China’s rising assertiveness and the decline in the East Asian regionalism narrative

Andrew Yeo*

*E-mail: yeo@cua.edu

Accepted 28 May 2019

Abstract

After a decade of vibrant scholarly and political discourse regarding the prospects of East Asian integration, the narrative of regionalism has lost its luster in favor of a darker regional narrative. Has the idea of East Asian regionalism come to pass, and if so, what explains the decline in the narrative of Asian regionalism both as a policy idea and as a research program? After providing empirical evidence tracking the rise and decline in scholarly publications and news articles regarding Asian regionalism, I present several plausible reasons explaining this decline. Among them, the perceived shift in Chinese strategic behavior, and in turn, the adoption of more pragmatic interpretations of Asian security practices – one defined by power balancing and institutional rivalry rather than community building – appears to have struck a major blow to the East Asia regional project.

In the 1990s, realist thinkers cast a dark narrative over post-Cold War Asia. As Aaron Friedberg (1993–94, 5) quipped, Asia remained ‘ripe
for rivalry’. Despite such pessimistic forecasts, however, by the early 2000s, an alternative narrative centered around East Asian regionalism had developed indicating greater optimism for Asia’s future. Take for instance the November 2002 meeting of the East Asia Study Group (EASG) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where senior officials from Southeast and Northeast Asia\(^1\) celebrated their final report on recommendations for future East Asian cooperation. The work of the EASG, and the gradual proliferation of Asian institutions, reflected the renaissance of East Asian regionalism in both theory and practice (ASEAN, 2002, 56). It also bolstered constructivist claims regarding Asian security, highlighting the role of ideas, discourse, and narratives in the making of a nascent security community. The dominant narrative of regionalism would be relatively short-lived, however, replaced by concerns of great power competition in the region in the 2010s.

Do narratives and discourse shape strategic reality in Asia? Or are narratives merely a reflection of underlying material structures as realists would argue? In this article, I examine the rise and decline of an East Asian regionalism narrative within the broader context of Asian security trends. Narrative here refers to the political and scholarly discourse related to East Asian regionalism with the understanding that ‘rhetorical contests shape the course of politics’ (Krebs, 2015, 1). In the past decade, discussion on East Asia’s future tended to vacillate between two alternative narratives: one marked by robust economic growth, increased interdependence, and the growth of Asian regionalism, and the other characterized by ‘increased tensions, rising military budgets, and slower economic growth’ with conflict looming on the horizon (Haas, 2013). Since 2011, however, discourse regarding the future trajectory of Asia has shifted toward the latter narrative, casting a pall over the future of Asian security. This shift is significant, especially if current strategic narratives reinforce a balance of power logic, thereby undermining efforts in building regional cooperative security.

For sure, some skeptics were never sold by the East Asian regionalism hype, arguing that the rhetoric of Asian regionalism outpaced what

---

\(^1\) The group comprised of thirteen senior officials representing the ten ASEAN member countries and, the People’s Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, as well as the Secretary-General of ASEAN.
was actually happening in practice. It is puzzling, however, if measurable indicators of regionalism such as the growth rate of regional institutions or the diffusion or convergence of institutional rules and norms have remained constant or increased, yet the narrative of East Asian regionalism still declined. Furthermore, there has been little accounting or explanation in the literature as to why well-touted policy ideas and a vibrant research program has since faded. This article acknowledges several plausible reasons for the decline in the Asian regionalism narrative, but gravitates toward one in particular: the perception of China’s rising assertiveness in the late 2000s. This shift in Chinese strategic behavior presented perhaps the biggest blow to the East Asia regional project as scholars and practitioners turned to more pragmatic interpretations of Asian security practices, one defined by power balancing and institutional rivalry, which undermined earlier optimistic accounts of East Asian regionalism. At first glance, the findings suggest that narratives are epiphenomenal – that is they tend to reflect underlying material structures such as the balance of power. What is important to note, however, is the interplay between material and ideational factors. More concretely, shifts in material structures create opportunities for actors to construct new strategic narratives. This in turn shapes policy thinking, if not policy-making on regional issues.

My argument is structured as follows. In section 1, I define regionalism and present empirical evidence indicating a decline in a regionalist narrative from 2011, even as actual trends in East Asian regionalism remained relatively constant the past two decades. Section 2 briefly reviews the literature on East Asian regionalism placing trends in the regionalist narrative in its scholarly and policy context. Section 3 examines several plausible explanations for this decline before honing in on the ‘China assertiveness’ thesis. It describes how Beijing’s increasing assertiveness in the region, matched by Washington’s strategic rebalance to Asia, and further exacerbated by the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, pushed balance of power dynamics to the forefront, undercutting the East Asian regionalism narrative constructed in the previous decade. Section 4 concludes by discussing the implications of my argument for theory and policy.
1 The declining narrative of East Asian regionalism

1.1 Defining regionalism

International relations scholars use the term *regionalism* to refer to state-initiated processes of regional integration. T.J. Pempel (2005, 19) states that regionalism, as a process of institution creation, entails three basic elements: a top-down quality; a bias towards formal agreements; and the presence of semi-permanent structures in which government actors are key participants. Katzenstein and Shiraishi (1997, 1) adopts a somewhat broader definition by conceptualizing regionalism as ‘institutionalized practices’. Ellen Frost (2008, 15) connotes regionalism to a political movement ‘dedicated to a region-wide agenda of some kind’. Following Pempel and Katzenstein, she adds that regionalism ‘implies top-down, coordinated action’ and is driven by ‘the action of political authorities … planned and executed for reasons of state’ (Frost, 2008, 15).

Regionalism should be distinguished from a societal-driven, bottom-up process of *regionalization* (Kim, 2004). Riding on the wave of globalization from the 1990s, regionalization has flourished with new breakthroughs in information, telecommunications, and technology. Trade, investment, financial markets, production networks, and pop culture have all been major forces driving regionalization. If regionalization is a means to an end, the end is enhanced regional integration: this includes but is not limited to the integration of markets, technology, financial systems, labor, and society.

In reality, state-led and societal-driven processes of regionalism and regionalization are not mutually exclusive. Thus the distinction between regionalization and regionalism should be treated as notional rather than truly binary. Societal-driven processes are not completely independent from national governing structures or existing institutions. Governments may facilitate, encourage, or constrain the actions of private actors. International institutions also provide a framework for regionalization processes (Frost, 2008, 14). Conversely, increasing trans-regional interaction and the cross-border flow of people, capital, and information may prompt states to build institutions to regulate or enhance the capacity of such regional transactions. Therefore, a
broader understanding of regionalism will include vertical and horizontal modes of regional integration, allowing processes of regionalization to be included in a working definition of regionalism.

1.2 Declining regionalism narrative

If regionalism represents a process of regional integration initiated by governments, but also supported by bottom-up regionalizing trends, what exactly is meant by a decline in East Asian regionalism? To be clear, this study investigates the decline in the narrative of East Asian regionalism, both as a policy idea and as an academic research program. In other words, scholars and policymakers are simply talking less about Asian regionalism than in the past.2

A decline in the regionalist narrative is different from stating that regionalism itself is in decline as determined by any set of measurable indicators. For instance, a decline in the number of regional institutions or their rate of growth; slower diffusion/convergence of institutional rules and norms; or a reduction in the volume of interregional trade, foreign investment, and travel might suggest a state of declining regionalism. Of course, one would expect a decline in the narrative of regionalism to be correlated with a noticeable decline in any measurable evidence of regionalism. However, it is possible that even with measures of regionalism remaining constant, or even trending upward, that the overall narrative of East Asian regionalism may still be in decline. This avoids criticism from those who remain skeptical of East Asian regionalism, arguing that there was never any significant degree of regional integration taking place in the first place (Jones and Smith, 2007a,b). Even if the rhetoric of regionalism inflated any ‘real’ substantive progress on regional integration or institution-building, skeptics will still agree that a robust regionalist narrative persisted in the late 1990s and 2000s.3

To gauge trends in an East Asian regionalist narrative in scholarly and public debates, I performed several keyword searches in academic

---

2 Narratives can be defined in three distinct domains: discourse, story, and use. In this article, narrative is treated as a set of discourse. Unlike description which remains static, narratives are cast and recast. See Krebs, Ch.1.

3 For instance, Jones and Smith (2007b, 166) argue that regional scholarship has reinforced an inaccurate perception of wider regionalism.
and news databases. Although a variety of sources, including online news in English and Asian languages, think tank reports, and government policy documents might also be analyzed, I chose data sources which could be searched systematically across a period of approximately two decades. First, I performed a keyword search on ProQuest Political Science\(^4\) for the term ‘Asian regionalism’\(^5\) anywhere in the article, and then in the abstract only. The results appear in Figs. 1 and 2, respectively, and indicate a consistent rise in scholarship on Asian regionalism from the 1990s before reaching a peak in 2010, and then declining.

**Figure 1** indicates a peak of 78 articles published in 2010 with the term ‘Asian regionalism’ before a steady decline takes place from 2011 onward. This pattern is replicated in Fig. 2. The height of scholarship

---

4 Proquest Political Science includes an index of ‘450 leading political science and international relations journals.’ The majority of sources in the index are academic journals, but the database also includes trade journals, magazines, reports, and wire feeds. My particular keyword search of ‘Asian regionalism’ anywhere in the article produced 855 articles, of which 749 were drawn from academic journals.

5 I used ‘Asian regionalism’ rather than ‘East Asian regionalism’ to cast a wider net. Asian regionalism would include any article with the term ‘East Asian regionalism.’ Although this may capture a few ‘false positives,’ this was preferable to limiting a keyword search to ‘East Asian regionalism’ which excluded several articles about East Asian regionalism relevant to my search.
on Asian regionalism occurs in 2010 with 11 published articles before experiencing a decline from 2011 to 2018.

Although the Proquest Political Science index contains academic sources published or edited in Asia (i.e. Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur), the database undoubtedly reflects a bias toward Western sources. To help reduce bias of Western scholarship, the same keyword search was conducted with six established Asia-focused international relations journals and produced similar trends in article frequency count as the ProQuest search. The pinnacle of scholarship on Asian regionalism generally occurs between 2009 and 2010 in these six journals. As an additional robustness check, I performed both a basic and a specific keyword search limited to books published on Asian regionalism from 1992 to 2018 in the WorldCat database. The trends were strikingly similar: a decline in publications from 2010 as indicated in Fig. 3.

---

6 The six journals included in the search were Asian Survey, Journal of East Asian Studies, Pacific Review, Contemporary Southeast Asia Studies, International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, and Pacific Affairs. Searches were conducted manually for journal publication years which were unavailable through a database search function (i.e. Proquest or EBSCO).

7 One anomaly was the appearance of nine articles in 2014 in the Pacific Review which included the keyword ‘Asian regionalism’ anywhere in the article (but only one article in which the keyword appeared in the abstract or title).
Turning to public discourse on Asian regionalism, Fig. 4 presents data from a keyword search of ‘Asian regionalism’ in all global newspapers within the Nexis Uni database (formerly LexisNexis) between 1991 and 2018.

8 However, the general trend for articles mentioning ‘Asian
regionalism’ indicates a general rise from the 2000s up through 2010 before trending downward.\(^9\)

Since the Nexis Uni search only included English language articles (even if published in Asian sources), I decided to include a keyword search for Asian regionalism in Japanese language sources as a robustness check.\(^10\) I selected three major Japanese newspapers (Yomiuri, Asahi, Mainichi) from 1991 to 2018.\(^{11}\) A search result for ‘Asian Regionalism’ (アジア地域主義) produced only 18 articles across the 3 newspapers with the highest frequency in 2000 (4 articles), and 0 to 2 articles from 2003 to 2010. From 2011 to 2018, only one article appeared in the search (in 2013).

Although the low frequency of articles makes it difficult to form strong conclusions, the near absence of articles on Asian regionalism after 2010 does at least support claims of a downward trend in the regionalist narrative. To cast a wider net, I also conducted a search with the English terms ‘Asia’ and ‘regionalism’ in Japanese (アジア & リージョナリズム). Although a few ‘false positives’ appeared in the search, most of the 61 articles were still relevant to the context of East Asian regionalism in international relations.

As Fig. 5 indicates, the most striking pattern for Japanese narratives of East Asian regionalism is its robustness in the 1990s. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss why Japanese narratives of regionalism appear earlier in Japanese rather than Western discourse, it

---

8 The spike in 2000 is partly explained by discussions pertaining to greater institutionalization of East Asian regionalism under the APT process. In 2005, deliberations related to the East Asia Summit partly attributes to the increase in number of articles.

9 Although the general trend indicates a decline in mentions of ‘Asian regionalism’ from 2010, some specific years such as 2013 and 2017 included more articles than in the mid-late 2000s (e.g. 2006 and 2007). There were no obvious events in the database of articles to explain the slight uptick in 2013 and 2017 (e.g. the withdrawal of U.S. from TPP in 2017). One could therefore make the counterargument that the Asian regionalism narrative has not really declined. While true, I would argue that the overarching trend still suggests that narratives of Asian regionalism will not be as pervasive moving forward.

10 I identified Japan as a most likely case to find articles on Asian regionalism given its early role in the 1990s as a promoter of Asian regionalism.

11 These three sources appear to be frequently selected in Japanese newspaper content searches as they reflect different ideological perspectives and include relatively good keyword search functions. Due to high costs, I was unable to access larger Japanese language news databases.
is clear that by the late 2000s, the narrative of East Asian regionalism had dissipated even in parts of Asia.12

In short, evidence from scholarly and news publications indicates a robust decline in an East Asian regionalism narrative after 2010. The task at hand is to understand why this narrative declined after climbing steadily from the 1990s and what this means for regional strategy moving forward. The next two sections provide some context and explanation for the rise and fall of the East Asian regionalism narrative in scholarly and policy debates.

2 East Asian regionalism in theory and practice

2.1 An alternative to the ripe for rivalry thesis

The rise of an Asian regionalism narrative was by no means self-evident at the end of the Cold War, especially in the context of Asian security. For instance, Aaron Friedberg’s (1993–94) seminal ‘ripe for rivalry’ thesis, predicted a higher chance of conflict in Asia relative to Europe. The noted lack of regional institutions and interstate linkages binding Asian nations, while not a reason for conflict in and of itself,

12 My hunch is that Japan played a leading role in the waning years of the Cold War on Asian regionalism, particularly in the formation of APEC. However, by the 2000s, ASEAN had positioned itself into the ‘driver’s seat’ of Asian regionalism with Japan taking on more of a supporting role.
did not lend the region to stability, much less the idea of an East Asian community. Other structural realists concurred with Friedberg, pointing to the uncertainty of the regional balance of power and underlying security dilemmas among major powers as reasons for conflict (Betts, 1993; Christensen, 1999).

By the end of the decade, however, no major conflict had erupted. To the contrary, throughout the 1990s, regionalization processes in Asia reflected by increased regional trade and expanding regional production networks paved a more promising path for Asia’s future. Paradoxically, the Asian financial crisis, rather than disrupting regionalist trends, motivated policymakers to pursue greater regional coordination and interaction to better manage if not prevent and protect Asian states from another economic crisis (Beeson, 2003; Terada, 2003, 251).

Regionalist discourse from policymakers, most notably Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir’s formulation of an East Asian economic community, complemented societal-driven regionalizing processes (Mahathir, 1994, 95–99). Most importantly, the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the subsequent rise of the ASEAN Plus Three helped solidify the emerging, elite-led vision of an East Asian community. Thus in 1999, regional leaders noted in their APT joint declaration ‘the bright prospects for enhanced interaction and closer linkages in East Asia and recognized the fact that this growing interaction has helped increase opportunities for cooperation and collaboration ... thereby strengthening the elements of peace, stability, and prosperity in the region’ (ASEAN, 1999). Even China, which had only a few years earlier viewed institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum with suspicion, treated regional integration as the ‘building blocks’ to cooperation and an ‘inevitable trend’ (Kim, 2004, 50).

As economic regionalization and regional political developments advanced in practice, scholarship on East Asian regionalism also flourished from the late 1990s (see Figs. 1–3 above). The literature on Asian regionalism could be grouped into roughly two different strands. One strand adopted a rational-legal perspective to Asia’s evolving institutional architecture (Kahler, 2000; Ravenhill, 2009; Aggarwal and Koo, 2007; Haggard, 2013). Researchers took stock of formal organizations, assessed institutional design and outcomes, and examined the efficacy of Asian regionalism. Although scholars writing in the rational-legal
vein often noted the shortcomings of Asian institutions and questioned their utility, Asia’s institutional development was treated as a mostly positive, if limited, development for the region.

The second and arguably more prevalent strand of scholarship to arise out of the late 1990s and early 2000s adopted a process-oriented perspective to Asian regionalism (Acharya, 1997, 319; Katzenstein and Shiraishi, 1997; Stubbs, 2002; Pempel, 2005). Rather than focus on formal institutional structures and the efficacy and function of institutions, scholars in the constructivist tradition stressed institutional norms and practices. ASEAN’s consensus-based approach to regionalism exemplified this perspective with consultation, dialogue, and consensus-building becoming the hallmarks of Asian regionalism (Narine, 2008; Acharya, 2009; Ba, 2009).

The spectrum dividing academic scholarship between liberal-rational arguments on the one hand, and constructivist arguments on the other roughly corresponded with policymakers’ support for an inclusive or more exclusive form of Asian regionalism (Acharya, 1997, 319). Who belonged in East Asia and who did not was more than just a mere academic question, but one of identity and politics. As Cho and Park (2014, 592) note, the content and nature of Asian leadership related to issues of boundaries and membership. A more inclusive understanding of Asian regionalism accepted Western membership, most notably the United States and Australia. In contrast, an exclusive version of East Asian regionalism touted regional institution-building limited to countries culturally and geographically located in Asia proper (thus excluding countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada).

By the mid-2000s, trends in East Asian regionalism had prompted a measured but more optimistic forecast for Asia relative to the immediate post-Cold period. For sure, tension and uncertainty were still part of the Asian landscape. However, the transition to regional multipolarity assumed by Friedberg did not pan out. Several conflict-mitigating factors which Friedberg (1993–94, 15) noted as mostly absent a decade earlier had since developed. Increased linkages, particularly the expansion of business production networks in Asia and trade interdependence, had raised the costs of war. China’s ‘peaceful rise and development’ depended on robust external economic ties with the United States, Japan, and other regional players (Shirk, 2007, 34). Those most optimistic about Asia’s emerging security order treated the
spread of ASEAN norms and principles as the markers of a nascent security community (Acharya, 2001). In fact, ‘regional community’ had become a ‘dominant interpretative framework’ for understanding East Asian institution-building (Nabers, 2010, 940; Ba, 2014, 193). Emphasizing the dominance of the East Asian regionalism narrative in the scholarly and policy communities, Ba (2009, 193) states, ‘A relatively robust network of ‘track II’ entities in East Asia – many that explicitly referenced ‘East Asian community’ in their names or activities – also proved instrumental in relaying the ‘security community’ concept between the policy and academic worlds’. A narrative of East Asian regionalism had undeniably risen to the forefront of Asian international relations by the mid-late 2000s.

2.2 Skeptical views

As policy discourse and scholarship on Asian regionalism reached its nadir, skeptics from a variety of international relations perspectives pushed back against overly optimistic portrayals of regionalism. In a scathing critique of the entire ASEAN project, and the constructivist orientation on regionalism more generally, Jones and Smith (2007b) argued that the marriage of constructivist international relations theory with the agenda of ASEAN-centered policy promoters in the late 1990s resulted in the distortion of Asia’s empirical record on regionalism. As Jones and Smith (2007b, 165) state:

The academic preference for constructivism has misinterpreted the growth in official rhetoric extolling East Asian regionalism since 1997 in a way that has helped produce and reinforce this paradox. By contrast, we contend that government declarations of a developing East Asian identity actually serve to obscure the continuation of traditional interstate relations and do not herald any wider, let alone inexorable, movement towards an integrated regional community.

On the economic front, John Ravenhill, a leading scholar on East Asian regionalism, also qualified the degree of economic integration and institutional growth which had developed in post-Cold War Asia. While acknowledging modest levels of regionalization in the 1990s and
‘a whole new architecture of regional institutions’ created after the Asian financial crisis, Ravenhill (2009, 235) questioned their efficacy in promoting better governance. He states, ‘The institutions that have been constructed, however, mirror the deficiencies of those created under ASEAN’s auspices. They are often little more than consultative forums. Cooperation remains shallow. Governments have seldom been willing to accept even the most modest of constraints on their autonomy in policy-making as the price of constructing East Asian institutions’ (Ravenhill, 2009, 235). Ravenhill’s remarks are corroborated by a major study by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Although the ADB finds that regionalism has progressed more in East Asia than in the Asia-Pacific as a whole, ‘economic integration has advanced unevenly across functional areas’ (ADB, 2010, 83).

The skeptics may ultimately be right about East Asian regionalism. Perhaps it was really ‘much ado about nothing’ as we find gaps between the regionalist discourse and diplomatic practice. However, such arguments do not explain why a once dominant narrative lost its luster in recent years, a topic explored in the next section.

3 China’s new assertiveness and its impact on regionalist discourse

Several plausible hypotheses might explain the decline in a broader East Asian regionalism narrative in recent years. First, regionalism itself may have slowed down in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, resulting in less discussion about regionalism. Second, historical antagonism and rising nationalism within several Asian countries may have dampened the spirit of regionalism from the mid-late 2000s. Third, and relatedly, the rise (or re-emergence) of new leaders such as Xi Jinping in China and Shinzo Abe in Japan and a shift in domestic politics may have made it more difficult to sustain the narrative. Finally, one might simply argue that the novelty of East Asian regionalism wore off with scholars and policymakers moving on to other research agendas in Asian international relations. Of course, none of these reasons, which I return to in the conclusion, are mutually exclusive. However, I hone in on one hypothesis in particular: given the timing of its decline from around 2010, I argue that the greatest source of challenge to the narrative of regionalism has been China’s so-called ‘new assertiveness’ in
regional affairs, and more broadly the hardening of a balance of power logic in Asia (Johnston, 2013).

China’s rising assertiveness has led to an intensification of balancing behavior in the region. In East Asia, several major and secondary states, despite developing strong economic ties to China in the post-Cold War period, have reacted to Chinese assertiveness and its ability to exert hard and soft power with suspicion, particularly on issues related to Chinese maritime activity and the ongoing military modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Increased threat perceptions of China have resulted in balancing efforts from regional actors, either by aligning more closely to the United States, and/or by procuring additional arms and weapons systems.

Additionally, the United States responded first quietly, and then openly to Chinese assertiveness in support of its allies by touting its ‘pivot’ to Asia. Chinese leaders have interpreted the US pivot as a form of containment directed against their country. The absence of trust, fueled in part by misperceptions, thus carried the potential to spill-over into a region-wide security dilemma (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014, 86). Any narrative of East Asian regionalism would likely ring hollow in such a political climate. This is not to argue that regional actors, including China, stopped supporting regional institutions or pulled away from regional economic initiatives. To the contrary, regional-institution building efforts continue to grow. However, the prevailing narrative of regionalism based on a shared community, has been replaced with a more pragmatic understanding of regional architecture interpreted at best as overlapping (Cha, 2017; Yeo, 2018), and at worst, wholly competitive (Frost, 2014).

The mechanisms linking China’s growing assertiveness and the ensuing decline in the regionalist narrative is outlined in Fig. 6. More concretely, a shift in Chinese foreign policy behavior created a discursive environment making it much more difficult to sustain the East Asian regionalism narrative both in rhetoric and in practice. Of particular note is the timing of increased Chinese assertiveness, occurring around 2009, and the decline in the regionalist narrative shortly thereafter. One would expect a lag time of 1–2 years from when scholars and practitioners first begin to perceive greater Chinese assertiveness and a shift in the regionalist narrative in scholarly publications and news
publications. Indeed the Proquest, Nexis Uni, and WorldCat searches all mark a decline taking place from 2011.

3.1 China’s regional engagement, 1998–2008

Before expounding on China’s assertive turn in the late 2000s, it should be noted that at the height of the East Asian regionalist narrative, several leading China scholars remarked how China was an important, active player supporting regional goals (Johnston, 2003; Shambaugh, 2005). Writing in 2005, David Shambaugh (2005, 64) argued, ‘China’s growing economic and military power, expanding political influence, distinctive diplomatic voice, and increasing involvement in regional multilateral institutions are key developments in Asian affairs’. Asian states were increasingly turning toward Beijing for regional leadership. And with its rise, Shambaugh declared that ‘China’s reputation in the world has never been better’ (2005, 66).

Like many other East Asian countries, the Asian financial crisis in 1997–98 motivated China to think harder about regional cooperation (Shambaugh, 2013, 96; Beeson and Li, 2014, 78). As such, China’s suspicious stance on regional organizations began to give way to tepid support. Institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum which focused on dialogue, consensus, and noninterference in domestic affairs were viewed as nonthreatening by Chinese diplomats. China’s willingness to participate in regional security dialogues eventually led to their full participation in a number of other multilateral organizations (Shambaugh, 2005, 70). In 2003, China became the first non-ASEAN state to pledge to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and

Figure 6 From China’s increasing assertiveness to a declining regionalist narrative.
signed a Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity, indicating Beijing’s willingness to submit to the regionalist narrative. Such actions are consistent with what Shambaugh (2005, 72) observed at the time as the four pillars of China’s new regional posture: ‘1) participation in regional organizations; 2) establishment of strategic partnerships and deepening of bilateral relations; 3) expansion of regional economic ties; and 4) reduction of distrust and anxiety in the security sphere.’ The take-away from several other leading China scholars during this period was a China more productively engaged with other regional actors (Kang, 2007; Johnston, 2008). China’s openness to regionalism helped created a climate more conducive to institution-building and regional integration, thus feeding into the regionalism narrative driven by ASEAN.

3.2 China’s new assertiveness, 2009 to present

Chinese foreign policy experts argue that China’s regional engagement with its neighbors took a dramatic turn south from around 2009 (Friedberg, 2011; Johnston, 2013; Liff and Ikenberry, 2014, 56). Although Johnston (2013) disagrees with (and tries to dispel) the ‘new assertiveness’ meme in US–China relations, his careful analysis of media content supports the emergence of such discourse within US policy circles. Specific actions cited as evidence of increased Chinese assertiveness in the late 2000s/early 2010s include Beijing’s strong reaction to US arms sales, its maritime claims and escalating actions in the South China Sea in March 2010, and its response to Japan’s arrest of a Chinese fishing trawler captain in September 2010 (Johnston, 2013, 9).

To track whether rising threat perceptions and the ‘new assertiveness’ meme existed in East Asia and not just within the United States, I used the same keyword search terms as Johnston13 and conducted a similar analysis of news articles mentioning Chinese assertiveness in an index of 15 English language newspapers published in Asia.14

---

13 On LexisNexis the key search term was ‘China’ w/5 ‘assertiveness.’ The search was also conducted using ‘China’ w/10 ‘assertiveness,’ which retrieved a larger number of articles, but did not affect the general trend indicating perceptions of assertiveness beginning in 2009. I thank Iain Johnston for sharing his original data.

14 The following newspapers were included in the search: The Straits Times (Singapore), The Japan Times, The Japan News, The Korea Times, The Korea Herald, The Manila Times,
As Fig. 7 indicates, discourse regarding Chinese assertiveness begins to rapidly expand in Asian newspapers from 2009. The analysis does appear to support the idea that regional actors also experienced increasing threat perceptions from China from the late 2000s. This was particularly true of non-Chinese claimants to island and maritime rights in the South China Sea. Trouble began brewing when China submitted its territorial claim to the United Nations in May 2009 along with a nine-dashed line map demarcating a U-shape around all the islands of the South China Sea and toward the coasts of Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines (Swaine and Fravel, 2011, 2). Beijing’s declaration of claims also asserted its ‘right to make submissions on the outer limits of the continental shelf that extends beyond 200 nautical miles in the East China Sea and in other sea areas’ (Quoted in Swaine and Taylor, 2011, 4).

China has taken several actions to defend these positions. These include ‘the imposition and expansion of an annual unilateral fishing ban, regular maritime security patrols ... various forms of political and diplomatic pressure, and the conducting of scientific activities and extensive naval exercises in the vicinity’ (Swaine and Taylor, 2011, 4). Since 2013, China began construction of artificial islands above reefs...
and islets it occupies in the Spratly Islands leading to intense international criticism. Satellite imagery have confirmed China’s militarization of the islands by placing weapons and expanding what experts acknowledge as military facilities (Buckley, 2016).

China has also taken bolder steps in the East China Sea in its dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. For instance, in February 2017, three Chinese Coast Guard ships entered Japanese waters near the disputed islands (Panda, 2017). Although tensions in the East China Sea have not reached the proportion of those in the South China Sea, anti-Japanese sentiment combined with China’s growing capabilities and its commitment to defend is territorial claims have raised the specter for conflict.

More generally, while relations between China and her neighbors were relatively congenial in the mid-2000s, the 2009 flip to a more assertive China led to more strained relationships with ASEAN, Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam (Shambaugh, 2013, 77). For instance, China-South Korea relations were relatively strong, even up through the first half of 2010. However, China’s tepid and frequent nonresponse to North Korean provocations since the sinking of the Cheonan in 2010, and South Korea’s decision to deploy the THAAD US-based missile defense system in South Korea in 2016, led to increased friction. In retaliation, China reduced visa approvals and cancelled K-pop star concerts, and blocked local stations from showing Korean dramas and movies (Snyder, 2016). China also launched a potential trade dispute with South Korea by curbing charter flights between South Korea and China and preventing technology companies using Samsung or LG batteries from receiving Chinese government subsidies (Shim, 2017). In short, China’s increased assertiveness has made several regional neighbors wary of Beijing’s motives, making the narrative of regionalism and an East Asian community feel more distant and hollow.

### 3.3 Power balancing and the US pivot to Asia

US-Sino relations have been underpinned by a balance of power dynamic since the 1990s, even if calls for US engagement (or

---

‘congagement’) with China were at times louder than containment. One consequence of China’s rising assertiveness, however, was the Obama Administration’s strategic rebalance to Asia. The Obama Administration had begun formulating its rebalance strategy as early as 2009, even if the strategy did not publicly emerge until 2011 in a Foreign Policy article penned by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2011). Clinton’s article was shortly followed by the Pentagon’s public release of its own global strategy in January 2012 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012).

One might argue that the pivot to Asia preceded China’s increased assertiveness in 2009. For instance, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon revealed that the pivot was not something which just developed in 2010 or 2011, but had ‘emerged from a set of assessments, a set of activities – rising from a set of assessments that we did at the end of 2008 and into 2009 at the beginning of the administration’ (Donilon, 2012). But as President Obama’s first National Security Council director for Asia Jeff Bader (2012, 80) argues, one could detect China’s assertiveness in Chinese official statements, in the writing of Chinese security analysts, and to some extent in Chinese behavior ‘beginning about 2008 and continuing into 2010’. Thus it is reasonable to argue that a rise in Chinese assertiveness factored into the Obama Administrations strategic review. The pivot to Asia was certainly about more than China, as former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell (and one of the chief architects of the pivot) argues in his memoir (Campbell, 2016). But even though the US pivot was meant to reassure Asian partners about US regional presence rather than explicitly contain China, the call for increased US commitment to the region from Asian allies was in response, not a precursor, to the perceived aggressive shift in Chinese behavior. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the South China Sea. As former Ambassador to China Stapleton Roy (2012, 36) states, ‘China’s more assertive behavior following the 2008 financial crisis increased the desire of Beijing’s neighbors for the United States to remain engaged to play a balancing role’.

Consequently, the strategic rebalance had the effect of strengthening traditional US-treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. In Australia, the United States agreed to deploy up to 2,500 marines to the northwestern coastal city of Darwin.
on a rotating basis. A small contingent of 250 soldiers had already begun rotating in and out of Darwin since 2010. A larger contingent, however, would enable the two sides to expand military exercises and training with their Australian counterparts. Furthermore, during the 2014 AUSMIN consultations, Canberra and Washington signed the Force Posture Agreement, described as ‘a robust policy and legal framework and financial principles for implementation of the force posture initiatives announced in 2011’ (Australia Department of Foreign Affairs, 2014). If any doubts lingered regarding Australia’s support for the US strategic rebalance to Asia, the joint communiqué quashed such judgments by ‘demonstrat[ing] the United States’ strong commitment to the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean regions and Australia’s firm support for the US rebalance ... reaffirm[ing] mutual intent to deepen [the] relationship and regional security’ (Australia Department of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

In the Philippines, US–Philippine relations during the rebalancing period focused extensively on defense cooperation (Greitens, 2014). In 2011, two Chinese patrol boats threatened to ram a Philippine survey ship commissioned by the Philippine Department of Energy to explore potential oil deposits 150 kilometers east of the Spratly Islands. Outgunned by the Chinese Navy, Manila turned to the United States to strengthen its naval capacity while seeking international bodies such as the UN and ASEAN to pressure China to resolve disputes in a peaceful manner consistent with international law (Cruz de Castro, 2013, 56). Both sides also signed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014 institutionalizing a new, 10-year framework for US–Philippine defense cooperation (Greitens, 2014, 133).

Beyond US treaty alliances, growing concerns regarding China resulted in strengthened relations with nontreaty partners such as Singapore, and forged newfound relationships with countries including Vietnam and Malaysia who had traditionally been aligned to China. For instance, the United States and Singapore conducted its first bilateral Strategic Partnership Dialogue in 2012, followed by a second and third meeting in 2014 and 2015 covering issues including defense and security, trade, environment, and education (Stumpf, 2014, 235). Regarding US relations with Vietnam, Hanoi and Washington signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation and formed the US–Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership
to ‘provide an overarching framework for advancing the relationship’ in a range of areas including security, economics, diplomacy, education and training, war legacy issues, human rights, culture, and sport (White House, 2013). Much of this newfound cooperation with nontreaty allies has followed the heels of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.

The US strategic rebalance may have unfolded regardless of China’s new assertiveness in 2009. However, it is undeniable that China’s regional ambitions weighed significantly on the minds of US policymakers in crafting its strategic rebalance to Asia. The logic of balancing has continued under the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy as the US shifts its attention westward in response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Trump’s actions in Asia, including withdrawal from the TPP, have only helped further exacerbate a declining regionalist narrative.

Meanwhile, China’s rising assertiveness led other regional actors to align more closely to the United States. This can be interpreted as a sign of increasing balancing behavior from several actors fearful of China’s intentions. Liff and Ikenberry (2014, 88) have interpreted internal and external balancing among regional actors as partial evidence of ‘a security dilemma–driven spiral gradually unfolding between China and several states’. The scenario of increased military competition in Asia in recent years is in sharp contrast to the narrative of regionalism which aired more prominently among Asian security debates a decade earlier. As Liff and Ikenberry (2014, 88) summarize, ‘China’s growing power and regional relationships, marked by widespread uncertainties and insecurities about the future, appear to be important facts of life in the contemporary Asia-Pacific. Political frictions and mistrust among major actors in this unfolding drama are exacerbating the effects of objectively measurable and rapid material shifts’.

This is not to argue that all of Asia’s security woes, and thus the decline in the regionalist narrative, are attributable to China’s foreign policy behavior. Disputes arising from historical antagonism and deep-seated nationalism in Asia have also made more recent regional institution-building efforts seem hollow. Divisions within ASEAN and the failure to effectively resolve South China Sea disputes have also hampered regionalism. However, China has exploited such divisions by using its economic leverage and insisting on bilateral consultations rather than multilateral negotiations to keep ASEAN at bay.16 In effect, China’s assertiveness and the salience of balance of power politics
and US–China great power competition have Asian scholars and policymakers talking much less about regionalism today.

3.4 Objections and alternative explanations

I have attributed the decline in the East Asian regionalism narrative to China’s growing assertiveness. Some may object that the thesis articulated in this article assigns too much blame on China for undermining the regionalism narrative in East Asia. After all, if East Asia is embroiled in a security dilemma dynamic, why does the logic begin with China’s behavior and not that of the United States? Indeed, Jennifer Lind (2017, 74) argues that the United States, in addition to China, has acted as a revisionist power by pursuing ‘a strategy aimed at overturning the status quo’ through the advancement of liberal ideas, free markets, and US influence. Perhaps China’s ‘assertiveness’ is in reaction to US power in the region, and therefore the US alliances and force presence functions as an obstacle to Asian regionalism.

As an ‘off-shore balancer’ (Mearsheimer, 2001, 261), the United States and its alliance system certainly contributes to the balance of power logic in Asia. And as articulated in Fig. 6, it is the action–reaction cycle of the security dilemma, which goes beyond the actions of any single state, that has dampened the regionalist narrative in recent years. What matters, however, are the perceptions of regional actors in determining which great power feigns assertive (i.e. revisionist) goals.

The United States at times has exhibited greater assertiveness in Asia, but it has not deviated significantly in its Asia strategy in the post-Cold War period. The promotion of liberal internationalism, primarily through the structure of bilateral alliances, has been in place since the postwar period (Walt, 2018). China, on the other hand, has exhibited a notable shift in its foreign policy rhetoric, as witnessed at its 19th Party Congress in November 2017, and indeed through the expansion of its ‘core interest’. More than US interpretations of China’s behavior, it is the perception of other regional actors regarding China’s actions as threatening (more so than the United States) which warrants Chinese assertiveness as the starting point of a security dilemma.

16 I thank Aoqi Wu for this point.
Second, one might argue that the decline in the East Asian regionalism narrative occurs because scholars have finally caught up to the reality of Asia’s weak and limited regionalism. After all, leading scholars in the mid-2000s had already identified that regionalism was not as robust as perhaps earlier constructivist scholars had made it out to be. Perhaps Asian regionalism has simply fallen out of vogue. Although certainly plausible, the timing of this argument seems unusual: despite recognizing the limits of Asian institutions in the mid-2000s, the narrative of regionalism continued to persist in academic and public discourse until 2010. It seems more than coincidental that the downturn in scholarship and discourse on Asian regionalism would coincide only after, and not prior to China’s increasing assertiveness. Moreover, the proliferation of regional institutions in Asia in the past decade make it less clear whether regionalism is truly declining in practice, making the decline in the regionalist narrative all the more puzzling (Pekkanen, 2016; Yeo, 2018).

Third, a set of domestic variables including rising nationalism and the rise of political leaders less enamored to the rhetoric of regionalism may have closed off discussion. This is true, but problems of historical antagonism and nationalism (particularly anti-Japanese nationalism) are present even during periods of regional optimism. I would argue that Chinese assertiveness in the late 2000s helped exacerbate the effects of domestic political variables. Moreover, Shinzo Abe and Xi Jinping became heads of their respective states in late 2012 when the narrative of East Asian regionalism was already in decline.

Finally, some may argue that the 2008 financial crisis slowed down regional integration processes, leading to a decline in the regionalist narrative. Although economic indicators do suggest a dip, followed by a slower rate of trade and investment after 2008, this factor does not appear to be significant. For instance, as Fig. 8 indicates, ASEAN’s trade with its Northeast Asian partners has declined in recent years. However, beyond the dip in 2009, trade does not appear to have been affected significantly by the financial crisis. One could also make the claim that security tensions triggered by Chinese assertiveness have resulted in reduced trade levels (i.e. maritime disputes between Japan and China in 2013; Chinese boycott of South Korean goods in 2017).

In sum, the decline in an East Asian regionalism narrative is a reflection of broader security developments. Inter-regional linkages through trade, capital investments, labor mobility, and travel may ebb and flow, but they
have not dropped precipitously. More regional institutions exist today than a decade earlier. Other factors which might undercut the regionalist narrative such as nationalism or historical antagonism have remained fairly constant. What has changed, however, is the perceived increase in Chinese assertiveness since the late 2000s, and in response, greater balancing behavior through the tightening of US alliances and military buildup in East Asia.

### 4 Implications and conclusion

What are the implications of this research for international relations and Asian security in theory and in practice? Realists may feel vindicated by the empirical findings, but narratives do turn out to play a role in calibrating expectations of regionalism in the wake of rising threat perceptions. Even if the empirical findings support realist perspectives of post-Cold War Asia, realism itself says little about when and how actors actually perceive shifts in regional trends. Admittedly, it is difficult to decipher whether narratives track shifts in policy, or whether policy change itself occurs as old narratives fade in favor of new narratives. However, international relations theorists might consider how new initiatives such as Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Trump administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region are in part a manifestation of a declined East Asian regionalist narrative.
Three additional points are worth highlighting. First, ASEAN is certainly in the driver’s seat of Asian regionalism when it comes to promoting regional cooperation mechanisms. But from a macro-perspective, the real driver (or destroyer) of East Asian regionalism may actually be China. Regional initiatives flourished in the early and mid-2000s when China was more engaged and receptive to such institutions. As argued above, institutions and regional fora have continued to expand in recent years. However, the regional initiatives drawing greater attention from foreign policy experts and the media today are those initiated by China such as the AIIB and the BRI, rather than ASEAN initiatives. China’s vision of regionalism, guided by its own national interests, is not the liberal international one preferred by the United States, or even an ASEAN-centered form of regionalism. Future research should explore Chinese conceptions of regionalism and determine whether a regionalist narrative is in decline, or if the dominant (read ASEAN-centered) conception of regionalism is declining in favor of a new conceptualization, one with Chinese characteristics.

Second, East Asian regionalism as a narrative may be on the wane, but this does not necessarily prove that regional skeptics were right all along. The brand of regionalism offered by constructivists – one guided by norms, dialogue, and consensus-building – did hit a wall as geostrategic competition heightened. This fact appears to give more credit to the skeptics. I disagree with some of the more critical assessments directed against constructivist proponents of regional optimism and do believe the ASEAN way holds a unique place in understanding Asian regional dynamics. The recent decline in an East Asian regionalism narrative does not necessarily imply the end of regionalism in practice. It may simply mean regionalism is being manifest and moving in a direction different from what early proponents of regionalism envisioned or hoped for in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. Regionalism today appears to be associated more closely to regional institution-building or regional architecture, and less encapsulated by the idea of a political or even economic community (Yeo, 2019).

Finally, a decline in the narrative of East Asian regionalism raises further questions regarding regionalism and regionalist projects more broadly. Has the reemergence of a more powerful, assertive Russia also constrained the narrative of regionalism across Europe, and in particular within the European Union? Will the rise of right-wing, inward looking political
parties in Europe and in the Americas ultimately place a damper on regionalist narratives elsewhere outside of East Asia? Is regionalism in international relations, a topic which generated much scholarly debate in the 1990s and 2000s, now passé? And if so, is it because the idea of regionalism has lost its novelty, or is it due to rising conflict and political instability within regions? The decline in regionalist narratives may not be unique to Asia, but instead a wider secular trend taking place in other parts of the world. Comparative research exploring the relationship between great power competition and regionalist narratives may therefore provide a fruitful avenue of exploration at the intersection of realist and constructivist research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The author would like to thank Alice Ba, Kei Koga, Jessica Teets, Donald Emmerson, Wojtek Wolfe, and Aoqi Wu for comments on earlier drafts of this article. Additionally, the author is grateful to Aoqi Wu and Miho Moon for their excellent research assistance. Earlier drafts of this article were presented at the 2017 International Studies Association Annual Convention in Baltimore, MD; the 2017 ISSS-ISAC Annual Conference in Washington DC; and the Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS) in Singapore in June 2017.

References


