Geopolitics of Regionalism; Moving towards Regional Integration as a Means for Lasting Peace and Stability in the Middle East

Mohammad Hassan Khani[*]- Associate Professor of International Relations, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

From emergence of ancient civilizations in pre-history era to the dawn of early 21st century in contemporary history, the world has witnessed a variety of ways according to which members of international community tried to solve their disputes and find peaceful solutions for their conflicts. However, a very recent mechanism which proved to be fruitful is moving towards integration and convergence within the region they belong to.

Defining and drawing the lines of common interest is the first step in this long road. It is the objective of this paper to explore that how moving towards regional integration based on geographical closeness, cultural interaction, and economic cooperation can create the framework for a geopolitics in the Middle East leading to a new regional subsystem in international system ending decades of bloody wars and costly destruction and promising a better future with peace, stability and welfare for its nations. The paper also argues that a minimum level of mutual understanding, mutual trust, and political will, and less intervention by outsiders are among necessary preconditions for this process to begin. The paper finally evaluates the challenges facing this approach from an Iranian perspective.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Regionalism, Peace, the Middle East, Common Interest.

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[*] E-mail: Khani@isu.ac.ir

Introduction

How to prevent war and conflict among nations? How to bring a lasting peace to international system and replace hostile and violent confrontations by peaceful coexistence? These are the typical questions in the minds of statesmen and scholars from early history of human civilizations till now. Generation after generation they have been trying to find a convincing and practicable answer to these questions. Defining lines of common interests between members of international community, creating a positive and workable interdependency among them, and finally establishing a framework for mutual cooperation and moving towards a common fate are among the most important ways by which we can avoid wars and antagonism and promote peace and reconciliation. In order to do that, moving towards regional integration, as suggested by many scientists of International Relations, has been described as one of the best functional mechanisms. In that sense Regional Integration can be defined as moving towards cooperation among those state-members of international community who live in the same neighborhood and enjoy a meaningful geographical proximity. It has also been regarded as a working policy and good way for achieving peace, security and economic prosperity across the globe. To see how this approach may or may not work in the Middle East, we first need to look at the theoretical framework and also from the historical background which it comes.

Names, Theories & Key Concepts:

When it comes to regionalism and regional integration there are many names who made great contribution to this field among them are a few very well-known ones such as Leon Lindberg, David Mitrany, Ernest Haas, and Karl Deutsch whose works have been and remain to be enlightening source of reference in this field. Each of these scholars have made a particular contribution to the study of regional integration shedding its own light on the subject. Alongside with academic theorists there were also a number of

politicians who also contributed to this notion among whom Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet are the most famous ones especially in regard with the idea of regional integration in Europe. As far as the conceptual and theoretical debate is concerned the concepts and theories such as functionalism, neo-functionalism, security community, spill-over and sense of community are among the most important ones in explaining and analyzing how regionalism and regional integration work.

Looking at theoretical bases for the notion of regionalism and regional integration shows that during the past five decades there has been a whole lot of efforts by scholars of international relations trying to explain the function and importance of regional integration in international politics. Ernest Hass is among those theorists who did a great contribution to initiating and developing the idea of regional integration. Hass defines integration as a process in which political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new center, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states (Hass, 1958: 16). The model proposed by Louis J. Cantori and Steven F. Spiegel is also among the best explained in this field. They define the move towards regional integration by neighboring countries in terms of their desire to work together in form of a subordinate system of international system (Cantori & Spiegel, 1970: 46). Answering the critical question of how to achieve it they recommend frequent contacts, interchange, and communication between peoples as indicators of successful integration (Cantori & Spiegel, 1973: 47).

Although there are some analysts who doubt the credibility of such approach towards the role of regionalism in world politics, yet there are those who argue convincingly that regionalism and the regional arrangements as subordinate systems, have been and will be central to many of the debates about the nature of the future international order. Andrew Hurrel sees regionalism as a prescription, a moral position or as a doctrine

as to how international relations ought to be organized (Hurrel, 1995: 39). Regional integration will have many different effects and consequences for nation-states as well as their citizens. It will bring a sense of commonality among individuals and also institutions making them to feel that they are no longer separated by borders rather belong to a more or less similar identity. Regionalism is a practical , moderated, modified version of globalization with less harmful consequences and more beneficiary effects towards which member-states move   voluntarily .It is not an alternative to globalization.

How Does Regional Integration Work?
In the wake of increasing cross-border transactions, communications, and connections of different kinds between different states, the boundaries of their authorities will be changed and the feature of their societies will become more and more likewise. The more this kind of feeling spreads across the member-nations in individual and social levels, the more and the better their way will be paved towards creating a bloc, a cluster, or a subordinate system, distinguishing them from the rest of the system. Undoubtedly the efforts made by governments to redraw boundaries of their authority and to expand it at the regional level will have a huge impact on political map of each region and will consequently lead to economic, and social consequences. And in the final analysis it is this interaction and intercourse between these clusters of nations by which the future of each individual state and the future of the region as a whole will be shaped. Any regional arrangement consists of a number of players and actors, big and small, who are acting individually or in form of groups and blocs according to a set of common norms, interests and concerns. For this common interests and concerns to form and establish and to be defined, there must be a minimum sense of community between those nations which are about to be parts of this integration. Karl Deutsch defines this sense of community as an essential element in the concept of integration. According to him integration

is defined as a matter of mutual sympathies and loyalty; of 'we-feeling', trust, and mutual consideration; of partial identification in terms of semi-images and interests; of mutually successful predictions of behavior, and of cooperative action in accordance with it (Deutsch, 1957: 36). In other words one can argue that the following phases must happen in order we can achieve the basis upon which the regional integration can be built:

1.Developing a common understanding about each other, and about the region, and developing a genuine and natural empathy towards each other in a way that each nation feels and perceives other nation's pain and misery or joy and prosperity as its own.

2.Making sure that all members do stay loyal to each other and will never betray each other no matter what is the circumstances.

3.Reassuring the fact that in spite of the different nationalities, ethnic roots, and religions they belong to, still they can enjoy a deep and meaningful sense of oneness which gives them a sense of common identity above all others.

4.Trying to expand bilateral and multilateral sense of trust, faith and confidence towards each other which makes it easy to cooperate with each other.

5.Attempting to increase their similarities in terms of their expectations and the way they see and perceive the threats and challenges, and then respectively their proposed policies and plans to solve them.

It is not difficult to imagine how different countries which adhere above points and pass the above stages successfully can facilitate their move towards regional integration. However, it seems that there must be a minimum level of above factors available for starting the process of regional integrations, and then as the result of the ongoing process, if successful, these five issues will reach to a maximum level.

The nations engaged in integration process usually start this process by trying it in just a few fields and then gradually these limited areas can and

will lead to a wider range of other fields from security to political relations, from agriculture to culture, from environment and energy to transport and trade etc. As the time passes by, and as the new concerns emerge, the new areas of cooperation and competition begin to come into sight. Hence, that durability, consistency and stability of any integration attempt which demonstrates itself in a regional bloc and organization does depend to great extent on how the lines of cooperation and competition between players will be defined and drawn. It is very important that the members of these new communities learn and accept that cooperation and competition do work at the same time in a healthy manner. Since in regional integration these lines are defined on the most natural commonality between the member states, therefore the risk of collapse and disintegration becomes less and less.

Historical Experiences:
For centuries, European continent was the scene of numerous and bloody conflicts in which different nations went to war against each other. Thirty years wars which happened between 1618-1648, Napoleonic wars, in late 18th and early 19th centuries, the conflicts resulted from 1848 revolutions in central Europe, the first and the second world wars, all are credible examples of how antagonistic and hostile has been the state of relation among European nations. The past experiences, in spite of their heavy cost, taught Europeans a valuable lesson and it was the fact that the only way to secure a lasting peace is to bond them economically, socially, and politically, and convince them of their common destiny.

What has happened in Europe during more than half a century, in terms of the success of EU members in integrating and defining common interests over a wide range of issues means and shows that regional integration can and will act as a very important factor and device in gathering different countries around a center and then emerging as a powerful bloc within which different nations who used to be enemies and hostile to each other can find common ground for cooperation and moving towards peace and

security from which all will benefit a lot.

Besides European countries there are other groups of countries in different regions in the world which are quiet both willing and capable of following the European model in their own ways. Association of South East Asian Nations known as ASEAN is a good example with a relatively good record of success. Other regions like Central Asia can also re-emerge as a key interchange of commerce and culture, as it was for centuries during the period of the Great Silk Road provided the countries in the region succeed in their effort to create a working regional arrangement (Fried, 2005).

Potentials for Regional Integration in the Middle East:

The main argument of this paper is that Middle East is also regarded as a good candidate for another attempt towards regional integration in 21st century. The region has got a great potential for cooperation between the neighboring countries which can ultimately affect each individual country in the region, and also can change the region as a whole and at the same time can enhance its role in international system in many ways and fields including economic, security and political ones. The neighboring countries can help each other in many economic areas, including transportations, trade, export and import and also bilateral or multilateral investment. Energy from producing stage to energy routs and then to consuming markets (pipelines and shipment of Oil and Gas) is another excellent potential field for cooperation among them. Perhaps one of the most important reasons for the significance of the Middle East is its geographical location and its geopolitics. Being located on the world map where three continents namely Asia, Europe and Africa meet each other and acting as a connection point between intercontinental regions gives it a pivotal position in the world regions A broad definition of Middle East region means even if Middle East is limited to the lands between Iran and Mediterranean Sea but it technically does affect other regions from the Caspian Sea and the Caucuses in the north to the Persian Gulf in south, and from North Africa to borders of

Central Asia to the East which all are of great importance for international system in both energy and security terms. It means that the Middle East serves as a natural link and bridge between these regions and Europe. This bridge can bring both security or threat, wealth or poverty, challenge or opportunity to all its neighboring regions including Europe. It is a bridge that EU cannot afford to ignore it or destroy it. The post-September 11th events and specially the post-Arab spring turmoil showed how inseparable are the two regions. Terrorism, extremism, conflicts and civil wars in the Middle East can affect immediately and significantly the security and welfare of Europeans. Therefore it is in the long term interest of Europe as a whole, and in the national interest of its every member-states to help to find a lasting solution to the problems of the Middle East and to establish a working mechanism by which a lasting peace and security together with sustainable development can be achieved in this part of the world. It is the core idea of this paper that moving towards regional integration is one of the ways toward this goal. It is a matter of common interests for all countries in this regions and also the interests of other nations in the neighboring regions next to it, to develop a kind of close political and security relations among each other. The benefits of this process if successful does go beyond the region and its neighboring regions and will have a tremendously positive impact on international peace and security.

The main argument in promoting the regional integration as a means for lasting peace and stability for the Middle East region is based upon this assumption that there exists significant potentials to bring the nations of this war-torn region together making them to start building a new region based on common interests. There exists a relative degree of similarities and communalities in a number of fields including religion, history, culture and more importantly geography. The failure or success of regional integration in the Middle East region to a great extent depends on the ability of nations and states in this region to create that sense of community among the

Middle Eastern societies and then a security community and being able to come to agreement on the fact that their common social, political, security and economic problems must and can be resolved by their collective effort and through a long and peaceful process. The Meaningful Geographical Proximity which connects the capitals of the countries in this region tells us that a lasting peace, security, stability and prosperity will not occur unless it passes through Tehran, Baghdad, Ankara, Riyadh, Cairo and other capitals in the region.

Challenges and Obstacles Facing this Approach:
Having different ideologies and worldviews are among the most important challenges facing regional integration. Although regional integration based on geographical proximity and other practical and functional factors has pushed the old fashion ideological factors aside, yet it seems that ideological orientation and different worldviews remain to be among the important barriers in gathering different states around a new center and the Middle East in not an exception. As long as this drive is still there, it can be regarded as a potential obstacle towards regional integration preventing those states who live in the same neighborhood but have different ideological orientations from gathering. Religion and religious tendencies also will remain a significant motive for moving towards either integration or disintegration in different parts of the world. While economic reasons and geographical factors will increasingly impose themselves on others such as religion, yet religious benchmarks play a big role in drawing dividing lines between nations even at the beginning of 21st century. Evaluating the reasons for failure of movements towards integration in the Middle Eastern countries shows how religion and religious sectarianism has acted as an obstacle in moving towards integration and in some cases has serves as a cause for disintegration in this region. Division between Sunni and Shia population in the Middle East in general, and some countries such as Iraq and Syria in particular is a good example here. Another challenge here on

road towards regional integration is the fact that some of these countries are caught between two regions and find it difficult to choose between one bloc or another. In other words, it can be a dilemma that how to choose the team and the group they want to be a member of and how to reconcile the requirement of membership in one group with the requirement of being member in another one. This becomes a real problem when those two blocs have conflicting relations and in such case it becomes a big challenge to integration process. The dilemma Turkey is facing while want to be a driving force in integration process in the Middle East while trying to be a loyal member of NATO and becoming a full member of EU is a classic example of this challenge. The way these clusters of nations choose to behave towards each other and relate to each other is a very important factor in the success or failure of the process of integration in every region including the Middle East.

There are also other challenges and obstacles on the road towards a comprehensive integration which endangers the prospect for a fast and total political and economic integration in this region. Different orientations that the countries of the region have in their political tendencies and the diversity in their priorities namely their security concerns can be seen as a great obstacle facing the integration in the region. Talking about the Middle East, it seems that Ankara, Cairo, Tehran, and Riyadh, as main power centers across the region, are still far away from each other when it comes their perceptions and perspectives in security and political terms. While some of these capitals are concerned with their role in global economy and obsessed with demonstrating their role in international system, the leaders in other capitals of the region are most concerned with their political stability and economic development, and somehow struggling to find a way to make a balance between their domestic and foreign policy priorities. This is what F. Gregory Gause III calls it " a new Middle East cold war".(Gause, 2016)

There are those analysts who argue that the tendency towards superiority

by some actors has a negative impact on the whole process of integration slowing down the speed of integration in the region. The sense of fear and uncertainty towards certain bigger powers in region which exists among a few small countries is another potential challenge here. The existing of Big Power (s) in a region actually may be seen as a paradoxical factor and diverse effects on the process of integration in any region. It is a fact that any move towards integration and its success, to a great extent, depends on its being supported by membership and inclusion of at least one big power willing to invest in the success of the process and to share its political and economic strength to act as a locomotive of the train of integration. The lack of such power-generator will lead to its weakness and ultimately its failure. Having said that, yet interestingly the paradox lies exactly here. And the reason lies in the fact that when this big power is included, it immediately starts to act and behave as a Big Brother, tending to decide for itself, and impose its will, its interests and its ambitions upon others. This phenomenon does create a new obstacle in the road of a healthy arrangements in integration process. In the eyes of many scholars and policy makers in the region although there are many lessons to be taken from the Western and European model but yet there are areas that the Middle Eastern countries need to keep their own reservations and not to follow the Western model.

Perhaps one lesson that the advocates of integration in the Middle East can learn from European experience is the fact that as in Europe the integration process began by 'non-politics' zone , and even by trying to transform the political issues into non-political ones which here in the Middle East they can do the same. That is an understandable consideration due to the sensitivity that always is attached to all issue with a political nature and feature. That explains what David Mitrany meant by emphasizing on what he called the 'functional' agencies and the technocratic character of the Monnet method.

Conclusion

A full scale regional integration in its classic definition may not happen in the Middle East in foreseeable future, however moving towards it can be started at anytime provided the countries and nations in the region make such a decision. To make such a decision they first must be convinced that it is a feasible and useful phenomenon. Although being useful is a relative issue, yet common sense and conventional wisdom can help to judge here. Moving towards regional integration here means showing a desire and reediness to take the very first and preliminary steps to explore, define and draw the lines and areas of common interest. These initial steps may take years to turn to solid and clear plans after which we may be able to talk about next phase of economic and political and even security integration. These first steps are of mainly social and cultural nature. This phase may prove to be painfully long and slow process by which the psychological barriers can be identified and respectively removed. It is in this phase that the "self-interest" can turn into a "sense of We-feeling" from which the "common interest" can be born.

It is very unrealistic to talk about creating Middle East Union right now, but it is quiet realistic to talk about creating a kind of arrangements in which the nations of the Middle East come closer to each other, talk to each other, express and share their views, wishes, dreams and fears. It is in such environment that they can engage in a constructive dialogue attempting to identify their common problems and reflecting their concerns and sharing their desirable solutions based on the concept of common interest. As discussed throughout this paper, regional integration can lead to a world in which regional agreements offer scope to reduce security tensions between neighboring countries, and promotes cooperation among them paving the way for creating a good ground for regional peace and reconciliation. Despite the fact that regional integration proved to be a working and feasible mechanism for advancing cooperation in economic, political and security areas in Europe, however it still faces numerous challenges in other regions

such as the Middle East region. Nevertheless, due to its geopolitical significance, and due to the willingness of the neighboring nations and their common interests, the prospect for regional integration in the long run in this region seems to be promising and positive. The relative success of ASEAN is a good sign which makes us optimistic towards the future of integration policies in Asia. The geographical proximity of the countries in this region, together with being located in the neighborhood of Europe, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Persian Gulf gives it an extremely vital role in International System in geopolitical terms. Conflicting views and contradictory interests of internal and external players can be seen as one of the most important determinable factor in the failure or success of integration in this region. Defining and drawing the lines of common interest is the first step in this long road and this paper was an attempt to show how moving towards regional integration based on geographical closeness, cultural interaction, and economic cooperation can create the framework for a geopolitics in the Middle East leading to a new regional subsystem in international system ending decades of bloody wars and costly destruction and promising a better future with peace, stability and welfare for its nations.

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