

Interview: Can economic integration improve strained relations in Southeast Asia as it once did in Europe?

Marek Vojtěch, Adéla Genserová; December 3, 2015

European integration process opened the way to an unprecedented rapprochement of the European states. Probability of conflicts among the countries was reduced thanks to mutual cooperation. Can we apply this experience in Southeast Asia, too? We are learning from the European integration, but transfer of this kind of knowledge is difficult, says Cho-Hsin Su, security expert from Taiwanese National Chengchi University in interview for natoaktual.cz.



Better times ahead

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in the 60's, but only last week its members agreed on founding a formal partnership aimed at increasing regional free trade and capital flow. Complicated relations among countries in the region, China and Taiwan being the best example, have hindered the integration process so far. However, November saw a breakthrough in this regard: presidents of China and Taiwan met for the first time since the end of the Chinese civil war. Although their meeting in Singapore was more of a symbolic meaning, it can help to improve the situation in the region. Natoaktual.cz asked Cho-Hsin Su, security expert from Taiwanese National Chengchi University, about the current situation.

European Integration Process: Is it transferable to Asia?

natoaktual.cz: Are there any particular traits of European integration you believe would be transferable or even should be used in East Asia integration?

ASEAN vs. EU

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Cho-Hsin Su: I think that East Asian political leaders are learning a lot from the European experience, especially in the institution building. Especially the ASEAN. But I don't see very established traits of regional building in East Asia, which would be similar to European region building. For now I don't really think there are traits of European experience that is 100% or that can be implemented in the East Asia region, because it's just too different.

In terms of integration, are there any similarities between ASEAN and EU?

ASEAN constantly sends research groups to Europe to learn how they build up their institutional system (the Council, the Commission), how they deal with the common regional issues, etc. Although ASEAN has a structure similar to EU, the integration level is much lesser than the European model. Maybe in the financial sector, but East Asia is not at all close to how Europeans function in the financial integration.

If we take a look at regional defence cooperation, do you think there is a potential that an organisation similar to NATO could work in East Asian region?

I have to be very pessimistic about this, it's idealistic. When there is no trust, there is no need either. Our region is very complex as it is, plus the USA want to have a foot print in this region too, which complicates things even more. The NATO was built just right after the war, when the Soviet Union was an enemy. In East Asia, the risk comes from each other. Japan doesn't even have an army, they want to have and Prime Minister Abe is really trying to push forward this idea, but technically, they cannot have an army. So the idea is just not possible I think.

Are the relations among nations in the region so reserved indeed?

The East Asian countries try hard to interact in a civilised way, but internally, there are these huge negative feelings, towards the history, towards the future and the territorial disputes are constantly going up, all the time. The animosity between the countries is just so huge you cannot imagine.

Can we compare the animosity among nations to the situation in early European integration process? There was an idea that if you bond the nations economically, they will be less motivated get into conflicts or wars. Could this principle work in East Asia?

I feel that the East Asian people are not going towards more and more integration level as European Union, but probably, with closer economic ties, the possibility of war can be reduced, indeed, because the costs would just be too great. But in East Asia, this history problem is still a crucial element between China and Japan. They both are gigantic economic actors nowadays and their economic ties are very much linked with one another – but they still threaten each other. I think this is more irrational and sentimental, the national pride thing is not solved. It's reminding me a landmine – you don't know when it is going to explode. I think if that element is not solved, there is no proper peace.

Economy vs. war

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EU is effective especially in financial issues solutions

One of the integrational outcomes is the possibility of effective crises management. In this respect, how do you evaluate the EU?

I think for now, the Europeans have possibly made most efforts in the debt crises. What I have witnessed from 2009, especially in 2012, they had countless meetings on rebuilding and reconstructing their economic system. I think all these measures have made some effect that is for sure. Until Greek debt crisis, but that is unique case, I think other European economies have been more or less stabilized. I think in that sense the crises management for 2009 European debt crisis was pretty effective.

Well, that was for the debt crises, but what about more current situations?

Other crises management, e.g. the Ukrainian crisis, I think that has not been a very successful case for Europe. And for the refugee problem it's even more complicated. It really reveals the differences and there are so many elements involved. I would quote the Jean Monnet, that "this Europe will be forged in crises and be the sum of the solutions to these crises." I really do believe in that.

In terms of current crisis management, next to the Ukrainian crisis there is now also the issue of migration to the Europe, when the EU members are blaming each other for not being enough active in facing the crisis and that it may pose a dead end for the EU integration.

I had this concern. Because I really appreciate the whole European integration process, I think it's a brilliant human political invention. And I hope it will develop in a healthy term condition. But this time it just touches the core values of the member countries. I see really divided perceptions. I think the issue is just so complicated you cannot even have a rational talk.

Is an Asian NATO on the horizon?

Analysis by Shingo Masanuga written for natoaktual.cz portal can be found at:

http://data.idnes.cz/soubory/na_zpravy/A150217_M02_022_150209_MASUNAGA.PDF

Can you be more specific on the disunity?

For example a Hungarian professor I talked to, he focused on the difference between war refugees and economic immigrants. The other Czech professors I talked to, they focused more on the European experience of receiving immigrants as a tradition. They're all focusing on different dimension of the same issue. But I'd stay optimistic. I still think EU has a strong tradition in this integration direction.

Threat perceptions and relations with mainland China

Let us stay with the topic of security and defence. In Europe, given the current threats and threat perceptions, we tend to forget East Asia easily. How are these different from the ones in East Asia? Can you help us understand what are the current threats perceived by Taiwanese people in particular?

China. It's a threat ever since the Kuomintang, the government of the Republic of China, moved to Taiwan. Since then there has been a conflict between the cross-strait. It's formulating all of our policies - security, economy and I think everything is related to that. In Europe, the political division between people is more in terms of right-wing and left-wing, but in Taiwan it is pro-China and against-China. We don't have any other issue to talk about. Politically, every government and every political leader is thinking about this question, but there is no answer, not yet.

Where is the role of economic cooperation then?

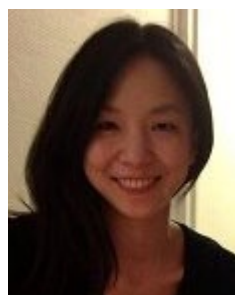
Especially in the world of free trade, economic globalisation etc., we are already so much connected with China, that it makes everything even more complicated. Businessmen are working so closely with each other, and especially the two sides actually all speak Mandarin and the culture, history... Everything is very proximate.

You spoke about the conflict between China and Taiwan. How does this translate into daily life?

What is happening nowadays in normal life is interesting. Many regulations have been abolished – for instance, earlier we could not go to China to travel freely, we had to apply for visas and so on. Lot of Chinese tourists are coming and they have the money to spend, but they still have strict regulations on working visas, they cannot buy houses and similar things. We still know the difference, when we hear them speaking, they have different accent. They are same as other foreign people, we see them, we talk to them.

Is it on the same way among state representatives?

At the political level, that's another story. We don't understand their government, it's still communist one party regime. In that term there is no much progress between the two sides. But we see them, we sell them things, we don't fight them.



Cho-Hsin SU majored in International Relations at National Taiwan University, Cho-Hsin Su has been particularly interested in the development of the European integration movement since college years. She has thus chosen French as her second foreign language, and continued her studies at graduate school at University Paris II, France. After finishing her Ph.D. in Paris, she went to the United States and worked as visiting scholar at Boston University for one semester. Then she came back to Taiwan and began her academic career at university. In June 2014, she also began working on a project at Google, which brought her a whole new dimension on the world of technology and creative thinking. Since August 2015, she has joined the faculty of the Department of Diplomacy at National Chengchi University.