Regional Organizations

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SSAGE reference

The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives

Regional Organizations

The post–Second World War period has seen a boom in regional organizations. They emerged to maximize the collective gains and are often based on the principle of proximity and affinity among their members. Regional organizations are formed to serve the following purposes: to promote human rights and democracy, to provide security and safeguard territorial integrity of member countries, and to secure economic alliances through trade and economic cooperation for rapid development. In addition, some regional organizations are established for more general reasons, such as to preserve cultural heritage (e.g., the Arab League and Organisation of Islamic Co-operation) or to address environmental issues (e.g., the Arctic Council is organized around environmental protection of the Arctic region).

Although in general parlance "regions" are considered to be contiguous geographical areas, international regional organizations are formed both with geographical contiguous and noncontiguous areas. Regional organizations based on economic, cultural, and environmental factors often conform to regional contiguity, but many of the regional organizations based on security factors have member countries that do not share borders with other member countries; that is, they are geographically noncontiguous. In addition, some regional groups based on geography may exclude nations for various reasons. For instance, the League of Arab States rests on geographical factors but excludes Israel, Turkey, and Iran because they are not Arab. In contrast, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is based mainly on identity rather than geography. This entry discusses regional organizations within the framework of categorizations based on purpose, explaining the conditions that facilitated their emergence and providing examples of relevant organizations, and then examines new challenges facing regional organizations, especially in the current era of a single superpower.

Purposes

Human Rights and Democracy

The misery and devastation that World War II brought led to collective thinking and mobilization of countries against such reoccurrence and to promote democracy and human rights. Furthermore, the division of countries along ideological lines, such as the capitalist bloc and socialist bloc, and the rising Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union further galvanized countries to come together for collective security or to align themselves with groups led by the United States or the Soviet Union. Those countries that wanted to remain equidistant from both the Soviet Union and the United States, mainly countries from the global South, created the Non-Align Movement (NAM).

The first two decades or so after World War II saw the emergence of the Arab League in 1945; the Pacific Community in 1947; the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 1948; the Council of Europe in 1949; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949; the European Union (EU) in 1951; the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) in 1951; the Nordic Council in 1952; the Western European Union in 1954; the Organization of African Unity (now African Union) in 1963; and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967.

Security

Although regional organizations based on security can be categorized in various types based on their number, funds, or military power, an important factor is the categorization based on

the functions the organizations perform. On the basis of the functions, the security-based regional organizations can be grouped into four subtypes, based on alliance, collective security, security regimes, and security communities.

The regional organizations based on alliance often aim at defense and attack using military power against a common threat—external or internal. The opponent, or enemy state or organization, is often excluded from this type of regional organization. Suitable examples of this type of regional organizations are NATO and ASEAN.

Collective security–based organizations work toward preventing and containing wars or acts of internal aggression among its members. Examples of such organizations are United Nations–based organizations as well as the African Union, OAS, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The security regime–type organizations mainly aim to regulate the use of force and acceptable types of weapons and to create transparency to overcome conflicts and build confidence among their members. Suitable examples of this type of organization are the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and OSCE.

Lastly, the security community–type regional organizations aim at persuading their members to settle conflicts without military engagement. To do so, these regional organizations encourage interactions and establish confidence-building measures among their members. The EU is a suitable example of this type of organization.

The emergence of a significant number of economic-based regional organizations since the mid-1980s can also be seen as a security response: By promoting collective economic interests, states aim to ward off wars and strife among their members.

Economic Cooperation and Development

While during and after World War II, security, human rights, and democracy were of primary importance in creating regional organizations, by the end of the 20th century and with the end of the Cold War, regional grouping for trade and economic cooperation became a prime concern. This gave birth to the Economic Cooperation Organization in 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation in 1985, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1989, the Central European Initiative in 1989, the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989, the Central American Integrations System in 1991, the South African Development Community in 1992, the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa in 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, the ASEAN Plus Three in 1997, the Central African Economic and Monetary Community in 1998, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States in 1998, and the East African Community in 1999.

Even further new subgroups formed within the larger regional groups for economic cooperation. This new regionalism, led by economic aspirations in the post–Cold War period, became quite prominent and is very much reflected in the formation of ASEAN Plus Three, the Central European Initiative, and the Central African Economic and Monetary Community.

The two decades of relative peace at the international level after World War II and changing international politics from war to development galvanized many states to group together into regional organizations and work collectively toward development. Prior to the mid-1980s, before the neoliberal economic policy focusing on free market and economic development

was dominant, several regional organizations had already emerged for economic cooperation and development. Some of these were the Council of Arab Economic Unity, which emerged in 1964; the Andean Community of Nations, or Andean Pact (1969); the Pacific Islands Forum (1971); the Caribbean Community (1973); the Mano River Union (1973); the Economic Community of West African States (1975); the Latin American Integration Association (1980); and the Gulf Cooperation Council (1981).

New Challenges

Regional organizations are increasingly facing and adapting to new challenges, such as environmental issues, climate change, terrorism, violence by nonstate actors, energy security, prevention of proliferation of weapons of mass destructions, crime, and drug trafficking. Although regional organizations work as democratic decision-making bodies to resolve territorial and larger security and economic issues, there remain many issues—internal democracy, coercion within states, hegemonic relations with other organizations, inability to expand or contract as needed, and shifting of conflict from stronger regional organizations to weaker nonmember nations—that need to be resolved. Weaker nations have often become victims of conflict between powerful organizations and nations—examples of such victim nations include Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Currently, the United States is the only global superpower. It has played an important role in shaping the world economic and military security since World War II. It has also played an important role in the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the integration of Eastern European countries into NATO. However, many members of organizations in which the United States is also a member have felt threatened by the United States' direct and indirect interference. Today, to a large extent, agendas in many regional organizations are driven by the agenda suitable to and consented by the United States. As the only superpower, the United States can start war against any country to protect its national interest or maintain its supremacy. For example, as part of the World Trade Organization, the United States can block free trade to protect its farmers. Although regional organizations (along with the United Nations and other international organizations) face challenges to their sovereignty and autonomy as a result of U.S. interference, the United States, as the only superpower, is able to constrain, contain, and limit regional conflicts that otherwise might be detrimental to international peace and cooperation.

See also Cold War; Colonial Borders; Geopolitics; Globalization; National Identity; National Security; Nation-State; Peacekeeping, Social Constructionism; Territorial Disputes; United Nations

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Further Readings

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