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## **Shifting Trends in Regionalism**

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### **Abstract**

Regionalism is a movement that emerged after World War II. It involves countries that are geographically close and interdependent, collaborating with the help of governments and NGOs to achieve mutual benefits in a particular area of shared interest. Such regional clusters have evolved due to geographical proximity, economic interdependence, security issues, social and cultural background, and more. The end of the Cold War led to the rise of new regionalism shaped by factors such as globalization, the emergence of new players, shifts in global power dynamics, increased interdependence, alterations in security paradigms, the advent of multipolar, and various other influences. This shifting pattern has had a major impact on world politics and power dynamics. Traditional notions of security are evolving to encompass human security concerns, while economic collaboration and identity-based regionalism are gaining prominence. Asia's growing economic clout, new regional players' arrival, and smaller states' growing role are reshaping the global power landscape. Asymmetric positions and chequered history hinder the functioning of regionalism. In this context, the article seeks to analyze the changing dynamics of regionalism, the primary drivers of this shift, and its implications for global power dynamics. The article is presented from the perspectives of neo-realism, neo-liberalism, and constructivism in a descriptive, analytical, and exploratory format, where the necessary information is obtained from secondary qualitative data.

**Keywords:** Globalization, power shift, multi-polarism, new regionalism, regional security

### ***Introduction***

The emergence of regionalism and regional arrangements in international affairs is a

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significant and fascinating phenomenon in the post-World War II era. Regionalism within international relations can be characterized as the manifestation of collective identity and shared interests. It involves the establishment and execution of institutions that reflect regional identity and influence actions within that specific geographical area (Bloor, 2022). It is a term often used but rarely defined in contemporary international discourse and has emerged as a prominent concept shaping the global landscape. Indeed, the nation-state system, which has dominated international relations for the past eight decades, is transitioning towards a system where regional groupings of nations will be more significant than independent sovereign units (Palmer & Perkins, 2015, 558). The development of regional organizations, combined with an increase in the number of autonomous nation-states in the international system, resulted in a complex scenario with a shift in the international system's pattern. The proliferation of regional multilateral institutions is a testament to this trend, with these institutions playing a pivotal role in fostering cooperation and facilitating interactions among states within defined issues and areas (Metzgar, 1997, p. 58). Regional organizations now govern every part of the globe, bringing significant changes to the international order.

Regionalism emerged as a distinct post-World War II phenomenon, initially based on geographical proximity, socio-cultural homogeneity, economic transactions, and security concerns. Its early forms were largely influenced by political and ideological contexts during the Cold War, as noted by Barbieri (2019, p. 45). However, the landscape of regionalism underwent significant transformations in the 1980s, mirroring the broader shifts in global politics. This pivotal era witnessed a departure from the earlier political and ideological foundations, ushering in a new dynamic that redefined the contours of regional interactions (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2007). The evolving nature of regionalism during this period underscores its adaptability and responsiveness to changing geopolitical realities, highlighting the intricate interplay between global and regional dynamics.

This article asserts that one of the most obvious manifestations of regionalism lies in the emergence of regional multilateral institutions. Moreover, it contends that the development of such institutions and the heightened organizational cohesion they signify have far-reaching implications for a region's interaction with the broader international system. It is full of potential for positive and productive conduct in interstate relations. Regionalism is a pragmatic and credible mode of action and organization for mutual benefit, ranging from the mere expression of regional uniqueness to intensive and extensive cooperation in vital areas amongst the actors of a region. It plays an important role for states in conducting their affairs, both at domestic and international levels. It is full of potential for positive and productive conduct in interstate relations. Regionalism is a pragmatic and plausible mode of action and organization for mutual benefit, ranging from the mere expression of regional uniqueness to intensive and extensive cooperation in vital areas among the states of a region.

Regions are taken as the building blocks of the global system. Regions serve as the foundational components of the global system. Regionalism is evolving in tandem with the dynamic world around us. Whatever changes occur within the regions influence the overall

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international system (Metzgar, 1997, p. 59). The traditional paradigm of regionalism, which was focused on trade liberalization, needs to be revised to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Instead, we need a new paradigm of regionalism that is more comprehensive, inclusive, and sustainable. Hettne has called it "the new regionalism" (Kelly, 2007). Indeed, the regional systems, in the last four decades, have been passing through new dimensions, which have left significant changes in the regional systems. In this context, the question automatically arises: What are the emerging shifts in regionalism? Which factors are responsible for bringing about such a shift in regionalism? Furthermore, what is the impact of such changes on regional and global systems? The article attempts to address the given questions.

#### **Concept and Literature Review**

Geography is the primary concept of the region, which is based on the concept of geographical proximity, i.e., the interdependence of a small number of states through a geographical relationship. The second concept is similar to the first but concentrates on the cultural and ethnic characteristics of the region. The third concept reflects the political realm, in which the interests of the major powers shape the region. The fourth concept is the definition of the region in the context of a particular security policy (Miller, 1968).

According to E. N. Van Kleffens, "a regional arrangement or pact is a voluntary association of sovereign states within a certain area or having common interests in that area for a joint purpose, which should not be offensive, with that area (1949, pp. 666–678). Similarly, it can be understood "as the feeling of belonging arising out of commonalities, based on geographical contiguity, culture, language, history, socio-economic factors, etc., channeled to attain common goals and objectives by the state of a region" (Meenai, 1998, p. 207). Regionalism is an advance over the traditional concept of absolute state sovereignty. Its contemporary form is largely a post-World War II phenomenon. While it began with the formation of regional military alliances, mostly in the context of bipolar rivalry, gradually it has acquired the context of regional economic cooperation. According to the Egyptian delegation's draft text of the UN Charter, the definition of 'regional arrangements' is as follows:

Organizations of a permanent nature grouped in a common geographical area of several countries that, because of their proximity, the community of interest, or cultural, linguistic, historical, or spiritual affinities, make themselves jointly responsible for the peaceful settlement of any dispute that may arise between them and for the maintenance of peace and security in their region, as well as for the safeguarding of their interests and the development of their economic and cultural relations (Palmer & Perkins, 2015, p.559).

This concept is further defined as "the cooperation among government or non-government organizations in three or more geographically proximate and interdependent countries for the pursuit of mutual gain in one or more issue areas" (Alagappa, 1995, p. 362). This definition indicates both government and non-governmental aspects of regionalism. It is also being used to refer to macro-regions (so-called world or international regions), which are larger territorial units as opposed to non-territorial units or sub-systems. They exist between

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the state level and the global system level. It has been called "a halfway house between the nation-state and a world not ready to become one (Nye, 1968). It also refers to the next big step forward in international cooperation. Nye further opines that regionalism is concerned with the process of integration, which implies the recognition of mutual obligations and common interests. Regional organizations translate this process into an institutional process.

The concept of 'organization' is closely related to the concept of 'regional integration'. It is also taken as the combination of the feeling of regional identity and regional inter-state cooperation binding with social feeling (Hurrell, 1995). Earnest Hass has defined regional integration' as "the process where political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities towards a new, larger centre whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over preexisting nation-states" (1968, p. 149). It refers to the process of unifying the various countries in an area into a single framework for decision-making.

'Regionalism' is a collective set of ideas, values, concepts, and goals that are used to shape, sustain, or modify a specific region or a certain type of international structure. It is characterized by an increase in economic and social interchange in certain geographic regions. It is typically linked to a particular policy or project and often results in the establishment of institutions through collective efforts. Thus, the concept refers to a way of building up institutional capacity based on certain ideas, rules, beliefs, behaviors, and standards. Groupings, integration, and fragmentation are common phenomena in international relations. The analysis of the paradigm shift in regionalism is based on a theoretical framework derived from international relations theory, notably neorealism, neo-liberalism, and constructivism, which are characterized by the presence of clusters, integration, and fragmentation in international relations. Prominent scholars of political realism argue that all these activities are conducted for the protection of national interests that are concerned with the security and survival of the state (Wohlforth, 2008).

Neorealism provides insights into the power dynamics and geopolitics driving the transformation of regionalism, emphasizing the role of major states and their pursuit of security and influence within regional structures (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013). The main topic of this theory is how power is distributed around the world. Regional organizations and alliances can change, grow, or shrink depending on how much power states have. It helps us understand how global power affects regionalism. Neoliberalism thus provides a perspective on the cooperative nature of regionalism that emphasizes the significance of institutions, global arrangements, and shared standards in the formation of a new regional order (Stein, 2008). Engagement in various forums, both at regional and international levels, also helps to promote international cooperation. Protection of national interests is possible by making institutional arrangements (Moravcsik, 2009, pp. 709–729). This theory helps us figure out how regional groups and treaties can be used to help people work together, make decisions, and stay stable in a world that is becoming more and more international.

This theory assists in understanding how regional organizations and agreements serve as institutions that facilitate cooperation, set rules, and promote stability in a globalized world. However, it does not just about understand these things; social constructivism can also be

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used to explain them. This theory posits that concepts, standards, and concepts of identity are equally influential in the conceptualization of international relationships (Hurd 2008, pp. 298–316).

Neorealism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism all play a significant role in the development of regionalism, as the ideas and identities of the regions are constantly changing. This combination of neo-realists, neo-libertarians, and constructivists allows for an in-depth examination of the multifaceted nature of the paradigm shift, which encompasses both competitive and cooperative forces in a dynamic regional context

### **Methods**

This article seeks to assess the current trends in regionalism and identify the underlying causes of this paradigm shift. It is expected that the knowledge and perspective acquired through multiple regional collaborations will lead to a more effective implementation of regional structures and the establishment of a comprehensive global consensus. Such a consensus is of paramount importance for international cooperation, as any global endeavor to collaborate is likely to be unsuccessful without it. The primary focus of the article is to assess the changing trends in regionalism, and the secondary data has been collected from various sources, such as documents, books, and journal articles, as well as websites and other related literature. The content of the article is presented in descriptive, analytical, and exploratory forms.

### **Data Presentation and Discussion**

#### ***Bases of regionalism***

One of the most significant developments in modern international relations is regionalism. It is part of the process of integration towards global governance. Experts view regionalism as a transition from a state system to a global integrated society, and it is referred to as the “halfway house between the nation-state and a world not ready to become one.” (Nye, 1968, p. V).

In the post-war world, there were lots of different types of regional organizations, each based on different criteria. These organizations were used to help resolve internal conflicts, and there were two main kinds of regional organizations: a) groupings of states, such as the Organization of American States and the Organization of African Unity, with a continental or hemispheric basis, a set of decision-making institutions, and established procedures for pacific settlement of disputes; and b) collective defense arrangements such as NATO, SEATO, and the Warsaw Pact, whose geographical bases conform to strategic needs rather than natural boundaries and whose non-military functions are virtually undeveloped (Miller, 1968, p. 80). Some scholars, like Claude (1968), have also opined that regionalism is based on the following three ingredients: an identifiable geographical region, geographical proximity, and an organization with a common sense of identity and purpose (economic, political, security/military, etc.) among the member states.

Regional organizations, however, have shifted their focus in recent years to economic

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considerations. The greater the exchange of people, goods, and services, the greater the likelihood that an organization will expand. Organizations to support investment, aid, trade, migration, and tourism bring countries together within the framework of a regional organization. A good example of such an organization is ASEAN. Pugalis and Grey (2016) suggest that regional grouping is the outcome of a combination of mixed motivations. Such organizations are typically formed for a range of reasons. It is difficult to identify the primary purpose of these organizations, which may be primarily political, military, or cultural. Organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the Arab League, and the Commonwealth of Nations are examples of such organizations. The primary purpose of the majority of these organizations is to promote the integration of the economy, economic development, and economic growth. However, the main reasons for regional confederations are security, territorial unity, social unity, and economic growth. Countries also play a role in the political process, which cannot be overlooked when forming regional structures.

#### ***UN charter and regionalism***

Regional organizations got global recognition after the declaration of the Charter of the UNO (Claude, 1968, p. 13). The charter of the United Nations organization has given more positive and detailed endorsement for regional arrangements. At the San Francisco Conference, the question of regional versus international organization was debated at great length; indeed, it was "one of the Knottiest Questions" with which the conference wrestled (Palmer & Perkins, 2015, p.594). Accordingly, chapter VIII (articles 52-54) of the charter of the United Nations organization has made provision for regional organizations and empowered them to take regional action to work under the purposes and principles of the United Nations. The United Nations (UN) has declared its ambition to establish regional entities. This ambition is reflected in the United Nations Charter, which states:

Nothing in the present charter precludes the existence of regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with such matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security as are appropriate for regional action, provided that such arrangements or agencies and their activities are consistent with the purposes and principles of the United Nations (Article 52(1)).

The United Nations Organization (UNO) has the objective of achieving a negotiated settlement of international conflicts under Chapter VI, Article 33, and Article 34 of the Charter. To fulfill this obligation, the Security Council shall promote the establishment of a pacific settlement of domestic issues through regional arrangements or by regional agencies. Article 52(3) of the Charter stipulates that regional organizations are responsible for fulfilling this obligation.

Observers have pointed out that the charter's inclusion of regional agencies raises some questions. Regionalism resumed its importance, resulting in agencies that had a more prominent role in international affairs and were more autonomous than initially proposed in the Charter. This term is more associated with regional security concerns. It is argued that the UN has been subject to unfair treatment in regional frameworks. In short, the linkages

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between regional systems and global organizations are now at the beckon of the former. They have proven to be effective in the region in a variety of ways, and their role should be extended to create a more conducive environment for peace and growth at a global level.

#### ***Changing trends in regionalism***

The term “paradigm shift” in regionalism is used to describe the changing nature of regional cooperation and integration that takes place in the world. Regionalism, in essence, is a post-Second World War innovation. However, some regional organizations also existed before the world wars. Their emergence has been seen since the 19th century. ‘The Concert of Europe’ (1815), ‘the Union of American Republics’ (1889), ‘the Balkan League’, ‘The Little Entente’ (composed of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia), a ‘Locarno Pact’ (Palmer & Perkins, 2015, pp. 560–561), and a few others are examples. But their criteria were highly doubtful to meet the requirements of a regional arrangement as we understand it today. However, it was only after the Second World War that voluntary and comprehensive regionalism came into existence in different regions of the world (Soderbaum, 2007, p. 479). So, regionalism in its contemporary form is largely a post-World War II phenomenon. While it began with the formation of regional military alliances, mostly in the context of bipolar rivalry, gradually it has acquired the context of regional economic cooperation” (Baral, 1998). As a result of the socio-cultural, economic, military, and political shifts that have taken place, regional groupings have undergone significant alterations.

The post-World War II era has undergone significant changes. In recent years, regionalism has shifted its focus away from trade liberalization in favor of a comprehensive approach that covers a broad spectrum of topics, such as development, security, migration, and climate change. Hurrell referred to this phenomenon as the “resurgence of regionalism” (1995). There are several reasons for this shift, including the emergence of new regional powers, the end of US dominance, the increasing interdependence of the global economy, the changing nature of security, the rise of new players, political changes and shifts, and more. The new paradigm of regionalism is more inclusive and focuses on tackling a broader range of issues. It also stresses the importance of cooperation between government-to-government and public-private partnerships, which seek to promote inclusive development.

#### ***New regionalism***

Regionalism can be understood by dividing it into two distinct periods: the era following World War II, which began in 1945, and the subsequent Cold War era. However, in the present 21st century, regionalism has taken on a new form and can be conceptualized differently, which is far from state-centric. When it comes to social interaction, geographical and political considerations are of lesser significance. "New regionalism" differs from conventional regionalism in that it is founded on policy rather than territorial considerations (Pugilist & Gray, 2016, p. 186). The successful implementation of new regionalism is attributed to the combination of both physical and virtual capital. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the characteristics of new regionalism differ from those of traditional regionalism, such as the number, scale, and number of participants (Engel, Zinecker & Mattheis, 2016). Today's world is full of financial uncertainty challenges posed by non-

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governmental organizations (NGOs) and international criminal organizations, environmental degradation, global warming, demographic challenges, and a variety of other issues that cannot be addressed through global multilateral frameworks (Barbieri, 2019). A novel strategy may be employed to tackle the challenges encountered at the regional level.

#### ***Changing role of developing countries***

The growing prominence of developing countries in regional integration is a key element of this transformation. Consequently, these nations now play a central role in numerous regional endeavors and utilize regionalism as a means to advance their own developmental goals. An exemplification of this can be observed in the case of ASEAN, which has taken the lead in fostering economic progress and addressing poverty in Southeast Asia (Feraru, 2021). Additionally, the new regionalism places an increasing emphasis on regional collaboration in non-trade-related matters. Regional organizations are actively engaged in conflict management, security, climate change, and migration. For instance, the African Union (AU) has been at the forefront of promoting peacekeeping efforts and resolving conflicts across Africa.

#### **Increasing trade and investment**

The economic element has always been a fundamental factor in regionalism. Mansfield and Solingen (2010, p. 148) note that a significant amount of research into regionalism has focused primarily on its social outcomes and has been conducted by economists.

The economy has always been a major factor when it comes to regionalism. In the words of Mansfield & Solingen, “Much of the research on regionalism has focused on its welfare implications and has been conducted by economists” (2010, p. 148). The shift towards regionalism has had a lot of impacts on the world's economy. The formation of regional organizations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia-Pacific Economic Forum, European Union (EU), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and others is significantly influenced by economic factors (Buzdugan, 2017). It has led to an increase in trade and investment within regions, thereby enhancing their ability to withstand global economic shocks. However, this transformation has also brought about significant obstacles and fresh trade and investment barriers. Moreover, the implementation of new trade agreements and changes in economic policies have further complicated the situation. The UK's departure from the European Union serves as a clear example of the risks associated with regional disintegration.

Economic factors have led to an increase in trade and investment within regions, thereby enhancing their ability to withstand global economic shocks. However, this transformation has also brought about significant obstacles and fresh trade and investment barriers. Moreover, the implementation of new trade agreements and changes in economic policies have further complicated the situation. The UK's departure from the European Union serves as a clear example of the risks associated with regional disintegration. In addition, certain

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regional economic organizations are controlled by powerful countries that may not always have the best interests of all members in mind. However, those countries that can adjust to this new system will be in a better position to succeed in the twenty-first century.

#### ***Rise of new issues***

The emergence of new issues has led regional institutions to enter a new era. The world is facing a multitude of new and complex challenges that are distinct from those of the past. These issues vary across regions, with Europe grappling with different concerns than those found in South Asia, Africa, and other parts of the globe. The rise of regional movements and the emergence of different experiences beyond Europe show that the world order is changing in important ways. Today, regionalism is no longer primarily centered on facilitating trade liberalization, promoting democracy, or advancing security objectives (Barbieri, 2019). The emergence of new regionalism has enabled the integration of subject matters related to policy objectives. The growing complexity of the international system is driving regional integration and collaboration efforts towards new areas of involvement that differ significantly from the traditional European integration model. Regionalism does not apply to climate change, refugees, migration, financial instability, non-state actors, and terrorism; all fall outside the purview of conventional theories of regionalism.

#### **Intensification of new actors**

The emergence of new actors has brought about a substantial transformation in the dynamics of regionalism. In the past, regionalism primarily revolved around interactions between states. However, both neoliberals and neorealists recognize that various non-state actors now exert their influence within and beyond the regional context (Soderbaum, 2007, p. 482). Consequently, the traditional international system, which solely attributed agency to states, has undergone a significant shift. Both state and non-state actors are involved in the process of reshaping the world order (Buzdugan, 2017). As the Cold War ended and liberal democracy took hold, several non-state actors began to emerge and operate. These waves have led to significant changes in the functioning of both international and regional systems. This movement promoted a variety of levels of governance that transformed the traditional work of regionalism into a more contemporary form. The emergence of regionalism is heavily influenced by a variety of actors, including non-state entities, regional organizations, civil society organizations, multinational corporations, international non-governmental organizations, and individuals. Regional cooperation is meant to benefit the people of all regions. Such actors focus on new forms of regional governance and cooperation. The new stakeholders have helped to make regionalism more dynamic, responsive, and adaptable.

#### ***Rise of non-traditional security***

When it comes to forming regional organizations, security and defense are the most important things to consider. Neoconservatives believe that security is important and that institutions help make that happen. Institutions give us a set of rules for how we interact with each other, and they mean that there is always an expectation of how we will interact with each other in the future (Mingst, 2004, p. 64). There are many examples of security alliances that have been created before and during world wars. Some of the most famous of

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these are the Triple Entente, NATO, the Warsaw Pact, SEATO, and ANZUS. All of these are based on the traditional security framework.

Security and defense are the most important driving factors for the formation of regional organizations. For neo-liberalists, “security is essential, and institutions help to make security possible. Institutions provide a guaranteed framework of interactions; they suggest that there will be an expectation of future interactions” (Mingst, 2004, p. 64). The 1980s, however, introduced a new dimension to security theory. The emergence of non-conventional security threats, including refugees, cybercrime, and terrorism, as well as climate change and environmental protection, poverty alleviation, gender equality, and terrorism (see Bhattarai (2013), pp. 11–32), led to a sharpened focus on regional security cooperation. The integration of human security concerns into regionalism has led to a new paradigm shift in the way regional organizations operate.

#### ***Changes in policy***

The concept of regionalism has evolved significantly over the years. Traditional regionalism was mainly concerned with economic and security policies. However, in the 1980s, regionalism started to focus on broader issues such as governance, accountability, human rights, democracy, environmental protection, gender equality, and poverty alleviation. These issues are all closely linked to fundamental human values. The work of Barbieri (2019) reflects a shift in focus to a different subject matter. It is worth noting that the ASEAN states have declared their commitment to principles such as democracy, the rule of law, good governance, and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms (ASEAN Charter, preamble, 2007). Countries worldwide, regardless of their developmental status, have started prioritizing development over security. All of these challenges are closely linked to the overall plan for development.

#### ***From bipolar to multipolar***

During the 1950s, regionalism became a prominent feature in world politics, characterized by bipolarism, with NATO and Warsaw emerging as the two leading regional organizations on military and defense bases. The dominant interests of superpowers shaped world politics during this time. After the pivotal year of 1989, the United States established itself as the unquestionable dominant force, marking the onset of a period characterized by a single dominant power in global geopolitics. However, significant change occurred with the progression of the early 21st century, directing global power dynamics towards multipolarism (K. C., 2023). This transformation has been a catalyst, reshaping the course of regionalism and challenging the once-unchallenged dominance of a single superpower. The rise of new players on the international stage and the evolving nature of alliances have contributed to a more complex and interconnected global landscape, where multiple nations wield influence and participate in shaping the course of global affairs. The shift from a bipolar to a multipolar world has changed the course of regionalism (Mansfield & Solingen, 2010, p. 158). The newly emerged regions have begun to occupy their role in global politics.

#### ***Waves of globalization and regionalism***

Globalization has transformed world politics, resulting in a more interconnected global

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landscape. This phenomenon has led to a gradual decrease in the importance of national boundaries and governments. The unrestricted flow of information, ideas, and capital, as well as the adoption of global values, have played a significant role in this process (Metzgar, 1997). Recent discussions on regionalism have largely revolved around the impact of globalization and the global order. Unlike earlier theories of regionalism, which focused primarily on internal factors of regional integration or intra-regional analysis, the current understanding of regionalism is closely intertwined with globalization (Hurrell, 2005). However, there are differing perspectives on the nature of this connection.

According to Hettne & Soderbaum (2007), some experts believe that regional factors should not be considered as part of global transformation. However, globalization refers to the increasing interconnectedness of economies, cultures, and societies beyond national borders. On the other hand, regionalism is a response to globalization as it reflects the shared desire of countries to tackle common challenges and opportunities within a specific geographic area. To Andrew Hurrell, globalization is a metaphor for the idea that various universal processes are operating to increase the interconnection and interdependence between states and societies. This often involves economic integration, political cooperation, and cultural exchange, all aimed at managing and utilizing the forces of globalization for the benefit of the region. However, the question remains whether regionalism is a result of globalization or the other way around.

Technology and transportation are two major drivers of globalization, and the media plays a significant role in shaping regionalism. The media has broadened the perspectives of major regional actors and has drastically changed global communication culture with modern tools such as email, the internet, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other systems. It is worth noting that the media has been instrumental in establishing democratic systems by overthrowing authoritarian regimes.

#### ***Small states and regionalism***

The majority of the world is composed of small states that frequently perceive a threat from larger states due to their limited size and resources. To safeguard their sovereignty and security, these small states often join international organizations, or "bandwagons" (Jesse & Dreyer, 2016). The choice of smaller states to join larger organizations often comes with a dual advantage. Not only does it provide a protective shell for their security, but it also helps to promote their economic well-being. However, for many of these states, joining such organizations is not merely a choice but a necessity for survival (Baral, 2022). Although small, miniaturized entities have the potential to significantly affect the global stage. A prime example of this is the significant role Singapore played in organizing the historic meeting between the US and North Korean Presidents, Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, respectively, on June 12, 2018. This event displayed the ability of small states to facilitate diplomatic breakthroughs.

Moreover, the proliferation of small arms through the Nepal-India open border is a huge security challenge (Upreti, 2020). As in any post-conflict society, the small arms circulation in Nepal was significant (Paudel, 2014). Several reports by Nepal Police, APF and SSB

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point out that the trafficking of small and light weapons through the open border has increased cross-border criminality (Bogati, 2019). Many criminal activities, along with the confiscation of small arms by police in different places in Nepal, have raised questions about how and from where these weapons get into the country. Assessments by government and non-government organizations point out that most firearms get smuggled across open borders. These are done by individuals or loosely organized groups (Paudel, 2014). The criminals prefer to rent small arms rather than own them, as it reduces their chances of getting arrested (Paudel, 2014). The bordering Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are the hubs for counterfeiting and crafting small arms (Hindustan Times, 2018). The small arms trade also contributes a small percentage to the illegal trade through the open border. Table 2 shows the number of individuals arrested by the Nepal Police with illegal weapons.

Regionalism in 21st-century international relations has evolved into a more strategic and economic approach, losing its original emphasis on geographical proximity. Regional participation in engagement has shown poor results in fostering political cohesiveness, as evidenced by the voting patterns in the United Nations. Recent conflicts, such as the Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Palestine issues, serve as prime examples of this. During the Cold War, the Communist bloc demonstrated a high degree of voting solidarity. However, liberal democracies have had limited success in achieving solidarity on major international issues. Certain regions or countries may be excluded from regional benefits due to their asymmetrical size, ability, and military might. A competitive environment can also undermine mutual understanding and cooperation (Engel, Zinecker & Mattheis, 2016). Recent geopolitical developments have posed significant challenges to regionalism. The disbandment of SEATO and Warsaw, the underperformance of SAARC, and the emergence of BIMSTEC as an alternative to SAARC have all contributed to this. However, NATO remains an active player in world politics. In response to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region, the US has introduced the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), which involves active engagement from Japan, India, and Australia. China, on the other hand, as a rising global power, has countered this strategy by introducing various initiatives such as Global Development Initiatives-2021 (GDI), Global Security Initiatives-2022 (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiatives-2023 (GCI). India's "Global South" policy has led to the formation of organizations that are not region-specific, not local, and not focused on any particular issue. These organizations include the Non-Alignment Movement, G-77, BRICS, and various UN agencies and forums. This approach has brought about a new shift in the way regionalism operates.

### **Conclusion**

The end of World War II marked a significant turning point in international relations, with the emergence of regionalism as a prominent development. The United Nations Charter acknowledged its importance, driven by geographic proximity, economic interdependence, shared security concerns, defense considerations, and socio-cultural ties. These elements led to the creation of regional organizations to address specific challenges and opportunities within specific geographic areas. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 brought about "new regionalism," influenced by new actors, security challenges, globalization, the growing role of small powers, a shift from bipolarity to multi-polarity, economic factors,

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and a growing emphasis on human values such as democracy and human rights.

Regional integration itself is a product of liberalist thinking, with neoliberals advocating for cooperation, consensus, and legal and structural frameworks to address emerging global challenges. However, competition and rivalry still exist in world politics, as states and non-state actors strive to maximize their relative power and preserve their autonomy. Regionalism, with its mixed history, faces numerous challenges that hinder its effective functioning. This is reflected in trade wars and other disputes, even within Western democracies, suggesting that regionalism also bears the imprint of neorealist thinking. The unequal positions of their member states have resulted in a lack of solidarity on regional and international issues, further hindering regionalism's progress. Nevertheless, international regionalism is widely accepted as a fundamental component of the international system, providing a motive and framework for increased cooperation between countries at a regional level.

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