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The “Asia-Pacific Community” Idea: What Next?

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Australian PM Kevin Rudd’s “Asia-Pacific Community” initiative has drawn mixed regional reactions. Notwithstanding its merits, the initiative should reconsider the prospects for a single institutional formula for the entire Asia-Pacific region.

IT HAS ALMOST been a year since Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd proposed a new regional architecture, the “Asia-Pacific Community” (APC). Arguing that Australia must drive the creation of a new architecture for the Asia-Pacific, Mr Rudd called for “a vision for the Asia-Pacific community...that embraces a regional institution” spanning the entire Asia-Pacific, “including the United States, Japan, China, India, Indonesia and the other states of the region”.

This comprehensive institution would presumably be capable of handling “the full spectrum of dialogue, cooperation and action in economic and political matters and future challenges related to security” — a one-stop shop for all things Asia-Pacific, as it were.

Mixed reactions to initiative

When Mr Rudd first mooted the idea, reactions to it were decidedly mixed; memorably, two senior statesmen from Mr Rudd’s Labor Party — ex-premiers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating —criticised the APC proposal. Others weighed in on failings that apparently marred the proposal’s preparation and launch. Beyond Australia, reactions from around the region were equally ambivalent. Some analysts from Southeast Asia were concerned that the idea might potentially undermine already existing regional arrangements.

Mr Rudd’s failure to consult with regional countries — a longstanding diplomatic practice in the region — before going public with his initiative was also questioned. For a China hand, the Mandarin-speaking premier seemed neither particularly “Chinese” nor “Asian” in his approach. Indeed, China displayed greater sensitivity to its regional neighbours by cautioning that the time was simply “not ripe” for the APC idea. Yet Mr Rudd’s propensity to float ideas for new institutions would not have been out of place in the world of Asia-Pacific diplomacy.

Invitation to parley

On the other hand, his initiative elicited praise from others. Mr Rudd's point-man for the APC venture, Richard Woolcott, claims that reception from the region has largely been "warm". Leading pundits in Indonesia and Thailand welcomed it as useful for spurring serious discussion about the future of regional community. As Indonesia's Hadi Soesastro put it: "If Rudd had come up with a fully-baked proposal, the exercise could be self-defeating." For Soesastro, the initiative should be seen as an invitation to all and sundry to participate constructively in the evolving regionalism of the Asia-Pacific.

If anything, Mr Rudd arguably did right by his Asian counterparts on at least two counts. Firstly, while he might have jumped the gun by launching the APC idea without first consulting the region or establishing consensus, he nonetheless sought thereafter to solicit regional inputs, primarily through his envoy's efforts but also on his own. Secondly, he kept the APC proposal relatively vague on details, presumably in order to stimulate discussion.

In that spirit, at least three concerns come to mind which Mr Rudd could consider.

No single architecture likely for Asia-Pacific?

The APC idea envisages a single body encompassing the entire Asia-Pacific, a geographically vast, culturally diverse, economically disparate and politically complex region. Conceding that the European Union should not be "an identikit model", Mr Rudd nonetheless insisted, perhaps rightly so, that the Asia-Pacific region could learn from the experience of the Europeans. Thus far, the region's efforts have yielded a limited regionalism, while prospects for more enhanced cooperation appear stronger at the East Asian rather than Asia-Pacific level, especially since the 1997 financial crisis. But as Australian academic Joseph Camilleri argued, no single institutional formula is likely equal to the task of handling the vast array of security challenges that confront the Asia-Pacific today.

At the moment the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is the only body that boasts region-wide representation. If anything, the inability of the ARF to progress further in security cooperation underscores key challenges facing any effort at large-scale comprehensive regionalism in the Asia-Pacific. Perhaps mindful of the ARF's debatable track record, Hugh White, a prominent Australian strategic thinker, observed that while the APC was not a bad idea in itself, it would likely be unhelpful for addressing Australia's "most urgent problems".

All this is not to imply that those challenges cannot be overcome, or that no fortuitous union of national wills and capacities needed to form the APC (or its equivalent) would ever materialise. But it does mean that proponents of the initiative have their work cut out for them, not least in a region that has long frustrated attempts to define an overall strategic coherence and all-inclusive regionalism.

Strengthen existing institutional arrangements

Secondly, no Asia-Pacific community would likely be possible unless existing regional bodies are taken into account. Unsurprisingly, the APC initiative raised questions about the relationship between the proposed APC and existing regional groups such as APEC, ASEAN, ARF, ASEAN+3 and East Asia Summit (EAS). Although Mr Rudd allowed that these "will continue to play important roles", how exactly they would do so was unclear.

What is crucial for the Asia-Pacific today is for its existing bodies to be strengthened. While the ARF and EAS continue to dither, the ASEAN+3 has shown promise by establishing a multibillion dollar, foreign-reserve pool for needy economies. For a region in risk of institutional fatigue, the answer may lie in enhancing and empowering existing institutions rather than in adding yet another forum to an

already cluttered regional landscape. Ideas previously floated, such as upgrading the ARF to a summit, or twinning APEC and ARF to facilitate greater synergy, merit reconsideration. To the extent the APC initiative might have instilled a deeper sense of urgency and resolve in extant groupings to enhance cooperation, there is no question then that Mr Rudd has in fact done the region a service.

Functional regionalism: the way ahead?

Finally, the APC idea could benefit by taking seriously functional processes already underway in the Asia-Pacific. For a region as diverse as the Asia-Pacific, the logical path towards community formation consists in interests-based cooperation. Indeed, there are growing signs that the region is moving in that direction, as evidenced by the ways in which, say, ASEAN+3 countries are managing the economic recession, or the ARF is tackling disaster relief, maritime security and transnational crime. Conversely, the region's ideological pluralism makes a values-based community less likely. In the same way, an Australian university don has urged that dialogue within the Asia-Pacific must begin with "processes, not principles".

Crucially, the region's growing functionalism could also put Mr Rudd's understanding of regional leadership to the test. His APC vision rests primarily on collective leadership by big and middle powers. However, tiny Singapore, for instance, has often taken the lead in international economic matters, such as the formation of the ASEAN Economic Community or issue advocacy at the Doha Round trade talks.

Whether Mr Rudd's big and middle powers can provide the requisite leadership in various functional areas remains to be seen. In order for his APC vision to succeed, what the Australian premier cannot afford is to inadvertently deprive others of their stakes in the region.

To be sure, Mr Rudd is not unaware of these concerns. His upcoming visit to Singapore for the Shangri-La Dialogue at the end of May will no doubt serve as a useful gauge of regional views as well as an opportunity for deliberations with fellow leaders on his initiative.

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