they offer prescience.

Even at the height of a conflict that pitted two superpowers and their ideologies against each other, what occurred on the international stage was often dwarfed by events happening at the regional level. While the Cuban Missile Crisis and, perhaps to a less pronounced effect, the U-2 Incident both brought the world to the edge of its seat, it was the regional conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Latin America, the Middle East, Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world that defined the era and played the dual role of becoming the battlegrounds of the Cold War but also itsundoing.

Fast forward to 2020, and the legacy of the Cold War and the impacts of the post-World War II international order on regional affairs are far from gone. One of the most significant of these is theprominence of regional diplomacy and how it continues to be a driving force in contemporary international affairs.

In fact, the geopolitical imbalance that was left in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union only served to further incentivise states and regions to work together more closely, especially as the role of the United States as the self-imposed guarantor of the existing liberal international order has weakened and new lines have been drawn in the sand.

The expansion of regional diplomacy

As existing global alliances fissure and strategic interests realign, regional and plurilateral mechanisms are becoming increasingly more attractive, in part, due to the flexibility that lies in direct contrast to rigid structures reinforced by ideology.

This phenomenon is hardly novel nor should it be surprising. As the former Indian Ambassador to Algeria and prolific scholar on diplomacy, Kishan S. Rana, notes, multiple new regional groups have emerged since the end of the Cold War, as countries seek to build new connections with foreign states, exploit mutual interests and enhance economic, trade, security, touristic, cultural and political ties.

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Such interests range from fostering new trade and investment opportunities, to exploring mutually beneficial cooperation with states with similar values and ideologies that may not have been as easily permitted before but ultimately fall under the umbrella of enhancing political and economic ties and strengthening security. Brahma Chellaney exemplified the latter well, highlighting how Beijing's increasingly aggressive expansionism in the region has caused the Indo-Pacific's major democracies to shore up their mutual support and solidarity.

Likewise, amid the US abdication of international leadership, an assertive China and the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Union is testing its own geopolitical strength. Similarly, the Three Seas Initiative is uniting twelve Central, Eastern, and South-eastern EU member states into a new regional bloc that, in addition to developing infrastructure and promoting economic development between and them, is meant to counter growing Chinese influence in the region.

Regional integration

What is increasingly apparent is that a significant driving factor behind the emergence of regionalism is the impact that globalisation and interdependence have had and the subsequent win-win outcomes that greater regional cooperation seeks to produce. Such developments have also led to new regional diplomatic endeavours, such as the ascent of thePacific Alliance in Latin America, the formation of the East African Community (EAC), or the unifying umbrella of CARICOM in the Caribbean.

Of these, the EAC offers a notable example. It is an organisationmaking significant headway in areas such as forging an EU-style customs union and visa liberalisation among its six states, and leading the way among other African regional groupings in terms of progress. Such endeavours can be fragile, however, as states are also at the mercy of new, dynamic and tenuous political developments that can undermine regional diplomacy as the recent coup in Mali illustrates.

Regional cooperation may be seen as a viable alternative to an international order under pressure, especially if rooted in strong bilateral diplomacy. 'The relative importance of legal treaties and universal bodies such as the UN is declining,' Stewart Patrick – the director of the International Institutions and Global Governance Program at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) – presciently wrote in 2014.

Instead, he stressed, '[t]he United States and other states rely more on regional organizations, "minilateral" cooperation among relevant states, codes of conduct, and partnerships with nongovernmental actors. And these trends are only going to continue. The future will see not the renovation or the construction of a glistening new international architecture but rather the continued spread of an unattractive but adaptable multilateral sprawl that delivers a partial measure of international cooperation through a welter of informal arrangements and piecemeal approaches.'

New developments and global challenges

Yet, regional groupings are also not immune to new developments and global challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, presents a new threat to regional cooperation as countries turn inward and international cooperation continues to be superseded by national interest. Although some countries, such as Australia and New Zealand or multiple EU countries, have worked out arrangements that allow their citizens some degree of privilege, proximity and the perceived trustworthiness of their public health and governance systems are two overwhelmingly decisive factors that influence such cooperation.

Between countries with less friendly relations, neither regional nor international cooperation seems promising – a reality furtherexacerbated by the politics surrounding vaccination and the ensuing geopolitical competition. The refusal by the Trump Administration to join the World Health Organisation's (WHO) effort to work with partners to develop and distribute a vaccine lends even further credence to this

notion.

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Unfortunately, while solidarity and cooperation are imperative to overcoming any global challenge, particularly one involving public health, I do not foresee regional cooperation being able to overcome the hurdles that such geopolitical competition is helping to fester. What is especially concerning is the way that certain countries are using a possible vaccine asleverage overothers. We can only hope that as climate change – arguably the most significant global challenge we face – worsens, we will be able to overcome our pettiness, learn from the mistakes of the Covid-19 pandemic, and recognise that the only way to overcome existential threats is through collaboration.

An uncertain century

It is clear that to have discounted regionalism throughout the 20th century would have been a folly. It continues to be a major defining element of 21st century diplomacy as well, and one that is seemingly growing in terms of importance and relevance – as the diplomatic complexity embedded within the formation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict illustrate well. As the allure of the grandiose of global governance is eclipsed by national interest and public scepticism, regional diplomacy offers a chance for countries of all sizes and polities to pursue mutually beneficial cooperation, while also empowering them with greater autonomy to choose how they wish to define their bilateral relations and with whom.

Even though competition and adversity between states has not subsided, new and ever evolving regional groupings present novel opportunities and allow for political and diplomatic manoeuvring as well as solidarity that may otherwise be more difficult to foster or could easily be captured by the interests of larger powers.

From conflict resolution to economic benefits, there is clear space for regional diplomacy to shine with the healthy disclaimer that any past success is no guarantee of the sustained relevance of any regional or plurilateral organisation (for an example of this, look no further than theNon-Aligned Movement). Ultimately, it seems that Jay's notion that 'good regionalism is good geopolitics' is still as true now as it was in the middle of the Cold War. Hopefully our diplomats and foreign ministries

around the world will continue to enrich both for the sake of a more mutually prosperous and beneficial future. Our societies are counting on it.



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