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ASEAN Way, No Way: Informality and Regional Organizations

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Abstract

The relative lack of formal regional integration in Asia and the rise of informality has led to the argument that Asian regional organizations are somehow different; informality is allegedly the result of cultural and historical differences that require Asian regional institutions to be more consensus-driven, communitarian, and flexible. In contrast, we argue that countries in Asia are highly diverse, and that regional informality is not distinctively "Asian". By comparing the development of formal versus informal intergovernmental organizations across regions, we show that using IIGOs to limit sovereignty costs and preserve flexibility is a strategy to promote international cooperation in every region. We analyze the proliferation of informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs) using the IIGO 2.0 dataset to show that informality has become widespread in other regions. Indeed, Europe is far more informally organized than scholars have previously acknowledged. A case study of ASEAN underscores that the "ASEAN Way" mischaracterizes the foundations of informality. We extend these findings to make a larger theoretical point about the problems inherent in essentializing the concept of "region" rather than focusing on underlying variables and mechanisms; regions are malleable social constructs that cannot be reduced to fixed geography.

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Introduction

The post-Cold War era witnessed a resurgence of regional organizations in world politics along with renewed scholarly attention to their growing importance (Haftel and Hofmann 2013; Panke 2019; Schneider 2017). Much of this work historically relied on a consensus that *deep regional integration* through *formal institutional arrangements*—either explicitly or implicitly modelled on the European Union (EU)—can bring member states major political and economic benefits. While comparative regionalism scholars have moved beyond the "integration snobbery" (Murray 2010) that held the EU as a paradigmatic institution (Schneider 2017), many findings still conclude that institutional formality is regional in nature. However, this conventional wisdom ignores that the "classic" model of regional integration as seen through formal intergovernmental organizations (FIGOs) such as the EU is giving way to a proliferation of informality in regional integration. This can be seen in an increasing usage of informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs) that have relatively weak administrative structures and limited secretariats, where states coordinate collective understandings and actions during recurrent meetings of high-level national officials. IIGOs have more flexibility than FIGOs, and are thus particularly well suited institutional arrangements for interstate collaboration in periods of rapid change and crisis.

Those who have noted this shift to informality, have largely attributed it to factors such as regional culture or shared history that is different from the European experience. For example, Acharya and Johnston (2007) ask why Europe has a FIGO like the EU, but Asia "only" has less formal institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN)[3] – a regional organization established to aide cooperation on economic, social, cultural, and political issues in

[3]ASEAN has since formalized into a FIGO but was created as an IIGO, as we discuss below. See http://www.asean.org/.

Asia. ASEAN emphasizes quiet diplomacy and the rejection of adversarial posturing in negotiation. Their analysis is that "uniquely Asian" norms have affected how regional groups like ASEAN organize using 'formal informality' rather than the 'formal formality' emphasized in other regions (2007:246). This soft institutionalism has been labelled "the ASEAN way" (Acharya 1997) to emphasize the seeming distinctiveness of Asian institutions, which eschew formal mechanisms and legalistic decision-making procedures in favor of *musyawarah* (consultation) and *mufakat* (consensus) rather than bargaining and confrontation to achieve collective goals (Acharya 2012: 206-207).

The shift to informality is widespread, however, and better explained by the timing of international institutionalization than by its geographic location. Asia's "exceptionalism" in informality is due to its late-institutionalization, not to its region or culture; Europe has likewise shifted toward greater informality in terms of its more recent institutionalization. In other words, across very different regions, states share the common trend of using more informal intergovernmental organizations to handle some of the most recent issues of global governance. Africa is the greatest anomaly with its persistence in the creation of formal institutions which may be explained by their regime-boosting capabilities (Söderbaum 2011) and their ability to generate selective benefits for politicians and bureaucrats such as status, financial benefits, and power (Gray 2018). Using the IIGO 2.0 dataset, we show that the proliferation of IIGOs[4] is not uniquely Asian, but is widespread, reflecting changing organizational possibilities in the late twentieth and twenty first century both globally and *across regions*. While formal integration continues in many areas, many aspects of European institutionalization have also become

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[4] Institutions can be informal in multiple ways (Westerwinter et al 2021), including in their internal norms (Stone 2011).We focus on the distinction between informal and formal IGOs, which have been the central vehicles for regional organization.

markedly less formal. Conversely, ASEAN itself has significantly formalized, not because it is less Asian. It is simply that states find alternative institutional formality and levels of delegation (Vabulas and Snidal 2022) to be more useful for different problems and at certain times (Westerwinter et al 2021). Therefore, our findings reinforce the view that scholars and practitioners of regional institutions have been too preoccupied with formal regional integration. Instead, formality is not a property of particular regions but reflects a growing and general demand among states to protect their sovereignty while cooperating. Rather than treating regional organizations in terms of geographic boundaries, we should see them as clubs whose membership is socially constructed around shared foreign policy goals in light of common problems that are partly shaped by geography.

Our critique of the "ASEAN way" argument lends itself to a broader critique of treating contextual factors as untheorized "explanations" of important outcomes in international relations. This is especially true for concepts like "region" that are not fixed but are (partly, at least) socially constructed and change over time. We thus argue against the tendency for scholars to "essentialize" contexts (such as region) rather than unpacking them into underlying explanations and core mechanisms. By examining ASEAN (in its early stages) as an IIGO, noting that it transformed into a FIGO, and comparing it to IIGOs in general, we show that there is nothing uniquely "Asian" about the ASEAN way. Its more communitarian, consensus-driven, softer international commitment is similar to around 150 other IIGOs we have identified across a wide set of regions. Taken together, our argument is not that regionalism is becoming less relevant but that the *form* of regional agreements is changing to reflect the changing needs more broadly in global politics.

1. What is a region?

We define region as a level between the national and global: a "social construction that makes references to territorial location and to geographical or normative contiguity" (Borzel and Risse 2015:7). As this definition indicates, geography and territory are important elements in defining regions, but not the sole determinants. The geographic component is strongest when states have created (and thus scholars have analyzed) regional groupings that correspond closely to traditional "continental" definitions (e.g. Asian or African groupings), but also to alternative geographic considerations such as common latitude (e.g., the Group of Temperate Southern Hemisphere Countries on the Environment), a common body of water (e.g. Black Sea Economic Cooperation), or ecological factors (the Arctic).

But geography is an imperfect guide to defining regional organizations. Regions can also include contiguous areas that may not align with "standard" definitions of a geographic region. NATO, which began with twelve members that roughly fell in the North Atlantic region, is still considered a regional organization even though it quickly expanded for functional reasons to include Greece and Turkey and subsequently a series of new members from central and then Eastern Europe. Moreover, common language (Latin America and Francophone areas) as well as common culture (Arab states) or religion have been used to define regions—but these entail contiguous norms and practices rather than geography. But some element of geography seems necessary in defining regional organizations: the OECD, for example, is not usually considered regional because it is defined by income rather than geography. Similarly, the BRICs, is not

usually considered regional because even though these countries share contiguity in terms of their ascending development status, they are not geographic neighbors.[5]

What then do we mean by "region"? We thus argue that many conventional understandings of "region" are not theoretically sustainable for several reasons. First, regionalism scholars treat regions as unmalleable factors that might explain patterns in things like political development or economic growth. These researchers have thus treated regions as independent variables (IVs) that could indicate whether some outcome in international relations is more or less likely to occur. For example, scholars may look at whether "European" countries are more likely to have free and fair elections than "African" countries. In other words, they argue that something about the country's "Europeaness", makes those free and fair elections more likely. The key challenge with this logic is that regions are not objective categories but instead they are socially constructed. There are no hard and fast lines where Europe stops and Asia begins.[6] For example, in which region should we place Turkey? Russia? Nor does every scholar have the same understanding of what it means to be African – or of when and which African countries should instead be put into a separate "Middle East and North Africa" (MENA) category. In fact, the MENA category reflects that there is something "different" about the north of Africa versus the sub-Saharan region, and between the Arabian Peninsula and the rest of Asia.

The rich "New Regionalism" literature criticizes some of the field's earlier shortcomings. While it falls prey to the same key problem of considering regions fixed, "New Regionalism's

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[5] Some readers may object that our broad conception of region makes a parody of it. That is not our purpose; it may be a by-product.

[6] Indeed, the labels Europa and Asia originated in Archaic Greece as the western and eastern shores of the Aegean Sea, respectively, with Libya being the label for the southern shore of the Mediterranean. The arbitrariness (and political-cultural aspects) of even this simple division is reflected in the fact that Ptolemy (who was a geographer as well as an astronomer) followed this division but changed the Asia/Libya border from the Nile to the Red Sea to avoid dividing his native Egypt.

critique of "old" regionalism's state-centrism and focus on formal institutions (Laursen 2003; Soderbaum 2015) provides a gateway for focusing on the role of civil-society actors (Borzel and Risse 2015). Expanding regionalism to address this aspect of informality is valuable (Katzenstein and Shiraishi 1997; Sandholtz and Stone-Sweet 1998; Soderbaum 2004), however, we argue that "New Regionalism" does not go far enough in pushing what it means to be informal. There is also need to account for *informal legal and administrative structures* that allow us to investigate how patterns of informality in regional organizations extend across the globe.

2. What are IIGOs?

To analyze the extent of informality, we turn to informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs). The legal and administrative informality of IIGOs represent an important way by which states institutionalize (Voeten 2019) softer forms of delegation and allows us to compare variation across regional organizations. An IIGO is an intergovernmental organization (1) based on explicitly shared expectations (2) among high-level officials holding recurrent meetings but (3) lacking any formal institutional arrangement of its own such as a secretariat (Vabulas and Snidal 2013, 2021). This provides a sharp contrast to a FIGO based on a legal treaty with a permanent, secretariat (see the Correlates of War IGO project, Pevehouse et al. 2020). Both IIGOs and FIGOs are ideal types; no empirical case necessarily fits either conception perfectly but the analytical distinction is helpful to compare very different institutional design choices. Indeed, most IGOs occupy intermediate levels of institutionalization along the IIGO-FIGO spectrum and IGOs can move between the two over time.

Organizations need not remain fixed as formal or informal over time; institutions change according to the needs of member states. For example, while ASEAN started as an IIGO based on a non-legal declaration among ministers with no secretariat, it has formalized over time to

become a FIGO by adding a permanent secretariat in 1976 (updated in 1981) and a treaty-based charter in 2008.[7] We unpack this more below. Still, other Asian institutions have remained informal (and ASEAN itself obviously still falls short of being a highly formalized institution like the EU).

When do states prefer to use IIGOs rather than FIGOs, which typically have much greater capacities for organizing, administering, and implementing cooperative activities? A first reason is comparative functional advantages. IIGOs offer greater flexibility, non-transparency, and speed than FIGOs while typically entailing lower transactions and organizational costs (Vabulas and Snidal 2013). These attributes are especially valuable when states must move quickly to address crises and evolving issues. By contrast, FIGOs are superior for dealing with on-going routine issues where centralized operational capacity is valuable.

Second, IIGOs provide a way for states to cooperate while avoiding high sovereignty costs. Because states protect their sovereignty, they are reluctant to delegate power and authority to FIGOs unnecessarily. For many problems, IIGOs provide an alternative organizational form that allows states to pool authority through joint decision-making while maintaining close individual control over operations instead of delegating that authority to FIGOs. Not having a secretariat means there is no independent agent that might threaten state autonomy by expanding its authority. However, IIGOs are less effective if states need a central agent with operational capacities or to tie their hands through harder commitments that solve time inconsistency problems. FIGOs solve such problems by delegating authority to an independent organization and secretariat.

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[7] http://agreement.asean.org/

Third, IIGOs provide a useful vehicle for preserving state (executive) autonomy from domestic legislatures and civil society actors. The informality and sometimes non-transparency of IIGOs allows the executive branch to limit the access and thereby the influence of other domestic political and non-state (whether domestic or international) actors over international cooperation. The very properties that make IIGOs effective – including flexibility, speed and secrecy – also open up possibilities for their misuse and raise normative question as to their desirability. While secrecy is clearly beneficial in certain IIGO settings (for example, in combatting money-laundering), secrecy also makes IIGOs highly unaccountable to domestic audiences and nonmember states. Formal agreements may also be more legitimate because they go through an international process, require domestic ratification and may be more transparent.

Fourth, IIGOs provide a way for states to escape the constraints of FIGOs and, especially, the concern that a FIGO might expand its autonomy. Increasing voice and participation of less powerful states in FIGOs has led powerful states not only to an increased use of informal arrangements within FIGOs (Stone 2011) but also to an increased use of IIGOs as a substitute for FIGOs. IIGOs have also been useful for weaker states that are disadvantaged in the major multilateral institutions and wish to develop an outside option to improve their situation.

Finally, while the previous considerations summarize the demand side benefits of informal organizations, supply side costs are also important. Because informality requires more active involvement of top governmental officials (e.g., summits) and sometimes extensive interactions within transgovernmental networks, IIGOs require good interstate communication and transportation to enable effective informal interactions. An important reason for the recent rise in IIGOs has been the massive improvements in transportation and communication (Manulak and Snidal 2021).

IIGOs need not be alternatives to FIGOs; they can be used together as complements in promoting international cooperation. An example is when the G20 (an IIGO) orchestrates the IMF (a FIGO) to govern international financial issues (Viola 2015). This allows states to gain the advantages of IIGOs listed above while still taking advantage of the operational capacities of FIGOs as necessary. In sum, the rise in importance of IIGOs does not mean that FIGOs will become obsolete and may sometimes increase the importance of FIGOs.

3. An Empirical Analysis of Regional FIGOs and IIGOs

Since 1815, when the first IIGO – the Concert of Europe – was organized to manage the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, states have created around 150 IIGOs to address their most significant problems. The first FIGO (the Rhine Commission) was also founded in 1815 but FIGOs did not grow in number until the early 1870s. At that point, FIGOs began to multiply at a fairly constant rate through the interwar period. The growth rate of FIGOs then increased dramatically from 1945 until the end of the Cold War, shortly after which FIGO growth basically stopped. By contrast, the dramatic growth spurt of IIGOs began only in the 1980s and appears to be continuing. While there are still almost three times as many FIGOs as IIGOs, informality is becoming increasingly significant both numerically and substantively. Indeed, sixty percent of the net growth in IGOs since 1980 – and all of the growth since 1995 – is attributable to IIGOs.

Like FIGOs, IIGOs operate at both the global and the regional level but our focus here is on regional patterns. How do patterns of informality show at the regional level? We categorize IIGOs as regional by examining (1) whether it is organized around regional goals, and (2) whether its membership confirms the regional association. Next, in order to compare regional IIGOs to other forms of regional integration that are primarily based on continental regional

categories,[8] we assign each regional IIGO to a mutually exclusive category: Asia, Europe,

Africa, Americas, Pacific (including Australia) and Other (which includes cross-regional

categories such as Europe-Asia and IIGOs that are geographically defined in nontraditional ways

as noted above). Such an exercise is difficult as there is no universally agreed definition of

regions among either scholars or policymakers. It therefore requires judgement calls,

underscoring our argument that regions are not straightforwardly intrinsic to geography.

As Figure 1 shows, the post-Cold War era has seen a surge of regional organizations, and

the form of regional IGOs – defined by the share of IIGOs -- has become distinctly more

informal. Indeed, the number of regional *formal* intergovernmental organizations (FIGOs) like

the EU, Organization of American States, or African Union has stopped increasing while the

number of regional IIGOs like the East Asia Summit (2005), the Lima Group (2017), and the

Three Seas Initiative (2016) continue to increase. These informal regional configurations are

especially significant because IIGOs are used primarily for important political issues including

security, economic, and political affairs to meet the challenges of the 21st century whereas many

FIGOS are used for secondary regulatory and social issues (Vabulas and Snidal 2021).

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[8] An alternative coding strategy would assign a cross-continental IIGO fractionally to each region (e.g., by share of membership) but coding rules could be arbitrary and may change with membership changes over time. While the Middle East is often broken out from Asia, we do not do that here as it has few IGOs and does not affect the results below.
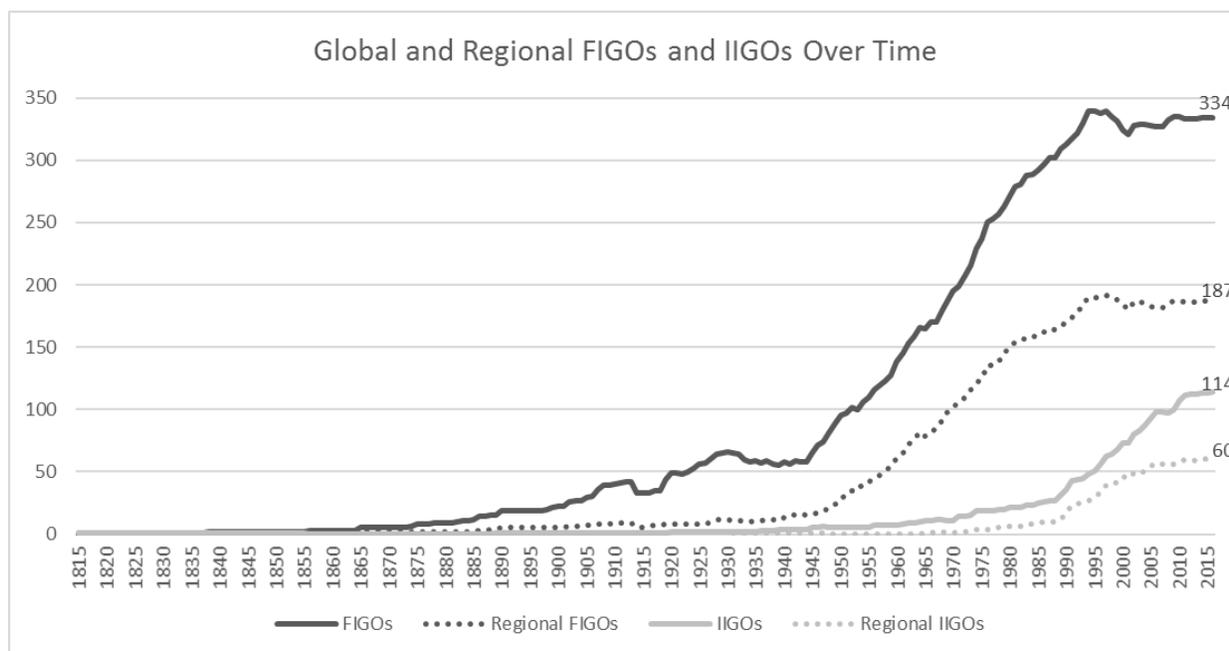
Figure 1: Cumulative IIGOs and FIGOs over time[9]

Figure 1 shows that 53% of IIGOs (60/114) are geographically regional while Figure 2

compares the frequency of IIGOs and FIGOs in different regions (as defined earlier). Comparing

across columns, Asia has the highest percentage of IIGOs (37%) and the other regions have a

greater proportion of FIGOs (from 74% for Europe up to 95% for Africa). Perhaps surprisingly,

however, the greatest number of regional IIGOs (43%) actually involve members from Europe

(including cross-regional cases such as Asia-Europe).[10] Thus, informality is prolific in Europe,

which does not accord with the standard presumption that Europe has a tendency toward FIGOs.

Just because formality has been ubiquitous in Europe does not mean that informality is absent;

IIGOs and FIGOs are not simply substituting for one another. European IIGOs such as the

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[9] These numbers include only organizations that are still "alive". Interestingly, IIGOs are more durable than FIGOs and IIGO "deaths" are largely due to increased legalization, acquiring a secretariat or both (in which case they become a FIGO). IIGO data is based on the IIGO 2.0 dataset (Vabulas and Snidal 2019). FIGO data comes from Pevehouse et. al. (2019).

[10] The 43% includes regions such as the Black Sea, Baltic Sea, Mediterranean, and North Atlantic that are categorized under "other" in Figure 2.

Austerlitz-Format, Budapest Process, the Visegrad Group, Weimar Triangle, and Central European Defense Cooperation have taken their place alongside FIGOs such as the Council of Europe and the European Union and have become increasingly important in the 21st century. This proliferation of regional IIGOs in Europe reflects increasing tendency for states to cooperate without strong institutional commitment or giving up more sovereignty than necessary.

Figure 2: Regional FIGOs and IIGOs

REGION	Number of FIGOS (%)	Number of IIGOS (%)	Total IGOs	Density (IGOs/States) 1990	2017	Number (%) Created after 1990
Africa	89 (95%)	4 (5%)	93	1.3	1.7	19 (20%)
Americas	66 (90%)	7 (10%)	73	1.6	2.0	13 (18%)
Asia	22 (63%)	13 (37%)	35	.4	.7	17 (49%)
Europe	75 (74%)	26 (26%)	101	1.5	2.4	37 (37%)
Pacific	6 (54%)	5 (46%)	11	.8		6 (55%)
Other	34 (61%)	22 (39%)	56	n/a		31 (54%)
TOTAL	292 (79%)	77 (21%)	369			123 (33%)

By comparison, Figure 2 shows that 24% of regional IIGOs involve members from Asia (again, including cross-regional IIGOs). Examples of Asian regional IIGOs include the East Asia Summit and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). These data show that there *is* significant regional variation in international institutionalization, but it is not as simple as "Europe tends to be more formally institutionalized" and "Asia tends to be less formally institutionalized."

Figure 2 also shows the ratio of both types of IGOs to the number of states in a region as a rough measure of regional IGO density, and the proportion of both types of IGOs created

before and after 1990 to uncover time patterns. What is striking is both the low density of Asian institutionalization but also its fairly rapid increase.

Figure 3 allows us to compare the formation of regional organizations (both formal and informal) in Europe and Asia over time to reveal a pattern that undermines the ASEAN Way claim. Before 1991, IIGOs were quite rare overall: only ten IIGOs had been created in the two regions combined. But in the post-1991 period their number more than nearly tripled to 29. By contrast, 72 FIGOs had been created in the two regions by 1990 but their number increased by only one-third (25) in the subsequent period. This change is also reflected in the regional breakdown. Europe formed many regional organizations before 1991 (64 in total)[11], only 13% of which were IIGOs. By contrast, relatively few IGOs *of any type* were created in Asia before 1991 (18 in total), only 11% of which were IIGOs. So before 1991, Asia produced fewer IGOs but the same proportion of informal ones. After 1991, Europe has continued to create more regional IGOs (37) but now nearly half of these are IIGOs (49%). In the same period, Asia still created fewer new regional IGOs (17) but a higher proportion are IIGOs (65%).[12]

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[11] We use a cut-point at 1990 because of the shift in international order following the Cold War. Below we critique the use of periodization.

[12] For stark contrast, we leave out the handful of organizations that are cross-regional between Europe and Asia.

Figure 3: Regional Institutions by Date of Creation

	Africa		Americas		Asia		Europe		Pacific		Other		All	
	FIGO	IIGO	FIGO	IIGO	FIGO	IIGO	FIGO	IIGO	FIGO	IIGO	FIGO	IIGO	FIGO	IIGO
Created before 1991	71 96%	3 4%	57 95%	3 5%	16 89%	2 11%	56 88%	8 13%	4 80%	1 20%	22 85%	4 15%	226 91%	21 9%
Total (%<1991)	74 (80%)		60 (82%)		18 (51%)		64 (63%)		5 (45%)		26 (46%)		247 (67%)	
Created in 1991 or after	18 95%	1 5%	9 69%	4 31%	6 35%	11 65%	19 51%	18 49%	2 33%	4 67%	12 40%	18 60%	66 54%	56 46%
Total (%≥1991)	19 (20%)		13 (18%)		17 (49%)		37 (37%)		6 (55%)		30 (54%)		122 (33%)	

Students of Asian institutionalization are therefore correct to say that Asia is not as densely institutionalized as Europe, but its institutions created before 1991were as formal as in Europe. While recent Asian regional IGOs are slightly less formal than recent European regional IGOs, the real difference between the regions is that Asia is late to creating institutions as a whole and has done so in a period where all states have moved towards creating more IIGOs.[13] In sum, informality is not a primarily regional phenomenon but a temporal one; we see a strong shift toward the creation of IIGOs in both regions in the post-Cold War era.

Indeed, the greatest anomaly in the regional patterns above is now Africa, which remains focused on the creation of FIGOs (95%). Sadly, this may reflect the sham nature of institutionalization in Africa where many FIGOs are created for "show" and pork barrel purposes and become "zombies" thereafter (Gray 2018). Indeed, one advantage of IIGOs is that there is little reason for creating them beyond *actually using them* for pursing interstate agendas. They do not have glitzy secretariat buildings providing cushy jobs for political appointees with large per diem allotments.

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[13] As noted above, Manulak and Snidal (2021) attribute the shift from FIGOs to IIGOs in the more recent period to shifts in the communication and transportation costs, including the internet, which have made informal international diplomacy much more effective and cost-effective.

What should we then make of these regional patterns? First, simple generalizations such as "Asian institutions are different to European institutions" are not sustainable under closer examination. While Asian institutions are more informal than European ones, the explanation seems to lie heavily in the fact that Asia is a "late-institutionalizer" in a period where there has been a general shift to IIGOs relative to FIGOs. For the same reason, Europe has a high proportion of IIGOs associated with the end of the Cold War, at a point when all countries seem to be opting for less formal mechanisms of cooperation to protect sovereignty. The real difference thus is time not region.

Instead of labeling these as "regional organizations", we might better treat them as "club organizations." The latter terminology emphasizes that shared foreign policy aims, sometimes combined with geographic location, are key determinants of organizational membership. In other words, normative contiguity is as important as physical or material contiguity in the social construction of intergovernmental clubs. In a similar vein, Davis and Pratt (2020) show how clubs provide a useful way to categorize formal "economic" international organizations; club membership "boundaries" are driven not by an ability to contribute to effective economic regulation (Cornes and Sandler 1996) but, instead, by shared geopolitical goals and values.

4. The ASEAN Way

This comparison is important because the increasing pattern of informal regionalism has been incorrectly attributed to a supposedly unique Asian (regional) ethos most clearly represented in ASEAN. ASEAN is a regional organization whose five founding members—Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Indonesia—are Asian. At the outset, ASEAN initially focused on security but the organization's focus has since expanded both in terms of membership and issue-coverage.

Whether ASEAN operates differently than other intergovernmental organizations—and more broadly, whether Asian regional institutions are structured differently to other regional entities—has consumed many scholars. Jetschke and Katada (2015:225), for example, note that "one of the most puzzling features of Asian regionalism as compared to other regions is its limited formal institutionalization." Moreover, Acharya (2015) has argued that a theory of regionalism is needed for the non-Western world, to account for states fundamentally wanting to preserve state autonomy and limit extra-regional influence. Acharya examines why ASEAN states prefer less formal or legalistic institutions (such as a supranational bureaucracy or formal arbitration/dispute settlement mechanisms) that could otherwise undercut sovereignty and non-intervention.

In order to begin to answer this question, Acharya advanced "the ASEAN Way" as a label for the seemingly distinctly different way that many argue defines ASEAN as compared to the European Union, which is often used as a standard model. This in itself is problematic for many reasons, but most importantly, the EU is the only regional integration scheme to truly go "beyond the nation-state" as a supranational organization. Nevertheless, Acharya coined the ASEAN Way to name an alternative pathway to formal intergovernmental cooperation, and instead recognize a novel form of international organization that is more communitarian and more consensus-driven (Acharya and Johnston 2007, 2012). The ASEAN Way involves "a high degree of discreetness, informality, pragmatism, expediency, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles" (Acharya 1997:329).

Acharya argues that the uniqueness of ASEAN stems from the historical peculiarity of Southeast Asia, which includes colonization, late independence and major internal security threats rather than external threats prominent in Europe or in Northeast Asia. These features,

according to this logic, have encouraged the development of organizing principles including consensus, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty. We argue, however, that institutional features not distinctively "Asian." A concern for internal security has been paramount in the early operations of other regional groupings beginning with the Concert of Europe. Moreover, colonialism, late independence and internal security threats also characterize many African countries which have favored formal rather than informal regional organizations. ASEAN countries are therefore not distinctive in terms of independence and security threats.

The ASEAN Way's foundational claim also often rests on the suggestion of a common history of colonialism (Katzenstein 1997:32; Katsumata 2003). However, of the five initial ASEAN members, Thailand was never colonized, and the other four members were parts of different empires (Portuguese, Dutch, English, and American). These colonial differences have mattered, establishing very different administrative and legal cultures that have held over time. Moreover, the five founding members do not share a common language but many languages including Thai, Malay, English, Indonesian, Filipino, Tamil, and Mandarin Chinese to name a few.

Others argue that the idiosyncratic factors related to ASEAN's informality are driven by shared culture of member states. In this argument, Asian culture is more communitarian than Western norms and often puts society over self. An example of how this bears out in ASEAN is that the organization has adopted the Malay practice of consultation and consensus building as an operational process -- and also noninterference in each other's affairs.[14] If the ASEAN Way does draw on a unique set of values, however, it is important to ask what and where they come from. Scholarly analysis of Filipino values, for instance, show that personal relationships form the

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[14] Relatedly, the "Shanghai Spirit" is similar to the ASEAN Way, but invokes the principles seen in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

backbone of the value system with strong roots based in kinship, friendship, and commercial ties. However, just within the Philippines, the value system is an assemblage of different ideologies, moral codes, ethical practices, and etiquette that can all vary greatly depending on individual's religion, upbringing, and more. ASEAN is indeed defined by the diversity of its members. Malaysia even expelled Singapore from the Malay Foundation in 1965, showing that the "region" is a political creation, not fixed by geography.

Moreover, many of these values are not unique to Asia or ASEAN countries. Tying back to why countries choose informal organizations, it is therefore hard to swallow the notion that only Asian countries would have a concern for their sovereignty. Indeed, the Westphalian Western order is built on this premise. This underscores a wider tenant: Asia is diverse, even without including parts of the Middle East or the arguably more European Russia. In terms of Huntington's civilizations, the original five members of ASEAN cut across three civilization groups defined at the broadest level, and Asia more broadly cuts across six even without including Russia. Indeed, using this accounting, Asia is the most diverse region (Russett, O'Neal & Cox 2000).

Quite simply, Figure 4 shows there is very little common history or culture beyond sharing the experience of Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Indeed Michael Jones (2004:148) poses the question, "How does a region create a common identity when there are so many competing cultural identities?" Instead of this collection of countries sharing bottom-up cohesion, the ASEAN Way has been socially constructed from the top-down, as a project to create a regional identity. This identity has been backward induced: analysts have looked at the nature of ASEAN and imputed those "values" to member countries rather than using independent measures of values as a way of capturing the experiences.

Figure 4: Cultural and Historical Differences Among ASEAN Founding Members

	Colonial Past	Ethnicity	Religion	Language	Legal system	Governance form 1967 Polity Score	Freedom House 2002 Rank (Score)
Thailand	None	Thai 86% Khmer	Buddhist 95% Islam 5%	Thai	Civil	(-7)	65 (22.75)
Indonesia	Dutch (1800-1811; 1816-1949)	600 ethnic groups	87% Islam 11% Christian	Indonesian	Civil	Republic (-6)	57 (20) Military dictatorship in 1967
Philippines	Spanish (1565-1898); American	34% Visayan 24% Tagalog 8% Llocan	Christian 92% Islam 6%	Filipino, English (+19 recognized) Tagalo 24% Cebuano 21%	Civil Law	Constit. democ (5)	89 (29.0)
Malaysia	Portuguese (1511-1641); Dutch (1641-1824); British (1824-1957)	Malay	Islam 61% Buddhist 20% Christian 9%	Malay (English recognized)	Common Law + Sharia	Democracy (Constit. Elective Monarchy) (1)	110 (38.8)
Singapore	British (1819-1942)	Chinese 76% Malay 15% Indian 8%	Buddhist 33% Christianity 19% Islam 14%	English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil	Common Law	(-2)	144 (47.33) for 2003

If the ASEAN Way label is constructed top-down, then it is not clear why it needs to be geographically regional. Social construction in the modern age is not restricted or even necessarily promoted by geography or other elements of regionhood. Indeed, ASEAN has many spin-off entities including ASEAN + 3 (which includes China, South Korea, and Japan) and ASEAN + 6 (which adds in India, Australia, and New Zealand). As ASEAN has expanded to these groupings, it has remained informal even though these groups are less culturally homogenous.

ASEAN has also extended its operational norms in geographically diverse directions that include Canada, the U.S. and EU. This expansion of dialogue shows that whereas region once strongly shaped the common problems faced by states, increasingly problems from economic development through cyber security are shaped at a non-regional and even global level. This is certainly the case for ASEAN countries who no longer face geographically-based security issues so much as global issues related to the economy and climate. ASEAN itself has arguably lost its "ASEAN Way", further undermining the idea that there is something distinctly Asian about the way this institution operates.

Furthermore, while ASEAN began as an informal grouping, it has since added a secretariat—initially in 1976, housed within the Indonesian Foreign Ministry, and then fully separate in 1981. It also "moved to forge an EU-style community" by legalizing the interstate cooperation through a treaty in 2008.[15] More significantly, as the scope of ASEAN has expanded to embrace a wider range of issues, the Secretariat has also expanded dramatically. Four Deputy Secretary Generals who oversee three supporting divisions and four departments support the Secretary-General. The departments each have two or three directorates with 46 divisions and a

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[15] International Herald Tribune December 15, 2008.

considerable staff. The organizational chart is correspondingly complex. There are a further 16

ASEAN Centres and Facilities distributed at various locations and another 75 entities associated

with ASEAN. In short, while ASEAN is not as formalized as the EU, it has become one of the

more extensively formalized international organizations. Importantly, ASEAN formalization is

not inevitable but is a response to the problems it faces, not to its identity.[16] By contrast, most

IIGOs have not formalized at all and, of those IIGOs that have, few have formalized as much as

has ASEAN.[17]

The ASEAN Way is thus a misleading label. It has been used as both a dependent

variable to signify nonintervention or consensual decision-making but also as an independent

variable to invoke Asian culture and ethos as a key explanatory factor for particular behaviors.

But the dataset of IIGOs shows that informality is not distinctive to Asia. Indeed the first

Western IIGO, the Concert of Europe worked on similar principles to ASEAN. The second

Treaty of Paris called for the Congress of Vienna "to consolidate the connections which at the

present moment so closely unite the Four Sovereigns for the happiness of the world … for the

purpose of consulting upon their common interests, and for the considerations of the measures

which at each of these periods shall be considered the most salutary for the response and

prosperity of Nations, and for the maintenance of peace in Europe."[18]

Our analysis instead shows that the proliferation of IIGOs—and the desire for informality

and protecting sovereignty more broadly—is not a uniquely Asian phenomenon but reflects

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[16] Indeed, if there is any change in identity going on, it would seem an endogenous reaction to problems faced and to be going in the opposite direction.

[17] The most institutionalized former IIGOs include the Inter-American system which developed into the Organization of American States (OAS), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which formalized as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) which became the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Ironically, the OSCE was proposed as a model for ASEAN but was rejected as too formal. ASEAN has now surpassed its level of formality.

[18] Treaty of Paris, 1783; International Treaties and Related Records, 1778-1974; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives.

changing organizational needs and possibilities in the twenty first century across all regions. Instead of asking why there has been no NATO in Asia (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002), for example, the true puzzle should be why there has been a NATO in Europe. While we agree that recognizing ASEAN's founding informal principles as being a significant institutional choice, the data we have presented above shows that ASEAN's administrative structure is far from unique, is not distinctly Asian, and that such institutional arrangements need not be region-centered. Indeed the seductively misleading homonymic terminology of ASEAN Way makes it sound like there is some special "Asian Way" but, in fact, it is simply that states find alternative institutional forms – more or less formalization – to be more useful for different problems and at certain times.

This fits with our logic of why states form IIGOs, but without invoking regional variation. Put differently, the number of informal organizations in Asia is not out of step with the number of informal organizations in other regions. The ASEAN way literature's focus on informality as being an Asian concept has led to a bias in the literature on regionalism. The ASEAN/Asian path is of course different from the EU experience, but not from what is happening more generally both with geographically-regional organizations and with IIGOs more generally. The goal of most contemporary IIGOs is to avoid sovereignty costs while achieving cooperation which is different than the goal of the EU which was to go beyond the nation-state and supersede national sovereignty.

IIGOs are increasingly used everywhere. Attributing variations in formality and organizational features to regional differences, or even to differences between regional and global IGOs, is misleading. Just as relying on EU integration as "the" model of regional cooperation is misguided, so counter-claims that "Asian institutionalization is special" are

overstated. Regional analysis should not be used to separate different cases by geography but rather to understand institutionalization in comparative terms. The rise of IIGOs highlights that there has been a large shift across all regions towards informal organizations. By analyzing IIGOs as a category, we gain a better understanding of the underlying factors that prompt states to design informal institutions that protect sovereignty and push for consensus-based decisions.[19]

5. Let's Not Essentialize Regions

The use of region as a contextual variable to geographically segregate the analysis of institutions is misleading. Instead, we need to incorporate contextual distinctions in a way that unites not divides our analyses. The incorrect association of informality as unique to the Asian regional experience points toward more general problems inherent in using "region" as an explanation. Instructive analogies for seeing the limits of region as a theoretical explanation are provided by its use in statistical approaches, by efforts to periodize history, and by the use of racial categories. First, in statistical analyses, "region" is frequently used as a control variable – and as an untheorized concept. We include control variables to neutralize (cross-regional) variation in order to focus on the variation of interest – which cannot be the control variable itself. Fixed factors (like region) are therefore not a central explanatory factors in an analysis – but they may provide pointers towards important underlying differences. Whenever the control variables are doing too much work in an analysis, it behooves the researcher to look inside them (e.g.., the underlying properties that characterize a region) and unpack them into theoretical and substantively meaningful variables.

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[19] By distinguishing the pre- and post-Cold war periods, our paper also shows that these patterns predate recent waves of nationalism and populism.

Second, similar challenges arise from using the periodization of history as an explanatory factor. Drawing arbitrary lines to create regions (or accepting conventional geographic demarcations) is similar to the problem we create when we divide history into periods. "The very act itself draws our attention to the fact that there is nothing neutral, or innocent, about cutting time into smaller parts" (Le Goff 2014:17). "Periodization always represents a judgment of value with regard to sequences of events that are grouped together in one way rather than another." This applies to our own effort to argue that time periods rather than regions better explain the nature of institutionalization. This claim itself invites further investigation. Is it due to some key difference between the Cold War and post-Cold War that has caused this change? Or is it because of changing institutional possibilities caused by communication and transportation possibilities? Policymakers today state that we need "new multilateral configurations to meet the challenges of the 21st century",[20] recognizing the importance of shifts in informality related to the time period.

A less closely related example is that while race is also often used as a control variable, to use it as an explanatory variable "we should talk about ancestry (which, unlike "race," refers to one's genetic heritage, not innate qualities); or the specific gene variants that, like the sickle cell trait, affect disease risk; or environmental factors like poverty or diet that affect some groups more than others".[21] Regions, like other categories such as "time period" and "race", are helpful for organizing research in early stages. However, as research develops, these categories must be theorized and ultimately replaced with the underlying factors that contain the deeper explanations.

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[20] Jen Psaki, President Biden's Press Secretary when discussing the upcoming meeting of the Quad on 24 September 2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-host-leaders-australia-japan-india-sept-24-white-house-2021-09-13/
[21] New York Times Dec 8 2017.

Region thus provides a useful stand-in for factors such as geographical proximity, geophysical factors such as the environment, common characteristics such as language and culture, and shared historical experiences, and increasingly political phenomena. Where geography and material factors dominate, it may be less interesting and important to unpack "region" but, especially insofar as region is socially constructed, we need to decompose it to its core parts. Instead of viewing ASEAN as reflecting a uniquely "Asian" concern for non-intervention and consensus, we should investigate concerns for sovereignty and emphasis on consensus-based decision-making more generally. These factors are not uniquely regional, but instead are shared by many states in all regions, at different points in time, and vary according to broader political patterns. This allows us to take advantage of comparisons to better understand the root cause of behaviors and outcomes. The ASEAN Way literature is important because it has identified an important variation in institutional form but it misleads by attributing institutional design to region rather than investigating and theorizing the phenomenon more broadly.

None of this is to deny the possible convenience of region as a key contextual variable -- but stopping at "context' leaves the intellectual job undone. Unpacking "region" also helps us understand that territory and geography are becoming less useful concepts in defining shared foreign policy aims, perhaps because of the growing centrality of technology and global interdependence in the 21st century (Manulak and Snidal 2021). The importance of the OECD (a club of wealthy, liberal economies), the G20 (a club of the world's "most influential" economies), and the Quad (a club dedicated to security in the Indo-Pacific) are but a few examples emphasizing the importance of club-based organizations rather than regions in world politics today. So instead of developing a theory of regionalism for the non-Western world,

scholars of international organizations need to recognize the increasing reliance on club-based, socially constructed informal intergovernmental organizations that are proliferating to address 21st century challenges.

7. Conclusion

States are increasingly using different institutional forms for regional cooperation, particularly informal intergovernmental organizations. IIGOs help states organize with flexibility and speed; importantly they help states coordinate without sacrificing state autonomy. These considerations are increasingly important for states that are paying increasing attention to maintaining sovereignty which has been true not only in Asia but in Europe and elsewhere. Conversely, while formalized regional integration has been a prime objective of the European Union, IIGOs have become a preferred institutional choice in many other situations in Europe (and elsewhere) to avoid delegation and integration. Our broader overview of regional IIGOs shows that states increasingly structure their interactions to cooperate without making strong institutional commitments or giving up more sovereignty than necessary.

This paper also presents a reminder of the need to theorize our concepts – both as dependent and independent variables – and why they occur or have their effect in international relations. "Region" is often useful as a placeholder but we need to push beyond it towards a deeper explanation. This requires unpacking region into geography, culture, language, politics, shared historical experience or whatever factors underlie its seeming effect and identify the mechanisms that connect across categories.

Just as it was an error to think that the EU model could be applied universally, it is equally wrong to believe that ASEAN is a region-specific institutional design choice. A better understanding of the underlying factors that prompt states to design institutions in a way that

protects sovereignty and pushes for consensus-based decisions can help brings these cross-regional cases together. By looking at IIGOs as an analytic category—wherein states purposefully choose more flexibility and communal decision-making—we emphasize the underlying political factors that create conditions for states to opt for less formal institutions rather than formal ones.

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