

June 24, 2009
THINK TANK

Australia must respect Asean's role

By Tommy Koh



AUSTRALIAN Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has proposed an Asia-Pacific community (APc). He spoke of the idea in Singapore last June and again at last month's Shangri-La Dialogue.

The region, he has argued, needs a body 'with a mandate to engage across the breadth of the security, economic and political challenges we will face in the future'.

Among other things, he has been at pains to emphasise that:

- Though there is no appetite for additional institutions, our current structures do not provide a single forum for all relevant leaders to discuss a full range of issues;
- The Australian initiative is to begin a conversation about where we need to go; Canberra has no prescriptive view on the matter;
- The APc would, over time, emulate Asean's success in community-building in South-east Asia; and
- Australia would convene a Track 1.5 conference to further explore its initiative at the end of this year.

My initial reactions to Mr Rudd's proposal are as follows:

- First, I welcome Canberra convening an inclusive process of discussions on our regional architecture. For the discussion to be useful, it should focus on the challenges and opportunities facing the Asia-Pacific region, the existing structure for dealing with them and whether there is a need to renovate that structure in order to enable the region to respond more effectively to future challenges and opportunities.
- Second, I think it is relevant to remind ourselves that there are in existence three parallel community-building processes in our region, each covering South-east Asia, East Asia and the Asia-Pacific, respectively.

The Asean story in South-east Asia does not need repetition here. The wider East Asian community has also embarked on a community-building process, driven by Asean+3

(China, Japan and South Korea) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), which is in effect Asean+3+3 (India, Australia and New Zealand).

The fact that we are also committed to building an Asia-Pacific community through the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum does not make either Asean+3 or EAS superfluous. I was therefore surprised when I heard an Australian friend say recently that with an APc we would not need either Asean+3 or EAS. Such a view shows that he was out of touch with Asian sentiments and realities.

- Third, I think, implicit in Prime Minister Rudd's remarks was the view that, while admirable, Asean's role should be confined chiefly to South-east Asia. Such a view disregards the important role that Asean has played and continues to play as convener and facilitator of Asean+3, EAS and the Asean Regional Forum (ARF). Asean's role has never been confined to South-east Asia.

Indeed, due to its cohesion, neutrality and acceptability to all stakeholders, Asean has been often called upon to play the role of the region's neutral chairman. Australia should respect this and not seek to divide Asean or to diminish its role.

- Fourth, one troublesome element of Australia's proposal - articulated by Mr Rudd's special envoy, Ambassador Richard Woolcott, and never publicly repudiated by the Australian government - is the idea that the APc will have a core group or bureau. This group would consist of key countries in the region: the United States, China, India, Japan and Indonesia. Some Indonesian commentators have added three more to the list - Australia, South Korea and Russia. That would make for a total of eight, a sort of G-8 for the Asia-Pacific.

I think such an idea is anti-democratic and elitist. It would also have the effect of marginalising Asean. As a practical matter, I do not see how the Asia-Pacific region can be led by a group of countries with such competing interests and agendas.

- Fifth, it could be useful to review the existing institutions and processes in the region. In doing so, we should be aware that each piece of the structure has its own history and logic. We must avoid destroying a structure that has taken years to build. This is not to say we cannot consider improvements.

For example, we could consider holding the annual meetings of Apec and ARF back-to-back. This can be done by moving a few chairs around as the compositions of the two organisations overlap though they are not identical. We should also consider whether to elevate ARF participation to the summit level.

Another idea worth exploring is whether to freeze the composition of the EAS at the current 16 or to admit both the US and Russia. There are cogent arguments in favour and against such an expansion and they deserve our serious consideration.

Those who favour the inclusion of the US in the EAS have argued that the regional initiative is unlikely to prosper without the participation of the US. Those opposed have

pointed out that admitting the US and Russia to the EAS would be analogous to admitting both into the European Union.

These are some of my thoughts as I reflect on the Australian initiative. The last thing we want is to create a new forum or organisation on top of the structure we already have. I hope my remarks will be viewed by my Australian friends as a constructive contribution to their initiative to begin a dialogue about where we need to go.

The writer is chairman of the Institute of Policy Studies. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's tertiary and research institutions.