

THE BIRTH OF AN ASIA PACIFIC COMMUNITY

Opening remarks by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia, to "Asia Players" Session, World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, 28 January 1995

Two very important meetings occurred in the Asia Pacific region last year - each major defining events, and together constituting what can be described as an historical watershed.

The first was the APEC Leaders' Summit in Bogor, Indonesia, in which the leaders of the eighteen major economies of the region - accounting between them already for almost 45 per cent of the world's trade and nearly 55 per cent of its production - committed themselves to achieving free and open trade and investment: no later than 2010 in the case of the industrialised economies, and no later than 2020 for everyone else.

The other meeting, which has attracted less global media attention, was the inaugural meeting in Bangkok in July of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) - bringing together for the first time the eighteen major security players of the region (including Russia and Vietnam, not presently part of APEC) to begin a multilateral dialogue aimed at creating a new cooperative security environment in the region - the idea being to build trust and confidence through a variety of cooperative strategies, including military cooperation programs, wide-ranging information exchanges, the development of preventive diplomacy processes and inter-governmental cooperation in mounting UN peace keeping operations.

These two meetings should be seen as consolidating, and putting in place, respectively, the key institutional elements - one about economics, the other about security - of a new regional architecture. 1994 was a watershed year, because these events can be seen as marking the transition, from theory to reality, of the idea of an Asia Pacific community.

In talking about an Asia Pacific community, I don't want to be taken as claiming that the region is, or ever should be, a Community in the capital-C European sense, implying among other things a customs union and single internal market. Rather I am speaking of community in the small-c sense, the flavour of which is best captured by the usual Chinese translation of the term, which involves characters meaning literally 'big family'.

Even expressed in this cautious way, there are still plenty of critics who can be heard to say that the idea of an Asia Pacific community is at best premature and at worst misguided. It is suggested, variously,

- that the region is simply too heterogeneous in terms of its political cultures, economic cultures and basic value systems ever to be capable of being so described;

- that it involves too many major powers with competing interests for any genuinely multilateral process - especially in the security matters - to assume any real significance; and
- that there is an unbridgeable gap, in particular, between the countries of East Asia and North America - that their separate regional identities will always count for more than any common Asia Pacific identity.

I believe that these responses, while familiar and understandable, understate the forces now at work to bring the Asia Pacific together; understate what has been achieved so far; and understate what is capable of being achieved. (I say this from the perspective of a country which, perhaps more than any other in the region, straddles its alleged dividing lines: we are historically and culturally of the West, but geographically located squarely in East Asia, doing most of our business there, having most of our strategic interests concentrated there, and with a demography increasingly reflecting that reality. We are a country, moreover, that has been more actively involved than almost anyone else in creating the new regional institutions to which I have referred.)

In the time available I can only substantiate these arguments in highly abbreviated summary form, but these are the main points.

As to the forces now at work to bring the region together:

- The phenomenon of convergence - of countries of very different backgrounds developing, with the help of modern communications technology, information bases, tastes, outlooks, practices and institutions that are ever more alike - is at least as alive and well in the Asia Pacific as anywhere else in the globe.
- Although there are obviously different rates of take-up around the region, there is increasing acceptance - as there is indeed around the world - that there are a common core of universal values which are more powerful in their resonance across the region than any values which are argued to be peculiarly Western or peculiarly Asian. These more universal values go to individuals' needs for security, for prosperity, and for dignity and liberty - including the right to have a say in the way they are governed.
- There is already a high level of economic integration within the Asia Pacific region, with some 60 per cent of APEC countries' trade being with other APEC members, and rapidly growing trade and cross-investment links between Asian economies who have not previously had much to do directly with each other.

As to the achievements and potential of APEC:

- APEC, within the very short period of five years since the inaugural meeting in

Canberra in 1989, has grown from a loose grouping prepared to cautiously discuss an OECD-style economic cooperation agenda (focusing on data compilation, policy dialogue and particular sectoral projects) to one which has now embraced a clear-cut trade facilitation agenda (involving business cost-savings measures in areas like technical standards and conformance testing, customs harmonisation and investment access guidelines), and now - following Bogor - a clear-cut, classic trade liberalisation agenda (involving tariff and quota cuts as well). True it is that much remains to be delivered, as distinct from merely talked about, but the progress has been remarkable.

- APEC's trade liberalisation agenda is yet to be worked through in detail, and I expect it to take two to three years before detailed agreement is thrashed out. Questions like what precisely 'open regionalism' means in this context, whether the progress can be made short of a formal Free Trade Area being negotiated, or indeed a new GATT/WTO round being leveraged into effect - are issues still to be resolved. But the political horsepower has now been injected, and the overall internal dynamics are highly favourable for further trade liberalisation momentum.

As to achievements, and potential further achievements, on the security side:

- The Asia Pacific region is - perhaps not unconnected with its economic success - as benign as it has ever been, and most countries seem to want to capture that mood and make it as permanent as possible. Witnessing as we do in Australia the minuet of the giants in our region (the US, Japan, China and Russia), and conscious as we all are in the region of potential flashpoints still like the Korean Peninsula, the Four Islands, the South China Sea and the uncertain future domestic environment in China, no one can sensibly deny the continued applicability of traditional real-politik, balance of power considerations. The United States's role as a 'balancing wheel' in the region is universally accepted, and no one is in the business of tearing up familiar bilateral alliances. But at the same time, there seems now almost complete acceptance of the idea that a great deal can be done to supplement and reinforce more traditional approaches by multilateral dialogue, confidence-building and problem solving processes.

- The ARF - the Asia Pacific's own version on Human Rights to be held in Vienna next year, which will hopefully further define the relationship between democracy, development and human rights.

Encouraging wider adherence to existing instruments should continue to have a great prominence in our policy on human rights in coming years. There are, of course, many gaps remaining to be filled - for example, by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which are currently under consideration. Nevertheless, the broad legal foundations on which more universal respect for human rights can be built are now largely in place.

Our present human rights approach has a strong bilateral as well as multilateral dimension, extending both to states who clearly share our basic perspective and those who may not. Paying attention to the policies and practices of so called like-minded states on human rights issues can assist Australia's efforts towards achieving better human rights observance for a number of reasons. It should, for example, facilitate the adoption of common fronts on human rights issues, which can be immensely valuable. It is also important to have a sense of the extent to which we do in fact share the policy goals of 'like-minded' states. Actions and attitudes by such nations provide the context within which Australian actions will often be understood.

The record unfortunately shows, however, that some like-minded states pursue policy applications of human rights which we would not wish to support. Some states appear to be considerably less concerned about the gross violations of the rights of allegedly non-democratic opposition forces than with the rights of often self-proclaimed pro-democracy or "liberation" groups. A striking example of this is the practice of some countries in providing military advisers or even arms to nationalist or "democratic" governments or opposition groups as part of their efforts to encourage the growth of democracy and thus of human rights. Australian policy in such circumstances could be devalued by too close an association with aspects of others' policies.

In making human rights representations to countries who may not be so like-minded, we have sought to ensure that Australia's approach is characterised by a focus on the kind of rights which can readily be accepted as universal in character, by consistency, attention to detail, and - crucially - a willingness to respond frankly and fully to criticisms directed to us.

In the past five years, we have made over 2300 official representations to more than 120 countries - including to close allies such as the US; major trading partners such as Japan and China, the UK and other Western European countries; countries in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America; as well as to our regional neighbours including Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Singapore and the Philippines.

Consistency means simply adopting so far as possible the same approach to all cases of alleged human rights abuse wherever they may occur, not picking and choosing between countries on other grounds. This maintains a minimum but important protection against politicising an approach which aims to work impartially for a common good. In some cases making diplomatic representations may be the only available measure, but they can also become an overly familiar and therefore less effective routine: consistency should not be viewed as adopting a standard process, but as a means of achieving policy goals.

There can be difficult conflicts arising from time to time between human rights objectives and other entirely legitimate national interests. This need not be a reason to

reduce engagement on human rights, but it is important to recognise that this engagement may not always be cost-free, at least in the short term. Some countries do take non-economi