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Brexit from EU: Lessons for ASEAN?

By Aedan Mordecai

Synopsis

As the UK prepares for the national referendum on whether to stay in the EU, the British Prime Minister attempts to negotiate reforms to the union. Choosing to leave would have significant consequences for all parties involved. Could ASEAN face a similar situation one day?

Commentary

PRIME MINISTER David Cameron has spelt out his demands for remaining in the European Union, which he hopes to renegotiate with the union before the in/out referendum he promised the nation during the last general election. The referendum, likely to be in 2017, will ultimately determine whether the UK continues to be part of the EU, regardless of the outcome of the negotiation attempts.

Cameron called for the referendum because he is unsatisfied with the Bloc as it is, but conversely is also campaigning to remain in the EU. The reasons to stay for Cameron are obvious: the EU is the UK's main trading partner and the single market offers many economic benefits. Although Cameron, as leader of the Conservative Party, represents the majority of the nation's capital owners first and foremost, the promise of a referendum was a necessary move as they were losing votes to the party further to the right, the populist, United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

Britain to leave the EU?

The question seems is why is the UK threatening to leave whilst simultaneously renegotiating? Does this represent a failure in the EU model, whereby members cannot otherwise air their grievances formally, in a manner where they are

addressed in a timely and serious fashion, or is Cameron just using this episode as a political ploy to satisfy his domestic constituents?

Either way, the EU has to face this conundrum, which could lead to contention among its members due to the UK's demands. As well as requiring alterations to existing treaties, Cameron wants to change the requirements for EU migrants to claim benefits. This would undermine the EU's principle of free movement, and would require some creative negotiating on Britain's side to achieve. Ultimately a compromise will likely be reached and a deal made, as the UK is not alone in desiring reform.

Why is Britain, one of the union's core members, potentially on the brink of leaving the EU? This situation has surfaced after much debate regarding the UK's position in the EU. Eurosceptic sentiment has grown within the country over recent years, a trend not just restricted to Britain. Parts of society believe that Brussels (the home of the European Union) decides too much of what happens domestically, with sovereignty being chipped away.

Others are unhappy about the perceived influx of foreigners and the effect this has had on local society. Sentiments such as these have been magnified by the emotions that the recent Paris attacks have stirred, with many fearing that Europe's open borders could be exploited by terrorist organisations. These feelings are underlined by the common belief that the British Isles inherently differs from Continental Europe.

Implications of a 'Brexit' on ASEAN

The momentum is with the 'Exit' camp, with recent polls indicating they have gained a majority. The implications of leaving the union will not be trivial. For one, it will not just lead to the UK separating from the EU, but also from Scotland. Scotland would almost certainly demand a repeat referendum regarding its independence, with the Scottish population likely to vote for this time around.

Cameron would be in an untenable position as a result, and would have to step down as prime minister. The new leader would be obliged to negotiate bilaterally with the EU countries as Britain will no longer be part of the single market, an inevitably arduous process. Most crucially the UK - or what is left of it - would be on the outside, looking in, when it comes to EU matters. Britain's strength militarily, economically as well as geopolitically, would represent a loss for Europe. While one could not predict the referendum result at present, leaving will have considerable implications.

ASEAN, despite the constant comparisons, differs hugely from its European counterpart, both in organisation as well as culturally. ASEAN is far more flexible in nature, where there is almost no infringement on respective member's sovereignty. A number of provisions are in place to avoid situations like the current EU showdown.

The insertion of the 'ASEAN minus X' clause allows members to opt out of agreed economic conditions if they feel they are not ready. Though this could lead to a two-track ASEAN, it does at least ensure that agreements are not forced upon states.

These provisions all stem from the ASEAN principle of consensus. Whilst the principle has its critics, and results in a snail's pace process of integration and decision making, it minimises the level of discontent.

The potential Brexit stems from domestic concern of Britain's relationship with the union, conversely ASEAN hardly features on any of the member states' domestic agendas, as it is predominantly an inter-governmental organisation and does not possess the EU's supranational character. It's highly improbable that there could be the backlash against ASEAN as an institution that we are currently witnessing in Europe.

Future safeguards

The establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) on 31 Dec 2015 will lead to further integration, though not to the degree of the EU's single market arrangement. This pattern of a steady integration raises the possibility of future calls for changes to previous agreements, as consensus in the present does not ensure consensus in the future.

Unlikely as a Brexit scenario seems at present, the future is less predictable. ASEAN should consider including an exit mechanism within its charter, as well as provisions for when a member state strongly desires an immediate change to the organisation. Safeguards and formal procedures could mitigate any damage arising from one of ASEAN's members deciding to rock the boat.

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