



**THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM AT  
25: MOVING FORWARD OR  
STANDING STILL?**

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As foreign ministers from the Indo-Asia-Pacific region and beyond convene in Bangkok on Aug. 2, they will be commemorating the golden anniversary of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). While they will justifiably commend its accomplishments, it remains to be seen if they will seize this opportunity to breathe new life into the important but underutilized organization as it sets out on its next 25 years.

Since its inception in 1994, the [ARF](#) has been instrumental in bringing together 27 diverse participant countries and organizations to collaborate on a common platform for dialogue and consultation. For the most part, its members have avoided direct conflict with one another despite overlapping territorial claims and other historic disputes. If it did not exist, attempts would be made to create it, and these would likely prove difficult, if not impossible.

The ARF, through its deliberations and annual ministerial meetings, has helped to build confidence among its members. By most standards of measurement, the ARF is a success. Unfortunately, if one uses the [measurement](#) outlined by the ARF itself in its 1995 Concept Paper, it falls far short of its own goals.

The Concept Paper prescribed a “gradual evolutionary approach” to manage regional security challenges. It was to promote confidence building measures (CBMs) in the first stage, develop preventive diplomacy (PD) mechanisms in the second stage, and construct conflict resolution (CR) mechanisms in the third stage.

While there has been engagement for mutual benefit in several important areas, the ARF has not been able to make much headway in the latter two core tasks. Nor have the ARF ministers been willing to accept the recommendations of others, such as its own Experts and Eminent Persons Group (EEPG) and the non-governmental track two Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific ([CSCAP](#)), which have charted a course forward toward PD/CR.

ARF member countries have in many instances sought to voluntarily resolve both inter-state as well as internal conflicts through outside mediation – the classic definition of preventive diplomacy – but this has taken place *outside* the framework of the ARF. In our recent [Issues & Insights](#) report, we have drawn some lessons learned that could help chart a future course for the ARF in the area of PD/CR, if it is so inclined. We also examine the prior work of the EEPG and provide some alternative courses of action to make its contribution more meaningful. As longtime members of the EEPG, we seek to enhance its relevance and effectiveness by sustaining the practice of organizing Virtual Working Groups and promoting closer engagement between the EEPG and other regional institutions.

Most importantly on this golden anniversary, we propose several options for the ARF ministers to consider regarding pursuit of its PD/CR stated objective. One option is to redouble efforts to implement recommendations that have already been submitted. If continued difficulties (which we identify primarily as a lack of political will) prevent the ARF from moving forward on the PD/CR agenda, a [second option](#) is for the ARF to consider shifting to emphasize a more inclusive *security cooperation* agenda. The shift should be portrayed as an advancement of the mission of the ARF after 25 years of constructive engagement and should be seamless

because the ARF has already been engaged in many areas of security cooperation.

If the first option is chosen, the ARF should redouble its efforts to move down the path toward PD/CR, beginning with a serious review of the recommendations provided by CSCAP, the EEPG, and an ARF-funded [2008 PD Study](#) and develop a timeline for near-, mid-, and long-term steps to accomplish this goal. The steps could include: the development of an early warning capability, better utilization of the EEPs and a clearer definition of their role, closer coordination between the EEPG and the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (A-IPR), and transitioning from a “pace comfortable to all members on the basis of consensus” to “a pace comfortable to none” where full consensus is only required for the most sensitive issues. These recommendations are spelled out in more detail in our report. Two specific recommendations have been echoed at almost every EEPG meeting. The first is that the Annual Security Outlooks submitted by ARF member states should be subject to a process of discussion and analysis by a sub-group of EEPG members. The second is that senior ARF officials should consider the creation of an early warning mechanism in which the EEPG could play a coordinating role.

If instead the ARF decides to shift its emphasis to promoting more inclusive security cooperation as [recommended](#) recently by Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, it should use the occasion of its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary to adjust its mission to be “a forum for open dialogue and consultation on regional political and security issues, to discuss and reconcile the differing views between ARF participants to reduce the risk to security, and to promote cooperation in the diverse fields of comprehensive security.” This will entail a small but significant and positive amendment to the stated mission of the ARF.

If this option is chosen, ARF ministers would recognize PD/CR as primarily the work of the countries of the region. It should, however, continue to monitor PD/CR developments and provide support and encouragement, as well as explore specific PD initiatives as activities within the ambit of security cooperation.

Regardless of the path chosen, the ARF should recognize that preventive diplomacy is applicable to both inter-state as well as intra-state conflicts and disputes, while confirming that third party assistance for internal conflicts will only be at the invitation of the state concerned.

They also need to look at the role and function of the EEPG. Here are four options that have been suggested at various times by EEPG participants: one is to simply stay the course with the current mandate, structure, and focus, which are comfortable to many and consistent with the wider trajectory of the ARF itself; a second is to keep the current form of the EEPG but shift its focus to work on specific problems in a wider security cooperation agenda; a third is to restructure the EEPG to emphasize the “eminent” rather than the “expert” part of its title; and a fourth is to disband the EEPG and have the ARF look to CSCAP or other institutions for expert input.

The alternatives for improving both the EEPG and ARF itself are many and varied. As the institution celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> year, this is the ideal time for self-reflection and some forward thinking to increase the relevance of this important multilateral institution.

There is of course another, and regrettably more likely alternative: the ARF ministers can continue to pursue business as usual, paying lip service to the expanded PD/CR goals while standing still. This would disappoint the founders, who noted in the founding ARF Concept Paper that, “if the ARF is to become, over time, a meaningful vehicle to enhance the peace and prosperity of the region, it will have to demonstrate that it is a relevant instrument to be used in the event that a crisis or problem emerges.”

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