

**Competing Communities: What the Australian and Japanese Ideas Mean for Asia's Regional Architecture**  
by Amitav Acharya

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The just concluded 4<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit (EAS) in Thailand will long be remembered as the venue for seemingly competing ideas from Australia and Japan for reorganizing regional cooperation in Asia. But will it also be known for having altered the course of Asian multilateralism?

At one level, the two proposals, Australia's Asia-Pacific Community, and Japan's East Asian Community, are timely. Multilateral institutions in Asia seem to have hit a crossroads. APEC, whose leaders' forum meets next month, shows clear signs of having outlived its usefulness and purpose. The EAS has not set any clear and concrete goals. ASEAN remains active and useful, but its capacity to lead wider regional institutions has increasingly come into question.

The proposals were spurred in part by regime change in the respective countries. Both the Rudd and Hatoyama governments are seeking to distance themselves from their predecessors. In Australia, Rudd's predecessor John Howard gained regional notoriety as America's self-proclaimed "deputy sheriff." In Japan, Prime Minister Koizumi's government once indicated that its regional relationships will be secondary to its alliance with the US. In this respect, the two proposals are welcome news for those who would like to see the advancement of multilateralism in the region.

The Australian proposal was clearly the first on the table, yet the Hatoyama government does not seem to address how its idea of an East Asian Community, which includes Australia, will relate to the latter's Asia-Pacific Community idea. This is a little odd because Australia and Japan have been close partners in ideas and initiatives for regional cooperation in the past. Both were central to the idea of the "Pacific Community" of the 1970s and 80s, which paved the way for APEC, and very recently, they held close consultations on the idea of creating a coalition of democracies in the region.

But there are at least four issues that will decide which of the proposals survives and in what form.

First, the rationale and specifics of the two proposals will matter a lot. While the Australian proposal has been on the table for some time and has gone through some revisions, there is still no clear sense of what the region is being asked to support. Initially, it seemed, at least to those not terribly

familiar with Rudd's thinking, that Canberra may be proposing a brand new institution. But more recently, the Australians suggest that the Asia-Pacific Community could be a rationalization of existing institutions rather than setting up a brand new one. The Australians are understandably cautious, especially after the initial response to their idea from Southeast Asia which was decidedly mixed.

In advancing the rationale for an Asia-Pacific Community, one suggestion from Australia is that there is no existing institution that covers the whole region (including India) and includes the different issue areas such as economic, security, and environment. But APEC does have an annual meeting that has discussed security issues such as East Timor and 9/11 attacks; it has addressed a host of issues aside from trade. And, lest we forget, APEC was an Australian initiative.

Turning to the Japanese idea, Hatoyama is certainly not the first Asian leader to propose an East Asian Community. After all, the October 2001 report of the East Asian Vision Group set up at the suggestion of the late South Korean leader Kim Dae Jung was titled, "Towards an East Asian Community". Hatoyama's idea seems to contain elements of uncertainty and even contradiction. In his UN Speech in September, he envisaged a European Union style grouping. Later in an article in the *New York Times*, he used the rationale of "the era of U.S.-led globalism...coming to an end." Yet in Thailand, he noted that that Washington remained the "cornerstone" of Japanese policy, and a Japanese Foreign Ministry official said Tokyo will "closely discuss and coordinate" its idea with the US. While nothing prevents Japan from pursuing a close alliance relationship with the US while advancing East Asian multilateralism, there will come a time when adjustments to the alliance relationship have to be made if Japan is to secure genuine Chinese support for the East Asian Community idea.

Second, China's role and attitude will be crucial to the success or failure of the two ideas. So far, Beijing has welcomed the Japanese idea. On Oct. 21, Assistant Foreign Minister Hu Zhengyue said that China is "positive and open" to the establishment of an "East Asian community." But, whether it will really go for a regional body that includes India and Australia remains to be seen. Recently, Beijing has favored the ASEAN Plus 3, rather than the broader EAS as the basis for an East Asian Community. Beijing also seems to be somewhat lukewarm towards the Australian proposal which more clearly allows space for US participation.

Third, whither the US? The Obama administration has shown greater support for Asian multilateral institutions than its predecessor. But, despite showing greater engagement with ASEAN, it has not indicated which institutional route it might take. Theoretically, it could seek to revitalize APEC, join the EAS (the road now being cleared by its accession to ASEAN's

Treaty of Amity and Cooperation), or it could sign on to the Rudd proposal. It can also do all of the above. Kurt Campbell, the US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs said, "I just want to assure you ... the United States is going to be part of this party. We are an active player and we're going to want an invitation as well." But Washington has other institutional preoccupation, especially ensuring the success of the fledgling G20 forum. And there is also the question of whether the US will be invited to participate. The Australia proposal clearly includes the US while the Japanese proposal is ambivalent. It is not impossible to imagine an East Asian Community without US participation, but failure to take advantage of the current positive US attitude towards Asian multilateral institutions by denying it membership may amount to a historic blunder on the part of Japan and other proponents.

Fourth, what might the role of ASEAN be in the proposed architecture? ASEAN and other nations have been presented with a choice, and a difficult one at that. ASEAN has little interest in taking sides in a competition between Japan and Australia. Japan is a valued partner and an "Asian" nation. But Australia's proposal includes the US, which will be important factor for ASEAN. Indonesia, the largest ASEAN member, has developed too close of a rapport with Australia not to take the Rudd proposal seriously, but would support whichever proposal gives it a bigger role to play. Indonesia's own idea for reorganizing Asian multilateralism would be a mini-lateral group of leading Asia-Pacific powers such as Australia, Japan, US, and, of course, itself. Lately, Jakarta has shown some impatience with ASEAN after fellow members forced a substantial dilution of Jakarta's initial proposal for an ASEAN Security Community, which stressed greater commitment to democracy and stronger security cooperation like an ASEAN Peacekeeping Force.

But ASEAN as a whole will also be seriously concerned about its "leadership role" in Asian multilateralism. Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said at the Hua Hin summit that "Both Japan and Australia proposed bigger communities, which is a test for us...ASEAN must be firmly integrated when we enter a bigger community." While he and other leaders "listened carefully and attentively" to the Australian and Japanese leaders," they also "emphasized...that it wasn't all that important to decide on some kind of rigid structure at the moment, but to be aware that the regional architecture would continue to evolve."

Non-ASEAN members have grown a little frustrated with ASEAN's lack of resolve in shaping the direction of Asian multilateralism. But as in the past, competing ideas from the outside have been good for ASEAN as it puts ASEAN in a position to make the difference. Both Australia and Japan needs ASEAN's support to make their proposals fly. Past proposals for regional cooperation, such as the Australia-Japanese idea of "open regionalism" and the Canadian-Australian idea of "cooperative security," had to be brought to ASEAN and modified (localized) to suit ASEAN's purpose before they could lead to concrete institutions such as APEC and ARF respectively. It is thus likely that the Rudd and Hatoyama proposals will go through a lengthy period of debate and negotiation and allow considerable space for

existing ASEAN institutions before they lead to something. The outcome is unlikely to be a revolutionary change in Asian multilateralism, *a la* a European Union in the east. Rather, it is likely to be an adaptation and modification of extant bodies based on the reconciliation between the "competing" Japanese and Australian ideas, especially if both come to accept US participation.