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Equality through the crisis, in Europe as in Asia

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The crisis is bringing Europe closer to Asia. There is less equality; there is a reluctant leader, Germany, like Japan in Asia – forever feared by the less powerful neighbours.

The crisis in Europe questions the wisdom of those who proclaimed the E.U. a “special” case, thus finding a convenient way to avoid pondering less favourable scenarios. One of such scenarios has now materialised, and as the crisis struck, we saw nothing special in the dominant country taking on leadership. There is also nothing exceptional in a future where “those with money will call the shots.”^[1] Finally, it is hardly surprising that in such critical times we saw little of the E.U. diplomats, and much of Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, the previous president of France. Put simply, decisions were made between the powerful member states’ governments, rather than as a “community,” the way that made the E.U. so special.



The lesson for Asia is that equality “on paper” can go only as far; crises bare true rules of the game. We have seen this when the weakness of ASEAN was revealed in the 1997 Asian financial crisis, questioning the influence of a Southeast Asian weak states’ grouping. But Asian states never considered themselves equal. M. Tamamoto perceptively wrote that major European states hold relatively equal power, contrasting this situation with inequality in Asia.^[2] But Europe is more than a bundle of the few big states, and even those biggest—like France, Italy or Germany—are not equal, neatly demonstrated by the *primus inter pares* position occupied today by Berlin. Outside the powerful core, lesser states like Greece or new Eastern European members to the E.U. sometimes genuinely fight their way through to have their voices heard.

Europe enjoys more equality than Asia—that is still true. But today’s critical condition has unveiled the nuanced power game that European states have to play, just as those in Asia always had to.

^[1] Stephen Castle, “Crisis Batters E.U.’s Longtime Cherished Notion of Members’ Equality,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 8, 2011.

^[2] Masaru Tamamoto, “Ambiguous Japan: Japanese National Identity at Century’s End,” in *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, eds. G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 208-9.

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