



The Future of the ASEAN Regional Forum

by Barry Desker

In the light of criticism of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), it is useful to re-visit the critical elements behind its establishment. The ARF was conceived as a process, not an institution. It focused on building mutual trust and sought to develop norms through confidence building measures (CBMs). The objective was to create a more predictable and stable pattern of relationships between major powers and Southeast Asia. Implicit in its conceptualization was the recognition that regional issues required the engagement of the great powers in regional affairs. The ARF introduced a new norm into the ASEAN process of cooperative security that emphasized inclusiveness through the promotion of dialogue among both like-minded and non-like-minded states.

In the context of regional institution building, the ARF is unique. It was not created in the aftermath of war, unlike European institutions that developed in the aftermath of World War II and in the shadow of the Cold War. It was not a treaty or alliance confined to participants from the Southeast Asia region. The ARF deliberately sought the participation of the major powers as well as mid-sized powers such as Australia, South Korea, and India that could have a significant impact on regional developments. Its membership was not limited to like-minded states. Instead, the focus was on inclusiveness bringing in participants with an interest in broader Asian issues who had traditionally been excluded from the consultative processes initiated by ASEAN in its Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) dialogues with major Western states and China. The ARF did not meet to resolve contentious issues or seek to be a negotiating forum. Its objective was to build confidence and trust as well as develop cooperative norms of behavior.

The ARF faces a major test today. Relationships in the Asia-Pacific region are changing. The role of the United States as hegemon will increasingly be challenged by a rising China, especially if China maintains economic growth of 8-10% per annum. Already Chinese capability in manufacturing runs the gamut from low skill, labor intensive manufacturing of textiles and garments to high skills, capital intensive wafer fabrication. Chinese military capabilities and political influence are likely to increase as rapid economic development occurs. The management of the U.S.-China relationship as well as China's relationship with its neighbors will be critical issues in the years ahead. In the ASEAN region the focus of attention is on intra-state conflict, but in Northeast Asia the risk of inter-state conflict remains high.

In the light of these considerations, the argument that an alternative to the ARF should be sought and a new regional military and political alliance should be created needs to be addressed. It would be useful to highlight the benefits of the ARF:

First, the ARF is the only regional forum that discusses sensitive regional issues. It has even begun to discuss sensitive domestic issues. While there has been little progress as a result of discussions on Myanmar, a process has begun that would have unthinkable a decade ago.

Second, the ARF has helped to build comfort levels and created an atmosphere conducive to cooperative security in a region that had not been accustomed to cooperation on security related questions.

Third, the ARF has facilitated the reduction of tension and the management of regional relationships. It has not resolved disputes or prevented the outbreak of conflicts but it could be used to minimize the impact of differing perceptions and interests.

Fourth, the ARF has begun the process of creating predictable and stable relationships among regional states. It has engendered an increasing awareness of regional norms among the major powers and has alerted the regional states to the changing values and perspectives arising from today's globalized environment.

However, in the light of the concerns expressed about ASEAN's weaknesses as well as the changing regional environment, what measures could be taken to strengthen the ARF? How can we ensure that the ARF remains relevant and continues to engage the major powers as well as the ASEAN states?

My suggestions represent an initial set of tentative thoughts intended to provoke discussion and debate on these issues.

First, participating states should engage in frank and constructive exchanges of views, utilizing the opportunity to express their concerns and even to highlight their differences in order that positions may be clarified and a better understanding of divergent perspective could arise. While ASEAN's focus has been on seeking consensus and compromise - "the ASEAN Way" - the ARF should be prepared to accept divergent analyses and agree to disagree where there are fundamental differences of views. The process of engagement and of attempting to understand divergent views is constructive.

Second, the ARF needs to move from an exchange of views to problem-solving. As an exercise in preventive diplomacy, the ARF could attempt to narrow the gap where differences exist on regional issues. By its very existence, the ARF is itself a confidence building measure but it now needs to add substance to the forms of cooperative regional security. The ARF should develop the meetings of its Inter-sessional Support Group (ISG) to focus on particular themes and issues. Such thematic

discussion would lead to focused exchanges of views and the building of an agenda for regional security cooperation.

Third, the ARF should establish an institutional framework for the implementation of preventive diplomacy. The ARF should consider initiatives such as enhancing the role of its Chair, setting up consultative committees of Eminent Persons as well as a register of experts who could facilitate the resolution of conflicts. We should also consider innovations such as a "good offices" role for a troika of the past, present, and next Chair of the ARF in seeking to resolve conflicts, reducing tensions, and facilitating discussions and negotiations on issues of critical significance for regional peace and security. In order to assist the Chair in embarking on initiatives on behalf of the Chair, he (or she) should be encouraged to use the services of distinguished statesmen from the region as Friends of the Chair. I would therefore propose that the initial ARF discussions on preventive diplomacy should be pursued and the process could be moved forward on an incremental basis.

Fourth, as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) is now hosted by different states rotating on an annual basis, the exercise of chairing meetings of the ASEAN Standing Committee, hosting the AMM followed by the PMC and ARF are a major challenge for a number of ASEAN countries. We should consider de-synchronizing the ARF Chair from the ASEAN Chair. For example, if Laos chairs the AMM and PMC, it could be immediately followed by the holding of the ARF in another ASEAN country. Similarly, if ASEAN countries do not feel ready to host the ARF, they could forgo the opportunity. It does not require all 10 ASEAN countries to host meetings of the ARF. ASEAN could even take the initiative to suggest that whilst meetings of the ARF would continue to be held in an ASEAN country, in future, ARF meetings could be co-chaired by an external ARF member. This would extend a principle as meetings of the ISG are also co-chaired by an external member. The effect would be to lock in the participation of the external powers as well as give the external powers a stake in the ARF process. The objective would be to build a commitment to the ARF as well as a better understanding of the evolving character of the ARF, especially amongst Western powers whose leaderships may change rapidly after domestic elections.

Fifth, the ARF should establish a Secretariat. Co-location with the APEC Secretariat would encourage an increasingly symbiotic relationship between these two key institutions for cooperative regional security and regional economic integration. Sixth, the ARF should consider the holding of meetings of senior officials of the defense ministries concurrently with the meetings of the foreign ministers. At the present time, there is a meeting of defense officials over lunch during the ARF. However, it would be useful to raise the level of defense involvement in the ARF process. Exposure of defense officials to the norms of cooperative security and engagement in the process of dialogue and discussion would create an awareness of the changing global and regional security environment. The objective would be to reduce the risk of misperception or misjudgement as well as creating a momentum for cooperative security endeavors, including consideration of measures to prevent the outbreak of conflict and tensions. Eventually, there could be the concurrent convening of meetings of defense ministers during the ARF.

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