

Benefits of proposed Asia-Pacific Community

by Doug Chester
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I REFER to the article by Rodolfo C. Severino, 'What's the point of a new Asia-Pacific architecture?' (Jan 7).

Mr Severino argues that Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal of an Asia-Pacific Community would 'undermine the structures that are already in place'. This is not the case.

In his Singapore Lecture: Building On ASEAN's Success - Towards An Asia-Pacific Community, delivered at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies on Aug 12 last year, Mr Rudd acknowledged that our region has benefited greatly from existing regional architecture, including ASEAN, APEC and the East Asia Summit. He said: 'These institutions have made, do make and will continue to make a great contribution to our security, stability and prosperity.'

A discussion about a possible Asia-Pacific Community does not mean the diminution of existing regional bodies. Mr Rudd has simply proposed a regional discussion about the type of architecture we should work towards to prepare for the challenges ahead. He has suggested building on structures already in place to foster a deeper sense of community with enhanced habits and patterns of cooperation.

The fundamental rationale behind the proposal recognises that the centre of global strategic and economic gravity is shifting rapidly to the Asia-Pacific. The region needs to shape the results of that historic change to ensure we benefit to the full from it, rather than simply react to developments.

Australia's long-term goal is to have an Asia-Pacific body that brings together relevant countries to conduct dialogue and cooperate across the full suite of challenges we may face. The current regional architecture is effective, but there is no one forum where all the key regional players can come together to discuss the full range of political, economic and security issues.

Few would argue with Mr Severino when he notes 'the centrality of ASEAN 's role has served the region so well for so many years'. In his lecture, Mr Rudd acknowledged that ASEAN has been a remarkable success story, saying ' ASEAN represents an outstanding essay in institutional success, for which member states, including Singapore, should be congratulated'. He has also explicitly said that ASEAN will remain central to the region's future architecture.

And the wider region can learn much from ASEAN's success - how to build the institutions, habits and practices of cooperation across the policy spectrum. At the same time, recognising the other spheres of influence in the broader Asia-Pacific region, enhanced regional cooperation, as proposed by Mr Rudd, should serve to advance ASEAN's interests still further.

It is Australia's strong belief that the Asia-Pacific Community proposal should be viewed as an opportunity to enhance the entire Asia-Pacific, not as a cause for concern in any part of this dynamic region.

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