

Kevin Rudd's multi-layered Asia Pacific Community initiative

by Carlyle A. Thayer
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In a speech delivered to the Shangri-la Dialogue in late May, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd once again advanced his proposal for an Asia Pacific Community this time calling for a one and a half track conference to be held in Australia later this year. There has been widespread academic and diplomatic scepticism of the proposal since it was first promoted in an address to the Asia Society in Sydney in June last year.



Veteran Singaporean diplomat Barry Desker declared the proposal 'dead in the water' shortly after Rudd spoke. More recently, the retired ABC foreign correspondent Graeme Dobbell, writing in a Lowy Institute blog, argued that the Prime Minister had cut his losses and 'moved on' by demoting the 'c' in community from upper to lower case. And, as the East Asia Forum has revealed, The Australian got it wrong when it asserted that Kurt Campbell, in his confirmation hearing for appointment as Assistant Secretary of State, had opposed the idea.

Before throwing the baby out with the bath water it is worth considering what a conference on the Asia Pacific Community might consider. Rudd's central premise was that 'none of our existing regional mechanisms as currently configured' were capable of

engaging ‘in the full spectrum of dialogue, cooperation and action on economic and political matters and future challenges to security’. He therefore proposed a regional institution that spanned the entire Asia-Pacific region capable of achieving these objectives.

Rudd’s proposal was aimed at overcoming the compartmentalisation of existing regional institutions by creating an effective leadership forum where major political, economic and security issues could be dealt with holistically rather than piecemeal. For example, APEC has focused mainly on trade liberalisation, while the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has dealt with confidence-building measures. The ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asia Summit (EAS) processes overlap in membership and their explicit roles have yet to be clearly defined.

There are several major challenges that must be faced if Rudd’s proposal is to become a reality. The first concerns what specific organisational form the Asia Pacific Community should take. Nearly a year after it was first proposed, it has become apparent that there is little regional backing for the creation of a new regional institution. But there appears to be some support for modifying or expanding existing multilateral arrangements in order to create a more effective regional architecture.

Both APEC and the EAS have emerged as front runners. Either APEC or EAS could be upgraded to serve as the foundation for Rudd’s Asia Pacific Community, or both could be upgraded and assume greater responsibility, respectively, for economic and political-security matters.

The second major challenge concerns membership. In 2008, Rudd initially nominated the United States, Japan, China, India, Indonesia ‘and other states in the region’ as members. As a result of Australian diplomatic soundings, it is clear that if Rudd’s proposal is to get off the ground ASEAN must be at its core. This means that Myanmar, viewed by many as a pariah state, would be included along with poverty-stricken Laos and Cambodia.

The question of membership could be addressed by expanding existing institutions such as APEC, by including India, or the EAS, by adding the United States and Russia. In either case, adding additional members to these institutions raises the complication of deciding what to do with countries (or 'economies' as in the case of APEC) that belong to one but not both bodies. APEC includes Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as Mexico, Chile and Peru, none of whom are participants in the EAS. Papua New Guinea, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the European Union are all members of the ARF and could legitimately claim they should be included in any new regional architecture.

Because the EAS has a smaller membership, and includes all ASEAN members, it might be a more suitable candidate for community building in the Asia Pacific than APEC. The EAS brings together heads of government and state. Russia wants in and the Obama Administration has already signaled it will pursue accession to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Accession to this treaty is a prerequisite for a seat on the EAS.

If a consensus emerged to build on the EAS process, progress is likely to be evolutionary. The EAS could gradually develop from a forum where heads of government and state discuss issues where economic, political and security considerations overlap into a body that provides leadership and direction in addressing these issues. The development of an Asia Pacific Community is more likely to build on existing multilateral institutions and arrangements than be at their expense.

Rudd's proposal for an Asia Pacific Community is still a viable proposition because the Prime Minister has not been prescriptive about what shape it should take. The current Global Financial Crisis has driven home the necessity for the Asia Pacific to step up regional cooperation. Before pronouncing Rudd's proposal dead on arrival it would be prudent to wait for regional reactions to the Prime Minister's advocacy at ASEAN-sponsored summits and the outcome of Rudd's one and a half track conference later in the year.

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