

What's the point of a new Asia-Pacific architecture?

By Rodolfo C. Severino

The Straits Times
Jan 7, 2009

AN ARTICLE by Mr Paul Kelly appeared in The Australian on Dec 20 last year, entitled, portentously, Shape Of The Future. It was an undiluted and unabashed piece of advocacy on behalf of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal for an 'Asia-Pacific Community'. The article draws much from the report of respected retired diplomat Richard Woolcott in claiming wide regional support for Mr Rudd's proposal. However, as Mr Kelly's account of Mr Woolcott's and Mr Rudd's 'soundings' remind us, the Rudd 'initiative' was announced first and Mr Woolcott was then sent to the region to seek support for it.

The quality of that support is reflected in Mr Kelly's interpretation of Malaysia's no-objection to American and Russian participation in the East Asia Summit (EAS) as implicit Malaysian approval of the Rudd initiative, when in fact the EAS and the proposed Asia-Pacific Community are two different things, as Mr Kelly himself acknowledges.

The question that Mr Rudd's proposal raises is this: What is the need for a new Asia-Pacific 'architecture' in addition to those that already exist? A related and, perhaps, more relevant question is: Would not the proposed new 'architecture' undermine the structures that are already in place?

Those structures - encompassing the Asia-Pacific as a whole or the region designated as East Asia (with or without Australia, India and New Zealand) - include the Asean Dialogue system, the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), Asean Plus Three, the East Asia Summit, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum, as well as the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) itself. These structures have two characteristics.

One is the diverse but overlapping character of their memberships. This diversity arises pragmatically from their differing functions.

The Dialogue system, with 10 Asean partners, seeks to engage, politically and economically, the major powers in the affairs of South-east Asia and with one another. The 27-member ARF seeks to build confidence among East and South Asian countries and the major powers with interests in Asia. Asean Plus Three links the three major North-east Asian countries to South-east Asia in areas of cooperation where Asean alone is insufficient.

The East Asia Summit adds Australia, India and New Zealand in strategic discussions on vital issues. Apec is devoted to the liberalisation and facilitation of trade and investments across the Asia-Pacific and to the consideration of strategic issues that relate to those purposes. It is difficult to see what a new configuration such as the one Mr Rudd proposes can add to these tested structures.

The other characteristic of these structures is that Asean is at the hub of all of them. The ministerial meetings of the Asean Dialogues and of the ARF are presided over by the Asean chair and take place on the occasion of the annual Asean Ministerial Meeting. Asean controls participation in them.

Asean Plus Three and the East Asia Summit convene back-to-back with Asean Summits and are also led by the Asean chair. Asean largely determines the areas in which Asean Plus Three cooperation is to take place and at what levels. Significantly, it was Asean that pushed the participation of Australia, as well as of India and New Zealand, in the EAS.

Asean manages all these processes. Its support for Apec was indispensable at the beginning but has somewhat diminished in significance with time. Still, Asean's central, if largely symbolic, role in Apec is manifested in the fact that Apec meetings take place in an Asean country every three years. Also, the Asean Secretariat is an Apec observer.

Asean's centrality in these regional constructs is based on certain strategic and pragmatic considerations. Asean, with 10 members, has achieved a critical mass with a total population of 574 million and a combined gross domestic product of nearly US\$1.5 trillion (S\$2.2 trillion). It is a leading market and investment destination of many developed countries. Indeed, some Asean countries are major sources of investments in Australia.

At the same time, despite its size, Asean is a neutral entity - non-threatening in fact and by design. Thus, key participants in various regional schemes, not trusting one another enough, insist on Asean's leading role. Indeed, such a role is a pre-condition for the success of Asia-Pacific regional forums.

In the light of these facts, it is hard to see how an Australian proposal for another regional forum could be more acceptable to its putative participants than the current structures, in which the centrality of Asean's role has served the region so well for so many years.

It would be better to devote time and energy to the strengthening of existing institutions and processes than to establishing new and unnecessary ones.

The writer, a former secretary-general of Asean, is head of the Asean Studies Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

The question that Mr Rudd's proposal raises is this: What is the need for a new Asia-Pacific 'architecture' in addition to the ones that already exist? A related and, perhaps,

more relevant question is: Would not the proposed new 'architecture' undermine the structures that are already in place?