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Multi-State Groupings Shaping the Global Scene: Case Study of European Union and Bangladesh

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Introduction

This paper examines how evolving multi-state groupings such as the European Union are likely to shape international relations of the future. In doing so it analyses relations between one such grouping, the EU, and a state-actor, Bangladesh in South Asia, eventually extrapolating some more-generally applicable conclusions.

Europe's relations with South Asia are undergoing a process of renewal. They date back very far, when Alexander the Great in 323BC knocked at the doors of India and established the Bactrian kingdoms in today's Afghanistan and Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa in Pakistan. Two thousand years later the Europeans returned as traders. Their flags followed their trade. Lord Clive's victory at Plassey through a combination of dare and deceit over Nawab Sirajuddowla of Bengal began a period of British imperial rule that ended when India (and Pakistan) made their 'tryst with destiny', in Nehru's words in August 1947. It had left a mixed taste in the mouth. However, connections continued.

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The British period witnessed a dichotomisation of Bengal. One half joined Pakistan in 1947 and morphed into an independent Bangladesh in 1971. There was a strange sense of mutual abandonment when in 1964 the British joined the European Union. The subsequent British withdrawal from 'East of Suez' had sentimental and emotional implications for both sides. South Asians, used to British-German rivalry, started to view their new-found linkages with a modicum of puzzlement. International relations had evolved. South Asian nations were now having to deal with this new avatar called the European Union. This paper includes the study of how this phenomenon is developing vis-a-vis the sovereign segment of the old Bengal, Bangladesh.

From Nation-States to Union in Europe

We all know that the modern nation-state was the product of the Treaty of Westphalia in Germany in Europe in 1648. It came at the end of the disastrous 30-year religious war that nearly decimated half of Europe's population. It took two more wars in the 20th century for man to pause and ponder over the state system and give it a rethink. In Europe a theory of international relations developed during the inter-war years known as 'functionalism'. It saw merit in integration among states on the basis of common interests in limited economic and technical areas and issues. This was more mundane and realistic than the idealism of the philosopher, Emmanuel Kant, or even the statesman, Woodrow Wilson. 'Functionalism' transformed into 'neo-functionalism' when it was realised that territories were still important. Mention must be made in this regard of my own teacher and father of the so-called English School in International Relations, Hedley Bull. He makes this point in his seminal work *The Anarchical Society*. The principal intellectual proponents of 'neo-functionalism' were David Mitrany and Ernst Haas. They saw the integration of individual sectors as furthering the process involving states leading to regionalisation. They were the theoretical gurus of the practitioners of European integration such as Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Paul Henri-Spaak, and Alcide de Gaspari. Those (including this author) who were involved with crafting the initial documents of South Asia's regional body, SAARC, were also inspired by the 'neo-functionalist' thought-leaders.

The current-day European Union can be traced back to the European Coal and Steel Community formed by six countries in 1951 and the European Economic Community set up by the Treaty of Rome in 1958. The Maastricht Treaty established the European Union in 1993, and finally the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 gave it its present incredibly complex shape and character. The number of members swelled to 27 with a growing queue of aspirants. It has its own Parliament, a cabinet called the Council, a huge bureaucracy called the Commission, its own Foreign Service, Court and Central Bank. Its total population is over 500 million, or 7.3 per cent of that of the world, has a GDP of US\$ 17.6 trillion which is over 20 per cent of that of the globe. It is a single market, within its Shengen Areas there are no passport controls, it enacts common legislation on

an increasing list of subjects, and it has a monetary union called the Euro-zone (17 countries), as those of us who follow the current Euro-zone economic crisis are well aware. The sad experience of Greece, Spain and Italy has resulted in the debate as to whether such Union was structurally dysfunctional to begin with. Europe's problems have ramification for other regions. For instance India's economic challenges today such as the decline of its growth rate to 5.3 per cent can be traced to the recessionary situation in southern Europe. In today's interconnected world, doubtless when Europe catches cold, a region as distant as South Asia sneezes!

The EU does not have a common military but most members are party to NATO. It has a High Representative for foreign policy or a foreign Minister in Catherine Ashton, but whose influence on global politics has so far been largely unremarkable. That is because while they seek to speak on foreign policy in one voice, they are not always able to. A case in point is Iraq where the UK, on the one hand, and France and Germany, on the other, assumed different postures. Where they speak with one voice is on Trade, that is why only the European Commission speaks for the EU in the WTO, but most members retain their Ambassadors to that organisation who try and protect individual country interests in the corridors, while maintaining their quiet in the chamber. The European Union is not just a model for other regions to emulate, but also a school for them to draw lessons from. This also applies to ASEAN looking to its own union in 2015. The principal lesson is that union for its own sake, the desire arising out of idealism or emotion, without adequately addressing potential disequilibria, can create more problems than provide solutions. Where the EU believes they are strong on is their soft-power, emanating from, as they claim, their European values. These are an amalgam of Europe's rich intellectual and societal history, both revolutionary and evolutionary. It is through this that it engages with much of the developing world. This phenomenon covers Bangladesh as well. For Bangladesh, this was a re-engagement with Europe, taking place at a different time in history, also different in substance and content from the earlier interface between Bengal and Britain in the eighteenth century.

EU-Bangladesh Engagement

The relations between the EU and Bangladesh are grounded in three major documents, that are dated 1973, 1976 and 2001. The last was the most substantial one that included political dialogue. In 2007 the EU drafted its Country Strategy Paper that covered the period till 2013. It identified the following as key challenges confronting Bangladesh:

A continued struggle in addressing the structural problems of poverty and to achieve the (UN) Millennium Development Goals by the target date of 2015.

Good governance problems that affect the efficient and effective delivery of the basic public services to the poor.

Potential economic and political shortfalls following the ending of the WTO textile quota system and the need to diversify the industrial base and to improve the enabling environment for business.

It is noteworthy that the document was prepared acknowledging Bangladesh's own response to the challenges contained in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper crafted in November 2005.

The EU determined that its impact would be maximised and there would be more effective use of resources if development commitments were concentrated on three focal areas (Human and social development, Good Governance and human rights, and Economic and trade development) and two non-focal areas (Environment and disaster management, and Food security and nutrition).

The EU's decision to provide unimpeded market access through EBA or the policy of 'Everything but Arms' has been a great boon for Bangladesh's garment exports. Along with America's, the European market turned Bangladesh's garment industry into the locomotive of economic growth of that country, helping poise it on the threshold of being perceived as another emerging Asian economy, which takes full advantage of the preferential trading system. The EU is currently the destination of 48 per cent of Bangladesh's total exports. As for foreign aid over the next three years, the EU will provide Bangladesh with US\$ 413-million for support to health, education, food security and rural development sectors. This is part of the plan to assist Bangladesh achieve by 2015 the MDGs set by the UN. While many western and developed countries are critical of the EU's policy of agricultural subsidy, ironically it renders grain cheaper for net food-importer like Bangladesh. In the setting up of Bangladesh's National Human Rights Commission, European support has been invaluable. As also, in the election process in 2008. Having been a member of the government through this period, the author would like to underscore the critical nature of his relationship with Ashton's predecessor, Austria's Benita Ferrero.

The European Consensus

The EU's development policy, applicable not just vis-à-vis Bangladesh, generally flowed from what has been called 'the European Consensus'. It was adopted by the European Parliament in December 2005. For the very first time it provided for a common vision guiding both the member-states individually and the Union collectively. The foremost objective of the EU's development policy, it was agreed, would be the eradication of poverty in the context of sustainable development, including the pursuit of MDGs. Several other elements, in line with

standards norms and values, as broadly perceived, of the European ethos were to be emphasised. These included respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, peace, democracy, good governance, gender equality, the rule of law, solidarity and justice, and commitment to effective multilateralism.

The EU was also at pains to demonstrate that its own values were consistent with global ones. For instance the document for Bangladesh stressed the importance of strengthening the social dimension of globalisation and of promoting productive employment and decent work opportunities. In order to do so it cited in full the relevant article of the ‘Outcome Document’ of the UN Summit of world leaders held in 2005. In it the member-states committed themselves to “strongly support fair globalisation and resolve to make the goals of full and productive employment and decent work for all, including for women and young people, a central objective of our national and international policies as well as our national development strategies, including poverty reduction strategies, as part of our efforts to win the MDGs”.

Some Pertinent Criticisms

There are many criticisms of the EU as well: First, the one being the firmly held view that their values are universal. Sometimes this is not an easy sell to partners, particularly in parts of Asia. Asia at times stresses its own values that flow from a mixture of Confucianism and other Asian spiritual traits that have underscored hard work, family and company loyalty and moral high grounds that many also see as principal determinants behinds Asia’s recent economic successes.

Second is the EU’s inability to put its own economic house in order. The Euro-Zone crisis and the problems confronting Greece, Italy and Spain in particular at the present time have brought little credit to the EU. In fact it has encouraged some ‘decoupling proponents’ in Asia, who argue that greater safety may lie in restricting exposure to Europe.

Third, is the fact that despite a very sophisticated development cooperation strategy, the EU is seen as a lightweight political player. It has not been successful in projecting itself as a serious diplomatic protagonist on the international scene, the treaty of Lisbon notwithstanding. Other nation-states, including the partner examined at some greater length here, Bangladesh, still prefer to deal with individual European States such as the UK, France, Sweden, or Germany. The Brussels-based EU leadership has not yet been able to leave a decisive footprint on the rest of the world as those residing in London, Paris, Stockholm or Berlin have.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, the EU remains a fountainhead of novel ideas. One of them is ‘Weltinnenpolitik’. This refers to global domestic politics. It is attributed to the German statesman Karl von Weizacker. With States eroding, he emphasises the intramural politics within nation-states, among non-state actors and NGOs. Are they not better suited to respond to contemporary challenges of poverty, disease and environment? This might mean today’s existing State-system is faced with two kinds of challenges; one, the thrust towards regionalisation on the one hand, and on the other, the pull of consolidation of internal communities.

So, for now the EU remains an important entity in the global scene despite the above mentioned shortcomings. Slowly a European identity is emerging. While its engagement with Asia is still concentrated on development cooperation, as the relations with Bangladesh demonstrate, Asia, on the rise, is also beginning to acquire certain commonalities, working through its own groupings such as SAARC and ASEAN. Eventually there will be three main supra-states in the world: Europe, America and Asia. This trilateral arrangement will call the shots on the global matrix. But the struggle of each to attain the goals of a common identity will take some more decades yet, and till then international relations will largely comprise inter-state interactions.

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