

SOFT ANARCHY: BALANCING SOVEREIGNTY, REGIONALISM, AND GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

In the international relations discipline, arguably the most consequential divide in the system is between anarchy and hierarchy. Although the international system is formally anarchic, beneath its surface lies a persistent hierarchy. As Hedley Bull suggests, anarchy does not produce chaos but an international society governed by norms, albeit one that often masks the dominance of great powers. Thucydides' Melian Dialogue captures this imbalance most starkly. The example closest to our time is the United Nations Security Council, which epitomises how, with the rhetoric of sovereignty, structural inequity is hidden. In contrast, soft anarchy provides the opposite explanation: a system that permits cooperation without the need to nullify the anarchic nature of global politics. Kenneth Waltz's structural realism argues that states, in isolation, act to survive in a self-help ecosystem. Soft anarchy alters this assumption; it emphasises that within regional platforms, power is allowed to be pooled. Rather than being subordinated to a global hierarchy, states are able to act through regional organisations. In this scenario, states are able to preserve sovereignty while enhanced cooperation is achieved by many. The claim made by Alexander Wendt, 'anarchy is what states make of it', supports this model, claiming that if the structure is socially constructed, then it can be softened with regional agency. Thus, soft anarchy embodies Rousseau's notion of collective will and Bull's 'anarchical society' rephrased to the regional level. Here, power shifts from a zero-sum tool to a shared instrument of governance. The soft anarchy is not a utopia; instead, utopia is to manage global volatility. It provides a concept where the world is not still divided into 193 actors; rather, it is grouped into cooperative blocs with the capability of restoring order. It is a form of invitation to perceive order in anarchy and cooperation within sovereignty.

Keywords

Soft Anarchy, Regional Organisations, International Order, Anarchy and Hierarchy, Power and Cooperation.



Resumo

Na disciplina das relações internacionais, pode argumentar-se que a divisão mais consequente no sistema é entre anarquia e hierarquia. Embora o sistema internacional seja formalmente anárquico, por baixo da sua superfície existe uma hierarquia persistente. Como sugere Hedley Bull, a anarquia não produz caos, mas sim uma sociedade internacional governada por normas, embora muitas vezes mascarar o domínio das grandes potências. O Diálogo Meliano de Tucídides capta este desequilíbrio de forma muito clara. O exemplo mais próximo do nosso tempo é o Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas, que simboliza como, com a retórica da soberania, a desigualdade estrutural é ocultada. Em contrapartida, a anarquia soft oferece a explicação oposta: um sistema que permite a cooperação sem a necessidade de anular a natureza anárquica da política global. O realismo estrutural de Kenneth Waltz argumenta que os Estados, isoladamente, agem para sobreviver num ecossistema de autoajuda. A anarquia soft altera essa suposição; ela enfatiza que, dentro das plataformas regionais, o poder pode ser compartilhado. Em vez de se submeterem a uma hierarquia global, os Estados podem agir por meio de organizações regionais. Nesse cenário, os Estados conseguem preservar a soberania, enquanto muitos alcançam uma cooperação aprimorada. A afirmação de Alexander Wendt, «a anarquia é o que os Estados fazem dela», apoia este modelo, alegando que, se a estrutura é construída socialmente, então pode ser suavizada com a agência regional. Assim, a anarquia suave incorpora a noção de Rousseau de vontade coletiva e a «sociedade anárquica» de Bull reformulada para o nível regional. Aqui, o poder passa de uma ferramenta de soma zero para um instrumento partilhado de governação. A anarquia suave não é uma utopia; em vez disso, a utopia é gerir a volatilidade global. Ela fornece um conceito em que o mundo não está mais dividido em 193 atores, mas sim agrupado em blocos cooperativos com a capacidade de restaurar a ordem. É uma forma de convite para perceber a ordem na anarquia e a cooperação dentro da soberania.

Palavras-chave

Anarquia soft, Organizações Regionais, Ordem Internacional, Anarquia e Hierarquia, Poder e Cooperação.

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Introduction

The international system has oriented itself as anarchic, or the absence of any central authority to control relations among sovereign entities. This situation has been depicted, for example, with close to 193 states, each of which operates in a self-help system characterised by low trust and high conflict (Waltz, 1979). While symbolically grounded in a UN figure, this snapshot betrays the more disorderly nature of world politics. The contemporary international order is not merely a homogeneous plain filled with equal sovereigns, but rather a diverse constellation of actors which includes: states, regional entities, international organisations, multinational companies, non-profit organisations, and even transnational epistemic networks (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Keohane & Nye, 1977). Apart from being anarchical, it is also messy, splintered, and lacking consistent norms.

In this multifaceted domain, the traditional understanding of anarchy neglects how global power is spatially organised and exercised. While there is no overarching single authority, the notion of nearly 200 fragmented and hostile units errantly oversimplifies the world and conceals emerging patterns of cooperation. This paper introduces soft anarchy as a corrective: a vision of the international system where anarchy remains the central structure, but is increasingly mediated by regional consolidation. Rather than viewing global politics as a network of self-contained sovereign states, soft anarchy suggests a framework in which authority is “zipped” into regional clusters — 7 to 9 functional blocs composed of cooperating states. These blocs are not sovereign-less; they serve to streamline sovereignty into less chaotic and more durable structures.

In this newly organised configuration, the international order is not ruled by a world state, nor does it exist in purely Hobbesian anarchical self-help terms. Instead, the system is progressing toward a form of multilayered governance where regional powers function as semi-autonomous stabilisers. These regional organisations counterbalance disparities in power, promote mechanisms of trust, and facilitate cooperative action in a plethora of domains such as trade, climate, migration, and security. These regional units



do not fully resolve anarchy, but transform it—from an unregulated contest of all against all to bounded pluralism where sovereignty is not relinquished but is exercised in relation to others (Bull, 1977; Wendt, 1992).

Figure 1. International Anarchical System (Hard Anarchy)

**International Anarchical System
with Many Actors**



Source: Created by authors

Figure 2. International Anarchical System (Soft Anarchy)

International Anarchical System (Softened)



Source: Created by Authors



The joint resilience of regions and states, accompanied by strong regional integration, defines soft anarchy. The Morgenthau power theory is limited to the perceptions of dividing power within states rather than governments clustering and sharing power through regional orders. This shift offers new room to navigate between the idealism of cosmopolitan governance and classical realism. As Kenneth Waltz claimed, states are forced to maximise their capabilities due to the survival instinct in anarchy, while soft anarchy counters that survival may also rely on strong regional interdependencies (Waltz, 1979).

This study employs a conceptual-analytical approach based on three frameworks: (1) structural realism, to ground the argument within the enduring logic of anarchy; (2) constructivism, specifically Wendt's assertion that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992, p. 395), to posit that softening anarchy is a matter of agency; and (3) a historical-institutionalist perspective to show the evolution of regional organizations as responses to systemic fragmentation and hegemonic exhaustion (Ruggie, 1993). The analysis, however, sustains the focus on empirical developments: the EU's legal-political machinery, ASEAN's informal consensus culture, and the AU's efforts at continental solidarity.

This study does not seek to regionalize the world any more than it is, nor negate competition between geopolitical forces. It seeks, instead, to reconstruct the international system not as a brutalized stage of 193 disconnected sovereigns, but as a contested and dynamic order of intersecting regional frameworks. In doing so, it attempts to shift focus from the binaries of order versus anarchy; state versus institution; sovereignty versus cooperation towards the edges of a more nuanced global anarchy.

To achieve empirical rigor and analytical precision, we now specify our methodological framework and the criteria guiding case selection. A transparent delineation of our regional examples serves to link the theoretical exposition of soft anarchy to a coherent, systematically justified evidentiary base.

Methodology and Case Selection

This investigation is primarily conceptual-analytical, deploying a theory-driven case illustration model to elucidate causal mechanisms (Ruggie, 1993; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). We integrate structural realism (Waltz, 1979) and constructivist ontologies (Wendt, 1992) within the tradition of the English School (Bull, 1977) and subsequently scrutinize our propositions through regional organizations deliberately chosen to maximize variation in institutional depth and norm-generating procedures.

Case-selection parameters.

We identify regional organizations along the following dimensions:

- Institutional density, measured by the richness of rules, organs, and adjudicative bodies;
- Normative procedures, contrasting consensus with majority rule (Rosamond, 2014; Jones, 2015);



- c. Policy ambit, encompassing security, trade, and social dimensions;
- d. Enforcement potential, combining monitoring mechanisms and sanctioning abilities (Hartzenberg, 2011);
- e. Inclusiveness of membership and the resulting distributional consequences;
- f. The presence and influence of a regional hegemon (Lake & Morgan, 1997; Reus-Smit, 2005); and
- g. Mutually reinforcing interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

Illustrative cases

- 1- The European Union displays high institutional density and employs qualified majority voting (Rosamond, 2014).
- 2- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations exhibits a low to medium density, relies on consensus, and adheres to a norm of non-interference (Acharya, 2001; Jones, 2015).
- 3- The African Union commands a continent-wide ambition, yet faces capacity constraints and is in the process of refining its legal machinery (Bala, 2017; Hartzenberg, 2011).

Caution in inference is warranted here. The examples provided are meant to clarify, not to catalogue completely; they chart regions where soft anarchy seems credible and regions where it falters. This approach trims conceptual uncertainty without venturing into overly broad claims.

Soft Anarchy: Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Soft anarchy is best understood not as the negation of anarchy, but as its modulation — a reconfiguration of the anarchic condition through regional aggregation, institutional buffering, and functional cooperation. Whereas classical anarchy refers to the absence of a central authority over sovereign states — leading to a system governed by self-help and power balancing — soft anarchy acknowledges that this structural void is increasingly filled by regional platforms of coordination. These platforms do not impose hierarchy; rather, they act as filters that diffuse conflict, mediate competition, and enable shared governance in specific domains.

Soft Anarchy in the Triangle of Anarchy, Hierarchy, and the International Community

Instead of an endpoint of a spectrum, soft anarchy is situated as one vertex of a triangle formed by three forces: anarchy, hierarchy and the international system. Classically, anarchy equates to statelessness with no structure, while hierarchy is the centre-periphery distribution of authority found in empires or hegemonic stability models. The



international community embodies shared norms, values, and rules which transcend state egoism (Reus-Smit, 2005).

Soft anarchy retains these poles. It assumes the absence of global governance as a baseline condition, and opposes a globalised hierarchy as unjust, unsustainable, and morally bankrupt while accepting community engagement through regionalism – constructing legitimacy and order through politically defined bounded spaces which may be cultural, historical, or functional. Although these bounded spaces offer no substitute for global governance, they bolster pragmatic scaffolds toward approximating order in a profoundly disordered world.

Soft anarchy intersects and builds upon big umbrella theories of International Relations (IR) by reimagining anarchy from a universal chaotic concept to a regionally governable one. It combines elements of realism, constructivism, and the English School to depict a cooperative, multilayered and institutionally organised international system.

Kenneth Waltz's structural realism (1979) is still perceived as one of the most significant theories regarding the issue of international anarchy. Waltz emphasised that the structure of the international system, with its relations of anarchy and distribution of capabilities, determines the behaviour of states. From this view, self-help necessitated competition and reduced survival to a focal point of strategic bonding among states. The notion of soft anarchy, however, challenges this rigid formula. It accepts the framework restrictions that Waltz outlines, but does not permit all states a uniform reaction. Within regional frameworks, such as the European Union, security and survival are managed, albeit institutionally, on a collective basis—something that is greatly under-theorised. Moreover, soft anarchy, which assumes all states as functionally identical units, introduces functional differentiation and posits that some states enjoy sheltered regional arrangements while others have unrestricted exposure to structural forces.

In contrast, Hans Morgenthau's classical realism viewed international relations as an enduring struggle for dominance stemming from human nature (1948). Morgenthau's theory postulates that power is perpetually competitive and cannot be shared. In this framework, cooperation is weak and always subordinate to the pursuit of national interest. Soft anarchy departs from this line of reasoning by offering a redefined notion of power as a form of governance. In the context of regional institutions, power transcends mere control to encompass shared responsibility and collective resilience.

The justification for soft anarchy draws from Alexander Wendt's constructivist view, "anarchy is what states make of it" (1992). Soft anarchy tries to break off from depicting anarchy as a given and static, in a tangible substance, condition. It attempts to reframe it as a social structure based on collective norms and identities. Organisations such as ASEAN and the EU are crucial in changing hostile relationships into cooperative ones through identity construction and norm diffusion.

Hedley Bull in *The Anarchical Society* (1977), suggested that states partake in a form of sociation that is aligned to some societal norms of constitutive rules, diplomacy, and mutual recognition. Soft anarchy expands upon Bull's ideas but concentrates on the regions, thus moving the locus of order from global to regional. As global bodies like the UN suffer more restrictions, regional bodies take on the normative and regulatory functions that were once envisaged to be performed by a global society. In this context,



soft anarchy preserves the ethical and institutional spirit of Bull's work while restructuring its governance framework to decentralised, regionally rooted governance.

Philosophical and historical perspectives

The ideas of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Thucydides have irrevocably influenced the order of intellectual relations with their concepts on order, strife, and interaction, which have become the focal point of consideration. Soft anarchy is not an outright dismissal of these legacies, but rather attempts to resolve conflicts posited by them as a modern answer to the age-old Power vs Peace, Autonomy vs Authority, or Realism vs Idealism duality. In this manner, soft anarchy asserts itself as a philosophical advancement, no longer premised on the assumption of a continuing "Pax Americana," but instead drawing on lessons from the past to address the challenges of an institutionally fragmented and multipolar world.

From Hobbes' State of Nature to Regional Constraint

The defining work on the consequences of anarchy remains Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, published in 1651. In the absence of a supervising authority, people live in a state of constant dread of violent death. For a long time, this metaphor has been extended to the international level, where states are viewed as existing in a complete absence of a global sovereign, plunging into perpetual chaos. "War of all against all" rationalises a self-sustaining, militarised system based on deep-rooted distrust.

Hobbes provides the seeds of transformation as well. Instead of perpetual conflict, he proposes the social contract — a consensus which bestows surrender to a designated power in exchange for assurance. Even if such a Leviathan doesn't exist at the global scale, soft anarchy globalized reinterpretation of Hobbes' solution assumes not a singular sovereign but a sprinkled collection of agreements within regionally divided frameworks. In this case, these regional units do not act as absolute dominators, but as bounded contract rules. Government decreases unpredictability and volatility while stabilizing expectations as a miniature Leviathan in defined geographic and normative limits.

Soft anarchy does not disregard the Hobbesian system of thinking; it modifies it instead. Even in the absence of a singular Leviathan, the international order as a whole function through a network of semi-sovereign regional systems that uphold consent, constraint, and collective security. Thus, Hobbes' answer is not out of date; it has simply been regionalized.

Rousseau's General Will and the Emergence of Regional Identity

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, unlike Hobbes, framed political legitimacy as resting not in fear, but in the general will, which denotes a moral obligation that free and equal persons contractually commit to. Participation in a polity is collective and, thus, constitutes a shared political future. Therefore, his vision was deeply rooted in self-determination.



Soft anarchy draws upon this Rousseauian ethic with regard to shared purpose and regional identity. While the projection of general will may be difficult on a global scale, it can certainly be meaningfully cultivated within regional blocs. The European Union serves as an example; it is not a mere technocratic arrangement, but a political community under construction in which states, while retaining sovereignty, decide to pursue shared norms and a common future. The ASEAN bloc also marks an emerging consensus on regional norms grounded in the logic of consultation and non-interference.

Thus, soft anarchy provides a new interpretation of Rousseau: sovereignty is not abolished but reconfigured through voluntary regional agreements. These contracts come close to approximating the general will, but not in a universal manner; instead, within systems of functional coherence and normative convergence.

Regional organisations shaped by soft anarchy illustrate Rousseau's insight that freedom and unity are interdependent and mutually reinforcing through shared political identity, economic interdependence, and institutional memory.

Thucydides and the Dialectic of Power and Restraint

The realist preoccupation with power and vulnerability in international relations is grounded in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, particularly the Melian Dialogue: "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." However, today's international system contests this dualistic view. It is no longer depopulated, self-sufficient states existing in a flat anarchical system; rather, states increasingly dwell within hierarchical regional blocs, which resemble extended political families. Such entities, including the EU, ASEAN, and the African Union, transform threat perceptions and redistribute power within shared structures of governance.

In a regionally structured system, unilateral aggression remains costly for the unilateral aggressor, and as such, it would be deemed deviant behaviour. The logic behind the system of interdependence encourages the establishment of a legal equilibrium, as well as a latent collective identity, which mitigates the incentive of hegemony. Aggression from one state tends to provoke a bloc defence response not only because of alliance obligations, but also due to sociocultural expectations. The soft anarchy approach neutralises the balance of power, embracing scholarly asymmetries while working to counteract their influence through extensive collaboration.

This particular model represents the world as divided into regions where relations among countries, albeit softened through collective governance, remain hierarchical. There still exists a semblance of power, but it is increasingly diffused through the veil of institutional legitimacy. Regionalism not only constructs a policy framework within a region; it changes the rationality dynamics: intra-bloc rivalry becomes self-evidently irrational, while external subjugation becomes ever more elusive.

Considering the changes which have occurred in the international system, starting from Westphalia to the present-day post-hegemonic instability, it becomes apparent that multilateral sovereignty is both fragmented and fluid. This movement is accompanied by soft anarchy, which attempts to find balance between rigid nationalism and globalist utopia. Soft anarchy supports regionalism and multi-layered governance as responses to



disorder, where regional organisations act as stabilising anchors. Rather than intricate blueprints, soft anarchy makes do with layers of adaptive processes of interdependence created by countless actors who put in place overlapping frameworks of ordered structure within disorder.

Similarities and Differences Between Kant's Idea of Perpetual Peace and the Concept of Soft Anarchy

One of Kant's final philosophical works, *Perpetual Peace*, was published in 1795. In this work, Kant outlines a blueprint for a universal peace that would encompass all global citizens. *Perpetual Peace* is composed of six preliminary articles, three definitive articles, and several appendices. The work, in its essence, reflects a political ambition aimed at achieving lasting peace. Within the framework of political and ethical relations, Kant identifies the conditions under which perpetual peace might be attained. The six preliminary articles outlined in the first section of the work are as follows;

- I. No Treaty of Peace Shall Be Held Valid in Which There Is Tacitly Reserved Matter for a Future War
- II. No Independent States, Large or Small, Shall Come under the Dominion of Another State by Inheritance, Exchange, Purchase, or Donation
- III. Standing Armies (miles perpetuus) shall in Time Be Totally Abolished
- IV. National Debts Shall Not Be Contracted with a View to External Friction of States
- V. No State Shall by Force Interfere with the Constitution or Government of Another State
- VI. No State Shall, during War, Permit Such Acts of Hostility Which Would Make Mutual Confidence in the Subsequent Peace Impossible: Such Are the Employment of Assassins, Poisoners, Breach of Capitulation, and Incitement to Treason in the Opposing State

The second section of *Perpetual Peace* presents the definitive articles for achieving perpetual peace, which are as follows:

- I. The Civil Constitution of Every State Should Be Republican
- II. The Law of Nations Shall be Founded on a Federation of Free States
- III. The Law of World Citizenship Shall Be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality

In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant discusses important concepts of reason, the state, citizenship, justice, law, legislation, and contract. He believes that the default state for individuals is one of possible conflict, meaning that peace is something that needs political and legal frameworks to be intentionally constructed. To Kant, individuals may be forced to follow laws in order to avoid conflict. This aligns with the theory of soft anarchy, which argues that the international system's natural state is one of dormant conflict without a central governing body. Soft anarchy stresses the need for regional cooperation and organizations in the promotion of order and stability to deal with this issue.



Both theories oppose hegemonic rule. Kant argues that no single state should dominate another, and soft anarchy opposes the structure of the UN Security Council and the hegemony of the five permanent members. Rather, soft anarchy favours a more decentralized governance model through regional systems such as the European Union, which operate on consensus or qualified majority voting.

Kant imagines a cosmopolitan legal framework founded on republican governments as well as a global federation of states. On the other hand, soft anarchy posits that while anarchy is persistent, it may be mitigated through rational institutional cooperation. The EU and NATO serve as examples for Kant's model. They provide more relevance and practicality than Kant's idealistic blueprint. To conclude, Kant's Perpetual Peace offers a distinctly utopian approach to global governance, while soft anarchy provides a more realistic, grounded approach which acknowledges the existence of anarchy and attempts to alleviate its prevalence.

Historical and Current Analyses of Regional Security Organisations

In the scope of international relations literature, two central criteria stand out in defining a region. The first is material or geographic, which locates a region spatially on the world map, most often a landmass or maritime area. From this perspective, a region is a bounded geographic space containing two or more states (Mansfield & Milner, 1999). The second criterion offers a more normative approach to regions, which, while still geography-based, focuses on a dominant recurring system of interactions in trade, security, and economics. These interactions are often due to common ethnic, cultural, or religious ties (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2002).

Scholars have observed that regional organisations and regional integration movements became more pronounced features of the international system after the 1950s (Fawcett, 2008). This was initially driven by Europe's desire to overcome, or mitigate, the impact of another brutal dispute in Europe after World War II, but the logic of regionalism eventually spread everywhere. The historical development of regionalism can be understood in two parts (Wunderlich, 2007). The first part, from the 1950s until the late 1980s, was characterised by the Cold War. The nature of international relations during this time was survival-centric. States concentrated on their very existence, like worrying about the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the deterrence strategy employed (Walt, 1991). All these gave rise to certain regional organisations like NATO, SEATO, CENTO, and the Warsaw Pact, which focused mostly on addressing these daunting security problems. Also, the EEC, while primarily aimed at economic integration, had a more critical agenda of enhancing and ensuring adequate security so that no conflict could arise in Europe (Erdoğan, 2008).

The second period, commencing in the 1980s, shifted focus from strategic priorities to more economic ones. With the relaxation of Cold War tensions and the rise of globalisation, the attention of regional organisations turned towards economies and trade. There was a growing perception that regional integration would increase the shared economic efficiency (Ateş, 2022). This period saw the creation of economic organisations such as NAFTA, GAFTA, MERCOSUR, and APEC. The EU, ASEAN, AU, and Arab League also deepened their frameworks to deal with comprehensive regional issues.



While proximity is still the primary consideration in the establishment of regional organisations, it is not the only one. More often, a combination of shared political, economic, and social objectives is more determinative. Today, regional organisations can be classified broadly into three main areas of concentration: political, economic, or security. Political organisations cover wider scope issues, economic organisations focus on fostering development and integration, while security organisations concentrate on collective defence from internal and external aggression (Ateş, 2022).

Soft anarchy in the context of security and military cooperation

One of the mainstream theories in international relations, realism, interprets the international system as an anarchic environment and considers states as the primary actors in this anarchic setting. These actors, due to the anarchic structure of the international system, seek to enhance their national power capabilities, leading to a pursuit of power maximisation. As a result, this transforms into a power struggle where "everyone is at war with everyone." Consequently, the "security dilemma" emerges (Tang, 2009). According to Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, a balance of power is necessary to prevent wars in an anarchic international system. It is assumed that the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War prevented a potential hot conflict. The concept of Soft Anarchy also emphasises regional and collective security organisations as solutions to security issues arising from the anarchic structure of the international system.

The Concept of Collective Security in the Soft Anarchy Model

The concepts of Soft Anarchy and Collective Security can be viewed as complementary to each other. Collective security is a security strategy that provides deterrence. The concept of collective security is based on the idea that every state within the system has an equal right to security, and the goal is to ensure the security of all states. Collective security is achieved when each member state activates its security elements against a threatening state (Delahunty, 2007). The foundations of this concept of collective security can be traced back to Kant's *Perpetual Peace*. This approach, realised with the establishment of the League of Nations by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, is now represented by the United Nations. Collective security is based on the political positions of states with the aim of maintaining and preserving peace in matters concerning global security (Yılmaz, 2017).

In the concept of soft anarchy, collective security is achieved through regional security organisations rather than a global federation. Cooperation and regional organisations serve to mitigate hard anarchy and bring balance to the system. This balance also prevents any single state or a few states from dominating the entire international system. The concept of soft anarchy does not view security as a zero-sum game. The gain of one state should not result in the loss of others. Soft anarchy approaches security as a win-win situation. This reduces the security dilemma. To achieve this, cooperation, norms, and measures that enhance security are required. This makes collective security possible.



NATO, CSTO and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Regional Security Perspectives

This section focuses on the NATO, CSTO and SCO regional security organisations, detailing their formation and objectives on the basis of fostering cooperation and tackling common challenges within the region.

The North Atlantic Treaty explicitly marks 4th of April 1949, as NATO's founding date, having been signed by 12 members with 32 countries as part of the alliance. Its major goal is to safeguard the political and military freedom of all member states while upholding collective defence. As prescribed in Article five of the founding treaty, all members consider an armed conflict towards one member as an attack against the alliance and are bound to aid the conflicted partner, whether politically or militarily. This was only invoked during the 9/11 terror attacks on America (Sonmezoglu et al., 2021; NATO, 2025). NATO's sole focus during the Cold War was combating the USSR's dominance and halting communism's expansion (Armaoglu, 1988). Post-Cold War, NATO undertook new responsibilities of crisis management and peacekeeping, such as in Bosnia and Kosovo. Presently, NATO also deals with terrorism, energy and cyber threats, as well as the spread of arms (NATO, 2025).

Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan convened on May 15, 1992 and founded the CSTO in Tashkent. Article 4 of the treaty to establish the CSTO states that aggression against one member is aggression towards all. Although originally intended to foster political and military cooperation, the CSTO transformed into a regional organisation in 2002, at which point it also received observer status at the UN General Assembly. Its strategic priorities include collective defence, counterterrorism, border security, and rapid response to crises (CSTO, 2025).

Formed by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 1996, the "Shanghai Five" became the SCO with the addition of Uzbekistan in 2001. While initially concentrating on border issues, the SCO's tasks broadened to fostering peace and stability as well as a just international order. Emphasis is placed on mutual trust, collective security, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and relations without confrontation. Its security agenda targets transnational threats, focusing on terrorism, radicalism, and separatism, termed by its members as the three main radical threats (Kutlu, 2021).

These organisations, as a collective unit, showcase the means by which regional frameworks deal with intricate cross-border conflict through provisions of collective defence, strategic cooperation, and adapting institutional methods based on the geopolitical situation.

Regional Military Cooperation and Its Impact on the Global Balance of Power

Regional security frameworks serve as important regional and global security actors in the development of new centers of power (Lake & Morgan, 1997). They also help forge alliances and counter prevailing powers. NATO during the Cold War strengthened Western alliance resistance towards the Soviet Union and reinforced U.S. global leadership (Walt,



1987). In response, socialist states formed the Warsaw Pact as a counterbalance to U.S. sway.

These organizations help foster a multipolar international system as they create distinct poles of power. Thus, NATO embodies the Western security structure's paralysis, while the Shanghai Cooperation Organization stands as an antithesis to the Western-centered disorder. Beyond mere cooperation on security, they provide normative frameworks and act as balancing mechanisms to address asymmetries of power.

Global organizations influence others through collaboration. For instance, NATO has worked with the United Nations on many missions. NATO's Operation Deliberate Force during the Bosnian war in 1995, followed by NATO's IFOR and SFOR commands enforcing the Dayton Agreement, is an example of this cross-institution collaboration (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024). Also, NATO KFOR in Kosovo operated under the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (Chesterman 2002). Furthermore, NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan under UN mandate demonstrates the intricate intertwining of local and global efforts toward achieving security and illustrates the globalization of "regionally integrated" security policies.

Regional Organizations and the Soft Anarchy Model

The processes of regionalization and global governance have both expanded the opportunities for collective action while maintaining state sovereignty. This situation depicts a preliminary stage in the erosion of the traditional paradigm of international anarchy. We witness the emergence of the European Union, ASEAN, and the African Union as an early or "childhood" phase of the soft anarchy model. After the Cold War, there was accelerating globalization, coupled with more complex international relations, which altered the conception of "region." In spite of this, a lot of the literature on regionalization still seems to be concerned with a static, bounded-by-geography definition. In contrast to this view, regions are always being transformed and redefined by economic and political as well as cultural processes (Levis & Wigen, 1997). Some (Mansfield and Milner, 1997) stress geographic proximity, while others define it strictly with preferential trade agreements (Winters, 1999).

The latest trends in regionalization are more complex than previously because they include both identity and integrity formation alongside economic and security considerations. The process follows "bottom-up" and "inside-out" patterns of ecological, economic, and security concerns. There has been a shift into a multipolar world order with the decline of American hegemony, which now includes significant non-state actor participation in regionalization (Hettne, 1999).

Global governance is defined as an arrangement of states, international organizations, private sectors, and civil societies that engage in sociopolitical decision-making at multiple levels. The paradigm of global governance emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to economic integration, post-socialist transitions, and the stagnation of the Western-centric order (Murphy, 2014: 23-24). However, the persistence of inadequate solutions to social injustice remains a challenge in broadening the scope of the concept.



There is now a much clearer relationship between global governance and regionalisation. They both involve multi-actor, multi-level frameworks that are distilled from local realities. Regional organizations, the European Union, and ASEAN strive to foster peace, democracy, human rights, and further economic integration. These regions enhance their governance structures in response to global challenges, like climate change, migration, and global health pandemics, which illustrates the interplay of regional and global governance systems.

In terms of explaining the evolution of membership norms, conceptual approaches are very useful for analyzing regional integration. Considered from a purely geographic or cultural standpoint, boundaries are negotiated through the interactions of member countries and supranational bodies. Through these negotiations, shared criteria are established which determine state eligibility for membership, thus providing strong political motivation at the time of application. There are two critical moments that I have not yet covered, and that have received inadequate scholarly attention: the moment when the members decide their criteria, and the moment they designate a certain state as eligible. These decisions are politically important, even if they are not legal norms (Thomas, 2021: 226).

The European Union represents a distinct and intricate model of regional integration. Beginning with the Paris Treaty of 1951, the EU grew through normative and institutional shifts into a system of multi-level governance. It incorporates European Commission legislative proposals, the Council and Parliament co-decision process, the President of the European Council's strategic direction, and authoritative jurisprudence from the European Court of Justice (Rosamond, 2014: 252). The EU moved beyond purely economic objectives to social rights and citizenship policies, which in turn altered the political and legal order. Deepened integration occurred through the 1957 Rome Treaties, the 1965 Merger Treaty, and then the Maastricht Treaty, which expanded integration into areas previously considered sovereign. Still, issues of democratic legitimacy, social opposition, and differentiated integration demonstrate the EU's flexible and multi-layered nature (Rosamond, 2014: 253–254). With regard to competitive and financial services, environmental protection, and competition, the EU remains a global normative power (Rosamond, 2014: 256–258).

Other regional models like ASEAN and the African Union (AU) provide alternative pathways. ASEAN has realized considerable integration with its "ASEAN way." It achieves integration through consensus, emphasized consultation and non-interference (Korwatanasakul, 2020; Ting & Yongkun, 2023). ASEAN has also enhanced regional stability and prosperity through the ASEAN Free Trade Area and ASEAN Economic Community, which facilitates the free movement of goods, services, investment, and skilled labor (Durahman, 2016; Prajanto, 2022). It is also ASEAN's "open regionalism" policy that builds relationships with the rest of the world's economic superpowers (Pangestu & Ing, 2016).

The African Union (AU) has wider political and economic goals like achieving continental integration and enhancing global relevance (Bala, 2017). Strengthening democracy, governance, and development is further enabled by the Pan-African Parliament and African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as the African Union Commission. The AU is active in politics and security, concentrating on preventative and remedial



measures concerning conflicts. In addition, the AU encourages integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (Hartzenberg, 2011).

These regional frameworks defy conventional definitions of sovereignty and illustrate the interaction of regionalism, national self-determination, and global integration (Holsti, 2016; He, 2004). The relationship is further heightened by technological innovations and economic interdependence, which serve as both centripetal and centrifugal forces (Baluev, 2014). EU, ASEAN, and Mercosur regional blocs amplify bargaining power, although some transfer of authority is required (Pentland, 1975). There is still a lack of balance in power and structural constraints; nonetheless, these models serve as early indicators of "soft anarchy," where some cooperative order is obtainable without complete surrender of sovereignty. Should integration proceed, a future where soft anarchy is more fully realized is possible.

Conclusion and Discussion

The international system is still formally anarchy, but now exists within a network of states, regional blocs and transnational relations that is more intricate and interconnected than ever. The soft anarchy model reclassifies this intricacy as not a loss of sovereignty but a collective recalibration. Instead of absorbing anarchy through a single central authority, it fosters cooperative regional clusters where power is shifted, tempered, and redistributed.

"Strong vs. weak" distinctions become irrelevant within this framework, as once smaller states are able to exert their influence, greater traditional structures provide access. The EU, ASEAN, and African Union are examples of regional organisations that serve as new forms of post-Westphalian order, lessening unilateralism and conflict. Order is maintained without hierarchy within semi-autonomous, interlinked regions, as soft anarchy propagates the horizontal distribution of power.

Soft anarchy reconceptualises economic and security disorder in the international system as an arena in which overlapping regional norms and governance networks, rather than a singular global authority, stabilise order while preserving state autonomy. Our integrative model combines realist constraints (Waltz 1979) concerning the anarchically competitive logic of survival; ontological securities and role conception (Wendt 1992); and normative society-building processes (Bull 1977). Regionally concentrated goods such as transnational trade security, counter-migration coordination, and uniform collective defence raise sufficiently shared external perceptions that actors can subordinate rival preferences to the management of common risks. Competently crafted regional institutions can then narrow transaction costs, fortify commitment credibility, and channel disputes into bounded adjudication. Structures that mediate between strict majority and pure consensus, independent verification that discourages opportunistic non-compliance, and redistributive mechanisms that mitigate asymmetries in gains together fortify the model's empirical purchase.

Nonetheless, soft anarchy encounters circumscribed applicability. Abstention on demanding consensus may incapacitate a region at critical junctures; a singular hegemon may skew institutional advantages and dictate asymmetrical costs; and indebtedness,



literacy, or bureaucratic capacity may continue to circumscribe enforcement and policy follow-through. Such weaknesses are magnified when intra-regional inequalities deny vulnerable members distributive access to the produce of cooperation, or when secured reputational legacies of historic conflict erode the reciprocal trust that reciprocity theorists and security communities presuppose. Awareness of these disequilibria remains vital, for the very governance frameworks that permit collective action may equally consolidate hegemonic order and consolidate defects of marginalisation if not continuously subjected to countervailing scrutiny and reform.

Scholarly attention should now turn to rigorously assessing the model's claims in diverse geographical contexts, prioritising the interplay between sovereignty pooling, institutional density, and the differential capacity of governance structures to mitigate conflict. For policymakers, the imperative is to construct regional frameworks in which collective engagement emerges as the rational baseline, underpinned by rules and redistribution mechanisms that render participation advantageous to every constituent state. If calibrated to the empirical preconditions of any given milieu, the logic of soft anarchy can furnish a credible trajectory toward regional stability—one that recognises the continuing presence of anarchy while directing its dynamics into institutionalised, just, and durable patterns of order.

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