

Regionalism and the European Union

Written by Kevin Bloor

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KEVIN BLOOR, MAY 21 2022

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Global Politics* by Kevin Bloor. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

This final chapter examines the magnitude of regionalism as a force within global politics. This chapter seeks to analyse the causes of regionalism, evaluate its relationship with globalisation and outline the development of regional organisations. A primary focus will centre on the European Union (EU), an organisation which continues to provide something of a blueprint for deeper integration. The chapter also considers the significance of the EU as an actor on the global stage, before concluding with the manner and extent to which regionalism attempts to resolve issues such as the avoidance of conflict.

Regionalism

Different Modes of Regionalism: Economic, Political and Security

Regionalism can be defined in the context of international relations as the expression of a shared identity and purpose. It is combined with the creation and implementation of institutions that manifest regional identity and shape activity within that particular region. There are a wide number of regional organisations to consider with varying levels of integration. For instance, the depth of integration within the Arab League or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is considerably weaker than the EU.

It should be recognised that regionalism is the process through which larger geographical or even continental areas emerge as political organisations through integrated international institutions. This may provide a forum for cooperation between various states. The formation of regional blocs has often been driven by the growing impact of economic globalisation. As borders have become more porous, states have sought to co-operate more closely in order to deal with the consequences of interdependence. However, it could also be argued that regional free trade agreements function contrarily, against the process of globalisation.

The driving forces behind regionalism can derive from economic, security and/or political grounds. The European Economic Community (EEC), the forebearer to the EU, is a clear example of economic regionalism. The whole justification for the EEC was to enhance economic growth and development within the European continent. The economic success of the organisation in its early years managed to attract countries around it who soon sought membership. For instance, the United Kingdom was drawn towards the European project partly due to the relative economic success of the EEC.

The creation of the European Union in 1993 was emblematic of regionalism. As a result of the Maastricht Treaty, the EU adopted three separate pillars. These pillars consisted of the European Communities, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and cooperation in the field of Justice and Home Affairs. This was later abandoned when the Treaty of Lisbon came into force in 2009, and the EU obtained a legal personality. By contrast, NATO is an organisation based entirely upon security concerns. The principal justification for NATO is contained within Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty, in which an attack on one is interpreted as an attack upon all, ensuring collective security. The European Union has also sought to develop its security dimension via a joint foreign and security policy.

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The emphasis is upon soft power, such as developmental cooperation, humanitarian aid and the EU's diplomatic presence.

Allied to the three-dimensional character of regionalism is the distinction between old regionalism and new regionalism. Old regionalism is rooted in the experience of interwar nationalism, and as such held a tendency towards protectionism in the economic realm. The formation of the EEC is a clear illustration of the former. Contrastingly, 'new regionalism' entails a more spontaneous process that emerges from within the region itself. In doing so, the process of regionalism adopts towards the dynamics of the region in question. Inevitably, some regions are more conducive towards regional integration than others. The extent to which a particular region accommodates regionalism will also differ considerably over time. For instance, the process of European integration developed from economic to political regionalism. New regionalism is a more complex process that may take place simultaneously at a variety of levels.

The Relationship Between Regionalism and Globalisation

Regionalism is consistent with globalisation in three ways. First and foremost, regional economic blocs have formed due to the adverse impact of globalisation on national sovereignty. States have therefore been more inclined to work closely with other states in the same region, as borders have become porous as a result of normative adaptation within the wider discourse of international politics. This has been striking economically, due to financial markets and multinational corporations (MNCs) having such an impact upon the character of national sovereignty. It is worth noting that even the wealthiest and most powerful economies have been affected by the seemingly unstoppable trend towards globalisation. Membership of a regional bloc does provide at least some level of political influence for the member state in question.

A second reason for the formation of regional economic blocs is that they enable nation-states to resist pressure from external global competition. A regional bloc acting as a customs union can therefore act as a fortress against the pressures from the wider global economy. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this argument is the European Union (EU). The organisation has often been accused of creating trade barriers against states outside of the organisation. This argument is particularly salient towards many of the poorest economies within the Global South. Similarly, the EU can adopt a negotiating position that enables members to resist the competitive forces unleashed by globalisation. For example, the EU can adopt a common position in a trade agreement with China or the United States. It is more likely that a nation-state will have their voice heard as a part of one of the largest single markets in the world than if they were outside of such an organisation. In this manner, the power such a unit may hold will be greater than the sum of its parts, retroactively adding to the perceived power of its member-states.

Thirdly, member states rationalise that the path towards prosperity is by gaining greater access to regional markets. In an increasingly globalised economy, membership of a regional bloc firmly committed towards free trade is a positive. Membership of a free trade area provides access to a larger market. In doing so, it facilitates economies of scale for firms within the regional bloc. Furthermore, regional trade agreements enable the free flow of capital and labour. It is perhaps worth noting that the number of regional trade agreements has risen from just 50 in 1990 to well over 300 today (Fernandes et al., 2021).

From the opposing angle, the relationship between regionalism and globalisation can be considered a contradictory one. Carving up the global economy on the basis of regional integration is clearly at odds with the actual meaning of globalisation. The rapid growth in the scope and scale of regional agreements is inconsistent with the creation of a truly global economy. Regionalism could therefore be described as the very opposite of the supposed global interconnectedness of states and non-state actors, centring focus on the regional as opposed to the global.

In order to substantiate this argument, the creation of regional organisations generates intra-regional trade rather than globalised trade. The existence of free trade areas, customs unions and common markets on a regional basis fosters trade amongst its members rather than with non-members. Regional integration also enables those organisations to place restrictions on those states outside of the organisation.

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In economic parlance, regional integration fosters both trade creation and trade diversion. The motivation behind regional trade agreements is to enable increasingly free trade amongst the member states. However, it also leads towards trade diversion. This can present a major issue if protectionist measures are imposed against non-members. The practice of trade diversion contradicts the aims of the World Trade Organisation and the broader Washington Consensus. It is therefore inconsistent with the process of globalisation as it is usually grasped.

Whilst the terms are often presented on a binary basis, it is certainly plausible to claim that regionalism is intrinsically linked to globalisation. If globalisation is widely thought to be the mutual dependence of states, regionalism can be said to enable such dependence. This is a more nuanced understanding of international relations and one that arguably offers an increasingly convincing explanation of the actual reality of global politics.

The Prospects for Political Regionalism and Regional Governance

The prospects for political regionalism and regional governance are driven by a combination of internal and external factors. The former relates to those factors that characterise the region itself. External factors, however, relate to events that originate from outside of the region (such as the 2007–08 Global Financial Crisis). The internal forces that shape regional governance may be far greater in one area of the world than another. For instance, the devastation caused by the Second World War undoubtedly provided the impetus behind early moves towards European integration. In addition, the impact of external forces may be significantly greater in one area of the world compared to others.

In order to identify the prospects for regional governance and political regionalism, it is perhaps necessary to consider the issue on a region-by-region basis. In doing so, it is possible to highlight the prospects for political integration and governance. Within the European Union, the prospects for deeper integration appear to be negligible. Due to a combination of forces both inside and outside of their immediate control, the European Union failed to implement an effective convergence criterion. The European Union has also been affected by the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the organisation in 2016. Given the depth of Eurosceptic feeling within many countries, the prospect of deepening regional governance seems limited.

Unlike the European Union, integration within East Asia has been primarily of an economic character. The impetus behind recent political integration was provided by the dramatic impact of the financial crisis during the late 1990s. The financial contagion that swept throughout such relatively open economies required a co-ordinated response from the member states affected. The crisis exposed the dramatic nature of globalisation and the need for some level of political integration to mitigate the overall impact. This led to the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI). The CMI began as a series of bilateral swap arrangements after the ASEAN plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea) held a meeting of the Asian Development Bank. This provided an Asian solution to the crisis, rather than the region becoming reliant upon the IMF. Having said this, progress towards regional governance remains slow, due to a lack of institutional integration.

In South America, regional governance has been limited by a number of familiar issues. These include the absence of economic convergence, a shift in the balance of global economic power and of course state sovereignty. The present situation consists of incremental attempts towards political regionalism in order to bolster democracy and regional security. The main impetus in recent times has centred upon liberalisation of trade. There are a number of complementary organisations within the region ranging from the Andean Community of Nations to the Southern Common Market – Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR). The region also has a parliament acting as a consultative assembly similar to the early format adopted by the European Parliament. There are also plans to establish the institution as the legislative branch of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). Created in 2010, the organisation reflects a decade-long push for deeper integration. In addition, the Pacific Alliance was created in 2012 amongst countries that border the Pacific Ocean. The aim of the Alliance is to establish the four freedoms in a manner comparable to European integration.

The path adopted by the European Union has also provided a blueprint for the African Union. The organisation has embedded several of the political elements of integration adopted within Europe. There are also signs that economic

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integration within the region is gathering pace. Although such institutions have not yet been established, there are moves to establish a single currency. This will entail the creation of a central bank based in Nigeria and a monetary fund within Cameroon. There are also plans to adopt an investment bank in Libya. In contrast, integration within North America seems unlikely due to the indifferent approach adopted by Washington. The United States is such a powerful country that integration with their neighbours does not offer anything like the same benefits as integration does for weaker states.

The Impact of Regionalism on State Sovereignty

The process of regionalism is widely viewed as having a negative impact upon state sovereignty. As states cede their authority towards regional organisations, they lose most of their ability to shape their own destiny. This was brought home in stark manner during the UK Brexit referendum, when a majority of the British public voted to leave the European Union. However, the picture is more nuanced than it might first appear.

There has long been a debate over the impact of regionalism on state sovereignty. There are those who claim that regionalism undermines the sovereignty of the state. This is based upon a zero-sum view of sovereignty. As a member of a regional bloc, decisions reached upon the basis of unanimity must be implemented by all the signatory states. This may be supported via the existence of supranational institutions. For instance, the African Union (AU) has recently strengthened its capacity to impose sanctions against member states who fail to meet their financial obligations. The Court of Justice of the European Union is another common illustration of this argument.

From the opposing angle, it could be convincingly argued that states merely pool (or share) sovereignty within any given regional organisation. In doing so, they are better able to shape their own destiny. They are also free to leave at any time. Crucially, this means that the sovereignty of the state has not been compromised. The salience of this argument is supported further by the broader process of globalisation. Issues within international relations tend to be of a cross-border nature (e.g. protection of the environment). Inevitably, this provides a persuasive reason for states to join regional blocs.

In recent years, it should be noted that certain countries have been able to reassert their sovereignty. Despite the combined forces of regional integration and globalisation, predictions about the demise of the nation-state and its associated sovereignty are overstated. Under the Trump administration, a number of decisions were consistent with isolationism. For instance, in 2017, the newly elected President decided to take the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The United Kingdom has also decided to counter the trend towards regional integration by leaving the European Union. Conversely, it must be recognised that these decisions have not slowed down the process of regional integration and globalisation. For instance, it is notable that when the United States withdrew from the TPP, in 2017, the remaining countries simply negotiated a new trade arrangement that incorporated most of the provisions from the former agreement. Equally, the European Union has continued with the process of deeper integration despite a major power leaving the organisation.

The Development of Regional Organisations (Excluding the EU)

The North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA)

The North American Free Trade Association is a trilateral trading bloc that consists of the United States, Canada and Mexico. NAFTA aims to reduce or eliminate barriers in the field of trade and investment between those three economies. One of the largest trading blocs in the world, the agreement came into effect during the mid-1990s.

In terms of its positives, the agreement ensures a more open trading system that represents just under 30% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Free trade has also contributed to a series of knock-on effects, such as lower transaction costs and a more efficient allocation of resources consistent with market forces. However, the impact has been controversial in terms of employment and the environment. In the US, NAFTA has been depicted as a source of job losses and lower wages. This criticism has been echoed by figures from both sides of the political spectrum. During the US electoral campaign in 2016, both Democrats (such as Bernie Sanders) and Republicans

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(such as Donald Trump) voiced anxieties felt within the 'Rust Belt' over the loss of jobs to lower-cost producers in Mexico. Trump, whilst president-elect, even referred to the agreement 'the single worst trade deal ever approved in the US.'

During initial negotiations over the trade agreement, there was significant vocal opposition within the US over the potential impact on American employment. Supporters however claimed the economic benefits of the agreement would be significant. Revealingly, a recent congressional report into the economic impact of the agreement confirms that 'NAFTA did not cause the huge job losses feared by the critics or the large economic gains predicted by supporters' (Villarreal et al., 2017). Overall trade with their two immediate neighbours is relatively modest by US standards. Whilst in office, President Trump sought to replace NAFTA with a United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) which took effect in July 2020. Given the similarities with the previous agreement, USMCA is often characterised as NAFTA 2.0.

The environmental impact of NAFTA has also been a source of controversy within Mexico. On the day the agreement came into force, the Zapatistas declared war on the Mexican government for its endorsement of NAFTA. The left-wing political organisation is aligned to the wider alter-globalisation movement and seeks indigenous control over agricultural land. The trade liberalisation that lies at the heart of NAFTA is contrary to their ideological platform. Whilst the USMCA enhances environmental and working regulations, the impact upon the environment remains subject to criticism.

The African Union (AU)

The African Union (AU) represents just over one billion people and includes all states that form the African continent. The AU replaced the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) which was regularly criticised as the 'dictators club'. Since its founding in 2002, the African Union has sought to defend human rights in a more effective manner than its immediate predecessor. One of the inherent weaknesses within the OAU was the manner in which national sovereignty was placed above concerns about human rights violations. The African Union has taken firm action in this area. For instance, Sudan was suspended from the organisation due to violence used against protestors in 2019.

The long-term objective of the organisation is the creation of an economic and monetary union. Following the approach adopted by the EU, the AU seeks to create a single market underpinned by a central bank and a common currency. The aim is to establish an African Economic Community with a common currency by the year 2023. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) came into effect with trade commencing on 1 January 2021. The AfCFTA is the largest in the world in terms of the number of participating countries since the formation of the WTO. This would represent the process of deeper regional integration amongst the member states.

The highest decision-making body within the AU consists of its member-states' premiers. Given its status within the organisation, the Assembly has the authority to act upon proposals sent by the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). There is also a representative body of the African Union called the Pan-African Parliament. In contrast, the Commission of the African Union adopts the role of an executive and administrative branch. The organisation also consists of an executive council, a committee of permanent representatives, and a consultative body that considers economic and cultural issues. There is also a quasi-judicial institution responsible for interpreting the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The governance of the AU is therefore comparable to the structure adopted by the EU.

Law-making within the organisation derives from a number of sources, such as constitutional documents, treaties and soft laws. Examples of the former consist of those documents that protect the welfare of the child and outline the conduct of democratic elections. The Abuja Treaty (signed in 1991) established the African Economic Community, whilst soft law tends to cover the issues concerning human rights. In common with the EU, the organisation has also developed a military dimension. Its first military intervention occurred in 2003 when peacekeeping forces were dispatched to Burundi. Troops from the African Union have since been deployed in failed states like Somalia on the basis of humanitarian concerns. Integration has also been fostered through various documents (most notably the New Partnership for Africa's Development) that have enhanced levels of governance. There has also been progress

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amongst the member states in terms of improving education and infrastructure. However, there are still issues to resolve, such as discrimination against minority groups.

The Arab League

Formed in 1945, the principal objective of the Arab League is to foster cooperation between member states and promote the common interests of Arab states. Over its lengthy history, the Arab League has provided a forum for member states to deliberate on matters of interest, settle disputes and construct a united voice.

One of the main achievements of the organisation is the development of a common security or military dimension. In 1950, an agreement was reached that committed the signatories to coordinate defence measures. In more recent times, the Arab League launched the Joint Arab Force (JAF) in order to combat the growing threat posed by Islamic extremism within the region. Participation is voluntary and the Army will only intervene at the request of one of the member states. Unlike the EU, the Arab League places a firm emphasis upon national sovereignty and independence.

In the absence of supranational institutions, decision-making is based upon cooperation and negotiation. Although the Arab League does have elements of a representative parliament, it would be highly misleading to make any comparison with the European Parliament. Without supranational institutions to draft and supervise policies, the Arab League has been hamstrung by the need to reach a unanimous position. The governance of the organisation has often been criticised as inefficient.

In contrast to European integration, Arab states have proved resistant to share economic wealth. Members have also found it problematic to resolve ideological differences between them. In particular, the ruling elites within the Gulf region have been reluctant to embrace the concept of Arab nationalism. Equally, vested interests with external powers have proved a major obstacle to the Arab League adopting a system that would compare with the depth of integration achieved by the EU.

In terms of the Middle East conflict, the Arab League has long been supportive of a homeland for the Palestinians. The framers of the initial Pact included the Palestinian Arabs from the very outset and, in 1964, the Arab League created a group designed to represent the Palestinian people. The group later became known as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). At the Beirut Summit in 2002, the Arab League adopted the Arab Peace initiative at the behest of Saudi Arabia. The proposal offered a normalisation of relations with Israel in exchange for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from occupied territories. Under the plan, Israel would recognise Palestinian independence in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital. The initiative was later promoted by representatives from Jordan and Egypt in 2007.

The Arab League has also reached a common position vis-a-vis the politics of the region. For instance, the League supported the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen and passed a resolution calling for Turkish forces to withdraw from northern Syria. The Arab League also condemned Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to annex the Jordan Valley in 2019. Yet having said this, smaller organisations within the Arab world have often been more effective in terms of securing economic objectives. For instance, the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) often uses its valuable resources to exert global political pressure, as it has done in the past.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is an intergovernmental organisation that consists of ten countries within South-East Asia. The organisation aims to promote cooperation and facilitate political and economic integration amongst its members. ASEAN is one of the most important political organisations within the region alongside the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

ASEAN has made considerable progress in terms of establishing an area of free trade and political stability. In terms of the former, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is one of the most important in the world. Unlike the EU, AFTA

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does not impose a common external tariff on imported goods. Back in 2008, member states launched the ASEAN Charter, committing the organisation to move towards 'an EU-style community'. The Charter aims to establish a trading area encompassing around 500 million people. It marks progress within a region of the world that – like Europe – was once riven by warfare. However, there are doubts as to the ability of certain economies to meet the requirements of closer economic integration. In terms of political stability, the organisation has also managed to ensure a nuclear weapons-free zone within the region, despite marked differences between the member states on the issue.

The organisation has also made some progress in the field of human rights. In 2009, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) was established in order to promote human rights within the region. However, the AICHR lacks the ability to impose sanctions against those countries that violate the rights of its citizens. Criticism has been made over the inability of the organisation to address ethnic cleansing within Myanmar. Corruption also remains an issue within the region, as do several border disputes.

ASEAN works closely with states from outside of the region. Since 1997 'ASEAN plus three' has provided a forum for cooperation with China, Japan and South Korea. As a result of the late-1990s financial crisis, the Chiang Mai Initiative has sought to establish greater financial stability within Asia. 'ASEAN Plus Six' incorporates India, Australia and New Zealand and provided the framework for the planned East Asia Community and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. ASEAN has also played an active role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

On a final note, the phrase 'ASEAN way' describes an approach to resolving issues that reflects the cultural norms of South-East Asia. Decision-making is informal, consultative and characterised by the desire for consensus. Quiet diplomacy amongst the member states enables leaders to communicate effectively without resorting to bellicose jingoism. However, this method has been criticised for contributing towards wording based upon the lowest common denominator. It also makes it very difficult for the organisation to take effective action in the face of a serious problem. ASEAN is sometimes viewed as a talking shop that's big on words but small on action.

The European Union

Factors That Fostered European Integration

There are several factors that are readily identifiable as having driven forward the process of European integration. Although the significance of these factors has fluctuated over time, the two constant themes throughout have been economic and political. From the very outset, European integration was designed to provide tangible economic benefits and prevent conflict within the continent.

After the disruption caused by the Second World War, a number of continental countries sought a new pathway towards a more peaceful and stable Europe. France and Germany had engaged in three major wars in the space of just seventy years. In order to break the cycle of conflict, it was agreed that the industries of war would be placed under the control of a supranational institution. In doing so, the ability to create a war machine would be removed. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was a success, and it paved the way for deeper integration. By the end of the 1950s, both the European Community and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) – a single market for nuclear materials and technology – had been established.

In an economic sense, the original six member states of the European Community sought to improve trading links via the removal of trading barriers. France, Germany, Italy and the BENELUX countries all recorded high levels of economic development as a result of trade liberalisation. It is no exaggeration to say that the lure of economic benefits persuaded countries within the second enlargement (such as the UK) to join. During the 1980s and 90s, a framework for economic and monetary union was outlined amongst the member states. The eurozone was established and the European Central Bank (ECB) in Frankfurt sets a common monetary policy within participant states. The eurozone consists of 19 EU member-states and the euro is one of the major global trading currencies on the foreign exchange markets. Given the tradition of state sovereignty over an area of considerable importance, the

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depth of integration achieved within the economic realm is remarkable.

Alongside political and economic factors, the process of integration has also been driven by a habit of cooperation amongst the member states. Former rivals have placed their differences to one side and embarked upon a European project that has transformed inter-state relations within the continent. Out of the depths of the deadliest military conflict in history, the member states of the European Union have forged a genuine zone of peace. The process of integration within Europe has established a significant actor on the world stage. The European Union is a hybrid of both supranational institutions, such as the ECB, and intergovernmental forums such as the European Council. The existence of both types of institution reflects the debate about supranational versus intergovernmental approaches.

In a theoretical context, the concept of 'spillover' has played a key role within the development of European integration. The founding fathers of the European project sought to provide a practical path towards an ever-closer union. Alongside Altiero Spinelli and Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet outlined a blueprint for a European federation. The Monnet plan entailed taking control of the German coal-producing areas and redirecting production towards the French. The aim was to weaken Germany and strengthen the French economy. Monnet and his allies later put forward the idea of a European Community. Prophetically, it was said that 'this proposal represents the first concrete step towards a European federation'. Jean Monnet also prophesied that 'Europe will be forged in crises', and that the bloc would end up being 'the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises.' Whether this depiction of the European Union remains a valid one is open to deliberation.

From an initially negative mindset (in the sense that countries were focused upon avoidance), integration amongst the European states has adopted a more proactive approach. Integration in one area has also created a momentum towards integration in other policy areas. Over time, deeper integration has enabled the European Union to perform the role of a major global power. The European Union now boasts a Common Foreign and Security Policy, harmonisation over policymaking and a diplomatic presence throughout the world. It also co-operates extensively with partners – such as its relationship with NATO which is depicted as 'separable, but not separate'.

Formation, Role, Objectives and Development of the European Union

The core aim of the European Union is to make progress towards 'an ever-closer union'. The unmistakable tone of this phrase is very much towards further integration. Right from the very outset, the direction of European integration pointed towards the creation of a United States of Europe in the notion of 'an ever-closer union'. From an original community of just six states, the organisation is now one of the most important non-state actors in global affairs with twenty-seven members. During the historical development of the European Union, the organisation has created a quasi-federalist system.

Another key objective of the EU is the existence of the four fundamental freedoms. Since the early-1990s, the EU has been pledged towards free movement of: (1) goods, (2) services, (3) capital and (4) people. This is an integral element of the single market and associated moves towards closer economic integration. The four freedoms are maintained by the role of member states and the various institutions (particularly the Commission). Consistent with the principle of spillover, the organisation has developed from the common market towards a single market with freedom of movement.

Implementation of the four freedoms has not been without controversy. Freedom of movement for goods and services tends to benefit the wealthier economies at the expense of those on the periphery. However, this is to some degree offset by the provision of regional funding. The main problem has undoubtedly been that of immigration. The influx of immigrants from the twelve new member states in the noughties caused anxiety amongst the wealthier states. Cheap labour from Central and Eastern Europe was one of the main causes behind the defeat of the proposed EU constitution during the French referendum. Concern over uncontrolled and unprecedented levels of immigration has also been highlighted by several populist parties and politicians. Furthermore, it was a decisive factor in the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom.

Establishment and Powers of its Key Institutions and the Process of Enlargement

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When seeking to comprehend the various institutions of the European Union, the first point to consider is the distinction between supranational and intergovernmental institutions. In basic terms, supranational bodies take decisions above the nation-state. An intergovernmental institution, however, retains the sovereignty of the state. The former tends to drive forward the development of a federal Europe, whilst the latter emphasises the importance of unanimity and the protection of national interests.

Another point to grasp is that the various institutions approximate the three branches of government. In terms of the executive branch, the European Commission consists of appointees from each member state. It is responsible for implementing decisions, upholding the treaties and managing the administrative functions of the EU. The Commission also proposes legislation and operates on the basis of a cabinet government. As with other executive branches, the term 'Commission' is used in a collective sense towards the civil servants in the *de facto* capital – Brussels. They work within departments known as 'Directorates-General'.

The European Parliament (EP) is the main law-making branch of the EU. Alongside the Council of the European Union, the EP adopts legislation proposed by the Commission. The EP consists of members directly elected from the member states. The European Parliament has grown in terms of competence and now shares equal legislative and budgetary powers with the Council. The legislative branch also holds the Commission to account. For instance, the EP approves the appointment of the Commission and can force the entire executive body to step down.

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) interprets EU legislation to ensure that rules are implemented in the same manner across all twenty-seven member states. National courts may require clarification from the CJEU in terms of how to interpret existing law. This supranational body also adjudicates upon legal disputes between national governments and EU institutions. Individuals, companies, and organisations can also bring cases to the attention of the court provided it relates to EU law. The judicial body enforces the law when an infringement has taken place. Finally, the CJEU can annul any EU law when there is a violation of existing treaties or fundamental rights. The CJEU is sometimes confused with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). However, it must be recalled that the ECtHR is *not* an EU institution but rather enforces the ECHR and is attached to 'The Council of Europe', not to be confused with any EU body, and is the institution formed after the Second World War to uphold human rights on the European continent.

The main intergovernmental body of the EU is the European Council. Given that it consists of member-states' premiers, the European Council is well-suited to debates over major projects. For instance, the practicalities of enlarging the EU during the noughties were discussed in depth at the Council level. As a collective body, the European Council shapes the overall direction and priorities of the organisation. Although it has no law-making power, it does provide a forum by which strategic planning can be achieved. Decisions taken within these EU summits are taken on the basis of consensus unless the existing treaties provide otherwise.

The Council of the European Union (sometimes referred to simply as the Council, or sometimes 'The Council of Ministers') is also an intergovernmental institution. It consists of representatives from member states to create a particular policy area. Alongside the European Parliament, the Council serves to amend and approve proposals made by the executive branch via its legislative role. The presidency of the Council rotates every six months amongst the national governments. Unlike the European Council, decisions are usually made on the basis of qualified majority voting (QMV), whereby each state is given a plurality of votes in relation to population density. Employed within intergovernmental forums, qualified majority voting (QMV) enables the decision-making process to move forward without the need for unanimity within the European Council and Council of the EU. QMV is arguably the inevitable consequence of an organisation that has expanded significantly since its inception. Less important decisions are made via simple majority, although in some cases the national veto is retained.

The accession process is formally launched when a country submits their application. This is addressed to the Council of the European Union, which then asks the Commission to assess the application. On the basis of agreed criteria, known as 'The Copenhagen Criteria', the Commission issues its recommendations for further steps that the applicant must take. Depending on these details, the Commission may recommend that the Council grant the applicant candidate status. On the basis of the opinions provided by the Commission, the Council has to agree on a

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unanimous basis whether to accept the application and whether accession negotiations should begin. The Council also decides whether or not the applicant should be given candidate status.

The lengthy process of negotiation focuses upon when the candidate country is to adopt the rules and obligations of membership, and under what conditions. Since the 2004 enlargement, the negotiating framework entails a suspension clause if the candidate makes a serious and persistent breach of the principles of the organisation (such as democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law). The negotiating framework also contains a clause that considers the EU's capacity to absorb a new member. These two areas have proved to be a stumbling-block regarding Turkey's potential membership of the EU.

Key Treaties and Agreements

Ratified by all of the member states, the EU treaties outline the role of the institutions alongside its remit and objectives. The EU acts within the competences granted via these treaties (and subsequent amendments ratified by the member states). However, the actual constitutional basis of the European Union derives from the Rome Treaty and the Maastricht Treaty.

The Treaty on the functioning of the European Union (more commonly known as 'The Rome Treaty') was signed in 1957 by the six original members. The Rome Treaty established the European Economic Community (EEC) and laid the foundation for integration amongst member states. In 1992, the Treaty on European Union signed at Maastricht was primarily responsible for the creation of the single currency, the euro. It also renamed itself as the 'European Union' in recognition of the expanded competences of the organisation, and established a pathway towards further integration within high politics (such as foreign policy and home affairs).

Since the passage of the Maastricht Treaty, there have been three further agreements. The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) transferred certain powers from national legislatures to the European Parliament alongside institutional changes to accommodate planned enlargement. The Nice Treaty (2001) agreed to further institutional reform in order to accommodate the planned expansion towards Central and Eastern Europe, which took place in 2004. From a similar angle, the Lisbon Treaty (2007) moved from unanimity voting to QMV in several areas. It also expanded the powers of the European Parliament, created a legal personality for the EU and made the Charter of Fundamental Rights legally binding. Finally, it gave member states the right to leave the EU and outlined the means to do so.

The EU also has a number of agreements that match its multi-speed approach. Although not a formal part of EU law, since 1995 the Schengen agreement enables visa-free travel amongst its participants. Most member states participate within the Schengen zone; 22 member-states currently fully participate, with Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Cyprus holding a legal obligation to join in the future, and Ireland opting out. The EU has managed to bypass the problem of gaining unanimity via securing agreements regarding the creation of Eurocorps, the European Gendarmerie Force, and the European fiscal compact. This serves to underline the overall importance of agreements reached within a multi-speed Europe.

Economic and Monetary Union

Economic and monetary union (EMU) is one of the major achievements of the European Union. In accordance with the incremental nature of European integration, EMU has been established at various stages. The latest stage is the creation of a eurozone, which is characterised by a common monetary policy and a single currency. In order to become a member, participant states need to meet the convergence criteria. With the exception of Denmark, all EU member states must comply with the convergence criteria with the expectation of eventual membership of the eurozone.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the process of European integration provided tangible economic benefits to its members. This was an era of stable economic growth within and between the original six members. The practical path offered by the founding fathers of the European project seemed to deliver genuine economic benefits. However, the record of the eurozone is more mixed. There are several reasons for this, not least the slowdown in the global

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economy that was out of the direct control of the EU. That said, the lack of convergence within the organisation is partly due to unrealistic targets. Poorer performing economies such as the Mediterranean PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain) were allowed to join the eurozone by including the hidden economy within the figures. The level of public sector debt recorded within these economies has meant bailouts funded by the more efficient economies and significant political unrest within those affected by the sovereign debt crisis, the events in Greece during the 2008 financial crash illustrating this case in point.

Another problem specific to the eurozone is the inflexible nature of monetary policy. Within such a vast economic unit, it is difficult for the central bank to adopt the correct measures. Adopting a level of interest rates suitable for the German economy may not match the interests of those economies on the periphery (such as those in Southern Europe). This may relate to other economic problems such as high levels of unemployment. The degree of youth unemployment within the eurozone is a particular concern for the long-term prospects of the European project. The inability of European integration to provide the economic benefits associated with its previous success continues to cast a considerable shadow over EMU.

Debates about Supranational Versus Intergovernmental Approaches

The debate concerning supranationalism versus intergovernmentalism concerns the thorny issue of how to proceed with European integration. This reflects a difference of opinion that was present at the very beginnings of the European project between those who wished to retain national sovereignty, and those who believed in the formation of a, so-called, United States of Europe. During the historical development of the organisation, the influence of these two distinct perspectives has fluctuated.

To clarify the distinction between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism, the Maastricht Treaty introduced the 'principle of subsidiarity', which was the notion that decision making capabilities are retained by member-states if EU intervention is unnecessary. Since then, the EU is obliged to take action at the most appropriate level of decision-making. For example, there are certain areas of policymaking that are more properly dealt with on the basis of unanimity. In such cases, the intergovernmentalist approach is adopted. However, there are other areas in which a supranational institution such as the Commission should make the decisions. In recent years, the powers of the European Parliament have also increased, for example to include supervising EU budgetary and institutional matters.

The founding fathers of the European Union could see the necessity for supranational institutions to drive the project forward. From the very outset, it should be recognised that integration was never intended to be wholly democratic in the manner that political action would be on the domestic level of the nation-state. Instead, there was a recognition that the forces of nationalism should be suppressed in order to prevent the outbreak of warfare, as had cursed Europe for centuries. For instance, during the Second World War, Altiero Spinelli and fellow prisoner Ernesto Rossi compiled a draft manifesto for a united Europe (Union of European Federalists 2019). They claimed that the war against fascism would have been pointless if it re-established a discredited system based upon shifting alliances. The proposal for a European federation of states with supranational bodies offered a tangible path towards a lasting peace. In tying all European nations so closely together, the possibility for any future wars would disappear, following a liberal grasp of International Relations.

The intergovernmentalist approach stipulates that member states are the primary actors within the process of integration. Intergovernmentalism marks an attempt to defend the national interest against communality and harmonisation driven by supranational bodies. The European Council and the Council of the European Union can halt those projects put forward by the supranational institutions. The institutional structure of the EU therefore provides a brake upon the process of political, social and economic integration. Equally, the intergovernmental forums within the EU have provided the right environment for planning major European projects like the single market.

The Significance of the EU as an International Body and Global Actor

The importance of the EU presents a fascinating case study to consider within global politics. Often identified *assui generis*, any assessment of the EU and its agency must recognise that it holds a unique set of characteristics. For

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instance, it would be unhelpful to make a direct comparison with great powers in terms of political and military influence. Given its structure, there are obvious limitations placed upon the EU that are distinct from that of a nation-state. Yet, having said this, the EU exerts considerable influence within global affairs on the basis of its soft power potential within the economic and diplomatic realm.

Over its historical development, the EU has facilitated the spread of democracy and respect for human rights. This has been achieved via encouraging former dictatorial regimes to join the organisation and therefore accept the rules and obligations of membership, transforming these previously non-democratic societies into open, democratic states. Many of the member states from Southern and Eastern Europe were at one time characterised by their dictatorial systems. The EU has also fostered liberal values in terms of the rule of law alongside free, fair and regular elections – upholding the liberal democratic peace thesis.

In diplomatic terms, the European External Action Service performs the role of the EU's diplomatic service with delegations and offices throughout the world. The EU is represented at the high table of global governance with a seat at the G20 and the WTO. It also holds observer status in the IMF, the UN General Assembly and G7 summits. The EU is a signatory to 50 free trade agreements with other countries, and works in partnership with emerging and regional groups on the basis of mutual interests. The level of humanitarian assistance provided by the organisation is second only to the United States. For an organisation initially created out of the wreckage of warfare, it seems symbolic that the EU was once awarded the Nobel Peace prize, in 2012. The success of the EU as a political organisation is tacitly underlined when other regional organisations seek to implement a comparable structure (most notably the African Union and ASEAN).

The political capacity of the EU has expanded alongside the enlargement of the organisation itself. Membership of the EU could be said to foster a zone of stability in a continent with a troubled history of conflict. It could be argued that the most significant political achievement of the organisation is its expansion from the original six to twenty-seven members, covering just under 4.5 million square kilometres and housing the third largest population in the world, if taken cumulatively. This has led to an increasing number of states applying to join the union. At the time of writing, there were five official candidate countries: Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Albania. It is worth noting that as recently as the 1990s some of these applicants were ravaged by warfare and instances of ethnic cleansing. Membership of the EU remains an attractive pull in terms of regional funding, global standing and access to the single market.

There are of course several constraints and obstacles that limit the EU's political influence. In terms of its relative importance, the EU is undoubtedly weaker than the United States. Whilst there is a debate over how to characterise the power balance within international relations, it cannot be denied that the US is the dominant political power.

The EU also finds it problematic to adopt an effective unified position. The EU is an organisation forged through compromise and consensus. In the search to speak with one voice, the European position can at times be something of a whisper. The complexity of its internal structure is one obvious limitation to consider here. In an organisation built upon a hybrid of intergovernmentalism and supranationalism, the EU cannot always act in a rapid and effective manner. Ultimately, it lacks the federal structure and political weight of a potential hegemon such as the United States, and as such is limited by its internal structural fractures, divisions and debate.

In economic terms, the EU is undoubtedly a significant actor within global affairs. Measured by the share of global GDP, the EU is the second largest economy in the world with a population size of approximately 450 million. This alone enables the EU to utilise its economic resources to exert influence. This is perhaps to be expected given that the project itself began essentially as an economic union. As the common market proved to be a success, countries sought membership for its economic benefits. The process of economic and monetary union has created a distinct European market that operates in a similar manner to any domestic economy. The single currency is the second largest reserve currency and the second most traded currency in the world, following the US Dollar in both cases. Moves towards implementing the four freedoms make it far easier to move abroad for work, and the Schengen Agreement even allows for largely unrestricted free movement of labour.

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Having said this, the process of economic and monetary union has faced major problems since the sovereign debt crisis of the late 1990s. It could be argued that the lack of convergence between the more developed economies such as Germany and the less efficient economies of Southern Europe was always going to present a problem. The institutions of the EU fudged the issue of convergence – and the resultant difficulties were to some extent a problem of their own making. Attempts to resolve the issue (such as debt restructuring) have only partially addressed the economic difficulties facing the organisation. For instance, there is a clear limitation presented by the divergent levels of public debt within the EU. In the context of economic and monetary union, those who support deeper integration may have placed political rhetoric over economic reality.

In structural terms, the EU has developed a highly developed and unique system of governance. This has enabled the organisation to act effectively and drive forward the process of integration. In relative terms, the progress made via European integration is indeed considerable. The EU has a common fisheries policy, a common agricultural policy and has harmonised over thirty separate policy areas. The laws, court decisions and directives passed by the institutions of the EU (otherwise known as the 'Acquis Communautaire') are of undoubted political importance.

However, the main constraint upon the EU is its democratic deficit. This refers to a lack of democratic legitimacy within the organisation. The main source of criticism centres upon the executive branch. It is undeniable that an unelected number of bureaucrats lie at the very heart of European decision-making, placing the accountability of the EU in the line of critique. Another related element to consider is the lack of public support for European integration. It is revealing to note that turnout in European Parliamentary elections has tended to decline, whilst the powers awarded to the institution have increased.

Pro-Europeans argue in favour of institutional reform in order to make decision-makers more accountable. Eurosceptics however believe that the project is inherently undemocratic. They point out that EU institutions have a habit of gaining powers over time despite the lack of public support for such measures. Powers should therefore be transferred to the national level in order to restore a sense of accountability. The UK's 2016 referendum and subsequent withdrawal from the organisation in 2020 has undoubtedly changed the contours of debate over this matter. Eurosceptic parties and politicians have gained support in several member states as a reaction against federal overreach from Brussels.

In terms of its military influence, the EU is relatively weaker than in the case of its economic might. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) involves military or civilian missions. Troops are deployed in order to preserve peace, prevent conflict and maintain security in accordance with the requirements of the international community. Military missions are carried out by EU forces established from the member states. Similar to Article Five of NATO, the CSDP consists of the principle of collective self-defence amongst the member states.

For an organisation that is often characterised as a civilian actor with soft power, the military capacity of the EU is worth noting. Headed by the EU's High Representative, the European Defence Union (EDU) is smaller than NATO's command structure. Given the amicable relations between the EU and NATO, the Allied Command Operations of the latter may be used for the conduct of EU missions. Having said this, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability is the actual military Headquarters of the EU. The European Defence Fund, created in 2017, marked another step towards a more effective military dimension.

The first deployment of EU troops under the CSDP occurred in 2003 in North Macedonia. Since then, the EU has deployed missions for policing and monitoring purposes to countries such as Sudan, Chad, Central African Republic and Indonesia. EU troops have also been sent to the Democratic Republic of Congo under a UN mandate. In terms of its maritime engagement, the EU has sent forces in order to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia. Closer to home, it has also sent troops to address migration issues in the southern Mediterranean.

Having said this, there are significant constraints in terms of its global military role. Perhaps the main problem facing European foreign policymakers is that the member states do not share a common platform. Historically, there are significant differences in terms of national interests and engagement with the outside world. Whilst France has a seat on the P5 and a history of engagement with the outside world, the Baltic states are primarily concerned with the

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desire to deter Russian overstretch via NATO membership. Attempts to create a common security and defence policy have been curtailed by the reluctance of certain states to establish a European alternative to NATO. The EU therefore remains somewhat reliant upon NATO (and in particular the United States). Of all the areas considered, the limitation upon its military role is the most problematic.

There are few better illustrations of the inability of the European Union to resolve a military conflict than the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Faced with a problem on its own doorstep, the EU was initially hopeful that it could operate effectively without American assistance. This was rhetoric that seemed to match the optimism of the post-Cold War era and the integration agreed upon during the Maastricht Treaty. However, the conflict was only resolved with a significant role from the Clinton administration and NATO involvement. In a unipolar world, the role of the world's only superpower proved absolutely vital in bringing the conflict to a peaceful resolution.

As a final note, it could be argued that the EU remains the leading model for regional integration. The fundamental concepts of European integration, such as pooled sovereignty, supranational bodies and the single currency, have been adopted in several areas of the world. The sheer force of globalisation further emphasises the need for successful regional integration along the basis of the EU. The manner in which European integration has accommodated the process of globalisation provides a useful blueprint for other regions of the world. That said, the circumstances behind European integration were unique to a particular context. The European project may have also reached its natural end. This is particularly noticeable within the political dimension. It should also be noted that the economic performance of the European Union has been relatively poor in recent years. This perhaps undermines the desirability of European integration, and in part explains why regional blocs such as ASEAN have gone their own way, trailing a somewhat differing path of regionalism.

The Extent to Which Regionalism Addresses Contemporary Global Issues

Conflict

In the case of preventing conflict, the concept of regionalism and the establishment of regional blocs is designed to mitigate potential disputes between states. The leading illustration of this point is the EU. The initial purpose of the European Coal and Steel Community was to make war 'not only unthinkable but materially impossible' in the words of the former French foreign minister, Robert Schuman. The practical benefits of the organisation provided a blueprint for deeper integration amongst former enemies (most notably France and Germany).

The argument that regional blocs can be utilised in order to prevent conflict is built upon the theory of neofunctionalism. According to this perspective, integration in one area inevitably creates a dynamic towards deeper integration overall. Over time, member states will make progress towards a federalist structure comparable to the United States. Neofunctionalism advocates rule by technocratic experts housed in supranational institutions.

Another important concept within neofunctionalism is that of spillover. This reflects an assumption that moves towards a more federal Europe must be achieved on a gradual basis. The creation of an ever-closer union with three discernible branches of government requires a level of legitimacy that can only be achieved on an incremental basis.

Since the 1950s, the European Union has managed to prevent conflict amongst its own members via creating a zone of peace and stability within the continent. For instance, it is a prerequisite of membership that members must be committed to democracy. In the 1980s, three countries joined the organisation after a period of dictatorial rule. In addition, several of the countries that joined in the noughties were former communist regimes. The European Union has since expanded its external presence within the field of conflict prevention. The EU has a standing army, a foreign policy and a security policy. Although primarily a civilian actor, the EU is in possession of a military capacity that seeks to ensure peace. These operations are usually conducted in cooperation with other international organisations.

Regional blocs also provide a method by which potential disputes can be resolved with meaningful dialogue and a mediated forum. In some regions of the world, these forums have actively prevented conflict. For instance, the AU is

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pledged to secure a peaceful continent via a dialogue-centred approach to conflict prevention and resolution amongst its members. Another example to consider would be ASEAN representatives dispatched to Cambodia in order to negotiate a settlement following the 1997 coup. In these and several other cases, regional blocs act in order to resolve or prevent conflict. As one might expect, the record of such organisations is somewhat mixed.

Poverty

Regionalism also plays a role in terms of mitigating the impact of poverty. In the EU, regional funds are directed towards deprived areas such as southern Italy (known as the 'Mezzogiorno'). The cohesion fund aims to improve economic well-being and avoid regional disparities. Over a third of the EU's budget is allocated towards this particular objective. The broader aim of European integration (a Europe of the Regions) could also be said to empower regions. In doing so, initiatives associated with greater regionalism *within* the European Union help to alleviate its poorest areas. Since the mid-noughties, the main emphasis within the organisation has been to increase living standards in the relatively disadvantaged parts of Eastern Europe.

The general aim of regional blocs is to increase the level of prosperity and thereby reduce levels of poverty. The reduction of trade barriers within such organisations undoubtedly stimulates economic growth and development. This should help to raise living standards on the basis of trade creation. In certain aspects of integration this is a central objective. For instance, the creation of the African Economic Community has helped to increase trading opportunities amongst the member states. However, it must also be acknowledged that economic integration creates both winners and losers. In terms of the former, consumers should benefit from lower prices and enhanced choice. However, less efficient producers will be forced out of the market. It could also be claimed that the process of economic and monetary union within the EU has exacerbated poverty. This is particularly striking amongst those economies who struggled to meet the convergence criteria laid down at Maastricht.

Human Rights

Regionalism seeks to protect human rights via internal and external measures. Membership of regional organisations often requires an adherence to fundamental human rights. This is particularly obvious in the case of the European Union. Turkey first applied to join the organisation in a formal sense during the late-1980s. However, its human rights record presents a barrier towards joining. Indeed, the states which are admitted require unanimous support amongst existing member states. They also require approval from the supranational bodies in terms of their adherence to an accession agreement. In an external sense, the EU routinely condemns those countries that violate human rights. They may also utilise their considerable soft power in order to exert pressure upon countries outside of the organisation to uphold universal human rights.

A similar observation applies to other regional blocs. Member states can be prevented from joining an organisation due to their poor human rights record. In some cases, they can even be removed from the organisation, for instance as Venezuela was in its suspension from MERCOSUR in 2016. Having said this, some regional blocs take the issue more seriously and therefore have a better record on human rights. In the Middle East, a number of states have been accused of violating human rights. Controversially, the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam was adopted by member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in 1990. The declaration undermined the universality of those rights guaranteed under the UDHR. It is also worth noting that the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) which dates back to 1963 did little to protect civil liberties. Often called the 'dictators club,' the OAU has since been replaced by the African Union (AU).

In the specific context of the European Union, access to its lucrative single market is problematic for those outside of the organisation. There have been several criticisms from civil society organisations about the level of protectionism adopted by 'Fortress Europe.' This presents a very real barrier towards export-led growth from less developed countries. It also presents an issue in regards to migration and human rights. A high number of asylum seekers flee from human rights abuses in regimes such as Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. Although European states pay lip service to universal human rights, they have also been criticised for their reluctance to accept refugees fleeing from human rights violations. The response to the Migration and Refugee Crisis from 2014 onwards has illustrated

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precisely this.

The Environment

Finally, regionalism also seeks to protect our shared environment. Given the transnational character of the issue, regional blocs provide a particularly suitable forum by which to address common problems. For instance, the EU's environmental policy has a major impact upon its member states. According to one estimate EU environmental law is now in excess of 500 directives, regulations and decisions. It has even been argued that the EU has the most extensive environmental laws of any international organisation in the world (Jordan and Adelle 2012).

The significance of the European Union's environmental programme can be assessed upon the international stage. The EU is a signatory to all the major multilateral environmental agreements. However, there is also a gap between capabilities and expectations. The rhetoric employed by the European Union does not always mirror its results. Other regional blocs have sought to promote trade in environmental goods. For instance, APEC economies seek to bolster trade in those goods that promote green growth and sustainable development. The commitment to reduce tariffs on environmental goods dates back to 2012.

The existence of regional organisations would seem to imply that environmental issues can be addressed in a more effective manner. Given the habit of cooperation generated by membership of such organisations, there is a regular forum to deliberate upon transnational issues. However, this is not in itself enough to ensure that levels of pollution are reduced. To take one example, NAFTA places less emphasis upon the environment. Under the agreement, domestic environmental laws should not discriminate against trade. As a consequence, firms can challenge environmental regulations passed in the signatory states. This is an approach that has contributed towards a significant increase in greenhouse gas emissions according to research by the noted environmentalist organisation Sierra Club (Sierra Club 2018). It should also be noted that Chinese membership of regional blocs has done little to limit the level of emissions deriving from the world's largest polluter.

Conclusion

In summary, the aim of this chapter has been to place the significance of regionalism within the broader context of international relations. For instance, there are several factors to consider that drive the process of regionalism. The relationship between regionalism and globalisation is a complex one. In one sense, regionalism is a reflection of the process of globalisation. However, it could also be viewed as contrary to the ethos of globalisation. Of all the regional organisations to consider, the most significant remains that of the European Union. It has for instance provided a blueprint for other areas of regional integration (notably in Africa). The EU is also an increasingly important actor within global politics.

About the author:

Kevin Bloor is an author, Principal Examiner and teacher. He has over twenty years of experience in the social sciences and is the author of several texts and educational resources such as *Understanding Global Politics*, *The Definitive Guide to Political Ideologies*, *Understanding Political Theory* and *Sociology: Theories, Theorists and Concepts*. He holds a BA in Politics and International Relations and an MA in International Relations, both from Staffordshire University, and an MPhil in Government from Manchester University.