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Regionalism in the Asia Pacific/East Asia: A Frustrated Regionalism?

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Abstract

Why have Asia's many projects in regionalism not been able to realize their stated goals, despite the fecundity of, and enthusiasm for, region-building initiatives over the last two decades? In an attempt to answer this question, this article identifies the pursuit of a holistic regionalism embodied in the desire for a regional community as a persistent goal in official discourse, and argues that an apparent state of frustration describes the difficulty of regional institutions and forums in bridging the growing gap between these articulated goals and actual outcomes. The empirical case for the argument here is provided by the founding of the East Asia Summit in 2005, which has disclosed the limits of both exclusive and inclusive models of regionalism in Asia. In exploring causation, the article argues that both structural and agential factors are at the heart of this problem. The tensions thrown up by the competing processes of realist and liberal-institutionalist order-building in Asia have imposed structural constraints on the ability of regional

projects to realize their normative aspirations. Equally important in causing this state of frustration are the agents of regionalism — in particular, regional elites — who articulated the goal of a regional “Community” to propel regional projects, and have set the bar above the current capacities of regional institutions.

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Regionalism in the Asia Pacific/East Asia: A Frustrated Regionalism?

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Why have Asia's many projects in regionalism not been able to realize their stated goals, despite the fecundity of, and enthusiasm for, region-building initiatives over the last two decades? In an attempt to answer this question, this article identifies the pursuit of a holistic regionalism embodied in the desire for a regional community as a persistent goal in official discourse, and argues that an apparent state of frustration describes the difficulty of regional institutions and forums in bridging the growing gap between these articulated goals and actual outcomes. The empirical case for the argument here is provided by the founding of the East Asia Summit in 2005, which has disclosed the limits of both exclusive and inclusive models of regionalism in Asia. In exploring causation, the article argues that both structural and agential factors are at the heart of this problem. The tensions thrown up by the competing processes of realist and liberal-institutionalist order-building in Asia have imposed structural constraints on the ability of regional projects to realize their normative aspirations. Equally important in causing this state of frustration are the agents of regionalism — in particular, regional elites — who articulated the goal of a regional “Community” to propel regional projects, and have set the bar above the current capacities of regional institutions.

Key words: regionalism, East Asia Summit, East Asian Regionalism, United States, Asia-Pacific.

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