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Kevin Rudd to drive Asian union

Matthew Franklin, Chief political correspondent | *June 05, 2008*

KEVIN Rudd wants to spearhead the creation of an Asia-Pacific Union similar to the European Union by 2020 and has appointed veteran diplomat Richard Woolcott - one of his mentors - as a special envoy to lobby regional leaders over the body.

The Prime Minister said last night that the union, adding India to the 21-member APEC grouping, would encompass a regional free-trade agreement and provide a crucial venue for co-operation on issues such as terrorism and long-term energy and resource security.

And he outlined his plans for his visits to Japan and Indonesia next week, saying he would explore greater defence co-operation between Australia, Japan and the US - an approach that had been championed by John Howard.

Speaking in Sydney last night to the Asia Society Australasia Centre, the Mandarin-speaking Mr Rudd said global power and influence was shifting towards the Asia-Pacific region and that Australia must drive the creation of a new global architecture for the Asia-Pacific century.

"We need to have a vision for an Asia-Pacific community, a vision that embraces a regional institution, which spans the entire Asia-Pacific region - including the United States, Japan, China, India, Indonesia and the other states of the region," said the Prime Minister.

The body would be "able to engage in the full spectrum of dialogue, co-operation and action in economic and political matters and future challenges related to security".

"The purpose is to encourage the development of a genuine and comprehensive sense of community whose habitual operating principle is co-operation," Mr Rudd said.

"The danger of not acting is that we run the risk of succumbing to the perception that future conflict within our region may somehow be inevitable."

Government sources said last night that Mr Rudd was attempting to revive the reformist spirit of former Labor prime minister Bob Hawke, who successfully pressed for the creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation group 20 years ago.

Mr Woolcott, 80, was Mr Hawke's right-hand man in establishing APEC and was a frequent critic of the Howard government's foreign policy.

Mr Woolcott told The Australian last night that Mr Rudd had made it clear there was great scope to co-ordinate existing regional organisations.

"This fits neatly into the concept of greater middle-power diplomacy," Mr Woolcott said.

"If the US or China or Japan or some other big power were to suggest it, other nations might be apprehensive and back away. It's better for a middle power like Australia to take the initiative.

"I've always thought that this was the part of the world where Australia lives, and if an Asia-Pacific community does develop, it's essential that Australia be part of it."

The proposed new pan-Asian body would come in addition to a range of existing forums through the region, including ASEAN, ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asian Summit.

But Mr Rudd said now was the appropriate time to re-examine the regional diplomatic and economic architecture because foreign policy based only on bilateral agreements had "a brittleness".

"To remove some of that brittleness, we need strong and effective regional structures," Mr Rudd said.

"Strong institutions will underpin an open, peaceful, stable, prosperous and sustainable region."

Mr Rudd said the existing forums were not configured to promote co-operation across the entire region.

And he said his proposal was consistent with US President George W. Bush's call for the development of an Asia-Pacific free trade area.

While the EU should not provide "an identikit model", the Asia-Pacific region could learn much from the union, which in the 1950s had been seen by sceptics as unrealistic.

"Our special challenge is that we face a region with greater diversity in political systems and economic structures, levels of development, religious beliefs, languages and cultures, than did our counterparts in Europe," Mr Rudd said. "But that should not stop us from thinking big."

Mr Rudd said he would send Mr Woolcott to complete the "unfinished business" he had begun with Mr Hawke. "Subject to that further dialogue, we would envisage the possibility of a further high-level conference of government and non-government representatives to advance this proposal," he said.

"I fully recognise this will not be an easy process ... but the speed and the scope of changes in our region means we need to act now. Ours must be an open region - we need to link into the world, not shut ourselves off from it.

"And Australia has to be at the forefront of the challenge, helping to provide the ideas and drive to build new regional architecture."

Mr Rudd said his Government's foreign policy was based on three pillars: its relationship with the US; its links with the UN; and "comprehensive engagement with Asia".

Discussing his visits to Japan and Indonesia next week, Mr Rudd said he would continue talks with Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda toward the creation of a free-trade agreement as well as advancing talks on security co-operation between Australia, Japan and the US. In Indonesia, he would pursue talks about a free-trade agreement and anti-terrorism co-operation with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as well as seeking a template for greater co-operation on dealing with natural disasters.

Additional reporting: Greg Sheridan

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