

Rudd's Asian aria sounds familiar  
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Any quest for new regional architecture shouldn't ignore what has already been built, writes Rory Medcalf. A measure of the success of Kevin Rudd's visits to Japan and Indonesia this week will be how much harmony he can find with those two major Asian countries in strengthening the region's diplomatic mechanisms and putting them to work.

Both could be key partners, along with China and India, in regional co-operation on guarding sea lanes, disaster relief and turning back the spread of nuclear weapons.

Regional co-operation with Japan could be a logical extension of Rudd's plan announced yesterday for a nuclear disarmament partnership with Tokyo.

On the eve of his departure, the Prime Minister signalled an aspiration to strengthen the Asia-Pacific's diplomatic "architecture". This long-term vision is to be applauded, so long as it goes hand in hand with more immediate efforts.

Rudd's call was for a framework spanning the US, East Asian powers and India. Such an institution would "engage in the full spectrum of dialogue, co-operation and action on economic and political matters and future challenges related to security".

These are outcomes much to be desired. The prosperity and security of the Asian century is more fragile than is suggested by spectacular growth projections that put China and India on course to match or surpass the US economy. For with the region's rising wealth and power comes a greater share of the world's trouble.

Energy, food and water doubts, wealth and development inequities, climate change, geopolitical rivalries, historical grievances, the vulnerability of just-in-time trade networks, transnational threats such as disease and terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons, the possibility of war: such dangers lie not far below the glittering surface.

Rudd's solution is not entirely original. The region already has a baffling array of structures. The 10-member Association of South-East Asian Nations is the core of ASEAN Plus Three (joined by China, Japan and South Korea), the East Asia Summit (adding India, Australia and New Zealand) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a security dialogue including all the pivotal powers on Rudd's wish list. The Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum subtracts India but adds the US, Russia, Canada and Pacific Latin America.

Unlike the China-backed ASEAN Plus Three, Rudd's map spans the Asia-Pacific and India, so has the merit of inclusion. But much the same footprint would come from adding India to APEC or the US to the East Asia Summit. Neither idea is new.

This is fine, because Rudd's regional overture will get much of a hearing only if it's in a recognisable key. In their meetings, Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono will want to know how it chimes with their favoured work-in-progress, the East Asia Summit, which Japan and Indonesia took great pains to help Australia join in 2005.

Fukuda and Yudhoyono may have pressing questions about what can be achieved using this and other existing mechanisms. On the security front, there are at least two near-term initiatives Australia could lead.

One is maritime security co-operation. The US Navy will remain the primary sentinel of the sea lanes. But other powers, including China, India, Japan and some South-East Asian states inevitably will seek larger roles.

The ARF has been dismissed as a talk-shop because its focus has been unambitious "confidence-building" meetings of foreign ministers, diplomats and defence personnel. Yet it might provide a

framework for the navies and coastguards of many regional countries to work together in piracy prevention and disaster relief. Indonesia would be vital to getting this afloat.

The other possibility is nuclear security. Rudd's commendable decision to visit Hiroshima underlines the closeness of Australian and Japanese interests in ensuring nuclear weapons are never used again. Global interest in disarmament is resurgent. Much could be done in Asia, not just by dismantling the North Korean bomb but through establishing a regional order based on restraint: where nuclear weapons are not brandished threateningly in the security postures of countries that possess them; arsenals are not expanded; other countries such as Japan are not tempted to go nuclear; and all contribute to new global efforts to wind back nuclear dangers.

The East Asia Summit is designed for leaders to raise big strategic issues. Rudd could ask Fukuda and Yudhoyono to join him in putting nuclear weapons on its agenda.

And such steps should be co-ordinated with India, whose Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced his major own nuclear disarmament initiative yesterday.

The quest for the ideal diplomatic opera house should go on, but it is also time for a fresh effort to breathe political will into the instruments the region already has.

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