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## **Towards an Asia Pacific Community**\*

**Richard Woolcott**

In the 20th century the world's centre of strategic weight moved from Europe to the United States. In the 21st century it will move to the Asia Pacific region. The economies of the Asia Pacific are already 54 per cent of global production and 44 per cent of global trade. This transfer of wealth will continue into the foreseeable future. The region already has the world's five largest militaries – the US, Russia, China, India, and North Korea – each with nuclear weapons.

\*This Essay was first developed as a concept paper for the “1.5 Track” Conference, to be held in Sydney, December 4–5, 2009.

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This major shift in strategic weight – which will involve increased regional influence over global economic, political and security affairs – is likely to be accompanied by pressures. These will arise in the form of increasing potential for regional strategic and territorial competition, competition for scarce resources – oil and gas, water and food – and challenges of pollution and energy security. The need to resist proliferation of WMD, the illegal movement of people, transnational crime, terrorism, and climate change, are other issues which emphasise the imperatives for – and advantages of – an effective regional architecture.

Australia's view is that it will be better for the countries of the region to develop consciously an architecture to meet these challenges – and to use it cooperatively to shape our collective future – rather than allow the situation to evolve passively, while simply hoping for the best.

In Australia's view the rate of growth, change and internal interaction in the region is too great for a passive approach to emerging challenges. We believe it would entail too high a risk of instability arising within the region. Such instability would be in no regional country's interest. Nor would it be in the world's interest, given the global economic powerhouse the region can become if peace and prosperity can be assured.

### The Existing Institutions

As yet there is no single institution in the Asia Pacific region with a membership and mandate to address comprehensively both economic and strategic challenges. Such an institution would be invaluable to assist in managing an increasingly crowded landscape of intra-regional interactions and to help ensure that

outward-looking regionalism is sustained as the bedrock of Asia Pacific integration.

Crucially, such an institution could be used to foster the habits of cooperation and mutual assistance and to avoid the risk of a drift into destructive competition, intra-regional bullying and conflict. The example of Europe in the first half of the 20th century is a stark reminder of how badly things can go wrong in the absence of effective architecture and the will of nations to use such architecture to work cooperatively.

Europe has now found its solution along just these lines – an effective architecture and the will to work cooperatively. But it has built a European architecture, predicated on history and cultural characteristics unique to Europe. The Asia Pacific region, which is much less compact and more diverse, will have to devise its own architecture, based on its own history and cultural characteristics.

The purpose of Australia's APC initiative is to launch a process of dialogue – a regional conversation – to make a start on collectively designing an overarching and effective regional architecture, and on engendering a stronger sense of the need for a region-wide will to work and plan cooperatively and in as coordinated a fashion as possible.

The groupings and institutions already in place in the Asia Pacific region are making valuable contributions to the region's stability and prosperity and could themselves become the building blocks of an Asia Pacific community. But none of them as currently constituted represents a coherent focal point through which all of the strands of the regional dynamic can be drawn together at a meeting of the leaders of the key regional countries.

**“ The choice is whether we seek actively to shape the future of our wider region ... by building the regional architecture we need for the future ... or whether instead we will adopt a passive approach – where we simply wait and see what evolves.”**

**The Hon Kevin Rudd,  
Prime Minister of  
Australia, May 2009**

ASEAN, ASEAN+3, the EAS, APEC, ARF and other less prominent bodies (for example ASEM and FEALAC)<sup>1</sup> are doing important cooperative work. But APEC's mandate is economic, and its membership is so wide as to be unwieldy. The ARF has no leaders-level meeting, can deal only with security matters, and many believe it is too large and has made insufficient progress since its inception. Meanwhile ASEAN, ASEAN+3 and the EAS are each, to varying degrees, insufficiently representative of the Asia Pacific region to be said to constitute an APc. The EAS is most representative, and has a leaders' meeting, but does not include some key countries.

ASEAN, as a subregional grouping in the Asia Pacific, highlights the importance of developing the right institutions at the right time: it has been crucial in the transformation of South East Asia from a region of strategic conflict into one of cooperation and consensus. Australia believes the time has now come to extend the vision that drove the formation of ASEAN to the wider Asia Pacific region. An Asia Pacific community could be seen as a natural broadening of the processes of confidence, security and community-building led by ASEAN.

## Outcomes of the Special Envoy's Consultations

Australia's vision for an APc has never been prescriptive. Following identification of the broad need for a more effective regional architecture, and for a cooperative will, the process embarked upon has been one of consultation and drawing on the ideas of other regional countries.

In the first instance the Australian Prime Minister appointed me as his Special Envoy, to consult at high level with 21 countries in the region and beyond, and to re-emphasise Australia's determination

to play an active and constructive role in strengthening necessary Asia Pacific cooperation.

In the course of my consultations I made the following key findings:

- a high level of interest across the region in the APc proposal, including widespread agreement about the importance of a discussion on how regional architecture can be developed to best suit the region's purposes;
- a strong recognition in the region that our current institutions, as they are currently configured, do not provide a forum for all relevant leaders to discuss the full range of economic, security, environmental and political challenges the region needs to address;
- little appetite for creating new institutions in addition to existing forums, such as ASEAN, ASEAN+3, the EAS, APEC, ARF and others, given the heavy travel schedule and meeting demands that regional leaders face;
- ASEAN's involvement in regional institutions is crucial to fostering habits of cooperation and understanding across the region, and has contributed strongly to the level of peace and stability the region has achieved; and
- a keen interest in further discussion on the Asia Pacific community proposal, including on the geo-strategic and economic challenges we will face in the 21st century and how we might develop our institutions to meet these.

Consistent with his overall vision for an APc, for a regional conversation about the APc concept, and with the outcomes of my consultations, the Australian Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd, has proposed that the next stage be a "one and a half track" conference.<sup>2</sup> The conference, which Prime Minister Rudd has asked me to host, is to be convened in Sydney on 4–5 December 2009.

**Australia believes the time has now come to extend the vision that drove the formation of ASEAN to the wider Asia Pacific region.**

1. ASEAN stands for the Association of South East Asian Nations; ASEAN+3 is the grouping of 10 ASEAN members plus China, Japan and the Republic of Korea; EAS is the East Asian Summit, bringing together the ASEAN plus three, plus Australia, India and New Zealand; APEC stands for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, a grouping of Asia Pacific nations including the United States; ARF is the ASEAN Regional Forum; ASEM is Asia-Europe Meeting; FEALAC is Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation.

2. "One and a half track" refers to combined Government and private diplomacy. "First track" refers to Government to Government-level discussions. "Second track" is where private and other organisations and individuals make a contribution to advancing foreign and security priorities.

Key government officials, academics and opinion makers from across the region will have an opportunity to come together at the conference to discuss the Asia Pacific's future, how to meet the challenges ahead, and what shape future regional architecture might take to maximise the prospects for regional peace, prosperity and global influence. The conference will be structured to provide for free-flowing and open discussion.

### Looking Forward

To help stimulate thinking ahead of the Sydney conference, I would like to inject into the debate the following propositions on how an APc can advance the interests of all countries in the Asia Pacific region.

First, an APc will be crucial to ensuring that the process of regional economic and financial integration is driven forward, and that the region as a whole strives for a market-driven regional economy that is open to the world. The wealth of East Asia has been built on open markets and open investment. To secure our future prosperity and competitiveness at the global level, this approach needs to be reinforced through ongoing cooperation and endorsement at the leadership level.

Secondly, an APc will be crucial to nurturing a culture of dialogue and collaboration at the leadership level to enable regional countries to meet current and emerging challenges arising from strategic competition. The first steps should promote region-wide security building measures. Eventually – just as ASEAN has been able to build a degree of strategic congruence among countries beset with historic rivalries – an APc will help build a sharper sense of common regional strategic interest across all of Asia, on top of helping to ensure that regional relationships do not become adversarial.

Thirdly, an APc will provide a crucial vehicle for discussion and cooperation across a range of challenges with transnational reach including climate change, water and food security, non-proliferation, illegal people movements, transnational crime and terrorism. As with more traditional security challenges, such as territorial disputes, the objective would not necessarily be to reach a single region-wide position, but to use the mechanism of regional consultation to help advance solutions be they global, regional or bilateral. As with strengthening strategic stability, it will be the habit of consultation at the highest level that requires nurturing: not because it will solve all problems but because it can make the search for solutions easier and diminish the risks of miscommunication, miscalculation and of descent into crisis or conflict.

The Sydney conference will provide an invaluable platform to discuss these assertions, the overall thrust of this concept paper, and the whole array of issues surrounding the proposal for an APc. Moreover, it will form a part of a larger and overarching debate now gathering momentum on where to take global architecture as a whole.

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