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We can learn from EU's transformation of bloody continent

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THE news that the European Union has been awarded this year's Nobel Peace Prize has been greeted with incredulity and outrage by many observers. But, while the timing might have been better, if the award is supposed to go to someone or something that has been instrumental in eliminating conflict could there be a more deserving recipient?

It's worth remembering the circumstances from which the EU emerged. Anyone with even the sketchiest grasp of history knows conflict, chaos and conquest have been a seemingly inescapable part of European scenery since time immemorial.

This, after all, is the continent that brought us the 100 Years War and industrialised genocide, among other horrors. It might look pretty civilised now, but it generally hasn't been. There is no guarantee it will remain so.

While no one expected the original Common Market to evolve as it has, its history offers important optimism-inducing lessons. The first is that peace doesn't just happen; it needs to be created. While there's no doubt that the magic of the market has transformed cross-border relations, the institutions that allowed interdependence to flourish had to be built.

At a time when US foreign policy is uncertain and subject to widespread criticism, it's important to acknowledge what a crucial and constructive role the US played in securing a peaceful and prosperous Europe in the aftermath of World War II.

True, the primary motivation for its material support of the devastated European economies might have been its evolving struggle with the Soviet Union, but the net effect was positive.

The contrast with our own region could hardly be more stark. While US policy in Europe helped Europeans to rapidly overcome their wartime antagonisms, in the Asia-Pacific ideological divisions lingered and old tensions remained unresolved. It is not only the Korean peninsula that remains a fossilised reminder of an earlier era; the increasingly dangerous territorial disputes between China and its neighbours have their origins in the struggles of the Cold War era that US policy helped to entrench rather than to resolve.

While the Asia-Pacific may now be an unparalleled economic success story, it has not been able to achieve the same degree of political co-operation and integration as the EU. Some might see this as no bad thing, but the Asia-Pacific has not been able to develop anything to match the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, much less the highly institutionalised relations between the EU's member states.

The absence of effective, powerful institutions in the Asia-Pacific helps to explain the persistence of problems that have disappeared elsewhere.

For all the EU's overweening, unrepresentative, elitist and occasionally incompetent bureaucracy, it has one great redeeming virtue: it has transformed the way the nation-states of western Europe interact. The idea of a common community of fate may not have percolated down to the general population of Europe, but it has redefined interstate relations at an elite level in this blood-soaked corner of the world.

The great tragedy of the EU experience is that it may be undone by its own success. The creation of a common European market, the free movement of labour and a common set of regulatory principles really are historically unprecedented developments. It is now clear that the common currency was the proverbial bridge too far.

But, to all those indulging in a suitably European bout of schadenfreude, be careful. . If the EU were to break up or even begin to jettison weaker members it would be a tragedy. The virulent strain of

nationalism re-emerging in Europe once seemed to have disappeared forever. The longer-term damage may be to our sense of what is possible managing an interconnected world.

For all its faults, problems and hubristic delusions of grandeur, the EU remains one of the few examples of real progress and co-operation at a time of mounting global challenges and uncertainties. What we should focus on is the fact the EU has been able to stabilise one of the world's most historically violent regions for as long as it has.

If the price of peace, stability and, let's not forget, prosperity for much of the past 50 years has been an occasionally over-ambitious and unresponsive bureaucracy, it's a price worth paying. Transnational interdependence is an inescapable and desirable fact of life. We have no choice other than to continue thinking about how such relationships might be organised. There is a powerful argument that our region needs EU-like organisations to manage fractious relations and resolve historical enmities. The EU is still the only example of how this can be done. The Nobel prize seems an entirely deserved acknowledgement of this historical reality.

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