

# The EU story: Can it offer inspiration for SAARC?



DR. SIEGFRIED O. WOLF



DJAN SAUERBORN

EU and SAARC have both reached a pivotal point in time. Which path will these supranational entities take? Will they overcome international crisis, national disharmony and economic uncertainty or will they slowly but steadily disintegrate and fall back into the logic of fragmented national interests and conflict? Until recently, it was common sense that Europe was the area with the strongest dynamics of regionalism, the world's spearhead for political and economic integration. But today it seems that the architecture of the European Union is increasingly being challenged; internally as well as externally. One major area of concern is the lack of effective fiscal/budget management instruments in the presence of a common currency. Furthermore enlargement has outpaced the processes and institutions for decision-making, only slowly adapting and contesting the consensus principle. Besides the growth of a remarkable global and cosmopolitan perspective among the Europeans, there is a return of a presumably ousted notion of nationalism; a phenomenon which is accompanied by a strong sense of Euroscepticism. The tensions between Northern and Southern entities are obvious, finding their expression in mutual accusations and misperceptions regarding economic performance and attitudes towards necessary socio-political reforms. Having this in mind, several commentators are allured to portray the EU as a political artefact. Especially in South Asia some claims are made that the EU has lost its attractiveness to serve as a

model for the South Asian Cooperation for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). However, proponents of this standpoint ignore two essential facts. First, with the financial turmoil the EU is doubtless facing one of its most serious challenges ever. The fact that the EU was able to agree on and

regarding European success in (regional) integration. The vision of a common political and economic future turned former arch enemies, France and Germany, into strong allies. Furthermore, their relationship is seen today as the engine of regionalism in Europe, transforming the continent into a

of national sovereignty. The subsequent increase in trust and transparency of state behaviour helped to bridge the traditional political and economic disunity. Having this in mind, one has to understand that regional integration is not a linear process; it is an evolutionary path marked by up and

condemnation of the Lisbon Treaty contested the resilience of the EU.

The EU project did not however succumb to these stepping stones. The EU is more than just an economic endeavour; it is a value in itself, and not just an artificial, supranational political institution. Compared to Europe's story of integration, South Asia has made little progress towards cohesive, purposeful action neither in the direction of security and welfare nor towards a normative foundation. In principle, there is an awareness of the necessity for political rapprochement and economic integration. But significant parts of the political establishment still lack the determination towards the consequent implementation of common policies which are to work towards regional stability, peace and prosperity. Of course one might argue that the success of the EU is based on the experience and the political, social and economic consequences of two world wars. The discrepancy between the South Asian context and the EU seems obvious. It is quite naive to think that the European model could be neatly packed and sent overseas and become absorbed by South Asia's policy circles. Additionally, the current state of play within the EU's institutional framework shows the limitation of multilateral negotiations and that state politics still matter. The fact that the members of the EU were not able to agree on a common offer to compete for India's biggest aviation arms deal in history and instead built up two camps – one lobbying for the 'Rafale', the other for the 'Eurofighter' -- shows the reality

of national interests in supranational entities. Same can be said regarding intra-European disputes over the magnitude of sanctions on Syria or its engagement in Libya, especially Germany's solo national effort regarding the dismissal of military intervention.

Besides all scepticism regarding the performance of the EU, the decisive transition of Europe towards peace, democracy and prosperity remains a remarkable achievement and is heavily contrasted by SAARC's inability to go beyond the rhetoric of regional cooperation. Being a body, which can mostly only agree to disagree, the SAARC resembles a 'toothless tiger' more than anything else. This can only partly be traced back to underdevelopment, political instability, a trust deficit, and lack in social cohesion. Bilateral power relations within the region and varying visions for SAARC further complicate a potential success story. However, despite turbulent processes of democratization in South Asia, the permanent growth of vibrant civil societies capable of overthrowing numerous authoritarian regimes in the region is remarkable. The history of Europe shows that the strengthening of democracy and fundamental values such as the protection of human rights and gender equality can help to influence the elites understanding of sovereignty in order to delegate parts of national power. Looking at SAARC, most of its member states should have an incentive to join hands in order to deepen economic cooperation. Nevertheless they are either unwilling or afraid of pooling

and sharing sovereignty, at least in the near future. In this context, the EU has a valuable lesson to offer. Even disastrous conflicts can be turned into fruitful cooperation as Post-World War II Europe has shown.

A slow but steady 'evolutionary process' taking the sensitivity towards national sovereignty into account seems like a more realistic scenario for SAARC. We must not forget that SAARC was only founded in 1985. Observers often refer to the seemingly unsolvable and rogue Indo-Pak relations as the main impediment towards regional integration in SAARC. Regions outside South Asia such as ASEAN in South East Asia have however demonstrated that conflict does not preclude cooperation.

Cambodia and Thailand, both members of ASEAN, have pledged to boost trade amid border conflicts and confrontations near the temple of Preah Vihear, a World heritage site. One can only hope that India and Pakistan overcome animosity and use their enormous potential to breathe life into SAARC.

**Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf is a lecturer of Political Science and International Relations as well as a senior research fellow in the Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University. Additionally he is director of research, South Asia Democratic Forum, a Brussels based think tank.**

**Djan Sauerborn is a research assistant at the Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University and South Asia Democratic Forum, Brussels.**



sign a much needed fiscal pact proves that collective decision-making is still well alive in the EU. Second, overtly critical commentators tend to ignore the vast achievements

zone of peace. Essential for this process was an exceptional combination of co-operation, co-ordination and supranational integration by a 'coalition of willing elites' to transfer parts

downs. Several setbacks like the rejection of the Euro by Denmark in the year 2000 and a successful Anti-Europe campaign in Ireland in 2008 which led to an electoral

**ESPECIALLY**  
IN SOUTH ASIA SOME  
CLAIMS ARE MADE  
THAT THE EU  
HAS LOST ITS  
ATTRACTIVENESS TO  
SERVE AS A MODEL  
FOR THE SOUTH  
ASIAN COOPERATION  
FOR REGIONAL  
COOPERATION