Prime Minister Rudd’s Asia Pacific Community Proposal Quietly Grows

Andrew MacIntyre*

Four months ago, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd publicly floated an initiative to develop what he called an Asia-Pacific Community, through which leaders of all the key countries in the region would be able to come together. His proposal was greeted mostly with a mixture of quiet puzzlement and outright scepticism. But this is an idea that is not going away. Over the course of the next twelve months or so I expect momentum will be built for taking it further. As this happens, the emphasis in discussion will soon shift from whether or not this initiative will proceed to focus increasingly on the modalities of how it will proceed.

Initial public responses to the proposal were wary. By far the most extensive discussion of Mr Rudd’s initiative – and the most sceptical commentary – has come from within Australia itself. This wariness had more to do with Australian domestic politics than the international politics of the Asia-Pacific region, since Mr Rudd’s announcement of the initiative came as the early ‘honeymoon’ phase of the new Labor government passed and complaints were beginning to emerge about ‘initiative overload’ across the policy spectrum and about ‘under organisation’ in the Prime Minister’s own office. A wide array of Australian analysts, journalists and parliamentarians past and present were quick to criticise the Rudd proposal for being ‘half-baked’, lacking in detail and presumptuous for not having consulted other regional leaders in advance. These complaints were not without some substance – not only was the initial articulation of the idea rather sketchy, with distracting references to the European Union, but even the distinguished former diplomat, Richard Woolcott, nominated to lead regional consultation process evidently learned about the proposal only a few short hours before it was announced.

But none of these issues were decisive and as Richard Woolcott himself has said, the circumstances were much the same nearly twenty years earlier when then Prime Minister Bob Hawke tasked him with leading a similar initial consultation process on APEC. Much more important than the flurry of debate within Australia has been the reaction within the Asia-Pacific region. Some commentators were sceptical or even dismissive of the proposal, with most government spokesmen expressing polite, non-committal interest in hearing further details. Significantly, no head of government spoke decisively against the proposal.

The real diplomatic action – which for the most part does not appear in the newspaper headlines – is now underway. Mr Rudd’s special envoy, Richard Woolcott, has undertaken a first consultative foray into the region, focusing on key Southeast Asian countries. Subsequent rounds will see him working his way around the wider region. There have been no official statements from Mr Rudd about progress, but informal indications are encouraging. This will help to build momentum.

Ultimately, the reason some version of Mr Rudd’s proposal is likely to succeed is that there is an underlying need for it. There is real scope for improving on the current scope of regional consultation arrangements to the advantage of all. Notwithstanding the variety of existing frameworks for regional engagement along various dimensions – most prominently ASEAN, the ASEAN + 3 framework, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and APEC – the inescapable problem is that none of these arrangements brings all the main players from South Asia to the Americas together. It makes no sense that there is no framework which also includes both India and the United States. While all existing frameworks serve some specific purposes, none adequately meets the needs of the region as a whole. There is no particular virtue in preserving the status quo for its own sake; more than anything else it is inertia and the
inherent difficulty of taking multilateral diplomacy into new areas that preserves it.

Leadership to overcome these problems could come from almost anywhere in the region, but as a middle-sized player Australia is one of a handful of countries that is well-placed to offer it. And with Mr Rudd’s quiet persistence it is quite likely that we will see results. Increasingly, the issue that is coming into focus is the modalities of just how a comprehensive framework for regional engagement might be developed from the status quo.

There are several broad possibilities. One is that it could evolve by adapting one of the existing frameworks. For instance, the membership of the East Asian Summit might be expanded eastward across the Pacific. Or the membership of APEC could be adjusted and expanded westward to South Asia. A second broad possibility is that a special gathering could take place on the coat-tails of an existing forum. Here, too, there are several imaginable variants, but by way of illustration, an appropriately comprehensive gathering of leaders could be engineered at the same time as the ASEAN or APEC summits, and evolve over time from there. Or third, an entirely new framework could be purpose built from scratch.

None of these broad possibilities is clearly superior to the others. Each has distinctive pros and cons. In the end, it is likely to be the path of least resistance that prevails. And it may be that a one-off and more limited gathering of pivotal leaders is needed to kick start the process and help cut through some of the initial complications.

To succeed, Mr Rudd’s initiative will need to evolve into something much broader than just another proposal from a regionally activist Australian leader. At least some countries and some other leaders will need to come to view it as advancing their interests. This is quite likely to happen and in the process the character and form of the initiative will evolve as ‘authorship’ widens. Indeed, that is what happened with all previous efforts to build frameworks for regional engagement, from ASEAN and APEC onwards.

The absence of a vocal chorus of public support for Mr Rudd’s initiative might be thought of as telling evidence of a lack of demand or even interest. It is not. Frameworks for multilateral regional engagement – whether in the Asia-Pacific region, or any other – are not essential elements of international engagement. That is why there is almost never overt demand for them. But they can be very helpful, even if in quiet and low-profile ways. There was no great demand for ASEAN at the time of its birth, but all Southeast Asian countries place value on it now. Similarly, for all its limitations, heads of state continue to invest time and effort in the APEC process.

Kevin Rudd's proposal has already evolved somewhat since his first speech in June. It will continue to do so as momentum gradually builds behind it and as an informal coalition of leaders willing to support its development emerges. It is an idea whose time is coming.

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Published by Asia Pacific Press, Brookings Institution Press, Social Sciences Academic Press (China) and ANU E Press

Available from ANU E Press http://epress.anu.edu.au

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