

## Power, leadership, and hegemony in international politics: the case of East Asia

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Dirk Nabers

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## **Power, leadership, and hegemony in international politics: The case of East Asia**

### *Abstract*

The article inquires into the conditions of effective leadership of states in international politics, and develops a framework for the study of so-called (new) regional powers such as Brazil, China, India, and South Africa in processes of regional institution-building. Various theoretical strands will be discussed as to the requirements of effective leadership in international affairs. Most importantly, the relationship between power, leadership and hegemony will be outlined. It is argued that the connection between leadership and hegemony is one of co-constitution. Leadership is necessarily based on hegemony, while hegemony can only be sustained through leadership. Furthermore, it will be shown that both leadership and hegemony are essentially political in character, whereas power has no such insinuation but has to be translated into leadership and hegemony through discursive means. Finally, the analysis asks for the preconditions of leadership in East Asia, using China's and Japan's roles in East Asian regionalism as an illustration.

*Keywords: Power, leadership, hegemony, Japan, China*

## **1 Introduction**

Leadership of states in processes of regional institutionalization is a significant though still widely ignored topic in the field of International Relations (IR). While some prominent works look at formal leadership from a rational institutionalist perspective (e.g., Underdal 1994, Sjostedt 1999; Tallberg 2006), this study asks for the broader conditions of effective leadership of states in international politics. In other words: it takes one step back by asking how leaders become leaders and what they actually do when they perform the role of a leader in international politics. As a first step, different theoretical strands will be presented as to the requirements of effective leadership in international affairs. Referring to Steven Lukes' (1974) three-dimensional view of power, it will be argued that leadership is effective and sustainable when foreign elites acknowledge the leader's vision of international order and internalise it as their own. It is often disputed and is constituted by shared ideas about self, other, and the world, relying on the intersubjective internalisation of ideas, norms, and identities. It will, however, be necessary to add another power dimension in the course of the paper, which will be summarized under the concept of (discursive) hegemony.

To exemplify the usefulness of the developed framework for the study of (new) regional powers such as Brazil, China, India, or South Africa, the analysis inquires as to the prerequisites of effective leadership in international institution-building in East Asia, using China's and Japan's roles in East Asian regionalism as an illustration. It should be noted at the outset that the kind of argument developed in this paper is in need of substantial theoretical elaboration, since leadership theory in IR still lacks a coherent approach. The bulk of what follows is thus theoretical in nature. Taking Lukes' insights into the concept of power as a

starting point, a process- and meaning-based theory of leadership will be developed. Two intellectual sources are of primary relevance in this context: Firstly, new theories of leadership developed in political theory, management studies, and psychology will be employed to outline a general concept of leadership that seeks to differentiate between power and leadership. In that context, it will be emphasised that ‘to lead’ is not a fixed state of being but rather an act that has to be unveiled by looking at political processes. It will thus be taken as what it is in the first instance: *a verb*. This perspective seems necessary as traditional accounts of IR theory, such as various versions of *rationalism*, centre on the distribution of material capabilities, while *constructivist* and *poststructuralist* approaches in IR have only recently started to approach process-related concepts such as power and hegemony in international politics (e.g., Nabers 2009; Joseph 2003). Secondly, insights about how a leader becomes a leader will be delineated, or – to use the term most aptly developed by Ernesto Laclau and his numerous followers in the Essex School of Discourse Theory – how a *hegemonic discourse* develops and what role a ‘leader’ can play in the process. The relationship between leadership and hegemony as it is conceptualised here is one of co-constitution. Leadership is necessarily based on hegemony, while hegemony can only be sustained through leadership. It will be shown that both leadership and hegemony are essentially political in character, whereas power has no such implication but has to be translated into leadership and hegemony through discursive means. After delineating the three relevant concepts and their interrelatedness in the next section, an integrated model of power, leadership, and hegemony will be developed. Sino-Japanese antagonism and the two countries’ quest for leadership in regional institution-building serves to exemplify the argument. The conclusion will summarize the most important implications for research on regional powers institutionalization.

## 2 Power, leadership and hegemony

### 2.1 Lukes’ concept of power as a starting point

Steven Lukes’ (2005 [1974]) famous definition of the term power provides us with a helpful starting point in thinking about leadership. Lukes argues that power is most effective in its unobservable form, that is, when *willing compliance* to the powerful is secured by means of influencing others ‘perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things’ (Lukes 2005 [1974]: 11). Summing up Lukes’ argument, power has to be understood as having three interrelated dimensions: First, referring to Robert Dahl’s (1957) classic definition, power is exercised if A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. Lukes points to the conceptual difference between the mere capacity of possessing power and the actual exercise of power. In a later methodological step, Dahl asked which actors had eventually been able to initiate alternatives that were adopted, or had been able to veto proposals (Dahl 1961), building a bridge towards what Lukes calls a two-dimensional view of power. This dimension looks at the *de facto* power of the members within a group in the decision-making process: ‘it incorporates into the analysis of power relations the question of the control over the agenda of politics and of the ways in which potential issues are kept out of the political process’ (Lukes 2005 [1974]: 25). Lukes maintains that the rules within any decision-making system naturally bias the mobilization of resources for competition in agenda formation against some individuals and groups and in favour of others. This dimension of power therefore incorporates coercion, influence, authority, force, and manipulation; it is restricted to concrete observable behaviour in a

political decision-making process, which is why Lukes goes a step further by developing a three-dimensional view of power. According to this perspective, an actor exercises power over another by influencing, shaping, or determining his wants, beliefs, and understandings about the world. Subtle forms of power, such as the control of information and the process of socialization, fall into this category.

This is an essentially social view of power, which may involve thought control and the indoctrination of people's wants. Although Lukes maintains that this view provides a deeper and more suitable explanation of power relations than the first two, rationalist approaches to international politics, such as institutionalism and liberalism, widely ignore this relational and processual perspective on power, due to their statist ontology (Kratochwil/Ruggie 1986). As Lukes (2005 [1974]: 12) has maintained, power does not necessarily have to be exercised. As a capacity, it can be turned into leadership, hegemony, or domination,<sup>1</sup> but this is not a *conditio sine qua non*. Power does not equal leadership.

Surprisingly, the early strands of IR theorizing largely relied on a capacity-based power definition. For instance, Kenneth Waltz conceptualized power as a 'means' and contended that 'the outcome of its use is necessarily uncertain' (Waltz 1979: 192). He thus restricted himself to measuring power in terms of the distribution of capabilities and was not interested in process and interaction. Many of Waltz's realist predecessors and theoretical companions fell within the broad compass of statist balance-of-power arguments. Examples are George Liska, who suggested that 'alliances are against, and only derivatively for, someone or something' (Liska 1962: 12) and Hans J. Morgenthau, who depicted international cooperation as 'a necessary function of the balance of power operating in a multiple state system' (Morgenthau 1967: 175). For those traditional realists, international institutions were always a function of materially defined state power and interests (Carr 1964: 170-171). Similarly, contemporary realist thinkers like John Mearsheimer focus on the material power levels of individual states, from which they derive the architecture of the international system (Mearsheimer 2001: 12).

Interestingly, neoinstitutionalist accounts aimed to adopt categories that exceeded the materialist scope (Keohane 1984, 1989; Krasner 1983), incorporating ideas and identities instead. That is perhaps why Robert Keohane suggested in *After Hegemony* that

[a]ny act of cooperation or apparent cooperation needs to be interpreted within the context of related actions, and of prevailing expectations and shared beliefs, before its meaning can be properly understood. Fragments of political behavior become comprehensible when viewed as part of a larger mosaic. (Keohane 1984: 56)

It is not absolutely clear what Keohane meant by this suggestion. Referring to peoples' values and their willingness to promote widely accepted norms, the theory obviously adopts variables that lie outside the realm of the traditional institutionalist paradigm, which is rational-utilitarian and strictly materialist in nature. However, in the last two decades many supposedly realist or neoinstitutionalist accounts have already transcended this narrow perspective. Friedrich Kratochwil and John G. Ruggie's landmark article on international institutions and organizations set the tone. Kratochwil and Ruggie unveiled a deep tension between idealist ontology and positivist epistemology, and argued for a new approach 'that would open up regime analysis to the communicative rather than merely the referential functions of norms in social interactions' (Kratochwil/Ruggie 1986: 774). More recent examples of novel perspectives on international institutions include Peter M. and Ernst B.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted at this point that *domination* is not the central concern of this paper.

Haas, who argue from a pragmatic constructivist standpoint that international institutions might indeed be ‘wilful actors on their own, but are also the venue in which reflexive new practices and policies develop’ (Haas/Haas 2002: 573). Finally, Thomas Gehring and Eva Ruffing’s work on the power of reasoned arguments versus parochial interests should be noted as only one example on how to surmount static power conceptions (Gehring/Ruffing 2008).

But realist thinking has also developed into meaning- and process-based accounts. For example, Stephen Walt assumes that power alone cannot explain the balancing behaviour of states. Instead he proposes the concept of ‘balance of threat’ as a better alternative than ‘balance of power’, and argues that the level of threat against any state is affected by geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and the perceived intentions of adversary states (Walt 1987: 5; see also Walt 1997). For example, the immediate threat that the offensive capabilities of states like North Korea or Iran pose for surrounding states may create a strong incentive for those states to balance against the threat. Even a state with a deteriorating economy and a military in disarray may prompt others to balance against it if it is perceived as especially aggressive (Walt 1987: 25-26).

What is striking about all these accounts is, on the one hand, a hesitancy to delve into the complexities of Lukes’ three-dimensional view and, on the other hand, a widespread ignorance with regard to the link between power and leadership. Michael Williams (2005) therefore demands a return to the anthropological foundations of realism and a focus on the constructive relational processes of Self and Other (for a comment, Jütersonke 2006: 464; also Wong 2000). His work is an intriguing deconstruction of – in his view – false dichotomies between classical realism and critical and poststructuralist thought. It is, however, questionable whether the proposition of such a kind of richer realism does not put the whole realist project into question, or – as Stefano Guzzini (2001) has shown – whether defining the core of realism does not mean abandoning a lot of what IR has to say today.

Writing about bargaining power in multilateral negotiations, for example, Gerald Schneider complains that ‘[it] is, moreover, nearly impossible to obtain indicators that sufficiently approximate the demanding concepts advocated by social constructivism and related approaches’ (Schneider 2005: 681). Sheer brute power has not only been more fascinating for IR theorists than complex social relationships, it has also been easier to handle conceptually. As Lukes’ definition exceeds even most constructivist approaches in terms of complexity, its manifold methodological implications might hinder many scholars from transcending traditional IR rationalism. In essence, Lukes’ work is a forceful critique of methodological individualism and behaviourism. In the following, it will thus be maintained, contrary to the rationalist position, that successful leadership in international affairs must take Lukes’ three-dimensional view of power into consideration and develop it further. Power has to be internalized in the intersubjective understandings of relevant actors. Ultimately, this is the basis of what will later in this article be called a hegemonic project.

## ***2.2 Power and leadership***

Having delineated the most obvious shortcomings of the static, rationalist, and solely materialist approaches to power, a second question to be addressed here refers to the conceptual distinction between power and leadership. What is it that differentiates leadership from power? Why does one leader lead and not another? What material capabilities does one need to become a leader? What characterises the relationship between leaders and followers?

Again, I argue henceforth that in order to understand leadership, we have to take a closer look at the process- and meaning-driven character of international politics. In various traditional strands of IR theory, collective interest is assumed to be pre-given and hence exogenous to social interaction (see the critique in Wendt 1994: 389; Ruggie 1998: 118-119). In contrast, I will argue that social interaction does ultimately have transformative effects on interests and identity, because continuous cooperation is likely to influence intersubjective meanings.

To date, James MacGregor Burns' definition of the concept of leadership is still the most sophisticated and functional, as it puts the complex relationship between *leaders and followers* at centre stage. It involves persuasion, exchange, and transformation. It is a form of power, but it implies mutuality. To quote Burns:

*Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers. This is done in order to realize goals mutually held by both leaders and followers. (Burns 1978: 18; emphasis in original)*

What is significant in this definition is that leadership is competitive; potential leaders have to appeal to the motives of potential followers. It must hence be distinguished from domination and coercion. As I will make clear further on in this article, ideas and motives are not carved in stone. Leaders might be able to get potential followers to see the world through their eyes. In contrast to mere power holders, leaders are effective because they induce change. Leadership, again in contrast to brute power, is inseparable from the wants and needs of followers, but these wants and needs may be changed through social interaction.

Leadership approaches must thus embed the concepts of leaders and followers within a broader theory of social and political processes, develop a model of social change, account for the physical constraints of social interaction, and recognise the difficult interplay between morality and power. It is helpful to look at how leadership is conceptualised in other disciplines, most notably political theory, psychology, and management. Several dimensions which make it possible to link leadership with traditional concepts of power can be extracted from the literature in these fields (especially Burns 1978; also Keohane 2005, Schirm 2009; Samuels 2003 and Young 1991):

1. While power can be an intrinsic quality that cannot always be explained by the interactions between the powerful and the less powerful, leadership must essentially be conceptualised as an *activity*. Power does not necessarily entail leadership, nor does power always help to achieve the desired outcomes, as Christopher Layne elucidates quite appositely with regard to the United States: 'There is a paradox between the magnitude of American power and Washington's inability to use that power to always get what it wants in international politics [...] hegemony is not omnipotence' (Layne 2006: 41-42). Leaders have to make decisions, gather resources, use incentives and threats, formulate visions, and build coalitions. As Nannerl Keohane puts it: 'Judgment is needed to identify issues and priorities, know how to allocate time and energy, make decisions, choose and recruit the people best qualified to be lieutenants and collaborators, and see how to use their skills' (Keohane 2005: 710). Leadership necessitates foresight and information-gathering skills, which might be called a form of power, but surely transcends traditional accounts.
2. Leadership requires an *institutionalised context*. It is seldom ad hoc. On the contrary, it rests on continuity, stability, and repetition. This continual asymmetry between leaders and followers is what one could also call *power*. Leaders must therefore pay attention to different institutionalised contexts at the same time, be it at the bilateral, regional, or

global level. Institutionalisation often means that leadership is *issue specific*, and different forms of power and leadership are required in different situations.

3. From this follows that leaders act under *constraints* when they use their power; they are not entirely free to choose their options, for their actions are shaped by followers and by circumstances to a changing degree.<sup>2</sup> As Burns emphasises in his groundbreaking monograph, leadership is always relational (Burns 1978: chapter 1): leaders must speak and be able to listen at the same time, and show empathy. Writing on *Presidential Power* in the U.S., Richard Neustadt argues that ‘real power is reciprocal and varies markedly with organization, subject matter, personality and situation’ (Neustadt 1980: 32). Followers must be assured that they can count on the leader in a difficult situation, such as a military attack. As has been the case for the United States on many occasions in the past, a leader must be willing to stand up for its principles, to show courage and integrity. But he must also admit mistakes and show that he has learned from them. This dimension of leadership relates power to legitimacy (e.g. Hurrell 2007: 78-79). Leaders are coalition-builders; they rarely act alone. Subordinates are enlisted to fulfil certain roles in the leadership game; tasks are delegated.
4. Finally, leadership has a *normative dimension*. It plays an imperative role in tackling internationally relevant problems such as terrorism, trade facilitation, climate change, humanitarian aid, and institutional cooperation in general. Strong leadership seems to be essential for guiding and directing a group of countries towards collective action. Effective leadership is crucial in this process, since it serves various functions in the negotiation process. Moreover, leadership theory suggests that decentralised bargaining is subject to collective-action problems. This will lead members of an international institution to delegate functions of agenda management, brokerage, and mediation to more powerful countries. Leaders might have the capacity to solve collective-action problems that might otherwise paralyse decentralised negotiations. The delegation of powers to leading countries can be seen as a functional response by states to collective-action problems in multilateral negotiations. Strong leaders often wield asymmetrical control over preference formation and negotiation procedure. Opportunistic leaders will use this privilege for both collective and private gain, promoting an agreement that is closest to their own preferred position (Tallberg 2006).

Bilateral or multilateral negotiations constitute the key method by which states address joint problems and develop standard behavioural norms in world politics. In multilateral negotiations, the more universal the character of an issue is, and the greater the number of the participating states tends to be, the more important effectual leadership is in order to make the debate move forward toward an accord. This is because the bigger the number of nation states which join the negotiations, the more diverse the issues which are regarded as national interests by each country, and the more complicated the relationship between those various interests. The presence of leadership is a necessary condition for reaching an agreement (Young 1991: 302). In other words, as Lindberg and Scheingold argued, ‘leadership is the very essence of a capacity for collective action’ in multilateral negotiations (Lindberg and

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<sup>2</sup> For that reason, Richard Samuels (2003: 6) has referred to leadership as ‘that constrained place where imagination, resources and opportunity converge. The imaginings need not be original to the leader, but he is the one who can control their use for his ends. The resources need not be entirely of her making, but she must be able to commandeer them for her own use. Opportunities will flow past individual entrepreneurs from time to time, and the successful leader will seize them. Most important of all, the constraints need not be determinant, and the change need not be serendipitous. Determined individuals will demonstrate a range of creative ways to combine resources and ideas and to seize opportunity’.

Sheingold 1970: 128). Likewise, Underdal contends that the more multifaceted the negotiation setting – that is, the larger the number of the actors and the number and ‘intricacy’ of issues – the more likely it is that some actors will emerge as leaders and others as followers. In this process, critical leadership becomes a determinant of success (Underdal 1994: 179-180).

Several authors in IR theory have thus tried to develop a more comprehensive, interactive model of leadership and power in the last two decades. Young has explored the concept of leadership from a behavioural perspective, differentiating between three forms of leadership – structural leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, and intellectual leadership – proposing a way to understand leadership in international bargaining that can be of great help when analysing states as leaders in international affairs. Young’s contribution with regard to the role of leadership in international politics is considerable. He makes three basic arguments: Firstly, leadership is essentially relational; structural leadership aims to translate relative power capabilities into bargaining leverage by making use of material threats and promises. Forming effective coalitions can be crucial in this process. Secondly, a leader will be able to act as an agenda setter, showing innovative solutions to overcome deadlocks or operating as a broker to gain support for salient solutions. Thirdly, leadership is a reflective process, necessitating a deliberative process of exchanging arguments. It implies the ‘power of ideas to shape the intellectual capital available to those engaged in institutional bargaining’ (Young 1991: 300).

This corresponds to Susan Strange’s distinction between ‘structural power’ and ‘relational power’. While the latter refers to the ability of one state to influence another state’s behaviour directly, she maintains that structural power denotes one state’s ability to indirectly influence others by delineating the structures within which they must operate (Strange 1983). In a similar vein, Ikenberry and Kupchan argue that

there is also a more subtle component of hegemonic power, one that works at the level of substantive beliefs rather than material payoffs. Acquiescence is the result of the socialization of leaders in secondary nations. Elites in secondary states buy into and internalise norms that are articulated by the hegemon and therefore pursue policies consistent with the hegemon’s notion of international order. (Ikenberry/Kupchan 1990: 283)

This is a statement that gets much closer to reality than the static assumptions presented by materialist approaches to power. It refers to the mechanisms that make leadership possible, to the sustainability of compliance by secondary states, and to the likelihood of leadership failure. To accommodate exogenous sources of leadership in the model developed here, one has to ask how material sources are turned into leadership in international negotiations, since it is assumed that the material power base has no intrinsic significance in itself. This is not to say that material incentives do not play a role in international politics; it is rather to address the question of how material capabilities are represented as meaningful in international politics.

Following Ikenberry and Kupchan, there are two basic ways to exercise leadership. The first refers to material incentives, ranging from economic sanctions and military strikes on the negative end to promises of reward on the positive end. These methods aim to change the costs and benefits of potential followers in pursuing alternative policies, and still operate with rationalist presumptions. The second means of exercising leadership relies on the modification of the basic beliefs of leaders in other nations (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990: 285). These two ways of exercising leadership are interrelated and reinforce each other in the political process. In reality, coercion and persuasion take place at the same time. As has been said before, the first method works through external inducement (Ikenberry and Kupchan

1990: 290), relying on economic and military incentives to induce followers to change their policies. The second is much more complex and has to be treated in more detail. It implies a reflexive, discourse-based conception of power, allowing for a complex reformulation of interests and identities.

Yet, where all the approaches discussed so far stop, and where this article proceeds, is how to engage potentials followers in the debating and contesting of ideas and meanings. In an intriguing analytical step, Burns distinguished transactional from transformational leadership. While ‘leaders approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another’ (Burns 1978: 4) in the former case – one example being military protection in exchange for the provision of land use, as with Germany’s and Japan’s relations with the United States after World War II (Nabers 2000; Berger 1998) – the follower is more fully engaged in the latter case: ‘The result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual simulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents’ (ibid.). As we will see, it is in this kind of elevation of followers into leaders that the theoretical strands of leadership theory and Lukes’ three-dimensional view of power converge. Leadership is always contested by challenges from those who are left out of what we will call a ‘hegemonic project’, and sometimes from those who find themselves in a subordinate position to the leader. The central question of the next section refers to the strategies that actors employ to present their particular visions as universal, so that they become acceptable to relevant others. As will be outlined, this understanding of power transcends the three-dimensional view and brings the theoretical nexus between power and leadership to its logical conclusion.

### **2.3 Leadership as discursive hegemony**

Crucial for a process- and meaning-based understanding of leadership and a fully defined understanding of power is the concept of *hegemony* as developed in modern political theory – not to be conflated with the concept of hegemony put forward by *hegemonic stability theory* in the field of IR.<sup>3</sup> While Steven Lukes relies heavily on Antonio Gramsci’s work on hegemony to develop his three-dimensional view of power (e.g., Lukes 2005 [1974]: 7-8, 49-50, 144-145, 152), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – in their seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) – reformulated Gramsci’s notion of hegemony in a way that takes discourse as constitutive for politics. Some observers see the book as the most outstanding example of the relationship between poststructuralism and political theory (Finlayson/Valentine 2002: 1). Laclau and Mouffe are at the forefront of those theorists in the poststructuralist vein who combine a theory of power with a strictly differential conception of identity. Laclau and Mouffe’s theory can thus be used as a foil for a process-based understanding of leadership. Although numerous interrelated concepts – such as discourse, hegemony, undecidability, difference and equivalence, emptiness and openness – are fundamental to Laclau and Mouffe’s work, only those aspects that are of direct import for a broader concept of leadership will be addressed here.

To start, *structure* is defined as discourse; the social and culture are constituted entirely within discourse. Discourse is necessarily about change and is defined through articulation. This does not deny the argument that power may rely on certain material circumstances. However, whether atomic weapons are constructed as a threat or as a nuclear umbrella to protect a certain country depends upon the nature of the discourse in which they are embedded.

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<sup>3</sup> For a broad discussion of hegemonic stability theory see the classic critique by Susan Strange (1987).

Meanings are entirely constituted by discursive practices. In fact, it is possible to understand the material and social world by studying meanings. Material conditions of possibility such as the possession of state-of-the-art weapons are of significance, but what matters for social relations is their meaning. Again, it has to be accentuated here that 'we inevitably resort to discursively-constituted concepts to refer to the extra-discursive' (Smith 1998: 88). Unquestionably, we have not 'constructed our ideas of international terrorism, both before and after 11 September, out of thin air' (Wight 2006: 161). But what ultimately matters for our analysis are the ideas produced by a specific discourse, not their material 'source'. The focus on socially constructed meanings does not eliminate the question of why some meanings prevail over others, as Wight (2006: 161-162) criticises. If Wight refers to power, which is not obvious in his criticism, it should be clear that material power is a form of power that depends on intersubjectivity as well. Human beings, the 'human subject', 'man', and 'woman' – the material conditions of possibility are constructed differently in different religious, ideological, or constitutional discourses. Any physical constraint has to be endowed with meaning by humans in order for one to be able to act on it. This underlines our previous argument that leadership must be understood in its cultural context and that it is based on the interpretation of issue-specific information.

The question is which meaning is able to prevail in the end. The notion of hegemony rests on the assumption that any discourse tries to dominate the field of discursivity. Power and the ability of regional powers to transform their material capabilities into leadership will thus depend on an actor's ability to present his own particular worldview as compatible with the communal aims. This works best in a situation of disintegration and indeterminacy in articulations of different identities (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 7, 13; Laclau 1977: 103; Laclau 2005: 122), or in a situation of *dislocation*. While crisis is a constant political phenomenon, the same is true for societal dislocation. As Norval maintains, 'if the structure is dislocated and thus incomplete, an intervention by a subject is needed to re-suture it' (Norval 2004: 142). This is the logical basis of all leadership, and basically of all politics. Previous political logics are put into question by a crisis, while more and more actors have to open themselves up to innovative discourses, and hegemonic strategies can be successful. A crucial question, then, is what a political project has to look like to be successful. Why does one prospective regional country carry more weight than another in assuming the role of a leader? To answer this question, let us scrutinise the hegemonic process more closely. The transition from one dominant discourse to another is a highly complex venture, encompassing a fundamental reconstruction of existing subject positions. As an ideal type, it can be summed up as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- (1) At the beginning there is a crisis, visible through a disintegration of popular identifications with institutionalised subject positions and political imaginaries. This could either be an external catastrophe such as a major war; a grave financial or economic crisis; humanitarian catastrophe or terrorist assault; or merely a necessary political decision in 'undecidable terrain' that might weaken dominant discourses, that is, prevailing concepts of reality, opening up cultural borders.
- (2) Competing political forces will attempt to hegemonise the political space, that is, to exercise leadership in that situation. Alternative discourses start to compete in their interpretation of the crisis and their attempt to resolve the 'lack' triggered by the crisis. Empty signifiers like 'Asia', 'justice', 'community', and 'order' function as horizons, as a 'surface of inscription' for a number of specific political articulations.

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<sup>4</sup> See also Smith 1998: 164-168.

- (3) Sooner or later, one predominant interpretation will evolve – often visible in the strengthening of communal bonds – which institutes the framework that determines what action is appropriate, and what action is inappropriate, to end the predicament. This dominant interpretative frame is due to its linkages with residual institutions – (Laclau 1990: 64; Norval 1996: 96).
- (4) In due course, these identifications will become more and more routinised. The discourse becomes what Laclau calls an imaginary: ‘not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object’ (Laclau 1990: 64). As it becomes an imaginary, the discourse will generate new kinds of political action along the lines of the dominant interpretative framework (cf. also Laclau 1977). Specific cultural forms such as norms, rules, (political) institutions, conventions, ideologies, customs, and laws are all influenced by this process. This is an exercise of power in its purest form, as it categorically excludes alternative institutional frameworks.

It has to be emphasised that this is an ideal-type version of the hegemonic process. An ‘international order’ is never fully constituted and hegemonic interventions are possible at any time. Hegemony-based leadership is issue specific, culturally embedded, historically contingent, and never to be understood as a once-and-for-all decision (Williams 2007: 119). To be sure, leadership requires some kind of hegemonic process. It has to be conceded, though, that the battle between discourses to become the leading interpretative structure also reveals the configuration of power relations in a given historical moment. It would be naïve to think that the material capabilities of regional powers do not play their part in a discourse. However, they do not pre-determine the path towards leadership. For example, Singapore – not Japan or China, as materialist IR research would probably suggest – took the lead in East Asia with regard to bi- and multilateral trade liberalization after the Asian Crisis. Power is uneven,<sup>5</sup> not stable or static, but is rearticulated continuously (Smith 1998: 57; Butler 2000: 14; Laclau 2005: 115). Logically, it is impossible to say which stance will prevail in the end. In the case of the European Union, it could be Germany’s as well as Luxemburg’s; in Asia, it could be Singapore’s as well as China’s. The political is structured in terms of the *logic of contingency*, which rejects the assumption that it is established according to general laws that hold true in any case. That is why Neta Crawford, by analysing the end of colonialism as one of the major changes in world politics over the past 500 years, advocates the view that arguments can impact on politics and determine the path to leadership at least as much as military or economic capabilities (Crawford 2002). It was certainly not in the interest of the leading colonial empires to end this era. Therefore, a distinction between an infinite set of logical possibilities and a limited set of historical opportunities seems appropriate to circumvent a voluntaristic view of society. As Laclau explicates,

[T]he undecidability between the various movements that are possible [...] does not mean that at any time everything that is logically possible becomes automatically an actual political possibility. There are inchoate possibilities which are going to be blocked, not because of any logical restriction, but as a result of the historical contexts in which the representative institutions operate (Laclau 1996).

To make this clearer, we have to introduce Laclau’s notion of *credibility*. The ideal type of a hegemonic process presented above emphasises that one predominant interpretation will evolve due to its linkages with residual institutions. While leadership has to be based on

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<sup>5</sup> As Laclau (2000: 54) aptly put it, ‘A power which is total is no power at all’. Lukes (2001 [1974]) offers the classical formulation of this view.

certain political traditions that subjects identify with, this argument will lose weight with the extent of the crisis (Laclau 2000a: 82; see also Laclau 1990: 66). The more far-reaching the dislocation of a discourse is, the fewer principles will be still in place after the crisis. While colonialism worked on a historical ground that had been already set up for it and drew on established interpretative frameworks of a 'leading race', 'subhuman beings', xenophobia and imperialistic nationalism, it was still possible to terminate. As Smith (1998: 106) argues, by following the logic of contingency, Laclau and Mouffe evade 'positivist prediction and theoretical meta-narratives'. By detecting the historical circumstances of political change, they are also sensitive to the actual limits of political practice at a given time.

Once a particular political force becomes hegemonic, however, it might be able to prevail for some time. Hegemony reproduces our daily life; it starts to be hegemonic when our everyday understanding of social relations and the world as a whole starts to alter according to the framework that is set by the hegemonic discourse. It is quite a different act of power than those discussed in rationalist IR theory, for it makes the world intelligible: 'The power of discourse to materialise its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility' (Butler 1993: 187). In a final step, the discourse produces specific practices and institutions. It acquires material objectivity by becoming institutionally fixed.

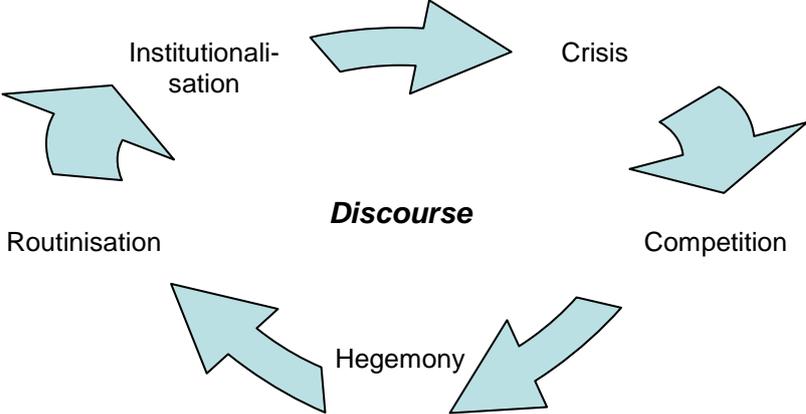
In a nutshell, hegemony is indispensable for the exercise of leadership. Both hegemony and leadership are essentially political; both rest on power, but not necessarily on the observable form of material power alone. Leadership must hence not be misunderstood as dominance or coercion. It is to Laclau's merit to have reintroduced the term hegemony in contemporary debates concerning problems of political power and authority. Hegemony means nothing more than the discursive struggle between political actors over the assertion of their particular representations of the world as having a universal significance. Ultimately, it is only through hegemony that leadership can be established.

#### ***2.4 Theoretical integration and empirical illustration***

The purpose of this section is to synthesise the concepts of power, leadership, and hegemony into one integrative model that makes it possible to study so-called (new) regional powers such as Brazil, China, India, and South Africa from a process- and meaning-based perspective. Summarising the most significant arguments of the previous sections, an integrative approach has to fulfil the following criteria: Firstly, it has to take into account the conceptual difference between the mere capacity of possessing power and the actual transformation of power into leadership. Secondly, it needs to put the multifaceted relationship between leaders and followers in focus, which opens up a perspective on leadership as a social activity that often takes place in an institutionalised context, is issue specific, culturally embedded, contested, and rests on entrepreneurial skills to manage political coalitions. Finally, leadership must be seen as being co-constituted by hegemony, which implies the ability of a prospective leader to present his particular visions as universal, so that they become acceptable to relevant followers. Any hegemonic process can then be traced along the lines of the ideal-type model delineated in the previous section: (1) starting with a particular political crisis (of lesser or greater extent), (2) moving to the competition between different political forces to hegemonise the political field and (3) the acceptance of a certain interpretative framework of identification (actual *hegemony*), to (4) its eventual routinisation and political institutionalisation. As illustrated in fig. 1, this final act of institutionalisation causes feedback effects on the discursive representation of the crisis, new interpretative frames start to

compete, and politics continues. Theoretically, this circle never ends; if it did, politics would have reached its final purpose. Most significantly, however, it is possible to analyse different kinds of leadership processes on the basis of this framework.

Fig. 1: Crisis and hegemony



In the East Asian case, which can be drawn on to illustrate the argument, it was the Asian financial crisis that triggered new complex correlations between power, leadership, and hegemony. In the years following the crisis, a dialectic and fundamentally contingent quest for leadership developed, mainly involving China and Japan, but also including some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)<sup>6</sup> and South Korea. Deeper integration and community building can be identified as the dominant interpretative framework used to overcome the predicament, with the institutionalisation of ASEAN+3<sup>7</sup> and the East Asia Summit (EAS)<sup>8</sup> representing the institutional materialisation of the hegemonic process (Nabers 2004). In brief, the development can be recapitulated as follows:

**1) Crisis**

The Asian crisis is widely considered as the primary source of a new Sino-Japanese struggle for leadership in the region (esp. Dent 2008a, 2008b). The resulting institutionalisation of the region was successful due to its linkage with an ongoing debate over the institutional shape of the region. The seeds for a genuine regional cooperation process combining both the Northeast and Southeast Asian subregions had already been sown by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir in his proposal for an East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG) in the early 1990s. Although the initiative was instantaneously torpedoed by non-East Asian countries (Low 1991), it lingered behind the scenes and was reinvigorated after the crisis (Nabers 2003). This finding offers preliminary, though still provisional support for a central theoretical argument outlined above: The ideal type cycle developed in the previous section emphasized that one predominant interpretation will evolve due to its linkages with residual institutions. Put differently, if the new political project clashes with the ‘ensemble of sedimented practices

<sup>6</sup> Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia.  
<sup>7</sup> The members of ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea.  
<sup>8</sup> ASEAN+3 plus Australia, New Zealand and India.

constituting the normative framework of a certain society' (Laclau 2000a: 82; see also Laclau 1990: 66), it will likely be rejected.

A second argument put forward above refers to the normative dimension of leadership: Leadership is essential in politics in general, and in crises situations in particular. In the East Asia case, this argument has gained salience in the years after the crisis. It was through increasing competition between the old and the new economic powerhouses of East Asia that ideas of regionalism gained new momentum. While some observers argue that "China and Japan possess the most significant 'regional leader actor' capacity in East Asia" (Dent 2008b: 3), these two countries also played a major role in the single stages of our theoretical model (interpretation of the crisis, competing interpretations, hegemony, institutionalisation).

Although East Asian and Southeast Asian countries for the first time operated as a unified actor in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), which was established in 1996, significant collaboration first evolved during the crisis. The domino effect of that financial quandary highlighted the "reality of the inter-connection of East-Asian's Economies" (Severino 1999). Interdependence and external shock are widely seen as the main trigger for alternative discourses on regional cooperation and region-building. The most prominent voices in this discourse emanated from Beijing and Tokyo,<sup>9</sup> and in the years that followed, an intensive quest for leadership in different political fields started to develop.

All in all, the financial crisis compelled many Asian countries to re-evaluate their place in the world. 'The crisis has stimulated a new sense of East Asian regionalism and brought the countries closer together,' says Tommy Koh, chairman of the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore (quoted in Financial Times, 13 May 2001). Early on, Chinese president Jiang Zemin reassured neighbouring countries that his government would "adopt a positive attitude towards strengthening financial cooperation in Asia and [be] ready to participate in discussions on relevant mechanism for cooperation" and promised that certain "practical moves on our part will promote the development of economic and technological cooperation as well as trade and investment liberalization in the Asia-Pacific region" (FMPRC 1997). Similarly, Japan announced it would play an active leadership role to counter the crisis.<sup>10</sup> The starting signal was given for a quest for leadership in the region that turned out to be the dominant feature of East Asian international relations in the years to come.

## 2) Competition

It was argued above that, firstly, competing political forces will attempt to hegemonize the political space to exercise leadership, and, secondly, that leadership is always relational. Leaders have to please the motive bases of potential followers to be successful. Sticks and carrots play their part in such an endeavour, but they, too, are part of a discourse over the right

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<sup>9</sup> Tokyo's interpretation of the crisis can be seen as exemplary in this context: "If we are lax in these efforts towards integration, we may invite more region-wide upheavels similar to the currency crisis. It is therefore important to understand how and in what sense this region, including Japan, is a community with common fate" (MOFA 1999).

<sup>10</sup> To quote foreign minister Obuchi: "As the largest economy in Asia, Japan feels a responsibility, despite its own very difficult situation, to do everything it can to help its East Asian friends through this time of economic trial. To date, we have contributed, both in international efforts led by IMF and in bilateral programs, a total of about 37 billion dollars -a sum that far exceeds the assistance from any extra-regional country. We will continue to exercise the leadership to support the East Asian countries in cooperation with the international community. We also intend to tailor our efforts to address the needs of the region's less developed countries hit by the economic difficulties" (MOFA 1998).

political path to follow. Such a discourse started immediately with the outbreak of financial turmoil in East Asia in the Summer of 1997. At the height of the crisis, Japan came up with an initiative to set up an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF), which was not realized, though, due to opposition from the West, especially the USA. But it was also immediately rejected by other Asian countries, most loudly by China. Contending that such an institution would be redundant given the presence of the IMF and that it would foster a split between Asia and North America, the proposal was buried for the time being (Kwan 2001: 11, 22-23, 127). However, Japan subsequently announced bilateral assistance plans such as the New Miyazawa Plan, worth \$30 billion, and special yen loans, amounting to 650 billion yen (Japan Times, 14.7.2001). Consequently, ASEAN members seemed to uniformly appreciate assistance by the biggest economy, as can be seen from remarks by Ali Alatas, former Foreign Minister of Indonesia:

I look forward to its [Japan's] playing an important role in our common endeavours to soften the social impact of the financial and economic crisis upon our peoples, and eventually to overcome that crisis altogether (DFA Indonesia 1999).

It becomes obvious that leadership is inseparable from the wants and needs of followers. Leadership is about giving and taking in specific situation, and different forms of power and leadership are required in different situations. Considering Japan's economic stagnation during the 1990s, China has also been deemed more significant in generating regional economic growth. However, a widespread concern has persisted in Southeast Asia that investment flows into China may reduce those into the ASEAN states and that China will aim at expanding its leadership role in the region (for a critical discussion see Cheng 2004). As Alice Ba has pointed out, similar development paths do not automatically lead to a greater receptiveness to another's message or even to the formation of a collective identity (Ba 2006: 168). To reassure potential followers, China time and again tried to downplay its economic size, emphasising the spirit of cooperation and mutual trust that ASEAN expects in its relations with Beijing. In his keynote speech to the Boao Forum in April 2002, Premier Zhu Rongji underlined that China's growing economy posed no threat to Asia, and stressed that China was ready to work with its neighbours to build 'a thriving new Asia' (South China Morning Post, 13 April 2002).

Subsequently, both China and Japan have tried to produce innovative proposals to overcome the financial predicament. In the first years after the crisis broke out, Japan quickly embraced a leadership role that included material incentives as well as vision and entrepreneurial skills (Nabers 2004; Terada 2004). By the turn of the century, Japan had contributed some 80 billion US\$ in financial aid to overcome the crisis (for an overview see MOFA 2000), while China has opted to intensify trade relations with ASEAN (Peng 2002). As an indication of the increasing readiness to accommodate the region materially, China in 2001 offered ASEAN to open up its sensitive agricultural market. At the same time, China and ASEAN agreed to implement a free trade agreement by 2010, which encouraged Japan to come up with a broader plan for an East Asian FTA in 2002 (Gilson 2004). Mounting rivalry can be seen as a source for structural change in this context (Ravenhill 2008: 469).

There are other examples of intense rivalry that can be quoted to underline the argument made here. The Mekong River region is one such instance (for China's role see Goh 2006). While Beijing hoped that the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area would be supported by infrastructural links between China and the ASEAN states and indicated in November 2000 at the informal ASEAN+3 summit in Singapore that it would fund the construction of a Lancang-Mekong development project in Myanmar and Laos, Japan proposed two big projects for the countries in the region. One was supposed to facilitate the use of high-technology wireless tags to ease

trade, and the other is advancing know-how on electrical power development (Japan Times, 27 September 2005).

As a result of these numerous competing proposals, followership in East Asia also remained divided, with some countries following Japan, some other supporting China. For example, a Vietnamese government official commented that Japan's vision of an Asian-wide FTA seemed to be "all show and little substance" and that its main rationale was to counter the FTA idea floated by China to ASEAN (Business World, 27 February 2002). In contrast, some ASEAN members have underlined Japan's continuing impact on Southeast Asian development. As Singapore's Trade and Industry Minister George Yeo put it:

Japan is ASEAN's largest source of imports and our second largest export market. Japan is one of ASEAN's largest sources of FDI. Southeast Asia can be Japan's alternative manufacturing base to China. We have energy and other resources, which Japan needs. The benefits of an FTA between Japan and ASEAN would be of even greater benefit to South East Asia than an ASEAN-China FTA in the short and medium term (ASEAN 2002).

Still, all these comments converge around the widespread acceptance of the idea of regional cooperation as the dominant interpretative framework after the crisis. It will be shown in the next section that this interpretation gained ground to a considerable extent in the years that followed.

### **3) Dominant interpretation**

As posited by the ideal-type cycle developed above, one predominant interpretation often evolves – also due to its linkages with residual institutions – which institutes the framework that determines what action is appropriate and what action is inappropriate to end the quandary. In the East Asian case, two factors seem to be of particular importance in this regard: Firstly, a dominant view quickly evolved that existing institutions like ASEAN, APEC and the IMF would not be able to clean up the mess; secondly, and related to the widespread criticism of the IMF, countries in the region consented on the opinion that a regional solution was preferable to one that looked for help in the "West". Hence, in the first phase of the institutionalisation process, political leaders in the region considered regionalism as a form of self-help mechanism in times of crises (Nabers 2003), and this dominant interpretation finally paved the way for the institutionalisation of the Asian idea.

With regards to ASEAN, it looked as if the institution's self-esteem had already been low on the peak of the Asian crisis. Its expansion in the 1990s to include such economically weaker and democratically immature countries as Burma, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had undermined consensus (Rüland 2000: 434-438; Kraft 2000: 454-457). And the new diversity had made political goals more difficult to accomplish. Singapore, a founding member of ASEAN, thus repeatedly spoke publicly of the need to "leapfrog" Southeast Asia to further economic growth and investment (International Herald Tribune, 26 July 2001). What is more, ASEAN, together with South Korea, had been the most seriously affected by the financial crisis. Particularly important was the effect on Indonesia, which had in the past provided much of the guidance in the group. Paralysed by the severeness of the economic turmoil, ASEAN contributed little to alleviating the crisis, which is commonly seen as diminishing greatly its value (e.g. Harris 2000).

Concerning global institutions, critics have argued that the IMF's demand for taut monetary policy and structural reforms as a condition for its loans failed to restrain the crisis and

actually aggravated it.<sup>11</sup> Summarizing the critique of the IMF during the Asian crisis for the Japanese government,<sup>12</sup> Tran Van Tho argues that the institution is generally unable to contribute to the strengthening of the supply side of the countries it supports, while its major task is stabilizing the macroeconomic environment. It can help by providing liquidity; yet, it fails when asked for support for real economic activities such as export financing or buttressing banks' lending capability. Moreover, the financial resources of the IMF are rather limited since it is an institution with global responsibilities. He concludes that:

In a word, there is a need for a new institution that plays a role complementary to the IMF's. Such a framework cannot be established on a worldwide scale, though, because forming a consensus among a large number of countries will be difficult and require considerable time. In addition, crises are often a matter of regional concern, and it is perhaps only natural that deeply interdependent countries should help each other out (Japan Times, 14.7.2001).

Many analysts agreed that the IMF reform measures were too abrupt and too harsh (e.g. Lewis 1999). Furthermore, deeper analysis of documents released by East Asian governments show widespread and open criticism. While the Japanese government points out that the "crises in Russia and Brazil demonstrated the need to look at the risks inherent in the global financial system itself" (MOFA 2001b: 2), the South Korean government directly addresses the need of "reforming the international financial architecture, and enhancing self-help and support mechanisms in East Asia through the ASEAN+3 framework" (MOFAT 1999: 1). Agreeing with this view, politicians such as the Japanese Finance Minister Miyazawa Kiichi and South Korean Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil have from the beginning encouraged an alternative approach to bringing the crisis to an end, advocating that the IMF is incapable of treating poorly performing Asian economies. Instead of IMF-lead reforms, especially Miyazawa promoted an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) as an alternative solution to the financial upheaval.

The idea of a regional community featured prominently in the discourse and served as a dominant interpretative framework to overcome the financial turmoil. The idea was very well reflected in a statement by Thai Deputy Prime Minister Supachai: "We cannot rely on the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, or the International Monetary Fund but we must rely on regional cooperation" (quoted in *The Nation*, 10 June 2000). Others openly called for the leadership of Japan<sup>13</sup> or China.<sup>14</sup> These findings suggest that the community idea had been widely accepted by the countries in the region at the turn of the century. In other words: The dominant interpretative framework that was set by the community discourse had become *hegemonic*. It is an act of power because it makes the world intelligible: 'The power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility' (Butler 1993: 187). In a final step, the discourse produces specific practices and institutions. It acquires material objectivity by becoming institutionally fixed.

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<sup>11</sup> For a critique see *Business World*, 26 May 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Tran Van Tho, who is professor in the School of Sciences in Tokyo's Waseda University, chaired the Japan Forum on International Relations Inc. in compiling the report "Economic Globalization and Options for Asia".

<sup>13</sup> As Singapore Prime Minister put it: 'If we can find a way for Japan to feel confident and comfortable enough to have a free trade arrangement with China, then we can have an East Asian Free Trade Area which, of course, will allow us to move toward an East Asian Economic Community'. Quoted in Terada 2004: 6.

<sup>14</sup> On the occasion of the China-ASEAN summit meeting in January 2007, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo emphasised she expects China to take the lead in East Asia: "We also look to China to take the lead in promoting good neighborly relations and regional cooperation by handling sensitive issues with surrounding countries in a matter that is guided by the spirit of equality, respect, consultation and mutual benefit," she said (IHT, 14 January 2007).

#### 4) Institutionalisation

The proposals put forward by Japan, China and other countries in the region after the crisis led to the institutionalisation of the Asian idea within the framework of ASEAN+3, comprising the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus China, Japan and South Korea. ASEAN+3 has developed rapidly since the outbreak of the crisis, which is a hint at the validity of one of the central arguments of this article, that is, leadership requires an *institutionalised context*. As Chris Dent observes in his analysis of East Asian regionalism: “For there to be regional leadership, there must be some sort of coherent regional entity to lead” (Dent 2008b: 3). Through continuous and repetitive leadership, institutionalisation is further strengthened. Although neither China nor Japan were able to control the field of intelligibility in East Asia and among Asian governments completely, the community idea has gained considerable ground after the Asian crisis, with Sino-Japanese rivalry being its primary driving force. Institutionalised summitry can in this sense further reinforce leader-follower relationships. In the region, a process of steady institutionalization soon developed, including ministerial rounds, senior official meetings (SOM) and proposals to establish an East Asia Vision Group. It was in Hanoi in December 1998 where the heads of state or government of the ASEAN members plus China, Japan and South Korea decided that regular meetings be held among them. The next summit meetings took place in Manila in November 1999 and in Singapore in November of the following year. Other meetings of the forum included those of the finance and foreign ministers of the 13 countries.

The adoption of the so-called Chiang Mai initiative (CMI) in May 2000 set a framework for cooperation in the areas of capital-flow monitoring, self-help and support mechanisms, and international financial reforms<sup>15</sup>. The 13 countries involved in the process agreed to execute a series of currency swap arrangements between their central banks, consenting to lend each other part of their hard currency reserves if any of their currencies came under speculative pressure. As a result of the CMI, in May 2001 Japan announced bilateral deals with South Korea, Thailand and Malaysia. Together with the 1 Billion US\$ announced by the ASEAN countries in November 2000, the mutual central bank support comprised more than 700 Billion US\$ in reserves. In July 2001, Japan and the Philippines reached a basic agreement to set up a 3 Billion US\$-peso swap facility as part of the envisaged Asia-wide currency safety net (SCMP, 14 July 2001).

The CMI was seen as a first step of monetary integration in East Asia, finally resulting in a monetary union (FEER, 12 July 2001). On that basis, long-term goal of a cooperative monetary regime in East Asia has repeatedly been outlined by Japan. In an interview in January 2000, Sakakibara Eisuke, former state secretary of the Japanese finance ministry, strongly advocated that kind of collaboration (World Bank, 12 January 2000). In line with the Japanese position, other Asian countries also encouraged expanded cooperation in social and cultural fields. As Malaysian Minister of Industry and Foreign Trade Rafidah Aziz sees it, integration in areas like youth, academic and media exchanges should begin right away. Building on further exchange in these fields, the minister says officials of the 13 participating countries can begin work on a customs compendium for the region (Asia Times online, 8 March 2001; MOFA 2001a). Accordingly, politicians from China, Japan, and South Korea reached agreement at the Singapore summit in March 2001 to begin a study to examine the

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<sup>15</sup> See Henning (2002) for a comprehensive summary of the CMI.

feasibility of creating an East Asian economic community of the ASEAN plus three members (Ibid.).

Between 2000 and 2009, China's and Japan's quest for leadership, underlined by repetitive innovative initiatives, remained the defining feature of East Asian international relations. Over the years, Beijing became diplomatically increasingly active. For instance, on the ASEAN+3 summit in Cebu in January 2007, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made a five-point proposal to upgrade the level of regional cooperation, calling for the establishment of an Asian Bond Market, the initiation of a regional investment and credit guarantee mechanism, the improvement of the financing and investment environment in the region, strengthened cooperation in the public health sector and the enhancement of financial risk management. Moreover, Wen suggested that ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea advance security cooperation. Wen added that China will host a 10+3 symposium on corporate bond markets and a workshop on the participation of international disaster relief by the armed forces of participating countries. Finally, the premier also proposed that ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea expand social and cultural cooperation:

Poverty alleviation and women affairs are new areas for 10 plus Three cooperation. To share experience in poverty alleviation, promote regional poverty alleviation cooperation and discuss ways of enhancing women's role in promoting economic development and social progress, China will hold this year a training course for officials for poverty alleviation and another one on women affairs for 10 plus Three countries (MFAPRC 2007).

In that sense, aspirations for leadership on both sides directly led to regional institutional change. The prime example for this mechanism is the multilateralisation of the CMI that was implemented in February 2009 and served as the core of the AMF that was boldly proposed by Japan in 1997. The 13 ASEAN+3 countries agreed that they would expand the regional currency swap arrangement to up to US\$ 120 billion. While the size of the fund stood at US\$ 80 billion before, China and Japan engaged in a contest over which country would offer more to enhance its liquidity. In an immense effort of symbolic value, both governments decided to pay an equal amount. Both Tokyo and Beijing contributed US\$ 38.4 billion to the pool, while South Korea supplied another US\$ 19.2 billion (BBC Monitoring Global Newline Asia Pacific Economic file, 3 May 2009). This supports another theoretical claim made above: Leaders are coalition-builders; they rarely act alone. Subordinates are enlisted to fulfil certain roles in the leadership game; tasks are partly delegated.

This brief overview served to exemplify some of the most significant features of power, leadership and hegemony: First, leadership (in contrast to power) is essentially related to the idea of community-building; it is relational and dependent on willing followership; leaders do not act alone. Secondly, solving problems in international politics entails leadership; this may involve translating relative power capabilities into bargaining leverage, but this is not necessarily so. Materially weaker states sometimes act as broker to gain support for salient solutions. Thirdly, leadership involves the continuous contestation over different representations that we call politics; it requires communication and social interaction, which are sometimes difficult to analyse, but still indispensable for a proper analysis of leadership in regional contexts.

## **4 Conclusion**

This study has shown that leadership by powerful states in processes of regional institutionalisation is a significant, yet still ignored topic in the field of IR. Various theoretical strands have been discussed as to the requirements of effective leadership in international affairs. Referring to Steven Lukes (1974) three-dimensional view of power, it was argued that leadership is effective and sustainable when foreign elites acknowledge the leader's vision of international order and internalise it as their own. Drawing on James MacGregor Burns' (1978) work, leadership was differentiated from power. In contrast to power wielders, leaders might be able to get potential followers to see the world through their eyes in a hegemonic struggle. Moreover, leaders are effective as they induce change. Leadership, again in contrast to brute power, is inseparable from the wants and needs of followers, but these wants and needs may be changed through social interaction.

Finally, analysing Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's political theory, the process of how to engage potential followers in the debating and contesting of ideas and of meanings was further investigated under the heading of discursive hegemony.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of the empirical case that was introduced in the previous section, it can be concluded that the struggle over meaning is central to an understanding of leadership. Meaning has to be internalised in the intersubjective representations of other relevant actors. In East Asia, a strategy of 'complex engagement' (Ba 2006) of Southeast Asian countries forms the main pillar in China's and Japan's leadership strategies: this kind of engagement is in constant need of attracting potential followers, of interacting in different issue areas, of 'argumentative persuasion' (ibid.: 161) and its support by material incentives.

In conclusion, hegemony-based leadership means nothing more than the discursive struggle between political actors over the assertion that their particular representations of the world have a universal significance. This is what leadership boils down to at the end of the day: The leader is the initiator, creator, and director in a struggle over meanings. It is the leader who makes communication and social interaction possible in the first place. While absolute power wielders tend to be objectified and dehumanised, leadership has to be seen as one of the essential and omnipresent features of social life in general and of international politics in particular. Of course, hegemony-based leadership is issue specific, culturally embedded, historically contingent, and never to be understood as a once-and-for-all decision. Once a particular political force becomes hegemonic, however, it might be able to prevail for some time. This allows us a view into the future of East Asian regionalism: It looks as if the institutionalization of the region had gained ground to an extent that it is irreversible for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>16</sup> Due to limited space, methodological issues are not addressed in this article. A possible path towards empirical research is offered by *critical discourse analysis* (CDA). CDA is concerned with structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, social inequality and control as conveyed by language. It accepts the claim of an ultimate impossibility of fixing meanings by speech and recognizes the role of hegemony as a process of temporal fixation. However, it is also interested in unveiling the function of discourses which are used to generate and sustain unequal social power relations and can be identified as ideologies. See Fairclough 2003, for an overview.

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