

# Australia's APC meddling with ASEAN

by Pavin Chachavalpongpun  
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Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's bold vision of an Asia-Pacific Community (APC) might be seen as the latest attempt to constitute his country's regional identity in an increasingly globalised era, lately realised by the tumultuous impact caused by the global financial crisis. It could also be Mr Rudd's exercise of an active foreign policy, reflected through his eagerness to place Australia gravitationally at the centre of the region.



ASEAN is not amused... Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd wishes to promote Australia's clout through a new Asia-Pacific Community that would supersede ASEAN.

But the APC is a dangerous concept, particularly for members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Mr Rudd, who is fluent in Mandarin and often shows off his skills whenever he visits this part of the world, is keeping himself busy upsetting more and more of his closest neighbours in Southeast Asia. His idea of an APC is practically designed to belittle, or

even alienate, ASEAN because it is seeking to create an Asian group that would begin meeting on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the East Asia Summit (EAS).

The proposed Asian group would encompass the US, China, Japan, India, South Korea, Indonesia, Russia and Australia. Past, present and future ASEAN chairs may be invited to join to APC, but ASEAN risks becoming "the potential loser" in Mr Rudd's new regional architecture.

The controversial vision of APC came to surface once again following an article by Paul Kelly, "Shape of the Future," published in The Australian on Dec 20, 2008. In this article, Mr Kelly referred to the concept of Mr Rudd's APC based on an interim report of former Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade chief Dick Woolcott who claimed to have visited 16 countries, spoken to 162 policy-makers in the region, and even earned support from some members of ASEAN.

Mr Woolcott boasted that the APC was meant to become a new regional community by 2020 that could cover all issues, economic, security and political. Although there are many regional forums, the report emphasised, none meets these overall tests.

But ASEAN diplomats were not entertained by Australia's unimpressive foreign policy initiative. They reasoned that the APC would only undermine already existing regional mechanisms, including ASEAN, its Dialogue system, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three, the EAS and APEC. Moreover, ASEAN has long been a main driving force behind these regional mechanisms. Its role as a hub of the many regional organisations in the Asia-Pacific is encouraged because ASEAN has been considered a neutral player and an honest broker that brings together key regional powers. In fact, upon its admission into the East Asia Summit, Australia unfailingly recognised this important role of ASEAN as the region's motivating force.

But Mr Rudd was too willing to mash ASEAN for the sake of his own foreign policy ambitions.

A question in return should be: why should ASEAN embrace Mr Rudd's vision at the expense of its own diminishing role? Indeed, one former ASEAN diplomat even called for Canberra to "leave ASEAN alone".

ASEAN's central role in the Asia-Pacific is not only justified by its long years of existence. Southeast Asia as a unique region in various ways in itself deserves a leading role. ASEAN, with its combined population of 574 million and its GDP of nearly US\$1.5 trillion, represents the core strength of the wider Asian region. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, is situated in ASEAN. Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore have retained good ties with the US. And the region acts well as a crucial bridge between China and India. Some ASEAN members have invested substantially in Australia. It is unappreciative of Australia, once invited to participate in the East Asia Summit, to reconstruct the landscape of the Asia-Pacific effectively without ASEAN. The APC will not work without the strong presence of ASEAN. Australia might have forgotten that existing regional cooperative frameworks have been successful because of ASEAN's active participation. Why should countries in the region spend more energy, time and resources on a new regional cooperation that would threaten what they have achieved over the course of decades?

How should Thailand respond to Australia's unbounded foreign policy ambitions? First, ASEAN has always been made a cornerstone of Thai foreign policy. To support Mr Rudd's idea of APC at the expense of ASEAN's shrinking role would jeopardise Thailand's own national and regional interests. Furthermore, as the current chair of ASEAN, it is a natural responsibility for Thailand to defend ASEAN's position. After all, a successful chairmanship is to be measured by the extent to which Thailand cements ASEAN's role in the region and beyond.

So far, the signs are positive. The Democrat government has put all efforts into making the upcoming ASEAN Summit a success after it was postponed due to the domestic political situation. Thailand earlier emphasised that this year's summit should be about the celebration of a new ASEAN Charter and the search for a shortcut to the completion of an ASEAN Community by 2015.

Australia's wish to strengthen cooperation within the Asia-Pacific is admirable. But to shrug off ASEAN and its past achievements, no matter how much or how little it has done over four decades, is condemnable. Indeed, the old notion of Australia as a country so different and far apart from Southeast Asia could be true since - after all these years - it has failed to understand the regional reality and the mentality of its Asian neighbours.

Therefore, the problem here does not lie with ASEAN: why has it been bypassed by Canberra? But it is rather with Australia itself because of its unrealistic foreign policy.

Prime Minister Keviiin Rudd may have an excellent command of Mandarin, but he needs to learn more of an "ASEAN" language if he wants to become a successful regional leader in his own right.

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