

SOUTHEAST ASIA BULLETIN



CSIS SOUTHEAST ASIA INITIATIVE

The CSIS Southeast Asia Initiative is a project of the International Security Program, Asia Group. CSIS launched the initiative in January 2008 to provide a venue for greater focus, examination, and analysis of Southeast Asian affairs within Washington's policy community. The initiative will include regular roundtables, conferences, studies, and forums to spotlight developments in the region. CSIS will also seek to partner with other interested organizations and individuals within and outside Washington to maximize the flow of information, analysis, and outreach on Southeast Asian affairs in the United States.

An important component of the initiative will be the monthly Southeast Asia Bulletin, which will provide a timely overview of key developments, events, and facts about the region, and offer a forum for short essays by official and unofficial commentators on regional affairs.

Derek Mitchell, director, Southeast Asia Initiative, and Brian Harding, research associate, welcome your feedback on the Southeast Asia Bulletin at dmitchell@csis.org and bharding@csis.org respectively.

The Southeast Asia Initiative of CSIS will host a major conference on Southeast Asian affairs September 25–26, “The United States and Southeast Asia: Toward a Strategy for Enhanced Engagement.” Registration information and a conference agenda can be found here.

Feature Article

RUDD'S ASIAN FIELD OF DREAMS:
BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME?

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On June 4, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced his ambitious plan, labeled “it’s time to build an Asia-Pacific Community,” for Australia’s comprehensive engagement with Asia¹. In doing so, Rudd set out the shortcomings of the expanding corps of regional bodies and called for an institution to be established by 2020. This body would span the entire region (Rudd’s Asia-Pacific includes India as well as the island states of the South Pacific) and engage “in the full spectrum of dialogue, cooperation, and action” on economic, political, and security matters.

Rudd’s speech, on the eve of his trip to Japan and Indonesia, had two main audiences. Domestically, it sought to tie his government to the Labor Party’s history of regional architectural activism, highlighted by the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC) and its leaders’ meeting under former prime ministers Robert Hawke and Paul Keating respectively. Regionally, it announced Australia’s next contribution to regional architecture after gaining entry to the East Asian Summit in 2005 and hosting APEC in 2007.

Unfortunately, both audiences, diplomatic niceties aside, have not signed on. They have either politely rejected the proposal or remain confused about what it actually means. Within days, Keating and Hawke had questioned Rudd’s reference to the European Union as an inspiration. A month later, Singapore’s respected Barry Desker bluntly called the proposal “dead in the water, right from the very beginning.” India’s media reported that the July 27 meeting of the East Asia Summit foreign ministers did not even discuss Rudd’s proposal.

¹Kevin Rudd, “It’s time to Build an Asia-Pacific Community,” (speech, Asia Society AustralAsia Centre, Sydney, Australia, June 4, 2008), http://www.asiasociety.org.au/speeches/speeches_current/s55_PM_Rudd_AD2008.html

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The speech's timing helps explain this underwhelming response. The Asia-Pacific Community idea did not feature publicly in Rudd's first major overseas trip where he visited the United States and China, two pivotal powers for any Asia-Pacific idea (indeed, then he was promoting the Six-Party Talks as the basis for an Asian security forum). The speech clearly came as a surprise to the governments of the Asia-Pacific and to many in Canberra whose job it is to explain Australian regional engagement policies. Richard Woolcott, who was named as the Asia-Pacific Community envoy, apparently became aware of his appointment only hours before the speech. Finally, this bold plan—which seems to override the existing, slow processes of regional construction—was announced before Rudd or Foreign Minister Stephen Smith had attended any of the meetings of the existing regional institutions.

So how does Rudd get out of this cul-de-sac?

His initial response has been to backpedal, saying he only intended to start a debate about regional architecture (apparently he missed the clouds of words spouted and gallons of ink spilled on this topic by academics and officials, albeit often to little result, over the past decade).

It's all the more unfortunate that Rudd went off half-cocked, because Australia and a more economically integrated, multipolar Asia-Pacific region do need more effective political, economic, and security institutions.

Rather than driving a bulldozer through what's already there, however, Rudd needs to understand the reasons why regional institutions are underdeveloped and underperforming. His clumsy parallel with the European Union, since disclaimed, showed a surprising naivety about Asia's unresolved historical legacies, resurgent nationalism, and the depth of contemporary strategic competition in the region.

A better starting point would be to take a hard look at the regional institutions that are already there and how they could be improved. The collapse of the Doha Round could breathe new life into APEC. While India remains in many ways a difficult partner, Rudd should take up the John Howard government's effort to convince Washington to admit Australia to APEC. He should use his familiarity with China and work with the United States and other major partners to overcome Beijing's obstruction of APEC's modest security agenda. And he should sit down with the U.S. administration to discuss how to advance the United States' Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific proposal.

Key to success will be disciplined, detailed policy development work and patient diplomacy: remember, Paul Keating's push to establish the APEC leaders' meeting took two years of quiet bilateral groundwork.

AUGUST TIMELINE OF EVENTS

August 4, 2008: The Philippine Supreme Court suspends a key agreement between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) after Christian lawmakers argue that it is unconstitutional. The Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain specifies terms for regional autonomy but has faced fierce domestic opposition. **See Major Regional Developments**

August 7, 2008: Cambodia's UN-supported genocide tribunal faces fresh charges of corruption, leading international donors to withhold at least \$300,000. The new allegations emerge as the court prepares for its first trial in September.

August 7, 2008: An avian flu outbreak hits Indonesia, causing three deaths in a North Sumatra village. World Health Organization (WHO) experts arrive to investigate, and 13 people with flu-like symptoms are rushed for tests.

August 9, 2008: One hundred members of Hizbut Tahrir, a radical Islamic group, demonstrate outside the U.S. embassy in Jakarta to protest Washington's alleged interference in the status of the Indonesian province of Papua, where a low-level separatist struggle persists. The demonstration followed reports that 40 members of the U.S. Congress had sent a letter to Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono urging an "immediate and unconditional" release of two Papuan activists who were sentenced to prison for raising a separatist flag.

August 10, 2008: Burma's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi meets with her lawyer for the first time in nearly five years to discuss a law that prohibits detentions in excess of five consecutive years. Her current detention dates from May 2003.

August 10, 2008: Former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra says he will not return to Bangkok to face corruption charges but will remain in Great Britain after attending the opening ceremony of the Olympics in Beijing. Thaksin cites political interference in the Thai judicial system for his decision. Thaksin and his wife Pojaman had been convicted of

AUGUST TIMELINE OF EVENTS Continued

various graft and tax evasion charges on July 31 and ordered to appear before the Thai Supreme Court on August 13. **See Major Regional Developments**

August 12, 2008: Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd announces that Australia and Indonesia will submit a proposal to Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders in Peru in November outlining a mechanism for the speedy deployment of armed forces in the event of natural disasters.

August 14, 2008: Cambodia's genocide tribunal charges Duch, the head of the notorious Khmer Rouge torture center Tuol Sleng, for crimes against humanity. His actual trial is expected to begin in late September.

August 15, 2008: Indonesia refuses to bend to U.S. pressure to halt the broadcast of the Al-Manar television channel owned by Hezbollah. Information and Communications Minister Mohammad Nuh says the station is not violating Indonesian law.

August 20, 2008: : Aung San Suu Kyi, reportedly frustrated with UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari's failure to achieve any progress in his mandate to compel the release of political prisoners (including herself) and promote political reform in the country, refuses to meet with him during a visit to Burma. Gambari does meet with representatives from the Burmese government, government-affiliated organizations, and some members of Burma's opposition party, the National League for Democracy. During his visit, Gambari expresses concern about Burma's faltering economy and said he would call on the junta to appoint a special UN liaison officer in Rangoon.

August 20, 2008: : Thailand and Cambodia sign an interim agreement concerning the disputed area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple. The agreement refers the dispute to a joint Cambodian-Thai boundary commission, although further progress has been stalled by Thailand's political crisis.

August 22, 2008: : The United Nations ends aid flights to Burma for cyclone relief. A total of 232 flights delivered medical supplies, shelter materials, and other humanitarian equipment.

August 26, 2008: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia sign an agreement to define their borders and implement a border marker system. Vietnamese prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung hailed this as "an event of major historical significance."

August 26, 2008: Malaysia's opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim wins a by-election in Penang, returning him to Parliament for the first time since being removed from power on false sodomy and corruption allegations in 1998. His political opponents had earlier attempted to stymie his political comeback with new charges of sodomy, which is a crime in Malaysia. Anwar has pleaded innocent but is scheduled to appear in court on September 24, eight days after his September 16 target date for ousting the current government.

August 27, 2008: ASEAN holds a disaster simulation exercise in Thailand as part of the ASEAN Regional Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercise 2008. The simulated typhoon scenario involved response teams from Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

August 27, 2008: ASEAN members expressed no objections to the development of nuclear power plants in Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam at a meeting of the ASEAN Technical Working Group on the Establishment of Nuclear Plants. In recent years, Southeast Asian nations have become interested in pursuing nuclear power to reduce dependence on traditional energy resources.

August 27, 2008: Singapore hosts the fourth three-day Western Pacific Naval Symposium Maritime Security Information Exchange, entitled "Safe and Secure Seas for All." It aimed to enhance information sharing and promote maritime security. The navies of 17 nations, including the United States, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Australia, and Thailand, participated in the symposium.

August 28, 2008: The 40th ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting concludes with the announcement that ASEAN and India had finalized a free-trade agreement in goods. The agreement, which is expected to be signed at the ASEAN summit in December, will substantially reduce import duties and tariffs in two phases, with 71 percent of goods affected by 2012 and another 9 percent by 2015.

U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

August 6-7, 2008: President George W. Bush makes a two-day visit to Thailand. He meets with Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and discusses military and security dimensions of the relationship, while vowing to enhance cooperation in education and law enforcement. The transcript of their press conference can be found [here](#). On the same trip, Laura Bush visits with Burma activists in Bangkok and with refugees on the Thai-Burmese border. More information on her activities can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

August 6, 2008: The U.S. and Vietnam Departments of Labor agree to continue an ongoing dialogue on labor issues until 2012. More information can be found [here](#).

August 7, 2008: The U.S. Army “Warrior Leader” Training Program graduates 44 Indonesian noncommissioned officers. The NCOs attended the program at the request of the Indonesian military to receive training in leadership and tactical doctrine. A press release can be found [here](#).

August 12–14, 2008: The Malaysian Armed Forces Health Services and the U.S. Department of Defense cosponsored a “Senior Leaders Seminar on Pandemic Influenza” in Kuala Lumpur. The event description can be found [here](#).

August 26, 2008: At the 32nd Pacific Armies Management Seminar in Jakarta, Lt. Gen. Benjamin R. Mixon, commanding general, U.S. Army Pacific, affirms the U.S. security commitment to Southeast Asia by promising continued multilateral military cooperation and enhanced “mutual cooperation” between the United States and its “regional friends” in confronting new challenges. For more on Gen. Mixon’s remarks, see [here](#).

SOUTHEAST ASIA AT CSIS

Other projects & reports from the International Security Program’s Asia Division can be found at www.csis.org/isp/asia.

MAJOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Political Turmoil in Thailand

The People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the group that brought down the government of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, began the month with daily protests of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej’s government and ended the month physically occupying key government buildings.

The PAD is led by Sondhi Limthongkul, a media mogul and staunch opponent of Thaksin, Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party (TRT), and TRT’s successor, the People’s Power Party (PPP), led by Prime Minister Samak. The PAD is an eclectic coalition of Bangkok elites—royalists, military, and business. In espousing “democracy,” the PAD sought to depose Samak’s democratically elected government and to install a legislature primarily comprised of appointed senators. PAD accused Samak of aiming to eliminate the monarchy, despite his unquestionable royalist credentials, and of supporting the political rehabilitation of Thaksin.

Thaksin, who was residing in Thailand at the beginning of August while waiting to face corruption charges, triggered further PAD outrage by seeking asylum in Great Britain after attending the opening ceremony of the Olympics in Beijing. Regardless, Thai courts went ahead and seized \$2.2 billion of Thaksin’s assets. The situation escalated on August 26 when approximately 35,000 PAD protesters stormed the building of state broadcaster NBT and occupied the Government House, home to the offices of the prime minister and other cabinet members. Forced to work out of a military compound, Samak issued warrants for the arrest of Sondhi and other PAD leaders but to no avail and used police to force the protesters from the government buildings, with similar success. Demonstrations spread to the opposition hotbeds of the south, where airports and railroads were briefly forced shut, including the important Phuket airport, which was closed for two days.

The month ended in deadlock, with both Samak and the PAD refusing to back down. The military, loathe to step in after its experience running the country after the 2006 coup, claims that it will not intervene in the crisis. Samak met with King Bhumibol Adulyadej, but his sentiments remain unknown.

Editor’s Note: Thai politics remained in flux between September 1 and the time of publishing. Following a court ruling on illegal activity as prime minister, Prime Minister Samak was forced to resign on September 9. A full recap of this evolving situation will appear in the October Southeast Asia Bulletin.

Prospects for Peace Recede in the Philippines

After a half century of armed rebellion by Muslim separatists in the south Philippines, peace was finally within reach in early August. The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, governed primarily by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has enjoyed semiautonomy since 1996. On July 28, a memorandum of agreement (MOA) was reached between the MILF and the Philippine national government that granted the MILF control of 712 villages on top of the semiautonomous area that it has controlled since 1989. Under the agreement, the MILF is allowed to organize its own police forces and courts and to control international trade and natural resources in the region.

Although the MOA called for future referendums on becoming part of the autonomous region within affected villages, Catholic leaders feared the implications of Muslim rule. On August 4, the day before the agreement was to be signed, Catholic lawmakers took their objections to the Philippine Supreme Court, arguing that the MOA was unconstitutional because only the central government had constitutional authority to control natural resources. The court immediately blocked the signing of the agreement to allow for further review.

Since then, the unstable peace in the south Philippines has all but dissolved. Breakaway MILF factions quickly took up arms, and the Philippine army was sent to the region to halt the violence and maintain central control. The two sides continue to fight in many villages, and at least 120,000 residents have reportedly fled the region. On August 21, President Gloria Malapagal Arroyo, facing a bitterly divided cabinet and mounting opposition, was forced to withdraw central government support for the agreement, although she left the door open for future talks.

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EVENTS TO WATCH FOR IN SEPTEMBER

September 8–12: The Khmer Rouge war crimes tribunal hearings will begin. More information and a full schedule can be found [here](#).

September 10–18: U.S. deputy secretary of state John Negroponte will visit Vietnam, Cambodia, and Hong Kong to discuss a broad range of bilateral and global issues with his counterparts. More on Negroponte's trip can be found [here](#).

September 16: Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has set September 16 as a deadline for current members of Parliament to defect to his party as part of his plan to topple the government.

Late September: Thailand and Cambodia are scheduled to resume discussions over the disputed territory surrounding the Preah Vihear temple.

MISCELLANEOUS FACTS ABOUT AUSTRALIA

The Australian Defence Force has 51,000 active duty personnel and is a highly expeditionary force. Approximately 3,500 soldiers, airmen, and marines are currently deployed in more than 10 countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, including about 1,000 each in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Australia is about the same size as the continental United States but is home to only approximately 21 million people. The country has about 82 million sheep, down from a high of 140 million in the mid-1990s. Nonetheless, Australia currently faces a severe shortage of sheep shearers, many of whom now work in Australia's booming mining industry.

Australia became ASEAN's first dialogue partner in 1974, resulting in the ASEAN Australia Economic Cooperation Program (AAECP).

Christmas Island, an Australian possession inhabited by 1,600 people, lies a mere 300 miles south of Jakarta, Indonesia.

An emu and red kangaroo appear on the Australian coat of arms because the animals are found only in Australia and because they cannot walk backwards, symbolizing progress and an unwillingness to back down.