

An Asian Versus European Way of Regional Cooperation

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In his provocative lecture, Kishore Mahbubani doubts that the European Union can serve as a role model for regional cooperation elsewhere. The Asian model would fit the world better, or so he argues.

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In his lecture "[The Secret Formula of Asian Regional Cooperation](#)" Kishore Mahbubani compares the regional integration that has occurred both in Europe and Asia. Such integration, he claims, is a "sunrise industry" that will command our collective attention over the next one hundred to two hundred years. So far, however, there is only one "gold standard" to measure ourselves by when it comes to regional cooperation - the European Union (EU). But although he readily concedes that the EU merits this status, Mahbubani also believes it is riddled with serious defects, and therefore is an inappropriate role model for other regions. But Mahbubani does not stop there. He finally claims that the model for regional cooperation developed in Asia fits the world better than its European counterpart.

In making his case, Mahbubani first concedes the three main strengths of European integration - 1) the abolition of war and of the prospect of war between countries in the region; 2) the free movement of goods, services and people across borders, and the high degree of mutual trust this type of movement both encourages and requires; and 3) the substitution of 19th century concepts of sovereignty with 21st century notions of mutual (and comprehensive) interdependence

Where there are virtues, however, there are also deficiencies. Mahbubani balances his positive 'take' on Europe by identifying three major weaknesses of European integration - weaknesses that are sufficiently deep that they disqualify the EU as a universal role model for regional cooperation: 1) it is a "mono-civilizational" entity, as the case of Turkey's stalled attempt to become a full member illustrates, 2) there is a large amount of political dishonesty between how the EU postures itself and how it actually acts, and 3) there is also a high degree of economic dishonesty, which has been revealed by the recent debt and Euro crises.

After both praising and largely condemning the European model of regional integration, Mahbubani

turns to the Asian model, where he identifies (at least to him) three superior strengths - 1) Asian regional cooperation is multi-civilizational; 2) while the prospect of state-on-state violence has not disappeared in Asia, the countries in the region have not warred against each other in decades (with the limited exception of the Thai-Cambodian border dispute); and perhaps most importantly, 3) Asian cooperation is flexible and pragmatic, in contrast to the fettered, legalistic processes one finds in Europe. In other words, in utilitarian Asia, form follows function. East Asia in particular is "underinstitutionalized" when compared to Europe and North America," or so writes [Seungjoo Lee](#) and for Mahbubani this is an overriding virtue rather than a toe-stubbing fault. He prefers such institutional "messiness," as he calls it, and is convinced that it would be a mistake to substitute such pragmatism with an over-rationalized European model of regional cooperation.

Finally, Mahbubani does concede that there are deficiencies in Asian regional cooperation - 1) the prospect of war has not been eliminated from the region; 2) the level of trust among Asian societies remains low, as glaringly shown by the tensions between China and Japan; and 3) many Asian countries face problems of internal governance, which hampers their ability to cooperate regionally. Still, in Mahbubani's view, such weaknesses do not trump the positives previously cited. He concludes by championing the Asian way of regional cooperation over the West and hopes that it will come to replace the European "gold standard." Pragmatism and flexibility should, in his view, win out over legal formalism in the broader world.

For further comparisons of regional integration in Asia and Europe see

- [Comparing EU and Asian Integration Processes - The EU a Role Model for Asia?](#), Axel Berkofsky, 2005, EPC Issue Papers
- [Comparing European and East Asian Experiences in Higher Education Regionalism](#), Cesar de Prado, 2009, GIARI Working Papers
- [Comparing Regional Integration in East Asia/Southeast Asia and Central Asia](#), Chinara Esengul, 2011, Asian Regional Integration Review
- [The Asian Way of Regional Integration: Are There Lessons from Europe?](#), Rolf J Langhammer, 2007, Kiel Institute Economic Policy Papers
- [The Experience of European Integration and the Potential for Northeast Asian Integration](#) Philippe C Schmitter and Sunhyuk Kim, 2005, East-West Center Working Papers

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