Regionalism and International Relations: Theoretical perspectives
It refers to the expression of a common sense of identity and purpose combined with the creation and implementation of institutions that express a particular identity and shape collective action within a geographical region.
Issues to be discussed

- What does regionalism mean?
- Which are the main varieties of regionalism?
Scholars, when trying to provide a definition, have focused on different elements of cohesiveness such as:

- **Social**: ethnicity, religion, culture, history,
- **Economic**: trade networks, interdependence
- **Political**: regime type, ideological homogeneity
- **Organisational**: institutional frameworks
A crucial point, which needs to be emphasised, is that there are not natural regions. Notion of region vary according to the perspective or the focus of the discussion. All regions are socially constructed thus politically contested. What is crucial is how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notion of regionness.
Therefore it is crucial to differentiate between regionalism as a **description** or as a **prescription**.

Regionalism as a **moral position** or as a **doctrine** on how international relations ought to be organised.
Notions of regionalism: 1) *regionalisation*

- It refers to the growth of societal integration within a region and to the indirect process of social and economic interaction.
- It is often defined as:
  - Informal integration or
  - 'soft regionalism'
Notions of regionalism: 1) regionalisation

- It gives more emphasis to autonomous economic processes
- The driving forces come from:
  - the market
  - private trade
  - investment flows
  - policies and decisions of companies
Notions of regionalism: 1) regionalisation

• a) regionalisation is not based on the conscious action of states or group of states nor presuppose any impact on the relations among states

• b) pattern of regionalisation do not correspond to state boundaries

• Examples of this model are:
  • Oversea Chinese communities in East-Asia
  • Mexican communities along the Mexican – USA border
Notions of regionalism:  
2) regional awareness & identity

- they are inherently imprecise and volatile notions
- however, we cannot ignore them as they are crucial for a deep understanding of what regionalism is
- Emmanuel Adler has defined them as “cognitive regions” (see E. Adler, “Imagined (Security) Communities: Cognitive Regions in International Relations” Millennium 26,2(1997): 249-277)
Notions of regionalism:
2) regional awareness & identity

- Borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s research, regions, like nations can be seen as **imagined communities**
- communities which rest on **mental maps** whose lines highlights some features whilst ignoring others
- often discussion on regional awareness put emphasis on **language** and **rhetoric**
Notions of regionalism:  
2) regional awareness & identity

- regional awareness is often based on internal factors
  - they are often defined in terms of common culture, history, or religious traditions

- it can also be defined in contrasting terms with regard to external ‘others’ who are often understood and represented in terms of security threat
Notions of regionalism:

2) regional awareness & identity

- Examples of this kind of ‘construction’ are:
  - Western Europe vs Soviet Union, represented in contrastive terms such as
    - democracy vs totalitarianism
    - transparency vs opacity
    - freedom vs oppression
Notions of regionalism:

2) regional awareness & identity

- Examples of this kind of ‘construction’ are
  - Latin American nationalism vs USA
    - Latinos vs yankee
    - Hegemonic vs egalitarian
2) regional awareness & identity

Examples of this kind of ‘construction’ are:

- Europe vs non European world
  - Civilised vs less/non civilised
  - Christian vs Non Christian
  - Modern vs traditional
  - Advanced vs backward
  - Rich vs poor
Notions of regionalism:

2) regional awareness & identity

- Europe vs Islam
- Asian identity vs Western identity

All these models assume a great deal of
- historical rediscovering
- myth-making
- invented traditions
Regional interstate cooperation

- regionalist activity often involves the negotiation and construction of interstate or intergovernmental agreements
- this can be achieved in both formal or informal terms
Regional interstate cooperation

- to this regard scholars have developed the notion of ‘regime’ to define
  “explicit or implicit principles, norms, rules and decision making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations”
Regional interstate cooperation

- therefore regional cooperation may be based on:
  - formal institutions or
  - loose structures involving
    - patterns of regular meetings
    - basic rules
    - mechanisms for preparation and follow up
Regional interstate cooperation

- this kind of arrangements serves a variety of purposes
- It responds to external challenges and helps in coordinating regional positions in international institutions or negotiating forums
Regional interstate cooperation

- It can be developed to solve common problems arising from increasing regional interdependence.
- Security is one of the major areas of interventions for this kind of regionalism and can produce:
  - regional balance of power
  - confidence-building measures
  - negotiation of region-wide security regimes
Regional interstate cooperation

- these arrangements are statist in their very nature as they assume the primacy of the State as main actor
- In fact, they are designed to enhance the role of the state and the power of the government
- they involve the reassertion and extension of state authority
Regional interstate cooperation

- This is pursued through the willingness to trade for:
  - a greater practical influence on the policies of other states and
  - the management of common problems
State promoted regional integration

- this is a subcategory of the previous
- it involves specific policies aimed at reducing or removing barriers to the mutual exchange of
  - Goods
  - Services
  - Capital
  - People
State promoted regional integration

- as pointed out by Peter Smith, regional economic integration can be compared along:
  - **scope** (range of issues included)
  - **depth** (extent of policy harmonisation)
  - **institutionalisation** (extent of formal institutional building)
  - **centralisation** (degree of effective authority centralisation)
Regional cohesion

- Refers to the possibility that the previous processes might lead to a cohesive and consolidated regional unit

- In this context cohesion might refer to:
  - the region playing a defining role in the relation between the states members of the region and the outer world
  - the region forming the organising basis for policies within the region
Regional cohesion

- the emphasis on interdependence does not mean that political significance derives from absolute measures of interdependence
- what matters is the extent to which interdependence is able to impose significant costs on important actors
Regional cohesion

- for outsiders this significance lays on the possibility that these policies impose costs on outsiders through
  - detrimental impact of preferential regional economic arrangements (*malign regionalism*)
  - or through shifts in the distribution of political power
  - It is also significant when outsiders are forced to arrange their relations with regional state in regionalist terms
Regional cohesion

- for insiders regionalism matters when exclusion from regional arrangements imply:
  - additional political and economic costs
  - This might refer to
    - loss of autonomy
    - reduction of foreign policy options
Regional cohesion

- An important indicator of regional cohesion is the extent to which regional development and regional politics shape the domestic political landscape.
Regional cohesion

- What really matters is to acknowledge that there are different path to regional cohesion
- The dominant model has been the European one focused on:
  - **End-goal**: formation of a new form of political community
  - **Route to achieve it**: increased economic integration
Regional cohesion

- However, regional cohesion might be based on different models
  - Gradual creation of supranational organisation
  - Creation of overlapping and institutionally strong interstate arrangements
  - Evolving mix of intergovernmentalism and supranationalism
  - Consociationalist constitutional arrangements
  - Neo-medieval order based on overlapping identities and authorities
  - Eventually, it could be based on a strong regional hegemon which polices the foreign policies of states within its sphere of influence and set limits on the permissible range of domestic policy options
Systemic Theories

- Theoretical analysis of regionalism has been deeply affected by a strong Eurocentric focus
- Therefore, it is crucial to develop alternative focuses
Systemic Theories

- in the modern world there cannot be completely self-contained regions immune from outside pressures
- Systemic theories emphasise
  - the relevance of the broader political and economic structures within which regionalist schemes are embedded and
  - the impact of outside pressures working on the region
Systemic Theories: neo-realism

- The appearance of island of peace and cooperation in a world viewed as inherently conflicting was initially seen as an anomaly.
- Realism was unable to explain this anomaly.
Systemic Theories: neo-realism

- Realism and neo-realism stress:
  - the importance of **external configurations of power**
  - **power political competition** and
  - the **constraining role** of the international political system
Systemic Theories: neo-realism

- for neo-realism, politics of regionalism have much in common with the politics of alliance formation
- regionalism is understood by looking at the region from the outside in and by analysing the place of the region in the broader international system
- regionalism is seen as a response to external challenges
- with no substantial differences between economic and political regionalism
Systemic Theories: neo-realism

- In this perspective, the shift in Europe from war and competition to regional co-operation is read as the result of dramatic external developments such as:
  - The devastation brought by the two WW
  - The loss of colonial empires
  - The rise of the USSR
  - The development of the bipolar system
Systemic Theories: neo-realism

- in this perspective the EU experience is read through the strategic role of the USA:
  - Marshal Aid’s conditionalities
  - Rearmament of West Germany
  - Its being embedded within the transatlantic security framework
Systemic Theories: neo-realism

- Critics of neo-realism emphasize its mischaracterization of the international system.
- They criticise its inability to account for the dynamism and the change over time of the international system.
- Those critiques insist on the increasing role of globalisation in shaping the system of international relations.
Systemic Theories: globalisation

- it is considered both a deterrent and a stimulating force for regionalism

- **Deterrent:**
  - increasing levels of interdependence
  - Rise of global issues
Systemic Theories: globalisation

- **Stimulus:**
  - Ever-deepening integration demand for collective action and management
  - The global character of many issues is often exaggerated
  - Regionalism is often the most viable way to integrate local and global
  - Need for the state to homogenise their economic policies