Australian call for “Asia-Pacific Community”: A sign of growing tensions

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Behind the recent speech by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd calling for an “Asia-Pacific Community” lie deep concerns in Australian ruling circles about the potential for conflict between the major powers in the region—the US, China, Japan and India.

Rudd proposed his grand blueprint to foster a regional cooperation body by 2020 at the Asia Society’s Sydney-based AustralAsia Centre on June 4. He described the changes taking place in Asia as of “historic proportions”, saying: “Put simply, global economic and strategic weight is shifting to Asia”. By 2020, he explained, Asia will account for around 45 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP), one third of world trade and one quarter of the world’s military spending. More than half of the global energy consumption will take place in Asia. The rapidly industralising region will have a population of 4.6 billion out of a projected world total of 7.7 billion.

The prime minister warned, however, that there was no international body to regulate the growing rivalry in the region for energy, raw materials, and even food and fresh water. He pointed to a series of potential flashpoints, including Kashmir, Taiwan and North Korea. “The danger in not acting is that we run the risk of succumbing to the perception that future conflict within our region may somehow be inevitable,” he said.

Rudd’s statement points to the dilemmas facing Australian capitalism, which is heavily dependent on economic ties with Asia, but strategically relies on its postwar alliance with the US. In the 1980s, amid sharp US-Japan economic rivalry, Canberra constantly sought to balance between the two powers. While US-Japan tensions eased somewhat after Japan’s protracted slump in the 1990s, the rise of China and India has only complicated regional relations.

Australia has found itself in the middle of increasingly complex and tense rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region. The US has sought to strengthen its alliances with Australia and Japan, and forge closer strategic ties with India, in a bid to counter China, which the Bush administration regards as the greatest long-term threat to US hegemony. Japan is also very nervous that it is being eclipsed in Asia by the rapid economic rise of China.

Within this context, the former Howard government backed the Bush administration’s wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq to the hilt, but attempted to maintain its distance from Washington’s policy of “containing” China, which is now Australia’s largest trading partner. At the same time, former Prime Minister John Howard did sign a joint security declaration with Japan in 2007, as a step toward a US-led “triangular alliance” tacitly aimed against China.

Rudd’s call for an all-encompassing Asia-Pacific Community is another attempt to moderate tensions that threaten to upset Australia’s delicate balancing act. But as several commentators have pointed out, the present rivalries are very likely to sink the plan from the outset. Moreover, the way in which the plan was presented points to a rather hurried and ill-considered proposal.

Rudd appointed the AustralAsia Centre’s founding director, Richard Woolcott, as a special envoy to convey the proposal to leaders of the region. Woolcott, an 81-year-old former diplomat and head of the foreign affairs department, was apparently asked to take on the job at the last minute. Interviewing Woolcott, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation described his new job as a “seemingly impossible” mission of bringing together the competing powers of China, Japan, India and the US.

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating was even blunter, describing the plan as “a very difficult task and not necessarily an appropriate one”. Criticising Rudd’s reference in his speech to learning from the European Union, Keating declared that it was not possible in Asia to even emulate the first step toward the European community. Noting the deep divisions in Asia, he said: “God knows it has taken the Chinese 350 years of the modern age to truly recover their sovereignty; I do not see them sharing much of it with anyone else. And Japan remains one of the most insular, monocultural countries in the world, whose political leadership, at least under the last Japanese prime minister, was still reminiscing about China’s war experiences including Japan’s foray into Chinese Manchuria in the 1930s”.

The international responses have been lukewarm at best. A Chinese government spokesperson welcomed Rudd’s call for an Asian community, but on its own terms. Beijing has been working to fashion a bloc based on the growing intra-Asian trade centred on the booming Chinese economy. The ASEAN+3 grouping (the Association of South East Asian Nations plus China, Japan and South Korea) was followed in 2005 by the East Asia Summit, which was fraught with tensions. Australia, which is widely viewed as a US proxy, had to lobby hard even to get a seat. Japan pushed to include India, in order to counteract the Chinese influence. The US was notably absent.

In his speech, Rudd singled out Japan and Indonesia as two key partners in the Asian community plan. But Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda has expressed no interest in Rudd’s vision. Fukuda delivered a speech in May outlining his perspective for the Pacific region that centred on Japan and ASEAN. Russia was far more prominently mentioned than Australia.

Behind the diplomatic snub are concerns in Tokyo that Canberra is playing too much attention to Beijing. Rudd came under fire in the Australian media for having left Japan—Australia’s second largest trading partner—off his first major world tour in April to the US, Europe and China. The omission did not go unnoticed in Tokyo.

Well before winning last November’s election, Rudd made clear his complete commitment to the US alliance, including Canberra’s continuing participation in the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. “Our alliance with the United States is the first pillar of our foreign policy and the strategic bedrock of our foreign and security policy,” he stated.

At the same time, however, Rudd has been careful to cultivate relations with China. He expressed concerns last year that Howard’s decision to sign a security deal with Japan would antagonise China. Fluent in Mandarin and known in China as “Lu Kewen”, Rudd has been presenting

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himself as a bridge between the West and Beijing. In Tokyo, Rudd's rise to power has been interpreted as a sign of growing Chinese influence. After his election, the *Japan Times* wrote: "His 'China connection' has had Japanese foreign policy experts questioning whether Sino-Australia relations will now take precedence at the expense of Japan."

Within weeks of its election, the new Labor government sent a customs vessel to monitor the Japanese whaling fleet in the southern Pacific—a move that was seen in Tokyo as encouragement to anti-whaling activists. Rudd even threatened to take Japan to the International Court over its whaling operations.

Just days after his call for an Asia-Pacific Community, Rudd headed off to Japan on June 8-12 in a bid to allay concerns in Tokyo and mend bilateral relations. He dropped the threat to take Japan to the International Court over whaling and said Australia would seek to resolve the dispute diplomatically. His first stop was Hiroshima, which was destroyed by a US atomic bomb in 1945, to show Australia's willingness to cooperate with Japan on nuclear non-proliferation. "We must learn from Hiroshima and act together globally on the question of nuclear non-proliferation and the future of a nuclear weapons-free world," he declared.

"Nuclear non-proliferation," however, is looming as the pretext for new acts of aggression—most immediately against Iran. The US and Japan have also been exploiting North Korea's nuclear programs as the means for exerting pressure in North East Asia, indirectly aimed at Pyongyang's main ally—China. Rudd's support of Japan's "anti-nuclear" stance was therefore a diplomatic sign of support for Japan's increasingly assertive stance, particularly in North East Asia.

During their meeting on June 12, Rudd and Fukuda emphasised the importance of trilateral cooperation between Japan, Australia and the US for stability in Asia. In actual fact, the trilateral alliance only heightens tensions with China. Rudd declared before leaving Tokyo: "The great thing about Australia-Japan relationship is, I believe, it actually transcends the political divide. It's a relationship that can endure differences as, in fact, our relationship with the United States endures differences."

The *Australian* commented on June 14: "What has been made clear to the Australians this week is the enormous sensitivity at all levels of official Japan to how its friends and allies engage with China, even as Fukuda, and Shinzo Abe before him, have put great effort into repairing and strengthening their own political relations with the Beijing regime... But no one from Fukuda down will deny that Japan and China are increasingly pitted in competition for food and energy resources from abroad and for diplomatic influence in the rest of the Asia-Pacific region. Japanese diplomats talk quite frankly about hedges against Chinese might and hope Australia might be part of a hedging strategy."

The question of energy and food security loomed large during the visit. In a speech at Kyoto University, Rudd played up his government's decision to ratify the Kyoto Protocol for cutting greenhouse gases. Questions from students, however, focussed on Australia's commitment to supplying energy and food to Japan, which is still the world's second largest economy and heavily dependent on commodity imports. The concern is that at some stage Australian mining and agricultural exporters may preference China at Japan's expense.

Sino-Japanese competition for energy has already provoked territorial disputes. After prolonged negotiations, the two countries signed an agreement last Wednesday to jointly develop disputed gas fields in the East China Sea. The agreement immediately provoked anti-Japanese protests in China, calling for its repudiation. During Rudd's visit, a diplomatic row erupted between Taiwan and Japan, after a Japanese maritime patrol ship deliberately collided with and sank a Taiwanese fishing boat in waters near the disputed Diaoyu Island in East China Sea. With Beijing's backing, Taiwan threatened to send warships to the area to protest Japan's action. While Tokyo eventually apologised, the underlying tensions remain.

A new book by Bill Emmott, former editor of the British-based *Economist* magazine, likens strategic rivalry in Asia to Europe of the late nineteenth century in the lead up to World War I. "The rise of Asia is not just, or even mainly, going to pit Asia against the West, shifting power from the latter to former. It is going to pit Asians against Asians. This is the first time in history when there have been three powerful countries in Asia, all at the same time: China, India and Japan. That might not matter if they liked each other, or were somehow naturally compatible. But they do not, and are not. Far from it, in fact" (Bill Emmott, *Rivals: How the Power Struggle Between China, India and Japan Will Shape Our Next Decade*, Allen Lane, 2008, p8).

As in Europe, the relative post-war stability in Asia-Pacific was based on the overwhelming economic and military dominance of the United States. The US helped to rebuild the shattered Japanese economy and the US-Japan Security Treaty signed in 1952 became the cornerstone of Washington's strategy in the Pacific. Japan was a major supply base for the US-led wars of aggression in Korea and Vietnam. For its part, Japan accepted its role as second fiddle to the US in return for protection under the American nuclear umbrella.

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s opened up a new period of great power rivalry, including in the Pacific. With the loss of its economic hegemony, the US has sought to exploit its residual military might to maintain its dominance. While it has been preoccupied with securing control of the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia through its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration has been also busy cultivating ties with countries to encircle China.

As part of that strategy, Washington has encouraged Tokyo to more aggressively assert its interests in North East Asia, creating tensions not only with China, but also Taiwan and South Korea. In response to the US threat, China has forged closer ties with Russia and begun holding joint military exercises. While being wooed by Washington, New Delhi has been wary of simply becoming a US tool against China. At the same time, India still regards China as a rival and a constraint on its ambitions to become the dominant power in South Asia.

It is into this seething cauldron that Rudd has tossed his appeal for an Asia-Pacific Community in which everyone can sit around a table and peacefully resolve their differences—a situation that would most suit Australian capitalism. The wishful thinking behind the proposal bears little relationship to the realities in Asia and internationally that are leading in the direction of new conflicts and wars.

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