

# The Crisis of Regionalism in Europe: What are the Implications and Lessons for Asia?

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Over the last few years the European Union (EU) has been experiencing a number of interconnecting economic, political, social and even geopolitical crises that are threatening its very survival as an effective organization. Given that multilateral organizations often continue long-after their original purposes have been achieved, it is entirely possible that something called the EU will continue to exist. Whether it will resemble the EU at the height of its powers and authority is a very different question, however.

In what follows I briefly consider the possible implications of the EU' s reduced status for Asia and its institutional development. This approach is justified by the fact that the EU remains the benchmark against which other regional projects are measured and is – in the opinion of many Europeans, at least – a role model for regional political and economic cooperation. After sketching the EU' s evolution and constitution I consider the forces that have rapidly undermined what had hitherto been seen by many as a deeply embedded, indispensable part of European politics and standard bearer of liberal ‘Western’ values more generally. Finally, I consider what implications its decline may have for other regional projects.

## Europe' s uniqueness

No other region has developed in quite the same way as Europe. Not only was it the first region to institutionalize economic, political and strategic relations, but it did so much more comprehensively

and enthusiastically than anywhere else. Indeed, the EU has seen itself as not just the benchmark for regional projects, but also as the standard bearer for liberal political and economic reform more generally. This role was no accident. On the contrary, the EU was encouraged and designed to entrench a particular form of capitalist, free market and – preferably – democratic practices and values in the face of stiff competition from the Soviet Union.

While many Europeans may have forgotten about the continent's geopolitical heritage, and similarly fail to appreciate the pacifying impact of its institutionalized transnational relations, there is little doubt that the EU has been spectacularly successful in fulfilling its original mandate. The continent has been a remarkable success economically, and its values and norms have been transferred – to some extent, at least – to other parts of the region. One of the key reasons that this happened so effectively was that the US encouraged and supported deeper regional cooperation in a way that it did not in East Asia.

The key question now is whether the EU can continue to embody, let alone export, such principles when it is losing the confidence of its own people and enjoying little support from the current American administration. Not only does Donald Trump display little understanding of the crucial role the EU has played in underpinning the postwar international order, but the institution itself is also succumbing to the same sort of populist pressures that brought Trump to power in the US. Many Europeans associate the EU with unresponsive, undemocratic, ineffective governance and are hoping for national rather than regional solutions to political and economic problems.

## Europe's significance for Asia

Regionalism in Europe and Asia are very different and this reflects their distinctive histories, cultures and the preferences of their respective elites. Whereas the European project of deeper integration and greater cooperation was supported by the Europeans themselves and by a 'hegemonic' United States, in Asia the region was divided by the Cold war and America's confrontation with communism. While ever the Cold War continued, genuine regionalism was impossible. Consequently, the US gave active support to a number of regimes that were authoritarian and non-democratic, simply because they were no communist. South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and even Singapore and Japan were examples of regimes that enjoyed strong American support despite questionable political practices at times.

From the outset, Asia's institutions were primarily concerned with protecting fragile domestic sovereignty, rather than encouraging EU-style integration. The Association of South East Asian Nations

(ASEAN) is the quintessential example of this possibility. Economic development and domestic security have been the principal concerns of policymakers, despite some rhetorical support for political pluralism and emancipation. Indeed, the most striking features of the ASEAN grouping are the distance between rhetoric and reality on the one hand, and the limited impact of the organization itself on the behavior of its members: there has been little enthusiasm for EU-style levels of cooperation, much less developing a powerful inter-governmental organization that might actually compel its members to act in ways that may not suit the region's political elites.

Unfortunately, many of the other organizations that have followed in ASEAN's wake have subscribed to precisely the same sorts of norms and practices that have characterized ASEAN, with precisely the same sort of consequences. Institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, which ought to be well placed to address critical regional security issues have in reality been incapable of exerting any influence, much less resolving crises on the Korean peninsula, the South China Sea or the Taiwan Straits. The failure and weakness of Asia's regional institutional architecture has not encouraged reform or a radical change of direction, however. On the contrary, Asia's institutions are flawed by design, something a proliferation of regional initiatives is unlikely to change.

## Europe's lessons

Many policymakers in Asia will draw comfort from Europe's current troubles. The series of economic, political, security and social crises currently afflicting the EU countries not only threatens that institution's future in ways that would have seemed unimaginable only a year or two ago, but they may also fatally undermine any chance of such institutional innovations occurring elsewhere. After all, the lesson that may be – rightly – drawn is that deep economic integration is simply too difficult without other politically problematic forms of political cooperation, too. It is painfully clear that many Europeans no longer share – if they ever did – the European vision of ever closer cooperation.

Given the continuing importance of nationalist forces and beliefs in much of Asia, the real lesson of Europe's troubles is that far-reaching cooperation is only possible in unusual, possibly unique, circumstances. In the absence of a major existential strategic and ideological threat, and absent the support of the ruling hegemon, the impulse for greater cooperation may also be missing. At a time when authoritarian China seems likely to once again dominate East Asia, and when the US seems may retreat into something like a more insular isolationism, the prospects for effective regional development in Asia have never looked more remote.

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