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Place at the table essential
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Australia's invitation to the inaugural East Asia Summit in December is a defining event in our foreign policy. It is the fruit of more than 20 years of bipartisan engagement with Asia and welcome confirmation that we are recognised by all our Asian neighbours as an integral part of the region.

Coincidentally, our presence at the summit brings to an end a distracting and misdirected discourse about whether Australia needs to become more Asian to be accepted in the region.

The message from the neighbourhood is clear. We can remain who we are; it's what we do that counts. By any objective criteria, whether it is trade, security, education or people-to-people links, Australia has conclusively demonstrated its regional credentials.

John Howard owes his Malaysian counterpart a debt of gratitude, since it was Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi who had the good sense and vision to drop the Malaysian veto on Australia's admission to the summit in exchange for signing the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation. As Howard has come to realise, this was a price worth paying for membership of the region's most exclusive and potentially powerful club.

Non-membership would have been a serious blow to Australia's international aspirations and reduced our ability to shape the character and future direction of Asian regionalism.

It was Badawi's outspoken and iconoclastic predecessor, Mahathir Mohamed, who repeatedly frustrated Australian attempts to join the ASEAN plus three grouping, the "Asians only" forerunner to the summit, famously declaring that Australia cannot be part of the region because it is not Asian.

Why did Badawi reverse track? The reasons are revealing. At one level, they reflect a broader, pragmatic reassessment by Southeast Asians that Australia, along with New Zealand and India, will add much needed economic and political clout while helping ASEAN to balance China's strategic weight.

But the commitment by Asia's leaders to a non-discriminatory, open regionalism is also a repudiation of Mahathir's discredited thesis that a common cultural heritage is the essential prerequisite to binding a region as disparate and vast as East Asia into a single community.

On the contrary, as the new members attest, shared interests are far more important and cultural diversity is a strength, not a weakness.

Cynics will no doubt argue that the summit is just another talking shop and therefore of little consequence. But they are wrong on three accounts. First, it is a powerful expression of political intent, the symbolic importance of which should not be underestimated. It is an opportunity for East Asia's leaders to articulate not just an authoritative vision for the future but also a plan of action, backed by the resources and level of commitment that only heads of government can deliver.

Second, Australia, New Zealand and India will shift the political balance in the summit towards countries that are committed to pluralism, transparency and the rule of law, thereby reinforcing the trend away from the authoritarianism and nepotism of old Asia.

Third, the summit represents an area far greater in geographical scope than its name implies. It is really East Asia plus. With India's inclusion the summit participants will represent more than half the world's population, spanning two continents, one subcontinent and, by 2025, three of the four largest economies (Japan, China and India).

That makes for a very influential entity that will guide a region that dwarfs the European Union in virtually every significant measure of power. Of course, East Asia will be a far looser association. One cannot yet, if ever, envisage an East Asian currency, common foreign policy or parliament. What is likely, however, is that the summit will provide a clearer sense of East Asia's possibilities and accelerate political and economic integration. Clearly, this would be in Australia's national interest as a fully paid-up member of the new club.

But the summit is not all good news. Its establishment calls into question the continuing relevance of the APEC forum, an initiative that has served us well, not least because it was the only forum where an Australian prime minister could regularly meet other Asia-Pacific heads of government.

Crucially, APEC includes the US while the East Asia Summit does not, an omission that may prove a source of regional tension if Washington feels it is being dealt out of the game or that the summit is subservient to China's will. However, that is unlikely to happen with India and Japan in the mix. Moreover, Australia's membership of the summit should help reassure Washington, as well as enhance our strategic value to the US.

In the longer term, deepening engagement with Asia may make Australia a less compliant ally of the US as we balance our growing interests in the region with our alliance obligations. It is possible, of course, to walk and chew gum at the same time. But one day we may find that gum is optional and walking is not.

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