The Future of Europe: Coping with Crisis

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The European Union has faced a number of "polycrises" since 2008, any of which could prove fatal to Europe; however, despite these challenges, the EU today is stronger and more stable than we are led to believe. The experiment in regional integration has endured for 65 years, which is actually longer than some countries in the world have been independent states. The regional interdependence of the EU member states is primarily economic, but also includes political, legal and cultural issues. Despite the recent headlines about BREXIT and the "demise" of the EU, it remains the most successful example of a voluntary international institution in history.

Europe's geopolitical influence is actually much greater than it is given credit. Its response to the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1990s and even Russia's intervention in the Ukraine in 2014, should be viewed as the exception rather than the rule. The EU actually exercises both "hard" and "soft" power transcontinentally and could arguably be called the world's "second super-power." As one example, the EU's member states' military power is second only to the United States when it comes to military expenditures and capabilities, clearly surpassing China. It can even be argued that the EU countries have a greater capacity to project military power than Russia, despite the recent expansion of Russian influence in the Middle East.

Europe's nonmilitary power surpasses that of the United States, primarily due to the region's collective economic power and influence. For example, Europe's GDP is 50 percent larger than China's and 13 times larger than Russia's. The EU has grown from 12 to 28 member countries, which support democracy, free-market economies and the rule of law. Europe also provides more foreign aid to developing countries, three times that of the United States. Europe has also used its economic power politically, joining the United States in boycotting Iran, which, it can be argued, helped force Iran to the negotiating table over nuclear weapons.

A growing concern in Europe has been the rise of right-wing radicalism, seen in nationalist leaders in France, Ireland, Denmark, Greece and the Netherlands, who called for referenda on leaving the EU. So far, only British votes have actually supporting leaving the EU, in 2016, with their BREXIT vote. While the British government is struggling over how to implement a departure from the EU, other states in the Union are not jumping on board. Most EU member state citizens have voiced support for the EU and public trust in its institutions remains high.

Europe does face significant challenges due to a rise in immigration from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Europe's Schengen Agreement, which makes transiting borders easy due to its passport-free movement, poses particular problems for controlling the movement of refugee and asylum seekers in European countries. Also, the recent spate of terrorist attacks, to include the Paris attacks in 2015, Brussels attacks in 2016, and various incidents throughout Germany in 2016, have created a backlash against immigration, leading some countries, like Hungary, to try to erect barriers to impede the movement of migrants.

In 2017, Europe faces other challenges from slow economic growth, high inequality, and political discontent. These internal factors have spurred a rise of Euroskeptics and European radicalism,

which threatens Europe's stability. Yet, the EU works best when it "muddles through" and does not try to expand on Euro-federalist programs, but instead relies on decentralized solutions to common problems.