



**COUNCIL FOR SECURITY
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The annual CSCAP Regional Security Outlook for 2019 has just been published and the full report is available [here](#) at no charge.

Part One: ARRIVING WHERE NO ONE WANTED TO GO

The first part of the CSCAP Security Outlook 2019 includes an introduction which elaborates on the themes addressed below together with a dozen articles by specialists looking at the security outlook from vantage points all across the Indo-Asia-Pacific.

Thinking about the regional security outlook is a pretentious business, even when one only looks forward about 12 months, as we do with the CSCAP Outlook. Practitioners quickly learn the tricks of the trade. One such trick is to be alert to a particular change likely to have major and enduring consequences for the challenge of maintaining a sufficiency of stability and order to preclude major power war and foster widespread betterment. A strong candidate for such a change emerged in 2018 with the end of ambiguity and denial about whether the United States and China saw themselves as in an essentially adversarial contest for global pre-eminence.

A newly common lament is that the so-called rules-based international order is in jeopardy. This order is undeniably a creation of the West and whether or not the actual rules are tainted by a demonstrable 'western' bias is an important question that awaits a definitive answer. What is already clear is that the extant order

was crafted to facilitate interaction between states with broadly similar philosophies on the conduct of their internal affairs and the framing of their dealings with the outside world. Recent events and trends raise the question of whether the extant rules-based order is capable of sustaining a level playing field between states that hold starkly different views on the question of governance, as is the case with the US and China.

Governance in the United States is driven by the view that government is both indispensable and a major threat to the personal freedoms that liberal democracies treasure. Governance is therefore distinguished by fundamental characteristics designed to preclude the State gaining dominance over the people. China's approach is driven above all by its 2500-year experience with imperial rule, with all its Emperors enjoying absolute power - the mandate of heaven - provided it was exercised responsibly and with compassion. The Socialist ideology that still animates China's present government similarly stresses that the State must command all the reins of power. Furthermore, Confucius allows that an all-powerful political leader (with the right personal attributes), together with a competent and disciplined bureaucracy and an orderly and respectful general public offers the possibility of the best imaginable governance of the nation. To modern China, the notion of constraining the power of the state - whether through elections and an authoritative parliament, an independent judiciary, a free press or venerated transparency - is tantamount to precluding optimal governance and therefore plainly illogical.

Future historians will be puzzled that, in the face of the prolonged deterioration in US-China relations, ASEAN did not find some way for the ARF or the EAS (or both) to set the example of striving to shape this pivotal relationship. The risks associated with an adversarial US-China relationship, and the challenge of addressing them, are still out there, and they continue to grow. The onus remains primarily on ASEAN to find the political will and ingenuity to commit the multilateral security processes it manages to the task of changing the trajectory of the US-China relationship. Much clearly depends on the US and China. They may yet surprise us with concessions and/or initiatives disguised as unilateral measures that in fact address the other sides deepest concerns. That said, these two states can no longer credibly assert that they have everything under control.

Part two: ARF -THE NEXT 25 YEARS

The second part takes a look at the ASEAN Regional Forum, which turns 25 this year, and asks whether a change in its objectives and/or modalities would meaningfully enhance the contribution it could make to order and stability over the coming 25 years.

Opinions on the ARF's effectiveness appear to fall broadly into two schools of thought. One school assesses the ARF as a disappointment, a bold idea that lost its way. The forum acquired a reputation as a 'talk shop' obsessed with procedural niceties that soon lost even the aspiration to step up as a process that could address and manage some of the region's actual security challenges. The ARF is seen as a political effort that is disproportionate to its indirect and uncertain benefits.

The other school stresses the importance of recalling how utterly foreign concepts like comprehensive or common security were to the states of the Asia Pacific at the time that the Cold War unraveled and that it has to be accepted that even the ASEAN aspiration to a forum for dialogue and consultation on security issues was heroically ambitious. Supporters maintain that the ARF succeeded in propagating its norms and in laying the foundations for habits of cooperation and the harmonization of views.

Regardless of how one assesses the efficacy of the ARF it remains important to consider whether the purposes and/or modalities of this process could be recast to give it more traction in the regional security environment now unfolding before us. The ARF itself, in 2009 and a CSCAP study, in 2014, urged such a course.

These schools of thought can be readily detected in the eleven short assessments assembled in Outlook 2019 on whether the ARF continues to deliver essential outcomes or needs to be re-invented. Most assessments convey a sense of frustration and impatience. The ARF may have been commendably ahead of its time in 1993/94 but the old sensitivities have been nurtured and sustained by some to preclude its development into a frontline regional security process. The ideas for reform flagged in these brief comments merit closer scrutiny and development as ASEAN, in particular, confronts the challenge of unshackling the ARF and allowing it to make a fuller contribution to preserving the stability and peace of our region.

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