



No need for another Asia-Pacific multilateral institution



By Maaike Okano-Heijmans

The Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd presented the idea of a grand interregional Asia-Pacific Institution. Where is this going to stop? Rather than proposing yet another multilateral forum, Australia's middle-power diplomacy should focus on a mediating role within the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC). If there is one thing to be learned from the European experience, it should be the importance of keeping cooperation transparent.

In an attempt to meet the challenges facing Australia and to shape the future of the region, Prime Minister Rudd presented the idea of an Asia-Pacific Union. The Australian government would do the region a much greater favor if it took advantage of Australia's unique position, close to Asia but of Western heritage, in already existing (inter)regional institutions.

Rudd's proposal for an Asia-Pacific Union by 2020, at the Asia Society Australasia Centre in Sydney, adds to a range of existing, overlapping forums throughout the Asia and Asia-Pacific region. These have mushroomed, particularly since the Asian financial crisis of 1997 made it abundantly clear that the region is in need of a consultative mechanism to enhance cooperation and prevent crises. Export-oriented growth and interregional networks illustrate the importance of economic cooperation in the region. In the security field, the relics of the Cold War and increasing challenges of terrorism, piracy and natural disasters keep peace and stability on the political agenda. Energy, climate change and food supply provide further food for discussion.

The advantages and need for cooperation are evident. However, most proposals seem to focus on narrow, strategic interests of the country that tables the idea. As an extension of this, discussion is about membership rather than content. The East Asia Summit and ASEAN Plus

Three provide a case in point. The competition for leadership in the region between Japan and China is partly fought out in their support for the interregional East Asia Summit and 'Asians only' ASEAN Plus Three, respectively.

Fundamental differences between Asian and Asia-Pacific countries have come to the fore especially in APEC, where the former group of countries prefers a loose form of cooperation while the latter desire a more institutionalized and legalized framework. With regard to security cooperation, discussion is quietly starting on whether the present Six-Party negotiations (that comprehensively address North Korean nuclear development) can be developed into a more institutionalized framework. ASEAN is already anxious about this idea, as the gravity of the forum is placed in Northeast Asia and with the United States, rather than in Asia at large and with ASEAN. A new institution would most certainly change the role of the ASEAN Regional Forum as well. Furthermore, it is unclear how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will respond to such a development. Will the Central Asian countries be included or does China prefer to bet on two horses?

The diverse Asia-Pacific region is served by several institutions that include different groups of countries and discuss political, economic

and/or security issues. But the situation becomes problematic when discussion about the new institutions and who is in it, distracts attention from promoting actual cooperation. Taking the European Union as a model for Asia makes for a distorted comparison, mostly because of obvious differences between Europe and Asia in history, political systems, size, development and ideas about (the level of) institutionalization. If there is one thing to be learned from the European experience, however, it should be the importance of keeping the structure of regional cooperation relatively straightforward and transparent. In other words: beware of a noodle bowl that is too big.

Australia is right to stay proactively involved in discussions about Asia and Asia-Pacific cooperation. It would serve the Asia-Pacific region best, however, by playing a mediating role in regional cooperation in existing fora and focus discussion on what exactly the goals and

purposes of cooperation are. A variety of regional institutions to address Australia's concerns exist already. Rather than trying to integrate these into a grand interregional institution that addresses political, economic as well as security concerns, effort should go to optimizing cooperation within these fora. That is what middle-power diplomacy and Australia's role in shaping the region's future should be about. Mr. Rudd's upcoming visits to Japan and Indonesia make for a good opportunity in this regard.

Maaïke Okano-Heijmans is Research Fellow for Asia Studies at the 'Clingendael' Institute of International Relations, and Visiting Fellow at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy of the Australian National University.

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