



HOW THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM CAN PROMOTE SECURITY AND PROSPERITY

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The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established in 1994 to promote peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region following the decline of the Cold War. Today, 28 years later, the 27-member process “driven” by ASEAN is still striving to accomplish its conflict management mission amid a geopolitical environment that has turned distinctly more adverse.

To realize its full potential, the ARF has to expand its mission to address both sides of the security coin, namely conflict management and inclusive security cooperation. It cannot continue to confine itself to its traditional confidence building and conflict resolution mandate.

The ARF is conceived as a forum for open dialogue and consultation on regional security issues that is tasked to manage conflicts and tensions through a three-stage process of confidence-building, preventive diplomacy and, eventually, conflict resolution.

Though the participating countries come from outside the area as well, the “geographical footprint” of the ARF's focus is Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania.

The ARF has been intensely busy. It has worked on several important areas of security, namely non-proliferation and disarmament; maritime security; counter-terrorism and transnational crime; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. But the work has been essentially for the purpose of promoting confidence among participating countries in pursuit of its three-stage conflict management mandate. It has not been approached as ends in themselves, to advance regional security in the respective areas.

Viewed through its own conflict management prism, the ARF has unfortunately performed poorly. It has not managed to progress beyond the preliminary confidence building stage despite a quarter century of effort. It has not addressed a single conflict in the region.

The constructive relationships it had forged among nations in the working groups (called Inter-Sessional Meetings (ISM) and Inter-Sessional Support Group (ISG)) have been completely overwhelmed by the rising tide of contention prompted by challenges to established norms, including by ARF members.

The South China Sea has become increasingly militarized. While the presence of warships from states outside the ARF is indicative of those states' commitments to upholding international rules and norms, it is a sign of tension caused by challenges to those very norms. Military expenditure has surged among many ARF states. The Korean Peninsula continues to be a dangerous flashpoint.

It is patently clear that the ARF must respond quickly and convincingly in the face of the mounting challenges. It can move forward on two fronts. First, it can begin working on addressing specific disputes and conflicts consistent with its current mandate. Second, it can expand its conflict management mandate to embrace inclusive security cooperation as well.

To advance more purposefully along the *first front*, the ARF would probably need to do at least three things:

1. Summon the necessary political will in ASEAN to lead the conflict management process that it has been entrusted with. ASEAN and its members have accumulated sufficient experience for managing disputes collectively as well as bilaterally.

The experience began when the then ASEAN Five, and later ASEAN Six, played a successful role working together with the United Nations and the major powers to help resolve the Vietnam-Cambodia conflict of 1979-1989. ASEAN itself is recognized as one of the leading models of regional reconciliation and conflict moderation.

ASEAN and the ARF can also draw on extensive resources both within the ARF as well as internationally to assist them in the process of preventive diplomacy, mediation, and settlement. Available parties include the International Court of Justice and the Secretary General of the United Nations. Reputable and neutral mediation agencies such as PACTA Finland, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and the Carter Center may also assist if approached.

2. Strengthen the institutional capacity of the ARF Unit and the Office of the ASEAN secretary general to monitor the regional security situation and support the ARF's initiatives.
3. Task the ARF International Support Group on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy to explore the specific disputes and conflicts that the ARF can address. In this regard, it is to be noted that although the ARF's geographical footprint includes them, conflict management in Southeast Asia and Oceania is the direct responsibility of ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) according to their respective treaty and charter mandates. Only Northeast Asia falls under the direct "purview" of the ARF. ASEAN and PIF, however, should welcome the views of the ARF on the situation in their regions.

It will be much easier for the ARF to engage on the *second front*, which is the other side of the comprehensive security coin. The benefits will manifest more quickly too. The ARF provides a ready institutional infrastructure for inclusive security cooperation. Not exploiting its full potential would be tantamount to a criminal omission.

To engage in inclusive security cooperation, the ARF will also need to do at least three things:

1. Expand the ARF's mandate, which is presently confined to conflict management, to include as well inclusive and comprehensive security cooperation.
2. Establish another Inter-Sessional Support Group (ISG) to be responsible for comprehensive security cooperation. Alternatively, expand the function of the existing ISG on CBM and PD to include security cooperation. Re-cast the substantial work that the ISM's have done in areas such as maritime security, and counter-terrorism and transnational crime, as work in the areas of security cooperation that also impacts positively on trust-building.
3. Consider additional areas of comprehensive security cooperation. Managing the outbreak of serious infectious diseases that might turn into pandemics could be one such area. Another could be the security impact of climate change on habitat and livelihoods. It is an existential threat for the islands of the South Pacific.

The signature ARF toolkit of confidence-building/preventive diplomacy/conflict resolution will not be applicable for security cooperation.

The ARF is approaching three decades of existence. It can easily achieve more for regional peace and security if it exploits its full potential.

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