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Australian PM wants Europe-style Asia-Pacific union

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By Michael Perry

SYDNEY (Reuters) - Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said on Wednesday that he wants to see an Asia-Pacific Community by 2020 structured similar to the European Union.

Rudd said there was a "brittleness" in bilateral ties, and that while regional bodies like ASEAN and APEC had achieved much, there was a need for a region-wide architecture to tackle the growing challenges of the Asia-Pacific century.

"Terrorism in Southeast Asia will remain a continuing challenge. Across wider continental Asia, the rise of India and China represent great economic, environmental, energy policy and security reverberations for the future," Rudd said in a speech to the Asia Society Australasia in Sydney.

"I believe it is time that we started to think about where we want to be with our regional architecture in 2020. We need to have a vision for an Asia-Pacific Community," he said, adding the world could learn from Europe where centuries of animosity had been transformed into transnational cooperation.

Rudd said an Asia-Pacific Community, which should include the United States, Japan, China, India, Indonesia and the other states of the region, would encourage cooperation and action on economic, political and security issues but also develop a "genuine and comprehensive sense of community".

"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," said Rudd.

"At present none of our existing regional mechanisms as currently configured are capable of achieving these purposes."

Rudd, a Mandarin-speaking former diplomat, came to power last November and aims to forger closer ties with the region. He visited Beijing earlier this year, where he won wide praise, and he is set to travel to Japan and Indonesia later this month.

ASIA-PACIFIC CENTURY

Rudd said "global economic and strategic weight" was shifting to Asia, citing Japan's post-World War Two growth, Southeast Asia's recovery from the 1997 financial crisis and the now rapid growth of both India and China.

By 2020, Asia will account for an estimated 45 percent of global GDP and one-third of global trade, while Asia's share of global military spending will have grown to nearly one quarter.

Rudd said the region contained potential flashpoints -- Kashmir, the Taiwan Strait, and the Korean Peninsula -- and that continued economic growth would see Asia's militaries acquire "higher technology military systems".

He said Australia would welcome the evolution of the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear programme, to become a wider regional security body.

Developing an Asia-Pacific Community would deal with terrorism, natural disasters and diseases which transcend national boundaries, while open trading regimes across the region to provide long-term energy, resource and food security.

Rudd said the region faced a dynamic demographic challenge in the future, with populations becoming wealthier but older. He said the region's

population by 2020 was projected to be 4.6 billion, out of a total global population of 7.7 billion.

APEC estimates that its member economies demand for energy will grow by around 40 per cent by 2020 and Asia's energy consumption could grow by around two-thirds by 2020.

Rudd said he had appointed Australia's former ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Wolcott, as his Asia-Pacific Community envoy to visit the region to begin the debate.

"The European Union of course does not represent an identikit model of what we would seek to develop in the Asia-Pacific. But what we can learn from Europe is this -- it is necessary to take the first step."

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