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ADB Working Paper Series

**DISINTEGRATION OF THE EU AND
THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ASEAN**

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Abstract

The EU has evolved from a grouping of six Western European countries with stated economic objectives to a large regional organization of now 27 European countries pursuing a wide range of political, economic, social, environmental, and security objectives, while the majority of the other European countries are associated with it or aspire to join it. The EU has been promoted as the main successful case of regional integration to be emulated by other regions. However, while its integration has been quite impressive, various developments have indicated the possibility of its disintegration. The threat of disintegration from within makes it even more worrisome as it reflects the growing discontent in some of its members with the way the EU is run under the leadership of its heavyweights (France and Germany), added to the EU's unfulfilled promises of growth, prosperity, and equality for all its members. Brexit ended a taboo and showed a way out of the EU for the dissatisfied EU members that will not likely be repeated in the foreseeable future. However, there are other possible scenarios for disintegration, including the degeneration of the EU into a loose regional grouping of convenience where its members take advantage of its benefits while pursuing their own national interests and following the EU's rules only when they serve their interests. ASEAN is much younger than the EU and has not sought, in practice, the same objectives pursued by the latter, although it has targeted regional integration in Southeast Asia. There is a degree of similarity in the circumstances under which the two regional groupings were established, but there are also various differences between the two regions. In a nutshell, ASEAN is a loose organization of 10 members who work together in certain areas of common interest, while mainly focused on their national objectives. Unlike the EU, it does not operate as a power bloc and contains a number of unresolved issues, which could pit its members against each other as they have done before. Consequently, if the EU, despite 70 years of planned integration with a significant degree of success, is not immune to disintegration, then ASEAN with its still insignificant degree of integration is surely vulnerable to such a possibility, unless it seriously initiates a process to address its root causes before it is too late.

Keywords: regional integration, EU disintegration, European grouping, European Union, ASEAN integration, Southeast Asia and regional cooperation

JEL Classification: F52, F15

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1. INTRODUCTION

Europe and Asia have had different experiences in many areas over the course of their existence and have developed into two distinct regions with differences in terms of their industrial, agricultural, and scientific capabilities as well as political and economic developments. Lagging behind Europe for a few centuries until the end of the 20th century, Asia has without doubt caught up and surpassed Europe and, in fact, all other regions in terms of GDP (\$30.635 trillion, Statistics Times 2019) to secure first place in the global ranking, although there are major differences among and within its regions in terms of economic development, which is also true in the case of Europe.

Despite their differences, Asia and Europe have gone through certain seemingly similar experiences since the end of WWII. The creation of a regional grouping is one of them in the form of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU), respectively. Of course, various factors of varying significances make them different from each other. These range from simple quantitative and geographical factors, namely the number of countries participating in these experiences (i.e., the majority of the European countries versus a small number of Asian ones) and their geographical extent (i.e., most of Europe versus a fraction of Asia), to qualitative ones, primarily their level of economic and industrial development granting their respective members the rank of developed and developing countries. Their level of integration is yet another factor. The EU has taken certain concrete steps towards full integration based on its membership's perceived sharing of "common European values and destiny" to justify forming a united European entity run by a series of universally accepted and observed rules and regulations with common foreign and defense policies, among others, run by a supranational political entity.

This objective has proven to be easier to dream about than build. While the EU has certainly become far more integrated than it used to be and there is a high degree of cooperation among its members over many issues (e.g., intelligence and military cooperation and free movement of their nationals, goods, and services within the EU boundaries), the European regional grouping is not heading towards a fully cohesive European state. On the contrary, its recent history suggests that such an objective is not feasible. In fact, the EU's continuity as a regional grouping operating as a united entity with its current level of integration is questionable, given that it has been experiencing certain developments heralding the dis-integration of the regional grouping, which has taken around 70 years to reach its current level of integration.

The signs of disintegration are not confined to Brexit, although that is the most obvious case. The ascension to power of right-wing political parties in Austria, the Czech Republic, Italy, Poland, and Hungary, which are pursuing their own policies in certain areas in clear opposition to those of the EU, is another case. The EU's so-called "heavyweights" (France and Germany) defying the official EU policy on energy aimed at reducing reliance on the Russian Federation as manifested in their building of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to increase their gas imports from the Russian Federation is yet another case. To these, the rise of "New Europe" consisting of certain EU countries taking sides with the US on various regional and international issues should be added.

Despite the high degree of integration in the EU covering not just economic issues but also many others (e.g., environment, foreign relations, security and defense), further consolidated by the membership of the majority of the EU members in NATO and the lack of major ideological differences and territorial disputes between and among its members, the emerging disintegration in the EU suggests that ASEAN, which is far less integrated, is not immune to this phenomenon.

ASEAN was established for different reasons from those of the EU in 1967. It expanded in the 1980s and 1990s as mainly a union of the Southeast Asian countries to promote peace, stability, and prosperity through economic and political cooperation among its members. Although efforts have been made under the “ASEAN Community” to turn it into a more integrated regional grouping, ASEAN is still a loose economic union of 10 Southeast Asian countries pursuing their own individual national interests, which may well be opposite to those of the rest, while having a degree of economic, political, and security cooperation. The ASEAN members have unresolved issues and historical mistrust still exists between many of them, which could escalate to crises and political and even military conflicts, as happened before.

ASEAN has not enjoyed common political and ideological orientations as a unifying factor, which have shaped the EU as a regional grouping established in the early years of the Cold War. Additionally, unlike the EU, it has not been developed to act as a power bloc to preserve the interest of its members, which are, individually, too weak to face the established and rising Asian and non-Asian powers and superpowers.

The rise and expansion of the centrifugal forces in the EU region has raised questions about the feasibility of a united Europe as a sustainable entity. Despite seven decades of efforts, the EU as a well-integrated grouping of Western countries is facing disintegration should the current trend continue. This ongoing development has an implication for efforts for regional integration in other regions, in particular Southeast Asia, where its forming states have been engaged in creating a regional grouping, albeit with less ambitious objectives. Hence, if the EU is not immune to disintegration notwithstanding all its efforts and the existence of many factors in favor of integration, then ASEAN with its very limited degree of integration and the existence of seeds of conflicts and unresolved issues between and among its members can and will possibly encounter disintegration, unless major efforts are made to address its root causes in the near future. Apart from setting another negative precedence to discredit regional integration as a realistic and useful undertaking for other regions, such a scenario, if it becomes a reality, will likely negatively affect the impressive development of Southeast Asia since the 1960s. By strengthening the existing mistrust and discouraging cooperation in the region, such development will create a suitable ground for the re-emergence of old and unsettled issues and conflicts to exhaust the region’s potential for growth and development. Preventing such a possible scenario is a necessity for ensuring the continuity of the region’s political, economic, and social development and the prosperity of its peoples. This paper seeks to contribute to this objective through its identification of the existing blatant manifestations of such a possibility and by making recommendations to eliminate it.

In elaborating on this argument, Section 2 deals with the historical context of the EU’s formation. Section 3 focuses on its current situation and the challenges to its continuity as a united entity. The possible scenarios of the EU’s disintegration are discussed in Section 4. Section 5 provides a brief historical context for the creation of ASEAN to serve as a background for Section 6, which deals with the evolution of this regional organization to its current form. Section 7 elaborates on ASEAN’s current situation, including the elements of disintegration that will enable further study of the possible scenarios for such a disintegration. Finally, Section 8 serves as the paper’s conclusion, and makes policy recommendations aimed at avoiding ASEAN’s disintegration.

2. THE EU EXPERIENCE

As the second-largest Western economy after the US and one of the two pillars of the Western alliance, the EU owes its very existence, expansion, and consolidation to certain factors that necessitated its creation in a certain historical context. Over time, these factors have disappeared or lost their significance as unifiers while the promised united and prosperous Europe of equal Europeans led by a supranational leadership in Brussels has proven to be unrealistic. The existing union of 27 European countries has continued in the wake of the departure of a European heavyweight (the UK). Its members are surely far more integrated than they were prior to their joining the European grouping. However, the EU of 2020, formerly seen as a successful model of regional integration to be emulated by other regions, notably Africa, which now has its own version of it (the African Union), faces disintegration as a distinct possibility.

While this outcome is not due to a deliberate and orchestrated process set in place by any number of EU members, the prospective disintegration is surely the logical result of the EU's development over the last 70 years within the existing regional and global contexts planting the seeds of disintegration to be discussed. In a nutshell, certain realities explain this undesired and unplanned prospect, particularly the following. The circumstances and necessities that helped conceive and made possible and facilitated the EU's creation no longer exist for the most part, namely the Cold War, the division of the world into two distinct hostile blocs, and the fear of a Communist takeover of Western countries, especially the European ones. The world of the 21st century is different from and more complicated than that of post-WWII. In particular, the expanding economic, financial, and/or energy dependence of the EU countries on other regions and countries have turned their Cold War enemies (the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China [PRC]) into "necessary evils," while they are also seen as major challenging powers to the EU.

Moreover, the promises of the EU as a necessary and capable entity to foster growth for all its members, end disparities among them, and secure prosperity for all of them have largely not been realized and, in fact, have proven to be unrealistic, as discussed in detail by many scholars, including Claus Offe (2015). Among others, this reality is evident in the debt crisis in the eurozone with its devastating economic, financial, and social impacts on many EU countries, specifically, but not exclusively, the less developed and prosperous ones (e.g., Greece, Spain, and Ireland). In fact, as discussed elsewhere, the global financial crisis of 2008 "morphed into the 'euro crisis'" in 2010 to affect all of the 19 eurozone countries, which have since been "rocked by economic stagnation and debt crises" (Stiglitz 2016).

This development has raised serious questions about the merits and, in fact, the very idea of the EU-united Europe, which had long had its skeptics among the EU members both on the right and the left of the European political scene (Vollaard 2018). Added to this, certain major challenges for the EU helped bring disintegration to the surface as a possibility after decades of efforts towards integration: the migration crisis, as millions of African and Middle Eastern people left their war- and crisis-torn countries for Europe; the Ukraine crisis involving the Russian annexation of the Crimea; and, of course, Brexit. All of these have practically divided the EU. These developments helped foster the rise of opposition to EU policy as formulated in Brussels in the aforementioned cases, and, in general, the EU policies shaped mainly by its heavyweights (Germany and France), while prompting the rise of nationalism, including right-wing, xenophobic, and extremist movements, particularly, but not exclusively, in small and/or less prosperous EU members, as discussed extensively (e.g., Wodak, Mral, and Khosravi 2013). More importantly, they paved the way for the ascension to power of right-wing parties in

Austria, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic and the growth of populist/extreme right-wing parties/groups in other countries, including France, as evident in the rapid expansion of its xenophobic and anti-EU National Front (now known as “National Rally”) to challenge the mainstream parties over governing France, as discussed in detail by many scholars, including Jan-Werner Müller (2016).

There is, of course, a range of views as to why the EU has reached a point that disintegration is now a distinct possibility. Although it is not clear as to how it could happen, apart from one obvious scenario as validated by Brexit, namely the EU countries leaving the union, there is now enough evidence to make this possibility credible as manifested in the rise and expansion of centrifugal forces in the EU that challenge the leadership of the EU over its member states in different forms. This is not an accidental development to be attributed to this or that factor, ideology, or individual, but the natural outcome of the EU’s creation process and the unachievable goal of creating a united Europe of equal, advanced, and prosperous nations led not by its forming state leaderships but by a “supranational” European leadership in Brussels. To shed light on this development, the creation process of the EU and the factors necessitating, prompting, facilitating, and consolidating the EU are discussed briefly. The focus will be on the factors behind disintegration and the possible shapes that it could take.

2.1 Emergence and Consolidation of the EU

The EU started as an economic agreement among France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands to integrate their coal and steel as France’s proposed initiative was accepted by the rest and approved by the Council of Europe as the Schuman Plan, leading to the creation of the European Payments Union on 19 September 1950 (European Union 2019a). Yet, the initiative had the undeclared objective of preventing another war between France and Germany that would divide Europe into hostile alliances and drag its countries into devastating wars as experienced during WWI and WWII. The consolidation of the organization into a cohesive, integrated, and multidimensional union of 28 European countries (before Brexit) covering a wide range of areas, including political, economic, security, foreign policy, and environmental, with executive, legislative, and judiciary structures to unite its members, has taken another 70 years.

Certain conditions have helped foster the evolution of an economic grouping of a few European countries into a supranational entity of just about all the European countries with many of the remaining ones waiting to join. In particular, there has been a historical context for such an evolution. Apart from the aforementioned war prevention objective, the EU is a “child” of the Cold War era, which divided the world into mainly two major hostile camps led by the Soviet Union and the US and affected Europe dramatically as the main arena for East and West rivalry pitting NATO against the Warsaw Pact. The EU’s creation was therefore a measure to remove the main sources of conflicts among the European NATO members and consolidate their economic power and resources. Such a context was far more important than the widely advertised “common culture,” “common values,” and, therefore, “common destiny” of the European countries. In fact, the envisioned union of European countries functioning as a group of close partners observing certain rules and regulations and acting as one entity all the time is yet to happen. It has proven to be a utopia as, in one form or another, all the EU members have clearly demonstrated their desire to preserve their individual identities while working more closely with each other. As concluded by many EU observers, the existing “high levels of socioeconomic interdependence and institutionalization” among the EU members have failed to secure “an ever-closer union” (Webber 2019).

The latter is especially evident today when differences between the EU members are not only apparent with regard to cultures and associated norms and people's attitudes, but also in terms of how each EU country is run and how its citizens are treated. In reality, apart from paying lip service to the EU-promoted values of "European heritage," "belief in democracy and freedoms," and the superiority of free enterprise as a "fair and fully functional" economic system serving as the necessary foundation of their political systems, the emerging and expanding blatant shift towards authoritarianism and human rights abuses in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, and Poland clearly reflect the lack of such commonalities among the EU members. Apart from the rise in antisemitic and antforeigner incidents caused by extremist groups (neo-Nazi, right-wing, and xenophobic), there are reports on governmental abuses and discriminations and/or restrictions of rights and services in different forms targeting social and religious minorities, women, environmental activists, foreigners, and asylum-seekers in these countries, for example (Human Rights Watch 2019; Barley, Biggs-Davison, and Alderton 2018).

The Polish government's efforts to undermine the independence of Poland's judiciary are a recent example of an emerging authoritarian trend in the aforementioned countries. Among other things, it is reflected in its plan to fire Polish judges who question the legitimacy of its judicial reforms (Reuters 2019). The adoption of those reforms will eventually lead to exiting of Poland from the EU for their contradicting the EU laws, according to the Polish Supreme Court (Reuters 2019).

2.2 Major Factors and Milestones in the EU's Consolidation

Known as the "Treaties of Rome" or "Common Market," the two Treaties establishing the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community of 25 March 1957 are especially important agreements for the EU's foundation for setting the stage for a more integrated economic community among its six founding members (European Union 2019a). Added to various political, economic, and social agreements, the Maastricht Treaty on European Union of 7 February 1992 officially created the "European Union" in its current form by setting "clear rules for the future single currency as well as for foreign and security policy and closer cooperation in justice and home affairs" (European Union 2019b). This was followed by two other related milestones meant to further consolidate the EU, namely the introduction of the euro in 12 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain) on 1 January 1999 (European Union 2019d) and its subsequent expansion to Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia, and Slovakia (European Union 2019e).

While sharp differences among the EU members in many foreign and security policy matters (e.g., ties with the Russian Federation) raise doubts about the EU members' implementation of the EU rules in these areas, the wisdom of having the single currency, the euro, is now seriously challenged. Promoted as a major measure for fostering economic growth and securing financial stability, especially for the less developed members and for addressing Southern Europe's competitiveness challenge, the euro and its associated economy and politics are now assessed as doing the opposite by causing deep political, economic, and social problems (Offe 2015). It is also argued that the euro caused "huge capital flows from the northern to the southern countries of the eurozone" resulting in "an inflationary credit bubble" in these countries, such as Greece, while depriving them of "competitiveness" and making them vulnerable to the US financial crisis of 2007–2008 that spilled over into Europe (Sinn 2014). Similarly, some scholars argue that the euro has acted against its promise

of bringing Europe together and promoting prosperity. As persuasively argued by Stiglitz (2016), the eurozone financial crises revealed the euro's shortcomings, and that Europe's "stagnation and bleak outlook" are a direct result of the fundamental challenges in having a diverse group of European countries share a common currency when their economic integration is outpacing their political integration (Stiglitz 2016).

Laying down plans to "reform the EU institutions with the objective of giving Europe a stronger voice in the world and devoting more European resources to employment and the rights of the EU citizens," the Treaty of Amsterdam of 17 June 1997 is another milestone (European Union 2019c). Even though the EU as a grouping of now 27 countries, after Brexit, has potentially a stronger say in global affairs than any single EU member has individually, its practical exclusion from many major global affairs (e.g., Syria's civil war) where Iran and Turkey, as regional powers, and the Russian Federation and the US, as global powers, are the players questions the EU's achievement in "giving Europe a stronger voice in the world." This is also evident in its practical following of the US policy towards Iran regarding the nuclear deal of 2015 despite its official opposition to the US withdrawal from it in 2018.

The period between 1957 and today has been the period of expansion for the EU to become a large regional grouping. Today, it has 27 members and the world's second-largest economy after the US as reflected in its GDP of €15.3 trillion in 2017 (European Union 2019f). It has political clout and a claim to superpower status, although it cannot function as such due to its internal division. The Soviet Union's fall paved the way for its rapid expansion as just about all the forming states of the Soviet Bloc found the EU to be the right vehicle for addressing their numerous economic, financial, and technological shortcomings while protecting them from the re-emerging Russian Federation. Yet, today, there are valid arguments as to the negative implications of the EU economic and financial policies in these countries' post-Communist era dominated by the "neoliberal ideas" and the "economic theories of Reagan, Thatcher, and the Chicago School" (Ther 2016). According to Philipp Ther, their implemented "liberalization, deregulation, and privatization" plans "had catastrophic effects on former Soviet Bloc countries" (Ther 2016). Although these countries are today certainly better off economically than they were when they started their post-Soviet era, Ther rejects the notion that the EU/US-supported and -introduced economic "shock therapy" laid the foundation for their eventual economic growth by arguing that what determined their success or failure in this regard was human capital and the "transformation from below" (Ther 2016).

This issue aside, the ex-Soviet Bloc European countries were all concerned about a predictable re-emergence of the Russian Federation in its post-Soviet era to motivate it to seek the restoration of its lost power and influence among its former European allies, in one form or another. Joining the EU and NATO (as an interrelated and practically inseparable grouping of Western countries from the EU due to its almost identical membership and the main geographical field of operation) seemed an absolute necessity for them, not only for addressing their aforementioned difficulties but also for their survival as independent weak states. Of course, this is a valid argument, given their countries' historical experiences.

2.3 Other Major Factors in the EU's Creation and Consolidation

There were other important factors that contributed to the EU's creation and expansion. This process has become easier due to the commonalities of its members. They include their being economically developed, albeit with major differences in the scale and scope of such status, their adoption of a version of the same style of government, and their mainly settled political and territorial disputes while their remaining ones have been contained, although they have not disappeared, as evident in the existence of separatist movements in the UK and Spain, for instance.

Undoubtedly, the memories of the devastating wars in Europe pitting the rival hostile groupings against each other amounted to a major factor, particularly the most recent one (WWI and WWII). The desire to prevent such wars in the European territories has certainly been a major factor in paving the way for the EU and keeping it together.

The European countries' individual inability to claim and sustain a global power status on their own, or a superpower status in the case of the "heavyweights," due to their weaknesses (e.g., small land size, lack of strategic depth, small and/or limited domestic markets, and limited and/or rapidly depleting mineral and energy resources) inclined them all to join a European organization with certain objectives in mind. Their combined resources enabled them to address most of these shortcomings and protect their independence and national interests while providing a superpower clout for the grouping as a whole to help them all meet the challenge of the then Soviet Union and later its major successor state, the Russian Federation. Operating globally, this Eurasian country is the only regional power operating in Europe that can claim to have superpower status on its own due to its lack of the aforementioned shortcomings, despite having challenges of its own. The prospect of this superpower joining the EU was and still is nonexistent, given its lack of interest in becoming a junior or an equal member of the grouping when it has the option of operating as a superpower.

The EU has sought superpower status to withstand not just the re-emergence of the Russian Federation but also the US, the only fully fledged superpower since the former Soviet Union's fall. The disappearance of the Soviet Union's threat in the 1990s as the main reason for hushing up differences within the US-led Western Bloc has since allowed major disagreements between the EU and the US to surface over regional and international issues such as the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the US withdrawal from the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal with Iran. The ascension to the US presidency of Donald Trump, who has publicly referred to the EU as a "competitor" (Congressional Research Service 2018) and initiated a trade war with the EU since 2017 covering a range of items (e.g., steel and aluminum), has also disclosed trade and thus economic disagreements between the two Western powers, previously kept out of the public realm as much as possible.

Undoubtedly, the PRC, a rising superpower accused by the EU of unfair trade practices, has been, since the 1990s, another major factor in the EU integration, especially due to its expanding exports and global market share. The EU's unhappiness with this reality has manifested itself in many ways, including its major trade disputes with the PRC, which have negatively affected their ties. As a recent example, in June 2018, the EU initiated "legal proceedings against China before the World Trade Organization (WTO) ... over what it says is a violation of intellectual property laws" (DW 2018).

The rise of Asian economic, industrial, technological, and/or military powers (e.g., India; Iran; Japan; the Republic of Korea; and Taipei, China) with claims to regional, global, or superpower status has further helped the EU's expansion, integration, and continuity. To varying extents and in different forms and beginning at different points in time since the

1960s, these powers have challenged the EU membership's interests in various fields such as competing over the global markets (especially Japan; the Republic of Korea; and Taipei, China) and expanding their spheres of influence in the regions of strategic importance for the EU and the US. Iran is the obvious example of the latter, which has been under various types of EU sanctions since 1979. In short, certain factors and specific historical circumstances created the ground for and helped the development of the EU from an economic grouping of six European countries to its current status.

3. CURRENT STATUS

3.1 Evolution of the EU

The Cold War was certainly a major factor contributing to the formation, expansion, and transformation of the EU. It is now a regional grouping of the majority of the European countries with a significant degree of cohesion covering a wide range of sectors and activities as reflected in its having a governing structure that operates based on certain rules and regulations while seeking to act as a superpower. The Cold War provided a common cause, which was fighting Communism and thus preventing its proliferation primarily, but not exclusively, in Europe through uniting the European countries outside the Soviet Bloc against the common enemy, i.e., the Soviet Bloc. This common cause helped in the creation and development of the regional grouping by hiding various differences among its members in terms of economic, political, social, technological, and military capabilities and suppressing disagreements between and among them as unimportant, given the magnitude of the threat they were all facing. Their common objective kept them united and inclined to work together.

Similarly, the end of the Cold War made a major contribution to the regional grouping by removing the obstacles to its expansion and setting the ground for its evolution to a much more cohesive and stronger organization, while also removing the common ideological orientation of the grouping, which kept it united until 1991. Being itself eager to expand its territories, markets, and resources for their obvious benefits and also as a necessity for the superpower status to which it aspired, the EU, which, like the ex-Soviet Bloc European countries, was concerned about the re-emergence of the Russian Federation, assisted these desperate countries with their immediate problems, of course to a varying extent as justified by their importance to it. The EU also set a range of criteria (Copenhagen criteria) for their future membership, including "a free-market economy, a stable democracy and the rule of law, and the acceptance of all EU legislation, including of the euro" (European Union 2019g). Croatia joined in 2003, to be followed by the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004 and Romania in 2007 (European Union 2019h). Europe's remaining Western countries joined the EU prior to 1991 (Denmark, Ireland, and the UK in 1973, Greece in 1981, and Portugal and Spain in 1986) or after it (Finland and Sweden in 1995 and Cyprus and Malta in 2004) (European Union 2019h).

As a result, today the EU has united the overwhelming majority of European countries mainly under the leadership of its two heavyweights: France and Germany. Apart from Eurasian Russia, the only European countries outside the EU territories are Switzerland due to its neutrality status, the two Slavic republics of the ex-Soviet Union (Belarus and Ukraine) as well as its non-Slavic republic of Moldova, the remaining components of former Yugoslavia (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia), small European city states with no interest in joining the EU as tax havens (Monaco and San Marino), a religious center (Vatican City), and Albania. While Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Turkey are EU candidates, the remaining

three European countries (Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein) are members of the EU's internal market enjoying free trade with the EU membership (European Union 2019i). In short, the EU now accounts for the bulk of Europe in terms of land, population, resources, and economy.

3.2 Limited Power

Despite such impressive achievements, the EU picture is not all rosy. Without a doubt, the EU is now the single major actor in the European theater owing to its combined membership's economic and political strength, even though its military strength is dwarfed by that of the Russian Federation. It is also a player on the global scene, but without the clout and capability to act on its own as a superpower. In fact, it has been overshadowed by the US and has acted on many major issues along the lines set by Washington (e.g., sanctions on Iran, Syria, and Venezuela). Its various ongoing differences with the US, including over trade as manifested in the US imposing tariffs on its various products (especially steel and aluminum) and the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, reflect the limits of its power manifested in its members practically limiting their ties with Iran to diplomatic relations and very insignificant amounts of trade for fear of violating the US unilateral sanctions on Iran. Additionally, the EU is facing growing disunity that will undermine its achieved integration should its current divisions persist and expand. The main examples of this, as identified by various observers of EU development, include, but are not limited to, deepening divides between "the German-dominated 'core' and the southern 'periphery'," the "winners and the losers" of the euro, the "advocates of greater integration and the anti-Europeans," and "the technocrats and the populists" (Offe 2015).

3.3 Rise of Centrifugal Forces

Among the other factors detracting from the EU as a sustainable successful experience of regional cooperation, the one that stands out is the challenge from within the EU. This is by far the most dangerous threat to the EU's continuity as a united regional grouping capable of operating as such in the European and global theaters. This challenge has practically, but not officially, eroded to a significant extent the ability of the EU to lead and represent its entire membership in not only major global matters but also those of internal importance to its membership collectively.

This threat is severe enough to create grounds for assessing the EU's current state of unity in terms of declining from "a unified global power to a fractious confederation of states" (Soros 2014). In harsh terms, it reflects the reality of the EU, although it may sound exaggerated, given the EU's overall appearance as a solid and fully functional union. The threat from within has manifested itself in various forms, four of which in particular are serious enough to question the continuity of the EU as a united and integrated European grouping. These are Brexit, the EU heavyweights-led defiance of the EU policies, the growing defiance of the right wing-run EU countries of the EU rules and regulations, and the rise of New Europe.

Brexit

Brexit is the most obvious case due to its significance as one EU heavyweight that has decided to leave the regional grouping. This has been discussed by various scholars of European affairs, including Douglas Webber (2019) and Hans Vollaard (2018). However, its significance could be argued as being limited, short-lived, and of no long-term consequence for the EU's integration for a certain reason. Thus, Britain has always been considered a half-hearted EU member with its clearly demonstrated lack of any desire to

accept the EU's authority and reduce its power in favor of that of the EU in many major EU issues, such as refusing to join the eurozone and the Schengen Area. The latter is "an area without internal borders, an area within which citizens, many non-EU nationals, businesspeople, and tourists can freely circulate without being subjected to border checks. Since 1985, it has gradually grown and encompasses today almost all EU countries and a few associated non-EU countries" (European Union 2019i). Britain's lack of enthusiasm for the EU has been especially evident in its conduct of foreign policy. On many important occasions, it has sided with the US against the will of other EU members, particularly its heavyweights (France and Germany), as it did in the case of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 when it joined the US-led "coalition of the willing."

However, despite the validity of such an argument, Brexit is still a major blow to the EU. It shattered a taboo by revealing the feasibility of leaving the EU for its members as an option if they have second thoughts about the benefits and wisdom of EU membership and believe they can do better outside the regional grouping, as two prosperous European countries with no interest in joining the EU (Switzerland and Norway) have concluded. Consequently, Britain's decision to leave the EU could potentially have a domino effect on the dissatisfied EU countries, which have shown their unhappiness with Brussels on many occasions to be discussed shortly. Nevertheless, as stressed by Vollaard, while it is not likely to be followed by the other EU members, the UK's departure has undermined "from within" the regional grouping (Vollaard 2018).

The EU Heavyweights-led Defiance of EU Policies

Serving as another case, the so-called "EU heavyweights" have shown clear defiance of EU policies in major issues of importance to the regional grouping. Their defiance has shown their lack of recognition of the EU's authority and therefore its collective interests when their national interests are at stake. Moreover, such behavior has demonstrated their lack of interest in accepting the EU as a supranational entity and, therefore, in further integration of the union with the effect of empowering the EU leadership in Brussels to act as the government of all its members according to the collective interests of the union. Acts of defiance have reflected the fact that the EU members have nonnegotiable national interests. Consequently, the EU idea of a totally united Europe with one governing body is quite unlikely to become a reality despite the existence of large and growing executive, legislative, and judicial entities in Brussels.

A major recent example is Nord Stream 2, a Russian project aimed at doubling the Russian Federation's annual piped gas export capacity to the EU region from its current 55 billion cubic meters (bcm) through Nord Stream 1 via the Baltic Sea. In connecting the Russian Federation to Germany as the project's main stakeholder through which other Western and Northern EU countries receive Russian gas as well, the project mimics Nord Stream 1 (Nord Stream 2 2019a). Despite the EU policy of decreasing the EU region's dependency on Russian oil and gas for political and strategic considerations, five major energy companies from Austria, Britain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands (ENGIE, OMV, Royal Dutch Shell, Uniper, and Wintershall) joined the Russian Federation's Gazprom and signed the financing agreement for its construction in April 2017 (Nord Stream 2 2019b). Other EU countries, namely Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, have also joined the project by allowing the construction of the pipeline in their exclusive economic zone in the Baltic Sea.

Led by the heavyweight Germany as the largest consumer of the project's gas, the aforementioned EU members' participation in Nord Stream 2 was notwithstanding the EU energy policy, as repeated many times by its officials such as EU Commission spokesman Alexander Winterstein on 31 March 2017 when he unambiguously said: "In a nutshell, we don't like [the] Nord Stream 2 project" (Euro Observer 2017). The

President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, clearly stated the reason for the EU's opposition to the project in his June 2017 letter to European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker by saying that the project "goes against the aims of the European Union to reduce its energy dependency on Russia. The EU needed to insist on more control over the project" (err.ee 2017). Additionally, the opposition of eight EU members to the project, as clearly expressed in their joint official letter to Mr. Juncker in March 2016 signed by their prime ministers (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania) and the President of Lithuania, had no impact on its continuity (Reuters 2016). The resulting disunity in the EU following the EU heavyweights' activities has also been discussed by other scholars of EU affairs such as Claus Offe in the context of the EU's financial crisis as he refers to the increasing disunity in the form of deepening divides between the "German-dominated 'core' and the southern 'periphery'" (Offe 2015).

Growing Defiance of the Right Wing-run EU Countries of the EU Rules and Regulations

The growing defiance of the right wing-run EU countries of the EU rules and regulations is yet another case of centrifugal forces challenging the EU's continuity. The ascension to power of the right-wing and xenophobic political parties with clear right-wing policies in Austria, Italy, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland has been an alarming development for the EU, prompting warnings about their destructive impact on the EU (Soros and Schmitz 2014). Their governments have openly opposed and defied EU policies on some or all of the following areas, immigration, gender equality, freedom of media, rule of law, and independence of judiciary, with the effect of prompting the EU leadership to openly criticize them with practically no effect. Poland making efforts to totally ban abortion and all of them opposing the EU immigration policy are just two clear examples, as discussed extensively by many other scholars (e.g., Ehmsen and Scharenberg 2018; Greven 2016). Their open opposition to certain EU policies and their moving ahead with their own policies have surely reflected the emerging extremist nationalism in the EU countries in paving the way for potentially fascist and Nazi-like governments. The EU has long sought to prevent such a scenario by promoting its concept of a "common European identity" to ensure peace and stability in the EU region.

Rise of "New Europe"

Finally, the rise of "New Europe" is another blatant case. The term was used for the first time by US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq in reference to the EU countries that broke ranks with the rest of the EU countries led by France and Germany to join and support that invasion. They were mainly ex-Soviet Bloc countries (e.g., Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania) with strong pro-American foreign policy despite their stakes in the EU membership as major beneficiaries of EU-provided assistance in various forms, which helped them reorganize themselves as Western countries after decades of membership in the Soviet Bloc. The EU helped them survive the sudden collapse of the Soviet Bloc, which, while still quite harsh, especially economically, on the majority of their populations, was comparatively far less painful than the experience of the 15 ex-Soviet republics as newly independent states in the post-Soviet era, as discussed elsewhere by this author (Peimani 1998, 2002, 2009).

By and large, these countries have officially or practically taken sides with the US, as became obvious in their above-mentioned policy. Their activities in support of the US operation in Iraq and Afghanistan have continued to this day in areas that have not been approved, at least publicly, by the EU. Examples include their hosting of US secret camps

in countries such as Poland (Goldman 2014). Although they have not initiated any process for leaving the EU, their closeness to the US and willingness to break ranks with the EU in support of US policies have certainly served as indicators of EU weaknesses, which could pave the way for its weakening and potentially its disintegration.

4. DISINTEGRATION: A DISTINCT POSSIBILITY

The aforementioned cases suggest that disintegration of the EU is a distinct possibility. Based on the available information about the developments in the EU region, it cannot be stated with certainty as to how and when this possibility could become a reality. Within this framework, at least three scenarios are conceivable.

One scenario is disintegration as a result of a wave of leaving of a significant number of EU members. Brexit provides grounds for this scenario, even though the difficulty of reaching a mutually acceptable agreement for Britain and the EU for their future relations could be a discouraging factor for those EU members that could consider leaving the union. Nevertheless, while leaving the EU is not very likely, as pointed out by many scholars (e.g., Vollaard 2018), those EU countries dissatisfied with the direction of the EU could see leaving it as an option in the post-Brexit era, which was a taboo in the pre-Brexit era. As mentioned earlier, the emerging dissatisfaction in the form of clear defiance of EU policies, rules, and regulations by Austria, Italy, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland indicates that at least some EU members do not accept the EU leadership governing their countries and thus could see a merit in leaving the union should their current attitude towards the EU continue and deepen.

The growth of the existing extreme nationalist/right-wing and xenophobic groups in the EU region could also prompt disintegration. Various versions of such groups are already in power in Austria, Italy, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland while similar groups are gaining strength in other EU countries. France is a major example of this phenomenon where its populist, right-wing, and xenophobic National Rally (previously known as the “National Front”) poses a serious challenge to the country’s “mainstream” parties, as noted by other concerned researchers as well (Müller 2016). Having negative views about the EU over its perceived weakening of France’s sovereignty, its ascension to power could potentially prompt France’s exit from the EU, although this is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Yet the same political parties are mushrooming in other EU countries as a result of a decline in their living standards caused by their poor economic performance. Such situations usually give rise to and reinforce extreme nationalism and xenophobia to challenge the merits of EU membership, which erodes their state power by requiring them to operate within the EU rules and regulations and be accountable to it.

Finally, practical disintegration is a possible scenario. In this case, the growing nationalism in the EU countries could weaken the enthusiasm for the EU and discourage further integration into the membership at the expense of losing part of their national power and authority. Some EU countries could even reduce their EU commitments by pursuing their own policies and abiding by their own rules and regulations to a varying extent. In such cases, they could still see merits in membership of the EU as it enables them to have access to other EU members’ markets and facilitates the movement of their people within the EU zone, added to the EU’s collective power, which could help them preserve their interests once challenged by non-EU countries. Consequently, they might opt to stay in the EU and selectively follow its policies, rules, and regulations whenever they serve their national interests, while having a free hand at home. In this case, the EU

continues as a united grouping in appearance as a matter of convenience with much less power over its membership.

This is a distinct possibility and has also been discussed by other scholars in a slightly different form but based on the same assumption as follows. Cooperation among the European countries is necessary and thus will continue within a more realistic setting because of their economic interdependence, historical ties, and their need for political pragmatism. Jan Zielonka, for example, argues that the EU's survival is only possible as a qualitatively different organization deprived of many real powers (Zielonka 2014). Dismissing the notion of equating the EU with a Europe that will grow stronger as an integrated entity without a strong EU, and thereby rejecting the view that the EU is the only model for European cooperation, he argues about the EU's "evolution" into a different and more realistic entity corresponding with its membership's objectives (Zielonka 2014).

He elaborates on an evolutionary path for the EU's transformation from crisis to disintegration, reintegration, vision, and a new European entity (Zielonka 2014). Named "polyphony," his suggested appropriate organizational form is a flexible decentralized Europe with a hybrid governance model called "neo-medievalism," after rejecting the other suggested alternatives, including the United States of Europe, as "unpractical" and "undesirable" (Zielonka 2014).

5. ASEAN: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

ASEAN is the well-known Asian regional grouping whose history of foundation and the factors prompting it have been discussed extensively, including by Rodolfo C. Severino (Severino 2006). Yet briefly, on 8 August 1967, the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia (Adam Malik), Malaysia (Tun Abdul Razak), the Philippines (Narciso R. Ramos), Singapore (S. Rajaratnam), and Thailand (Thanat Khoman) signed a document in Thailand's Department of Foreign Affairs building in Bangkok to create the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Known as the "ASEAN Declaration," the document stipulated ASEAN's aims and purposes as being "cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical, educational, and other fields, and in the promotion of regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter" (ASEAN 2019a). The ASEAN Declaration left the door open for the participation of the other Southeast Asian countries "subscribing to its aims, principles, and purposes" (ASEAN 2019a).

What prompted its creation were efforts to settle disputes between and among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines conducted in Thailand to end disputes and hostilities among them. This motivation is similar to that of the EU but with major differences, such as the absence of major wars among the ASEAN countries. However, they received their fair share of war in the 1940s as their region was dragged into WWII only to become a major scene of fighting between Japan and mainly Britain and France as the region's two main colonial powers dragging mainland Southeast Asia, Malaya, Myanmar, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand into the bloody conflict. The division of Viet Nam into two countries taking sides with the two protagonists of the Cold War (US and the former Soviet Union) pulled Southeast Asia into the Cold War. The Viet Nam War, which then spilled over into its neighbors Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), pushed the region into a long and devastating conflict pitting the US and its allies against the former Soviet Union and the PRC supporting their respective allies.

Unlike the EU, the Southeast Asian countries, both the founding five and the remaining five (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam), which

joined ASEAN in the 1980s and 1990s, were and still are developing countries. Singapore is the only exception to the rule as it has since changed itself into a developed country. Similarly, the founding countries of ASEAN established a regional organization with clearly stated, wide-ranging aims and purposes unlike those of the EU, which started their regional organization initially with a limited and focused economic objective of gradually including many others as their organization evolved.

Yet, these differences aside, ASEAN was founded for, more or less, the same broad objectives that prompted the creation of the EU. Hence, it aimed to end historical hostilities among its region's countries and unite them over their common denominators to prevent the expansion of Communism while preserving the interests of its membership. While fighting Communism was not mentioned as an objective by its founding fathers, as was the case with the EU, it was certainly one of their common objectives given the growth of Communism in mainland Southeast Asia and the ongoing war between North Viet Nam and South Viet Nam. This reality created a fear among the regional countries concerned of a potential Communist takeover of their countries as their underdevelopment and low living standards created a fertile ground for a rapid expansion of Communism with its egalitarian claims among their dissatisfied populations. Hence, ASEAN's founding members, like their EU counterparts, considered the creation of a regional organization to be a necessity in order to achieve that objective. In short, the Cold War's division of the world helped create ASEAN as it did in the case of the EU. However, it was not the only factor as there were other strong ones stipulated in the Bangkok Declaration to reflect the aspiration of the ex-colonies of the European powers to address their underdevelopment, lift their people's living standards, and build strong, stable, and peaceful countries.

6. THE EVOLUTION OF ASEAN

Without a doubt, ASEAN has evolved significantly since its foundation in 1965. The grouping of the five Southeast Asian countries representing half of the regional countries has grown to include all of them. As discussed in detail by many scholars of ASEAN affairs (e.g., Jones 2004), this process has proven to be difficult for various reasons, including the subscription of three regional countries initially out of the regional grouping to opposing ideology (Communism) and their taking sides with the Eastern Bloc in the divided Cold War era's world when the founding states were firmly on the opposite side. Although the organization was supposed to promote unity and cooperation in Southeast Asia, two of its members (Thailand and the Philippines) actively took sides, including by contributing troops, with the US in its war with the three Communist countries of mainland Southeast Asia (Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Viet Nam) during the Viet Nam War, which spilled over into Cambodia and the Lao PDR, while Malaysia and Indonesia sought neutrality. Singapore firmly supported the American war efforts (e.g., by making its country available to off-duty American troops) without directly entering the conflict.

This above-mentioned reality kept Viet Nam, the Lao PDR, and Cambodia out of ASEAN to prevent the realization of the founding countries' vision for Southeast Asia for quite some time. Thus, the three mainland Southeast Asian countries joined the regional grouping after the end of the Cold War when the former Soviet Union, their main supplier and protector, was no longer around and the PRC, as the challenging Communist power to the former Soviet Union, was changing its posture with the ascension to power of Deng Xiao Ping in the post-Mao era. Having helped the three countries to varying degrees and at different points in time, it thus shifted its stance as a staunch Communist power challenging the West to a cooperative Communist country seeking normal and tension-

free relations with the West as a necessity for addressing its extensive underdevelopment and poor economic performance.

In the absence of willing supporters with means, the three mainland Southeast Asian Communist countries needed to broaden their horizon to survive economically and avoid military threats on their own through normalizing their ties with all the regional countries, including their Cold War era's foes. Consequently, Viet Nam, the Lao PDR, and Cambodia joined ASEAN, respectively, in 1995 (ASEAN 2007), 1997 (Gates and Than 2001), and 1999 (ASEAN 2008). The remaining two non-Communist regional countries, namely Brunei Darussalam and Myanmar, joined the regional grouping in 1984 (MFA 2018) and 1997 (Gates and Than 2001).

ASEAN has certainly achieved one of its main objectives by absorbing all 10 Southeast Asian countries with their various and opposite ideological orientations, albeit in a loose grouping (Ba 2009). Nonetheless, it is only one requirement, albeit a major one, for achieving the envisioned goal of the full integration of the regional countries. To this end and as another major requirement, ASEAN adopted a charter on 20 November 2007 in Singapore, which came to force on 15 December 2008 (ASEAN 2019b) with the objective of specifying goals and providing structures to achieve the full integration objective.

As stated by the regional grouping itself, the charter is meant to serve "as a firm foundation in achieving the ASEAN Community by providing legal status and institutional framework for ASEAN. It also codifies ASEAN norms, rules, and values; sets clear targets for ASEAN; and presents accountability and compliance" (ASEAN 2019c). ASEAN summarizes the importance of the charter towards the full integration objective as follows:

- New political commitment at the top level
- New and enhanced commitments
- New legal framework, legal personality
- New ASEAN bodies
- Two new openly recruited DSGs
- More ASEAN meetings
- More roles for ASEAN foreign ministers
- New and enhanced role of the Secretary-General of ASEAN
- Other new initiatives and changes (ASEAN 2019c)

The charter sets out 15 purposes for ASEAN (ASEAN 2019c) amounting to the full integration of its region and the practical creation of a united states of Southeast Asia, although the charter itself does not spell it out in such words. Yet, this is their essence as these purposes cover all the conceivable requirements for such objectives, including maintaining and enhancing peace, security, and stability in Southeast Asia, creating a single market and production base for the region, alleviating poverty, strengthening democracy, enhancing good governance and rule of law, responding effectively in accordance with the principle of comprehensive security to all forms of threats, and promoting an ASEAN identity.

Serving as a summary of what is expected to be achieved through these purposes, Purpose 15 implies that the result of these purposes should be a united Southeast Asia acting as a single unit representing and preserving the interests of all its 10 forming countries as follows:

To maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive (ASEAN 2019c, 5).

The charter also sets two principles. They cover a series of rules of conduct to ensure the achievement of the 15 purposes and provide for a peaceful region where its forming members operate with full respect for each other's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity as stipulated in Principle 2's 14 codes of conduct (ASEAN 2019c, 5–7).

The charter also provides for a governing body. It consists of various entities as follows: the ASEAN Summit (twice yearly summit of the ASEAN heads of states), functioning as the ASEAN supreme decision-making and policymaking body (ASEAN 2019c, 10–11); the ASEAN Coordinating Council, consisting of its foreign ministers with a range of duties, including coordinating the “implementation of agreements and decisions” (ASEAN 2019c, 11); and ASEAN Community Councils, consisting of three councils in charge of ASEAN's full integration by covering the major areas of its activities, i.e., ASEAN Political-Security Community Council, ASEAN Economic Community Council, and ASEAN Sociocultural Community Council (ASEAN 2019c, 12–13).

Finally, the charter provides for many other bodies, including ASEAN Sectoral Ministerial Bodies and ASEAN Secretariat (ASEAN 2019c, 12–13). They are meant to ensure the proper operation of the regional organization in all major sectors and full cooperation of its member states in preserving and promoting the regional interests and in ensuring its peace, stability, and security.

7. CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Without a doubt, ASEAN was more integrated and cohesive in 2019 than it was in its early days, although with many challenges as discussed, especially with respect to economic, trade, and regional development issues (Kobayashi et al. 2017; Chia and Plummer. 2015). As mentioned above, it has various structures to enable its member states to work more closely in political, economic, security, and social realms. ASEAN is now a better-organized regional grouping whose members act together on specific issues (e.g., fighting piracy), but, by and large, not on all the major issues of significance to their region based on well-defined, regional-wide rules and regulations. That is why its members act in accordance with their national interests on many such issues and, therefore, practically take sides with, or at least tolerate the behaviors of, other states towards their fellow ASEAN ones. This reality constitutes a major shortcoming and, in fact, a problem for the regional organization, which intends to act as a united regional grouping. Given this objective, its 10 members are expected to act in concert and pursue their national interest, while taking into consideration the common interest of all the regional countries. Thus, they should refrain from acting in a manner that could undermine the interests of other ASEAN members.

A blatant example in this regard is the water/island-related territorial disputes in Southeast Asia where the majority of the ASEAN members have refused to clearly take sides with their two fellow members, the Philippines and Viet Nam, in their disputes with the PRC, as discussed by many concerned scholars such as John Harvey Divino Gamas (Gamas 2014). Consequently, the ASEAN leaders attending the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting under the Cambodian chairmanship in July 2012 failed to issue a joint communiqué at the end of the meeting, which was unprecedented. Reportedly, that was the result of Cambodia's refusal to “cater for Manila's demands that the statement

concerning [the territorial] disputes ... should mention its standoff with China at Scarborough Shoal” (Pradham 2012). The vested interest of the majority of the ASEAN members in ties, especially economic ones, with the PRC has inclined them to keep themselves out of those disputes.

Such attitude exists although these members consider the ASEAN, not just an alliance of individual states, but a “community,” which implies a group of states with close ties and common objectives in important issues heading towards full integration. Hence, all its members should account in concert and support their individual interests challenged by non-member states. The *Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together* officially proclaimed ASEAN a “community,” and was signed by the ASEAN leaders during their 27th ASEAN Summit on 22 November 2015 (ASEAN 2015). The document called the ASEAN community to “work towards building a community that is politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible” (ASEAN 2015).

ASEAN’s weak integration and the absence of cohesion form a major problem challenging its long-term survival as a meaningful regional grouping of the Southeast Asian countries. These weaknesses are demonstrated in the existence of many sources of conflict within the community. There are a number of unresolved territorial claims with the potential for escalation into armed conflicts. In fact, against a historical legacy of mistrust and hostility, such claims led to a brief military conflict between Thailand and Cambodia in 2011 over the ownership of Preah Vihear Temple in their border areas. Reportedly, the worsening relations between the two ASEAN neighbors over the issue between 2008 and 2011 finally led to a major outbreak of fighting, “most seriously over several days in February and April 2011, causing many casualties, destroying houses, and sending tens of thousands of people living near the combat zones into evacuation centers” (Ngoun 2012). Indicating the weakness of ASEAN as a regional authority accepted by the regional states, the Thai military declined the intervention of ASEAN to settle the conflict when Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen sought ASEAN’s assistance after his bilateral talks with the Thai government failed to settle the issue, before proceeding to the UN Security Council in February 2011 as the situation degenerated further. The UN body allowed Indonesia, as the rotational chair of ASEAN at that time, to “mediate the dispute. Consequently, Indonesia was expected to send 30 unarmed observers to the disputed border area. While both governments agreed to the plan, the Thai military defiantly opposed any such deployment, claiming it could threaten Thai security” (Ngoun 2012). Examples of other territorial disputes include that between Malaysia and Singapore over the sovereignty of the Pedra Branca islands, which the International Court of Justice ruled to be part of Singapore in 2018 (National Library Board 2018). Unless ASEAN encourages and facilitates the settlement of all the territorial disputes, their continuation, even if they do not lead to armed conflicts, will surely help discourage and, logically, damage their cooperation, while encouraging disunity. Needless to say, such a scenario would further weaken ASEAN as a union of the Southeast Asian countries.

Furthermore, there is a high degree of mistrust and/or animosity in various forms among the ASEAN countries. This reality has delayed many joint programs between neighboring Malaysia and Singapore, for example. In fact, the two countries have disputed over a range of issues, such as Malaysia’s supplied water to Singapore, the connecting bridges between the two countries, a proposed high-speed rail link between the two countries, control over airspace in a neighboring area, and the ownership of the above- mentioned islands. These disputes have haunted the two neighbors for decades passing through the periods of escalations and de-escalations. Some of them have re-emerged since the reascension of Mahathir Mohamad to Malaysia’s prime ministership late in 2018 as

reflected in their disagreements on their connecting bridges over the Johor Strait, the price of Malaysian water exported to Singapore, and the construction of the high-speed Singapore–Kuala Lumpur train, for instance (Koutsouki and Shukry 2018).

Mistrust and animosity are not confined to these two ASEAN countries as a high degree of such feelings has existed between Cambodia and Viet Nam for centuries due to what the Cambodians describe as Viet Nam's hegemonic attitude towards their country (Greer 2017). In the contemporary era, Viet Nam's December 1978 invasion of Cambodia to remove its Khmer Rouge government and its decade-long occupation of that country rekindled these negative feelings. While the two neighbors are not currently involved in active hostilities, such feelings still persist and affect their bilateral relations, especially because Cambodia's close ties with the PRC, with whom Viet Nam has historical animosity, have now worsened due to their ownership disputes over parts of their adjacent waters. In short, the existing mistrust and suspicion in the bilateral relations of the ASEAN countries are yet another problem for ASEAN, which will continue in the foreseeable future in the absence of any regional effort to address them.

The weaknesses of ASEAN are also evident in its inability to realize major ASEAN-wide projects. A major example in this regard is the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline (TAGP), which is aimed at interconnecting the existing and planned gas pipeline infrastructure within the ASEAN region for transporting gas across borders to ensure greater security of gas supply for the ASEAN countries. It is yet to become a reality about 18 years after its emergence during the 20th AMEM (ASEAN Ministers on Energy Meeting) on 5 July 2002 in Bali, Indonesia when the participating ministers signed the ASEAN MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) on the TAGP project. As reported by the ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE), the MoU sets out the "cooperative framework for greater public-private partnership and collaboration in the implementation of the TAGP. Under the TAGP MoU, ASEAN countries should study the regulatory and institutional frameworks for cross-border supply, transportation, and distribution of natural gas in the region involving multilateral countries" (ACE 2019). The idea of connecting all the bilateral gas pipelines to make a region-wide pipeline network is yet to be realized as the project has remained at the bilateral interconnecting pipelines between the ASEAN gas suppliers and consumers as stated by ASCOPE (ASEAN Council on Petroleum), which is the ASEAN entity responsible for the effective implementation of the TAGP project. According to ASCOPE, as of 2019, while the TAGP's "ultimate aim is to have multilateral pipeline projects," the 13 operational connections are bilateral in nature, with pipelines linking Singapore–Malaysia, Myanmar–Thailand, West Natuna–Singapore, West Natuna–Duyong, South Sumatra–Singapore, Malaysia–Thailand, and Singapore–Malaysia (ASCOPE 2019). It is not yet clear when the pipeline project will be fully realized.

A lack of unity in practice has been apparent in the case of territorial disputes. Several ASEAN countries (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Viet Nam, and the Philippines) have been engaged in disputes between and among themselves as well as with the PRC and Taipei, China geared to sovereignty over certain islands and their territorial waters and resources, in particular the Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, and Scarborough Shoal. On occasions, these disputes have escalated into low-intensity military conflicts in the case of the Philippines and Viet Nam pitting them against the PRC. Examples include a limited naval clash between the PRC and Viet Nam on 7 May 2014 over the PRC's setting up of an oil rig in a disputed area south of the Paracel Archipelago during which a Chinese coast guard vessel used its water cannon against a Vietnamese ship in an attempt to prevent the oil rig from being set up (Stout 2014). Yet, the ASEAN countries have refused to take sides and defend Viet Nam, for instance,

facing territorial disputes with the PRC as became evident in 2012 when the ASEAN leaders failed to issue a communiqué over their disagreements on this issue, as mentioned earlier. This refusal was repeated in July 2016 when the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in the Lao PDR failed to accept the request of the Philippines and Viet Nam to include in their communiqué the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favor of the Philippines on its territorial disputes with the PRC because of Cambodia's opposition (Mogato, Martina, and Blanchard 2016). Although seven ASEAN countries are not involved in these territorial disputes, the continuation of these disputes is a problem for all 12 ASEAN members as such disputes undermine the unity of the regional organizations and weaken their ability to function as a meaningful regional organization to preserve the interests of all its members. In the absence of any realistic prospect for their resolution in the foreseeable future, they will likely get worse, especially because of the growing involvement of the US in the regional territorial disputes in favor of Viet Nam and the Philippines and its expanding military presence in the region despite the growing opposition of the PRC. This negative trend will pose a major challenge to the unity of ASEAN by expanding the existing mistrust among its members. It also has the potential to break the regional organization into opposing blocs over the disputes themselves as well as for its members to take sides with the PRC or the US in this respect.

In short, when it comes to integration, ASEAN is certainly way behind the EU. Integration demands a high degree of cohesiveness requiring a sense of common interests and trust, which are still too weak in the case of ASEAN. Given that the EU, with its far greater degree of integration, faces disintegration as a clear possibility, disintegration is certainly a conceivable possibility for ASEAN, which is far behind the EU in terms of integration.

This development could take different shapes depending on how ASEAN evolves. The possible scenarios include the following two. Leaving the regional grouping is a distinct possibility, especially for countries such as the Philippines and Viet Nam, which face the challenges of the rising superpower, the PRC, without receiving any support from ASEAN. Against a background of the growing US presence in the Asia and the Pacific region, their expanding ties with the US, including in the military/security fields, hint at their realizing ASEAN's inability to protect them against the PRC over their mentioned disputes and hence the merits of their bilateral alliance with the US for such a purpose. Should this trend continue, ASEAN will gradually lose its importance for them and prompt their departure from the regional grouping.

Another scenario is the continuation of ASEAN as a loose coalition of the regional countries. It is basically the current reality as reflected in the regional grouping's aforementioned lack of cohesion. Accordingly, ASEAN members will see merits in remaining in ASEAN for whatever it can offer them while focusing on their bilateral relations with ASEAN and especially non-ASEAN countries for their needs, which cannot be secured within the context of ASEAN.

8. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Europe and Southeast Asia are very different in many respects, including their geographical specifications and histories. They have also gone through different political, economic, and military/security experiences since the 20th century with major impacts on shaping their societies. Yet, Europe and Southeast Asia have both created regional organizations in their respective territories with ambitious plans going far beyond the creation of simple regional groupings. Apart from helping to expand ties and cooperation among their members, they have both set the objective of regional integration for their

respective regions with the ultimate goal of acting as united groups on the regional and global stages.

Today, the EU is without doubt more integrated than ASEAN, even though it is still far from being its founders' envisioned fully functional, supranational state operating as a superpower in global affairs. In fact, it operates more as an umbrella organization of its now (in the post-Brexit era) 27 European countries enjoying close political, economic, security, and social ties, free movement of their nationals, and free trade, while maintaining their sovereignty and pursuing their individual national interests in their conduct of foreign relations. Hence, the EU speaks for them only in certain areas of common interest, not all. In comparison, ASEAN is far behind the EU in terms of structural cohesion and integration and yet to achieve its desired degree of political, economic, security, and social closeness, although there is a varying degree of cooperation among its members in these areas. Certainly, it is yet to speak for its 10 members on any issue of significance.

Against this background, if the EU still contains seeds of disintegration despite about seven decades of efforts to the contrary, ASEAN cannot be immune to this phenomenon. Given the existence of major sources of conflicts and disputes and the history of mistrust between and among its members, disintegration is a distinct possibility for ASEAN, but it is not an inevitability at all. In fact, as a major developing region with many underutilized resources, its membership can and will have an advanced and prosperous future should they overcome their disagreements and fully utilize their vast resources in a coordinated manner within the framework of their regional organization, while preserving their identities and interests.

Removing the sources of disintegration will not be an easy task to fulfill in a short period of time, given the existence of a long history of mistrust in some cases and the complicated nature of some of the disputes, such as the mentioned territorial ones, also claimed by non-ASEAN regional powers. However, ASEAN can certainly take the initiative to prepare the ground for encouraging further cooperation among its members as a prelude to settling their disputes, which is a necessity for their sustainable economic and social development and prosperity. To this end, a feasible recommendation of practical use for all ASEAN members is an ASEAN-led initiative for a negotiated code of conduct to be used in conducting their foreign relations. Such a code could help them avoid suspicion and further strengthening of historical mistrust in the region while expanding their ties with the regional and nonregional powers, especially the PRC and the US. This is a necessary measure as continuation of their current pattern of foreign relations will likely lead to a regional polarization pitting the ASEAN members against each other as a result of their existing pattern of relations with the two aforementioned powers.

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