



The ASEAN Regional Forum: Challenges and Prospects

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ISSUES & INSIGHTS

WORKING PAPER

VOL. 21, WP8 | June 2021



Pacific Forum

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ABSTRACT

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a special organization with a unique group of participants and an uncommon mission that it is still, after 28 years, striving to accomplish amid a changing geopolitical environment. To reach its full potential, it must expand its horizons and address both sides of the security coin, namely conflict management and inclusive security cooperation, rather than continuing to confine itself to its traditional confidence building/conflict resolution mandate.

What ARF Does

Established in 1994, the ARF has some characteristics not shared by any other organization. Its agenda is driven by the 10 member states of ASEAN but its membership consists of 27 countries from Asia, Australasia, North America, and Europe. Because it describes itself as a forum for dialogue and consultation, its members are not called members but participants.

Although ASEAN is the “driver,” the forum works on the basis of consensus. This means all have to agree before a substantive decision is made.¹ This in turn means that if one country disagrees or objects strongly, a proposal cannot be passed. Effectively, every participant from Russia to Canada and Sri Lanka to Papua New Guinea has veto power. In other words, this forum has more veto power than the UN Security Council, or ASEAN itself, which also works on the principle of consensus.

Though the participants are scattered over four continents, the focus of the ARF is on security in a smaller space. This space is called the ARF’s “geographical footprint.” The footprint is made up of Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. ASEAN and the other countries in the footprint, therefore, welcome the active participation and contribution of countries outside the footprint as well. This degree of inclusivity and accommodation of extra-regional players is probably unheard of in any other regional security grouping. ASEAN, for instance, is only for countries in Southeast Asia. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is for the countries in Oceania. The EU is for Europe. But the ARF’s membership goes well beyond its geographical footprint. All the members of the ARF participate fully not only at the level of consultation and decision-making, but also in the security activities and programs of the ARF, such as maritime security and counter-terrorism.

Like ASEAN, the ARF as an organization welcomes different political ideologies. It excludes none.² Its membership reflects a wide variety of political systems. It is not hostile to any country and works with all, even if individual members may be averse to certain political systems. Finally, the ARF’s purpose is to promote regional peace and security through a three-stage process of confidence-building measures (CBM), preventive diplomacy (PD), and conflict resolution (CR). Given the numerous tensions and conflicts in the region, there is obviously a pressing need for effective conflict management institutions and measures to address the situation.

The Importance of the ARF’s Contributions

The ARF is of considerable significance for the region and the countries concerned. It provides a valuable security complement to the numerous regional political and economic processes at work in the area although their margins do not fully align. The processes include the East Asia Summit, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, the ASEAN Plus Three, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM

¹ The ASEAN Regional Forum: A Concept Paper

<https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Concept-Paper-of-ARF.pdf>

² ASEAN Regional Forum. Retrieved from: <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about-arf/>

Plus) brings a defense dimension to cooperation in the region. Together the regional arrangements are interlocking building blocks for greater peace and prosperity.

The nascent ARF played a vital role in bridging Cold War rifts in the 1990s. Its sustained activity in various fields for the purpose of confidence-building has helped bring together countries that are sometimes at odds with one another due to ideological differences, contending strategic interests, perceived threats from each other, territorial disputes, and residual historical animosities. The ARF's activities have helped participating countries forge links across a variety of security-related establishments in pursuit of a common purpose. Valuable skills and experiences have been exchanged in the process in the Inter-Sessional Support Meetings (ISMs) and the Inter-Sessional Support Group (ISG).

ARF's Limitations

However, despite considerable activity over a period of a quarter century, the ARF has not been able to make headway in fulfilling its central mission of alleviating conflicts and tensions in the region. It has not attempted to moderate any conflict or inter-state security issue. The most it has done is make the routine comments on issues such as those affecting the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea in the annual Chairman's Statement.³

In conflict management theory, confidence-building measures mainly refer to targeted CBMs devised to address particular conflicts. For instance, specific CBMs introduced to manage disputes and tensions in the South China Sea; specific CBMs for the territorial disputes between Japan on the one hand and China/South Korea/North Korea on the other; a set of CBMs for the situation on the Korean Peninsula; or even particular CBMs focused on the territorial dispute between Japan and Russia on the northern fringe of the ARF footprint. It refers less to general CBMs embracing all participating countries whether or not they are in conflict. The ARF, however, has only focused on the latter to date.

Not only has the ARF not formulated any conflict- or dispute-specific CBM, the general CBMs it has worked on for more than two decades have not been able to prevent the security situation in the ARF footprint region from deteriorating further. Sadly for the ARF, it is key countries of the Forum themselves, located both within and outside its geographical footprint, that are driving the aggravation of the situation. Geopolitical tensions between the United States and its allies have escalated markedly with China and Russia. All of them are also members of the ARF. Military expenditure is rising sharply among many ARF participants, the South China Sea is being militarized, and states not located in the ARF footprint are deploying warships including destroyers and aircraft carriers frequently into the area. The Korean Peninsula remains on edge.

In the face of these mounting challenges the ARF has been neither seen nor heard. No member has called for the ARF to play a moderating role in any of the tensions or disputes. Perhaps the ARF does not even cross any party's mind when reflecting on the worsening situation. Some are of the view that the ARF, or rather ASEAN (which is responsible for leading the preventive

³ ASEAN Regional Forum, *Chairman's Statement of the 27th ASEAN Regional Forum*, Sept. 12, 2020. Retrieved from: https://asean.org/storage/2020/09/Final-27th-ARF-Chairman-Statement_as-of-13-September-2020-clean.pdf

diplomacy process), should accumulate more experience and capability by attending to the “easier” disputes within ASEAN itself before venturing into the other, more challenging ones, beyond. This makes some sense, except that the countries of ASEAN already have 50 years of experience in Southeast Asia, much of it considered successful.

ASEAN, consisting of five and then six members at the time, played a key diplomatic role along with the United Nations and other governments in the resolution of the Vietnam-Cambodia conflict of 1979-1989.⁴ Vietnam and Cambodia were not members of ASEAN then.⁵ Individual members of ASEAN such as Indonesia and Malaysia have also played successful mediation roles in the conflict between the Philippine government and insurgent movements in Southern Philippines.⁶ Besides these successful, dedicated CBM/PD/CR roles, ASEAN is a regional institution that is committed to general confidence-building and preventive diplomacy among its members. It is one of the most successful examples of its kind in the world, as evidenced by the peace, amity, and close comprehensive cooperation among ASEAN nations.

Southeast Asian nations have also resolved many bilateral issues such as border disputes bilaterally or with the help of external parties such as the International Court of Justice. The current domestic crisis in Myanmar is a fresh test for ASEAN. It is a challenge that ASEAN has accepted, holding an unprecedented summit in April 2021 to chart a path forward in hopefully resolving this crisis (at this writing, to no avail). Hence, the view that ASEAN should accumulate more experience and skills before it attempts to lead dedicated CBM/PD/CR for some of the issues in the larger ARF footprint area does not hold. ASEAN and its members began accumulating extensive experience well before the ARF was formed. The ARF appears to have steadily retreated from its original objective of conflict resolution, reflected in its three-stage conflict management process. Stage III, which was called “Development of Conflict Resolution Mechanisms,” was re-named “Elaboration of Approaches to Conflicts.”⁷ It seems rather odd that, after diligently laying the groundwork of CBM and PD, the ARF merely ends up “elaborating” on approaches to conflicts. This elaboration of approaches can be accomplished even now by the ARF’s Experts and Eminent Persons (EEPs) Group or the track-two Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) for the ARF’s consideration. There also appears to be a rather serious contradiction in the concept of the ARF. How can the geographical footprint of the CBM/PD/CR mandate of the ARF possibly include Southeast Asia and Oceania when Southeast Asia is the responsibility of ASEAN and Oceania the responsibility of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)?

The ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia of 1976 vest responsibility for promoting peace and managing dispute settlement in Southeast Asia in

4 Narine, Shaun. “Forty years of ASEAN: a historical review.” *The Pacific Review* 21, no. 4 (2008): 411-429.

5 Solingen, Eitel. “ASEAN, “Quo Vadis”? Domestic Coalitions and Regional Co-operation.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 21, no. 1 (1999): 30-53.

6 Franco, Joseph Raymond Silva “Malaysia: Unsung Hero of the Philippine Peace Process.” *Asian Security* 9, no. 3 (2013): 211-230.

⁷ ASEAN Regional Forum, *Concept and Principles of Preventative Diplomacy* (2019). Retrieved from: <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ARF-Concept-Paper-of-Preventive-Diplomacy.pdf>

ASEAN.⁸ Similarly, the Aitutaki Declaration on Regional Security Cooperation of 1992 and the Biketawa Declaration of 2000 entrust the responsibility for security, conflict management, and crisis response in the Pacific Islands to the members of PIF. What is left for the ARF's direct responsibility for pursuing CBM/PD/CR, therefore, is only the Northeast Asia region, which has no regional entity.

All this seems a rather dismal assessment of the ARF. But it need not be so if the ARF can further develop its full potential as an important regional security institution.

Prospects

The ARF can contribute more meaningfully to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific if it is able to consider a two-pronged approach to move forward. First, it can consider embarking upon initiatives to address specific tensions/disputes/conflicts in the region instead of continuing to focus on general confidence-building measures. Second, it can contemplate expanding its mandate, which is presently confined to conflict resolution, to embrace as well cooperation in both traditional and non-traditional security issues. Traditional and non-traditional security are collectively termed "comprehensive security" by the ARF and ASEAN.

The first prong: begin addressing specific tensions/disputes/conflicts

The ARF has been spending more than a quarter century in the initial confidence building stage based on the premise that conflict resolution must proceed in three stages: confidence building first, then preventive diplomacy, then conflict resolution.⁹ This is theory. In practice, there is often no time. Everything, especially the first two stages, may need to be telescoped when there is a clear and present threat. A crisis may not wait. Some can ignite at any moment.

Perhaps it is time, therefore, to move on from general confidence building to devising specific CBMs for specific tensions/disputes/conflicts in the region, as resources permit. ASEAN as well as other countries in the ARF already have a reservoir of skills and mixed experiences in the field. Moving on to the next phase is essentially a question of political will.

The ARF can begin by reinforcing its institutional capacity expeditiously. The ARF Unit has to be upgraded significantly to perform the added task of conflict monitoring as well as providing the necessary support for the ARF to execute its conflict management responsibility credibly and effectively. The Office of the ASEAN Secretary General may need to be expanded too, to cope with the added demands upon the Office.

At the same time, the Inter-sessional Support Group Meeting on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy may be tasked to explore the specific tensions/disputes/conflicts in the region that the ARF can consider to address incrementally. ARFEFP and CSCAP can assist.

⁸ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia*, Feb. 24 (1976). Retrieved from: <https://asean.org/treaty-amity-cooperation-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976/>

⁹ Heller, Dominik. "The Relevance of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) for Regional Security in the Asia-Pacific." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (2005): 123- 145

ASEAN is free to seek the assistance of other parties as well when discharging its conflict management responsibilities. It does not have to rely only on its own resources. Depending on the issue being addressed, other ARF members and the United Nations Secretary General may be approached to assist. Reputable and credible non-government peace and mediation centers such as PACTA Finland, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and the Carter Center can also be invited to play a role if desired. The resources available to ASEAN and the ARF are therefore quite extensive.

The experts among the EEPs can also be mobilized. Eminent persons such as former presidents, prime ministers, or a regional figure can be co-opted to serve as ARF Special Envoys when the occasion arises.

These extensive resources available to ASEAN and the ARF are another reason why the view that ASEAN should first gain more experience with moderating issues in its own backyard seems a little misplaced.

As indicated earlier, it appears that the ARF will not be directly involved in conflict management efforts in Southeast Asia and Oceania although its geographical footprint embraces them. Nevertheless, ASEAN and PIF can keep the other ARF members fully informed of developments in their respective regions and welcome their views and comments.

The second prong: expand the ARF mission to include comprehensive security cooperation

The ARF can make a more meaningful contribution to regional peace and security if its conflict management mission is broadened to include cooperation to address other security threats and challenges in the region. Confining its mission to the narrow goal of conflict resolution, as it has since inception, has resulted in the ARF being viewed as largely unproductive and ineffectual.

Not employing the regional infrastructure that is already firmly in place for inclusive security cooperation would be a serious omission. The well-organized ARF structure provides a golden opportunity to further advance security well-being in the region.

Comprehensive security cooperation is far from difficult for the ARF. It is already doing some of it, except that it is doing it for a different purpose, that is, to increase confidence among the countries participating in the activities rather than as ends in themselves. Thus, the ARF's Inter-Sessional Support Meetings (ISMs) have worked energetically in several important areas, namely non-proliferation and disarmament; maritime security; counter-terrorism and transnational crime; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.¹⁰ But the activities have been for the purpose of enhancing confidence in the context of the three-stage process of conflict resolution (CBM/PD/CR), which has been limited. The ARF is therefore seen as having performed poorly.

¹⁰ ASEAN Regional Forum, *Schedule of ARF Meetings and Activities* (2020). Retrieved from: <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/calendar-of-events/schedule-of-arf-meetings-and-activities/>

The activities should instead be viewed, and assessed, as efforts to address specific security threats and challenges, such as nuclear weapons, terrorism, and maritime security. Assessed by this standard the ARF has indeed already made some notable contributions to regional security. The ARF can explore other areas of comprehensive security as well. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing affects more incomes and livelihoods in the Asia Pacific than in any other region of the world.¹¹ The security effects of climate change are a global concern, but some countries are more seriously impacted than others. Several Pacific Island nations are facing potentially disastrous near futures.

Another area would obviously be pandemics – how they can be better contained, and how health facilities and medical supplies can be made more readily available to the less endowed countries. Covid-19 has killed and afflicted more people than many major wars and violent conflicts. Nearly three and a half million people have died to-date, and over 160 million afflicted. Every economy and community around the globe has been severely affected. Two countries among the most severely ravaged by the disease are ARF countries.¹²

Activities carried out under the second prong may need to be overseen by a separate, appropriately named, Inter-Sessional Support Group. Alternatively, the existing ISG on CBMs and PD could be re-named and its terms expanded to cover both conflict management and security cooperation.

Interestingly, the clash of footprints between the ARF, ASEAN, and PIF is not problematic for the second prong. Security cooperation can overlap and enrich all the footprints. This is another reason why the ARF should seriously consider security cooperation as an integral component of its expanded mandate. Inclusive security cooperation is also much less challenging to pursue than conflict management. Early results are far easier.

Adjustment of the ARF Mission

The ARF will have to amend its declared purpose if it is to engage in both conflict resolution and inclusive security cooperation. Its present mission reads as follows: “... 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 in order to reduce the risk to security.” Its adjusted mission could add words to the effect of “and to foster cooperation in the diverse fields of comprehensive security”.

The concept of comprehensive security is not a new concept, nor is it alien to the ARF. It was expressly recognized by the ARF as far back as in 1995, at the Second Ministerial Meeting in Brunei in August 1995. Paragraph 6.1.3. of the meeting’s Chairman’s Statement reads thus: “The ARF recognizes that the concept of comprehensive security includes not only military aspects but also political, economic, social and other issues”. Comprehensive security is also mentioned in many other ARF documents.

¹¹ Heydarian, Richard. “The Other Crisis in the South China Sea.” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, April 21 (2015) Retrieved from: <https://amti.csis.org/the-other-crisis-in-the-south-china-sea/>

A consequence of the adjusted mission will be that the signature three-stage ARF toolkit of confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution will only apply to conflict resolution activities under the first prong. It is not relevant to the second prong of comprehensive security cooperation.

Conclusion

The ARF has tremendous potential if, moving forward, it addresses both sides of the security coin, namely conflict management and inclusive security cooperation. Each complements and reinforces the other. If the ARF continues to confine itself to the narrow and challenging objective of conflict resolution, it runs the risk of becoming a grand initiative of limited consequence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mohamed Jawhar Hassan is former Chairman and Chief Executive, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia and, until recently, a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum's Expert and Eminent Person's Group. It draws from an ASEAN Academic Days 2021 online lecture presented to the ASEAN Centre of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University). For more on this subject, see [Issues & Insights Vol. 19, WP7 – The ASEAN Regional Forum at 25: Moving Forward or Still Standing?](#)