

Rudd's Asia community bid 'lacks detail'

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A former Australian Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum administrator and ambassador to South Korea, Colin Heselbine, has warned Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's push for an Asia-Pacific community is "doomed" unless the detail can be spelt out to a suspicious and sceptical region.

In an online essay for the University of Melbourne's Asialink Centre, Mr Heselbine accused Mr Rudd of "reinventing the wheel" with his Asia-Pacific community (APC) proposal, warning it had encountered scepticism

and suspicion from governments in the region and most had little appetite for adding to the existing crowded regional architecture.

He said Asia already boasted the 21-member APEC which dealt primarily with economic issues, and the 10-member Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) forum that now included four outreach groupings.

He said that, while Mr Rudd was right that there was no one overarching grouping dealing particularly with security issues and including the US, it was far easier to modify an existing one than to start from scratch.

"The Prime Minister's pronouncements have been remarkably lacking in detail and content ... [and] unless there is a clear and substantive rationale, the concept is doomed," said Mr Heselbine, who also did two stints as Australia's deputy head of mission to China.

Mr Rudd has set 2020 as the time frame for establishing the new grouping; Australia is to host an international conference in December to give it further momentum.

But Mr Heselbine said the proposal would have difficulty gaining traction as it had been unveiled without regional consultation and

there were anxieties it would undermine ASEAN among its members. China alone could crush the APC because any new structure would dilute its regional influence.

"In the current climate of difficult China-Australia relations, it is unlikely China will go out of its way to support an Australian regional initiative," Mr Heselbine noted.

A change of government in Japan also signalled Tokyo may be less willing to support Mr Rudd's plan.

Mr Heselbine said the most practical approach to achieving the Prime Minister's vision would be for the US to join the fledgling

ASEAN offshoot, the East Asia Summit (EAS), which included the other major powers of the Asia Pacific region with the exception of Russia. But Russia too could be encouraged to join.

"Achieving an effective EAS, with US membership, would be a far more realistic and practical objective of Australian regional diplomacy than wasting resources on empty meetings and discussions about reinventing the wheel with new structures," Mr Heselbine added.

Inner circle calls the shots, page 17 ■