

REVIEWING THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM (ARF) AND ITS ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN SECURITY

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Forum Serantau ASEAN (ARF) merupakan satu forum kerjasama yang ditubuhkan oleh Pertubuhan Negara-negara Asia Tenggara (ASEAN) untuk menangani isu-isu keselamatan dalam era pasca Perang Dingin. Bermula dengan kesedaran bahawa era ini memberikan peluang kepada mereka untuk mencorakkan arah pendekatan yang digunakan dalam menentukan keselamatan rantau ini, negara-negara ASEAN seterusnya mengkaji kemungkinan untuk melibatkan negara-negara lain yang mempunyai kepentingan di rantau Asia Pasifik ini duduk semeja dan membincangkan isu-isu yang mempunyai pengaruh kepada mereka semua. Rencana ini membincangkan perkembangan ARF dari awal penubuhannya dan bagaimana ianya telah terpaksa menghadapi perubahan yang berlaku dalam senario politik serantau dan antarabangsa. Peranannya dalam mempromosikan keselamatan serantau dan antarabangsa secara lansung dan tidak lansung ditekankan. Beberapa masalah yang dihadapi oleh ARF terutama sekali kredibilitinya selepas krisis ekonomi melanda rantau Asia juga dibincangkan. Akhir sekali, rencana ini juga membincangkan pencapaian-pencapaian ARF setakat ini dan cabaran yang menantinya pada masa akan datang.

INTRODUCTION AND A NOTE ON ASSUMPTIONS

The evolution of the Southeast Asian, and the wider Asia-Pacific, security environment in the post-Cold War era has been anything but uninteresting. The troubles in the South China Sea, the effects of the economic crisis, and the continuing problems in Northeast Asia are just some of the more salient issues. These events have called into question the relevance of nascent regionalism in the Asia-Pacific.

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The workshop invitation for which this paper was written states that the purpose is to look at how these changes have affected ongoing conflicts and conflict management efforts in the region. According to the programme, regionalism is considered a form of conflict management. The first assumption in the above statement is that of change. Has there indeed been a fundamental change in the basis of interstate relations in the area? Or, instead, have the bases of international relations remained the same while the manifestations of these bases have become quite dramatic? What did or did not change?

The second assumption is the contribution of regionalism to conflict management. Clearly, the evolution of the ASEAN comes to mind – where the ASEAN was formed as a means to minimize animosities among neighbours to enable each member to embark on their individual projects of national consolidation. It just needs to be noted that the building of a regional community or identity, especially in the Asia-Pacific, is a process fraught with conflicts of interests and approaches. As one scholar noted, these regional arrangements are actually “patterns of cooperation and muted conflict” (Hoffmann, 1973: 50).

It is within this context that this paper looks at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) – how the evolving post-Cold War environment continues to affect and challenge the ARF. The first part looks at the period 1994-1996 when the ARF was newly established, while the second part proceeds to look at the ARF in the midst of the Asian economic crisis and other security challenges. The paper tries to discern how the ARF has contributed to the security of Southeast Asia, and the continuing challenges to the ARF’s development.

ESTABLISHING THE ARF: 1993-1996

The development of the ARF, thus far, may be categorized into two periods – the period of its establishment, and the period of the Asian economic crisis – within which there were some differences in terms of regional and national outlooks.

Uncertainty and Optimism

The first half of the 1990s up to 1996 may be characterized as uncertain but with an underlying optimism among states about the dawn of a new age of regional cooperation. The uncertainty stemmed from several latent or “old” conflicts such as the situation in the Korean Peninsula, unresolved territorial and maritime disputes, the issue of China’s territories, nuclear weapons, and domestic insurgencies. At the same time, there were other emerging regional concerns

such as the extended maritime jurisdictions resulting from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea; the increased defense spending and weapons modernization and acquisition arising from the affluence of some Southeast Asian countries; the need to reconstruct Cambodia and the constructive engagement of Myanmar; and other non-traditional security concerns such as migration and environmental problems. But perhaps the most important consideration in the region at the time was the shifts in power relations. With the US seen as withdrawing its forces from the region, there was wide concern that other regional states would rush in to fill the power vacuum or challenge the primary role of the US in the region. In general these concerns are characterized by:

- the layering of new issues over old ones “where the ordering processes perversely imposed by the politics of Soviet-American relations no longer afford us any semblance of an ordered agenda” (Dewitt, 1993).
- the continued need to involve major powers in efforts to maintain peace and stability in a region where there are both strong and weak states; and
- the lack of an organizing principle in regional security beyond that of balance-of-power politics the relevance and adequacy of which was beginning to be questioned by newer security issues.

Despite these uncertainties, there was a sense of optimism in the region due mainly to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist-capitalist divide. Thus, there was no need to label other countries as “enemies”. Robust economic growth in the region was also another factor for a positive regional outlook. Many analysts noted that the increased economic interdependence in the area would prevent would-be rising powers from unduly upsetting the current situation as many states would benefit from an economically vibrant Asia-Pacific. One scholar has even noted that economics has gained a very significant role as success in gaining world market shares has become more important than territorial acquisition for the survival of nation-states (Strange, 1997: 369).

During this period, there was a sharp increase in the number of available channels for state-to-state communication. These channels – both track-one and track-two – have usually led the way for initiatives later undertaken by governments. In the area of security alone, the proliferation of channels for dialogue has been remarkable: “In 1989 there were only three or four channels for trans-Pacific discussion of political and security matters in a multilateral setting. By 1994 ... there [were] some 50 ongoing dialogue channels in the

Asia-Pacific region ...” (Evans, 1994a). These developments provided an opportunity for increased multi-polarity in the region as well as the possibility that for “... the first time in a century and a half the future of Asia will primarily be determined by Asians” (Evans, 1994b: 20).

Enter the ARF

The ARF was established in the midst of this uncertain yet positive regional outlook, growing from the synergy of track-one and track-two processes.¹ The Forum is a loose, informal arrangement created along the lines of what Acharya calls “Asian institutionalism” which does not focus on “formal legalistic structures of co-operation” but instead looks at institution-building “as a long-term process of socialization and consensus-building” (Acharya, 1999). The ASEAN is the prime example of this approach, which is guided by the principles of flexibility, inclusivity, consensus decision-making, and non-interference in internal affairs.

Why adopt the ASEAN model and the ASEAN as the core of the Forum? First, the ASEAN was seen, at this point in time, to have quite successfully managed the diversity of its members. It was felt that any insecurity which may arise from the diversity in the ARF might be best addressed and “rationally managed through organizational informality, state sovereignty, and flexible consensus” (Emmerson, 1996). It was also noted that “the ASEAN model was particularly appropriate for the post-Cold War era in which regional tensions were no longer expressed in a tangible and imminent common threat that called for a countervailing military coalition” (Leifer, 1996: 26). Furthermore, a regional arrangement rooted in respect for sovereignty and consensus did not pose high political risks for any member.

Secondly, the ASEAN emerged as the most acceptable partner for major powers in the Asia-Pacific. Notwithstanding the rapprochement after the Cold War, suspicions lingered and tensions erupted intermittently among China, the US, Japan and Russia. A regional arrangement led by either one of these powers would surely be viewed with reservations by the major powers as well as by the smaller states.² Moreover, the ASEAN maintained cordial relations with these major powers and had an extensive network of contacts with various Asia-Pacific countries through its dialogue partnerships. It was simply a matter of tapping these linkages.

¹ For a more detailed elaboration, see Ortuoste (1995).

² It is interesting to note that even Australia and Canada were also looked upon with some doubt by Asian countries in leading the process. For a full discussion of leadership in the ARF, please see Ortuoste (1999b: 62-64).

The acceptance of the ASEAN model as well as its role as the "primary driving force" of the ARF proved to be some sort of vindication for this grouping which had formerly been relegated to the sidelines. It seemed to offer proof that a slow and consensual approach also has its merits.

ASEAN's leadership in the ARF at this point in time also reflected ASEAN's newfound confidence when many of its members were enjoying high growth rates and international economic prominence, and the organization gained acclaim for its positive role in the resolution of the Cambodian issue. Beyond this confidence, one scholar suspects that the ASEAN members felt that to remain reticent on the issue of regional security would be counter-productive for the organization: there was a need to replace its original *raison d'être* – Cambodia and Vietnam; and there was a very real threat that this new regional initiative may be snatched from the ASEAN much as the APEC initiative had been taken by Australia.³

The Security of Southeast Asia

More than international prominence, the ARF also provided ASEAN an opportunity to advance its own objectives. First, the lack of a "concert of great powers" provided smaller states a chance to shape a regional arrangement which would ensure that their interests would be taken seriously by major powers. With the Cold War over, the major powers – US, China, Japan – were beginning to focus on the resolution of Northeast Asian, rather than Southeast Asian, issues. According to an analyst, "The ARF represents an effort by ASEAN to promote through a multilateral structure its regional security agenda, thus setting the parameters for its group political relations with extra-Southeast Asian states" (Weatherbee, 1997).

Second, the ASEAN states were mindful that while they could not prevent major powers from playing a significant role in the region, that role should increasingly be exercised on their own terms and on an equal footing. More specifically, engaging in dialogues would be better than facing unilateral intervention.⁴

Finally, since Southeast Asia had always been subject to the interaction of major powers, "how ASEAN as a group succeeds in maintaining its resilience and

³ Leifer (1996: 18) argues that "The changed pattern of international and regional alignments had reduced ASEAN's political significance".

⁴ "In founding the ARF, ASEAN hoped to enhance regional security by ameliorating tensions and cultivating a practice of consultation rather than intervention" (Quigley, 1997).

solidarity amidst these emerging and unpredictable power permutations will have a bearing on its own prosperity and on the stability of the region as a whole" (Mutalib, 1997: 83). Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas stated that 'the forum was attempting to "manage strategic change in such a way that a new equilibrium among the major powers in the Asia-Pacific region could evolve gradually and peacefully over the next decade" ' (Richardson, 1994: 2).

Part of managing this change was to maintain US engagement in the region while restraining rising powers such as China and Japan.⁵ It was particularly important to engage China to become "part of an East Asian and Pacific security community in which the breadth of interests in ... cooperation will reduce the possibility of a threat or use of force by China" (Weatherbee, 1997). This would prevent the creation of another enemy in the post-Cold War era. Through the ARF, the ASEAN could "promote a balance or distribution of power that would enable the Association to maintain its operational security doctrine without provision for collective defence" (Leifer, 1996: 19).

Thus for Southeast Asia, the ARF was never formally created to be an institutionalized conflict management mechanism even though the participants were mindful of old and potential regional flashpoints and their discussions would refer constantly to such issues. The Forum has no joint military power as it is not a collective security mechanism; and it has never sought to replace existing bilateral mechanisms and arrangements.⁶ The ARF thus embodies

the combination of a residual neo-realist focus on 'interest', the neo-liberal focus on institution-building, and notions of an 'Asian' security culture [which] allows for a broad regional definition. ... [the regional security discourse] is one primarily concerned with the security of states in the region rather than the security of a regional community as such (Naramore, 1988).

The ARF, unlike collective defense arrangements which focus on defeating a common enemy through military superiority, seeks to ensure national (rather

⁵ "ASEAN's enthusiasm came along with hard strategic thinking. ASEAN saw the ARF concept as a way of keeping the United States engaged in the region, the rising powers such as China and Japan restrained, and as a means to reassure the smaller ASEAN states" (Dorsch, 1998). "For ASEAN, ARF provides additional opportunities for encouraging the United States to remain in the region and for China to recognize the advantages of participating in the regional comity." Two imperatives: engage China, keep US involved (Weatherbee, 1997).

⁶ Because if it did, the US may not have joined in the first place.

than regional) interests in a rather roundabout way. It seeks to “develop a more predictable constructive pattern of relations for the Asia-Pacific” through political and security cooperation. The ARF, like other multilateral processes, could “facilitate bilateral (or sub-regional) dialogue among nations and their official or unofficial representatives who, for a variety of reasons, may be unable or ill-prepared to make arrangements directly with one another” (Cossa, 1999). The creation of a peaceful regional environment is seen as opening the stage for states to begin to discuss conflictual issues either multilaterally or bilaterally, and not necessarily within the ARF context.⁷

Moreover, the predictability of relations “is not to be provided through the operation of the balance of power, but through the development of a security arrangement that draws on concepts connective with cooperative security” (Foot, 1999: 117)⁸ The habit of discussion cultivated in the ARF would hopefully pave the way for dealing with more contentious issues. The first two ARF Chairman’s Statements noted that the ARF could be a high-level consultative forum to cultivate the habit of dialogue where diverging views could be discussed and reconciled. In this framework, “the process itself is an extremely important product, since increased dialogue promotes increased understanding, which, in turn, may lead to a reduced risk of conflict” (Cossa, 1999).

Finally, to ensure that the ARF process would continue to fulfill the security objectives of Southeast Asia, maintaining ASEAN leadership was imperative.

Establishing Processes and Principles

During this time, the ARF members were trying to lay the foundations for cooperation in the Forum. The ASEAN developed the concept paper that was later endorsed by all ARF ministers. It specified the three-stage evolution of the ARF: from confidence building, to preventive diplomacy, to the elaboration of approaches to conflict. The ARF members also endorsed the principles of the TAC; the notion of comprehensive security; the linkages among sub-regions in the Asia-Pacific; and the principles of informality, incrementalism, consensus, inclusivity, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality, and non-interference in internal affairs. Criteria for future membership were also elaborated during this time.

⁷ This is similar to the ASEAN approach wherein the members were given the latitude to pursue bilateral security talks, or resolve existing disputes in a bilateral manner outside of the ASEAN framework, but taking advantage of the principles for interstate relations laid down in the ASEAN.

⁸ See also Evans (1996); Yuen (1997); and Johnston (1997).

Apart from these efforts, there were several meetings – both track-one and track-two – which generated several ideas and proposals for CBMs and preventive diplomacy. Several inter-sessional groups – confidence-building, peacekeeping, and search and rescue -- were formed and convened on an irregular basis.

One analyst noted that the convening of the ARF provided “the critical chance for the region to drop diplomatic hypocrisy, step up communication and cooperation, both formal and informal, so that all parties are engaged in constructive and frank dialogue and exchanges” (Dizon, 1994: 6).

Also during this time, several security issues erupted in Southeast Asia such as the Mischief Reef incident in 1995 and NGO moves to raise the issue of East Timor on the ASEAN agenda. The ARF members discussed many of these issues in some detail but there were no initiatives to take serious action within the ARF framework.

THE ASIAN ECONOMIC CRISIS AND CONSOLIDATING THE ARF: 1997-PRESENT

The period for consolidation of the ARF process could not have occurred at a more inopportune time. In a milieu heavily influenced by the Asian economic crisis and the nuclear stand-off in South Asia, the period since 1997, while still exhibiting some uncertainty is accompanied by a more sober, even critical approach as multilateral structures such as the ARF have not significantly altered the underlying basis of international relations.

An Abundance of Security Problems

The issues which arose during this period covered the whole geographic scope of the ARF with the more problematic areas identified as: Southeast Asia because of the effects of the economic crisis, domestic political transitions, the threat of secessionism, and the problem in the South China Sea; Northeast Asia largely due to the impasse in the Korean Peninsula; and South Asia because of India and Pakistan’s nuclear brinkmanship. Moreover, the range of issues which erupted also spanned the breadth of security comprehensively defined – from traditional security issues (territorial and maritime disputes, nuclear weapons, management of relations among great powers, internal political stability) to the “non-traditional” security issues (the environment, regional economics). What is so significant about this situation?

First, these events dramatically emphasized the linkages in regional security in both Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific. The economic crisis drove home the crucial link between economics, internal stability and regional security. One analyst states that the economic crisis has affected "domestic stability, interregional relations, and trans-Pacific relations" [although in] differing degrees. So far, the impact of the crisis has been greater on individual or human security than on traditionally defined national security" (Morrison, 1999: 9-10). Not only did these events show the linkages among issue areas in regional security, but it also underscored the linkages among Southeast Asian states and in the wider East Asia. In effect, the destinies of regional states are closely intertwined.

Second, these linkages not only highlighted the need for a regional approach but also exposed the weaknesses of existing regional arrangements. A USIP report noted that: "The crisis has paradoxically illustrated the need for stronger regional institutional structures for cooperation while underscoring the incapacity of existing institutions to mount an adequate response to the crisis" (Synder and Solomon, 1998). Both the APEC and the ARF were severely criticized for not being able to respond to these security issues. Nowhere was this doubt about existing regional arrangements clearer than in the case of the ASEAN.

The economic crisis shook the very pillars of ASEAN credibility – economic dynamism; a public show of cohesion; an ability to solve ASEAN problems; and the engagement of regional actors (Ortuoste, 1999a). One analyst even goes so far to say that: "The public has been largely disappointed with ASEAN. Its perception is that of a helpless ASEAN, an ASEAN that cannot move decisively, an ASEAN that is trapped under its organisational and bureaucratic weight, and an ASEAN that fails to respond to real, current problems and challenges" (Dibb, Hale and Prince, 1999).⁹ Moreover, the public show of cohesion had also been undermined by the ill-planned expansion of ASEAN membership. The difficulty of socializing newer members into the ASEAN process is well documented in the cases of Cambodia and Myanmar.¹⁰ With such internal organizational challenges, the questions on ASEAN's credibility to lead the ARF and applicability of the ASEAN Way for the Asia-Pacific became more strident. One author has mentioned that the ASEAN has actually overestimated its influence over major actors, and is now in a Catch-22 situation: "... its ability to influence other actors is contingent on its political unity, yet that unity is contingent on its effectiveness as an international actor" (Narine, 1998). Is the ASEAN actually capable of leading the ARF?

⁹ The same point is made by Hadi Soesastro (1999).

¹⁰ See Herman Joseph Kraft (forthcoming).

Third, the weakness of existing regional arrangements derives not only from perceived structural inadequacies, but also from the manifest tension between national and regional interests. In the ARF, while there has been public recognition of the wide scope of security, state practice still does not fully take this into account. As mentioned above, the ARF was established primarily to serve national interests. These unique national interests also impact on the approaches used by ARF members most of whom would prefer the bilateral rather than multilateral approach to problem solving.

Connected with this is the continued primary importance given to sovereignty when the security issues arising point to the increasingly permeability of borders in terms of economic transactions, environmental impacts, population flows, and humanitarian problems. While this is a major trend in international relations, the development of international law and practice have not kept in stride (Tay and Talib, 1997: 258).

Finally, recent events have pointed to the continuities in international relations. One of these continuities is the vulnerability of Southeast Asian countries to external shocks, and their dependence on external actors with the unilateral capability to affect regional security and economics. It has been mentioned that: "Recovery in the region is critically dependent on policies and developments in the major economic powers, over which ASEAN has no control" (Singh, 1998). Moreover, the underlying basis of international relations – power, primacy of national interests, the persistence of conflict, and the wide differences among states – remains intact. It has been noted that the economic crisis has once again promoted shifts in the balance of power in East Asia. While this may have derailed many defense modernization efforts – a good omen for advocates of conventional arms control – it has simultaneously placed China in a more powerful position vis-à-vis its Southeast Asian neighbours.

Another continuing fact in Southeast Asia is the persistence of unresolved domestic issues. There is still a need to strengthen political institutions and instill proper governance; strengthen national unity or diversity; make economic growth sustainable; address the large socioeconomic inequalities in society; and provide for the development of civil society.¹¹

The Regional Response

What do these developments spell in terms of a regional response? First of all, the relevance of bilateralism, over and above multilateralism, has been renewed. This bilateralism has been developing since 1996 and may be considered as

¹¹ More in Ortuoste (1999c).

symptomatic of the low priority given to multilateral solutions at a time when multilateralism is still being developed and strengthened. These events include:

- bilateral exchanges among US, China, Japan and Russia;
- US review of all its bilateral relations in the region;
- Australia's increasing web of bilateral dialogues and defense agreements;
- continued bilateralism in ASEAN; and
- China's reinvigoration of bilateral ties with Southeast Asian country in time for the 21st century.

One author has commented that:

... bilateral alliances will continue to contribute to regional stability and security. For example, the presence of bilateral security arrangements between the US and its allies in the region, to a certain extent, provides a "temporary breathing space needed to facilitate [the] evolution [of rising regional powers] into ... more benign power[s]" and thereby tempers what could be their aggressive intentions and actions.¹²

Second, the period also saw an attempt by the ASEAN to mount a credible response in order to meet future challenges, as well as to counter criticisms of its irrelevance or impending demise. In re-building the ASEAN, the group developed visions (ASEAN Vision-2020 and Hanoi Plan of Action), undertook incremental steps in implementing previous agreements (environmental cooperation, SEANWFZ protocol), set in place new initiatives (e.g., surveillance process), and reasserted its leadership in the ARF.

In the last July sessions of the ASEAN, the Foreign Ministers went on a retreat to evaluate and honestly discuss the future of ASEAN, ARF and dialogue relations. Realizing that the ASEAN needed to take concrete measures to retain the driver's seat in the ARF, the internal review of the ARF process included organizational matters – once a taboo subject in the organization. It was then decided that the ASEAN Secretariat should provide technical and secretarial support required by the ARF Chair, monitor ARF activities, and serve as a repository for all ARF documents. Nevertheless, there is no special unit in the ASEAN Secretariat specifically devoted to handle ARF matters. Moreover, in

¹² "Bilateral Alliances and Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific: An Update" (paper presented at the 4th Workshop on the Bilateral System of Alliances in the Changing Environment of the Asia-Pacific, 10-12 June 1996, Tokyo, Japan), p. 5. Found in Quilop (1999: 20).

admitting Mongolia, which has no formal ties with ASEAN as a group, into the ARF the ASEAN has "delinked participation in the ARF from formal relations with ASEAN as a prerequisite for the participation in the ARF."¹³ More significantly, in the recent ASEAN Informal Summit in Manila, the ASEAN took the initiative to begin a process of "informal summitry" among the leaders of Japan, China and South Korea. Foreign ministry officials in Manila noted that ASEAN could act as an independent intermediary among the Northeast Asian countries. This could be interpreted as one means by which ASEAN could exert more, albeit soft, influence in Northeast Asia thereby countering criticisms of ASEAN's leadership in ARF based on the former's minimal linkages or familiarity with Northeast Asian security issues.

Finally, the period of the economic crisis also brought about a growing convergence in East Asia especially with the perceived "inaction" or belated action of the West, specifically the US, to the Southeast Asian economic crisis. The US seemed to lack appreciation for the role of Southeast Asia in regional security. The speedy assistance given to South Korea was interpreted as a strategic choice – clearly, Southeast Asia ranked very low in the priority of the US government. It has even been noted that US policy-makers continue to rely on Cold War thinking: "South Korea received quick and significant economic assistance because it faced a communist North armed with nuclear weapons. Indonesia did not, because, with the Cold War over, the country is no longer important to the US as a bastion against communism" (Dibb, et al., 1999).

While the US missed an important opportunity to make a positive mark on Southeast Asia, this opportunity was not lost on China. The Chinese government's economic assistance – commitment not to devalue the renminbi, assistance to specific countries, and initiation of meeting of ASEAN-China vice finance ministers and central bank deputy governors – as well as political support for ASEAN – it reaffirmed ASEAN's leadership in the ARF and commitment to sign the SEANWFZ Treaty – placed China in a leadership position in East Asia. China is capitalizing on this – reminding ASEAN leaders of its support during the crisis.¹⁴ It is also taking a more assertive stance in the South China Sea as evident in the China-Malaysia discussion on maritime disputes which saw the two leaders agreeing: "that the South China Sea issue can only be resolved by relevant countries involved, opposing any involvement and interference by any outside force" (Thayer, 1999). In effect ruling out an ARF role in the SCS. "In terms of the balance of power, the political winner is China, which has positioned itself as a champion of ASEAN economic

¹³ Dr. Termsak Chalermpananupap (1999). Special Assistant to the ASEAN Secretary-General.

¹⁴ One example was Jiang's recent visit to Thailand.

nationalism" (Weatherbee, 1997). China has also initiated a series of long-term bilateral agreements with Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.¹⁵

In addition, Northeast and Southeast Asia are finally taking more concrete steps to deepen their linkages. These linkages began with the contacts made in the APEC, the ARF and the ASEAN. The ASEAN +3 meetings, which was capped by a Summit in Kuala Lumpur, is the first of its kind for the organization. The most recent summit in Manila promises closer relations between the two sub-regions. The *Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation* identifies eight areas of cooperation: economic, monetary and financial, social and human resources development, scientific and technical development, culture and information, development cooperation, political-security and transnational issues.¹⁶ Weatherbee cautions that this might lead to "a more closed, exclusively Asian type" of regionalism (Weatherbee, 1997).

Wherefore the ARF?

The ARF did not play any significant part in any of the specific conflicts or security issues that arose during this period. It was difficult for the Forum to play any role in conflict management: the members themselves did not identify which security issues will be dealt with in a more active manner; the consensus nature of decision-making meant that parties to a dispute had an effective veto over collective action which could be potentially detrimental to their interests; and it did not yet have any mechanisms for actions in specific conflicts. In fact, there were even differences on which aspects of confidence-building overlap with preventive diplomacy, and how fast the evolution of the ARF should occur.

Nevertheless, the ARF presented all regional actors the chance to voice their concerns and to discuss issues in a more in-depth manner than in its first meetings. For example, despite the objections of China to discuss the South China Sea issue in the ARF, this matter has been taken up and each subsequent ARF meeting has seen more frankness on the part of the participants. Moreover, other issues like the economic crisis and transnational issues, along with more "traditional" security issues, have found their way into the security discourse of the Forum thus signaling an attempt to treat security in a much more comprehensive manner.

¹⁵ Discussed in detail in Thayer (1999). 15-Point Sino-Thai plan of action for the 21st century (05 February 1999); 12-point Sino-Malaysian framework of future bilateral cooperation (03 June 1999); PRC-VN mechanism for bilateral relationship (February-March 1999).

¹⁶ Other initiatives include the following: (1) Korea's East Asian Vision Group; and (2) Japan's Miyazawa and now Obuchi fund.

Moreover, despite of the economic crisis, the ARF has acquired its own momentum – there were more meetings held in the inter-sessional year 1998-1999 than in the previous years. While not very dramatic, there have been some progress in certain areas.

Confidence Building. In confidence-building, the ARF and the track-two CSCAP meetings have contributed numerous proposals which have found their way in the ASEAN concept paper and, more recently, in the two baskets of additional CBMs to be considered by the members.¹⁷ The implementations of these CBMs have largely been voluntary on a unilateral, bilateral, or sub-regional basis. These CBMs are of the information-exchange type of CBMs rather than restraint-type of measures. Some examples are:

- exchanges or dialogues on security perceptions;
- meetings of heads of national defense colleges;
- voluntary submission of annual defense policy statements or defense white papers;
- reporting to the UN Register of Conventional Arms.¹⁸

What is interesting to note is that country submissions to the UN Register has actually increased since the inception of the ARF from less than 10 to around 18 countries in the ARF. Moreover, countries with reservations about issuing defense policy statements or defense white papers have created their own versions of such documents and have shared the same with ARF members. This is actually a first step in a wider regional acceptance of transparency.

¹⁷ The proposals in the ASEAN Concept Paper for the 2nd ARF focused on the areas of CBMs, preventive diplomacy, non-proliferation and arms control, peacekeeping, and maritime security cooperation. Annex A would be first-track activities to be implemented in the near term. This Annex focused mainly on information sharing and developing principles for cooperation. Annex B, on the other hand, contained proposals to be implemented in the medium- and long-term and whose development may be initially undertaken by track-two fora. There has hardly been any implementation of Annex B proposals. Endorsed in the ARF meeting of 1998, the two baskets of CBMs are mainly elaborations on the Annexes of the ASEAN Concept Paper. Basket 1 is intended for near-term implementation, while proposals in Basket 2 are envisioned to be undertaken in the medium- and long-term. These proposals aim to build more intensive visits and exchanges, as well the possibility of creating a multilateral communication network, and other cooperative activities.

¹⁸ For a full report, see ARF Home page, and “Distillation of Agreed CBMs from ARF 1-4”.

Preventive Diplomacy. Proposals for ARF preventive diplomacy have also slowly developed over the years primarily through track-two efforts.¹⁹ It is only in recent years, possibly because of the security issues mentioned above, that there has been more in-depth discussion on the track-one level. The ASEAN, specifically Singapore, is developing a concept paper to be presented to the ARF-SOM next year. The important points to have come out of these discussions are the following:

- Definition: preventing severe disputes and conflicts from arising between states; to prevent such disputes from escalating into armed confrontation, and to prevent such disputes from spreading geographically²⁰
- Principles: use of diplomatic rather than military or coercive means; respect for sovereignty and non-interference; consultation and consensus; voluntary; requires trust and confidence; based on international law; and timeliness
- Four tabled proposals: (1) an enhanced role for the ARF chairman through good offices, liaison with other regional arrangements, to act as a bridge between track-one and track-two fora, and provide for coordination in-between ARF meetings; (2) consider a register of experts or experts group; (3) produce an Annual Security Outlook voluntarily at the track-one level; and (4) voluntary background briefing on regional security issues.

Already, the Foreign Minister of Thailand, acting as chair of the ARF, met with the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington, D.C. in September 1999, and a prospective meeting with the Organization of Security Cooperation in Europe is still pending concurrence in the ARF (Chalermphanupap, 1999).

The Security of Southeast Asia

While these developments seem to indicate movement in the ARF process, there are several questions which need to be asked about how the ARF is contributing to Southeast Asian security based on – building confidence and trust among the members, creating a predictable pattern of relations, managing great power relations, and affording a role for small states.

¹⁹ This is well-documented in Ball and Acharya (1999).

²⁰ The CSCAP draft's definition further elaborates that preventive diplomacy should limit the intensity

Trust? The ARF is widening the networks among participants, thus enabling them to undertake bilateral or multilateral activities with a multiplicity of partners. "The current dialogue mechanism centered around PMC, ARF and CSCAP is improving and widening channels of information gathering and sharing and policy consultation and coordination" (Dorsch, 1998). To a certain extent, these can help lessen uncertainty arising from certain activities like joint military exercises.

Nevertheless, some caveats are necessary. More contacts among military and defense officials can also advance transparency. While CBMs "are [indeed] useful in generating a degree of trust among countries which have a history of mutual suspicion" (Simon, 1998: 206-207), this should not be seen as an end in itself but part of a long process. It has been observed that "CBMs are prominently concerned with perception and usually do not deal with the root causes of security problems." Moreover, if the goals are too unrealistic, the "lack of progress can result in disappointment and halt the process."²¹ Thus for CBMs to bear fruit, the ARF members should be ready to go through the long haul and the ASEAN should provide strategic direction in this regard.

Thus, if these CBMs in the ARF are seen within the wider context of the events unfolding in Southeast Asia, one could be led to ask whether or not these CBMs are actually gaining ground or being used as some sort of means to appease weaker states when they are threatened by the actions of larger powers. For example, while China talks the "CBM talk" its refurbishment of structures in the Mischief Reef is seen with suspicion by the Philippine government. There have been concerns raised in some circles in the Philippine government about the effectiveness of such CBMs. However, these CBMs have opened up various avenues for the parties to explore various means by which they could manage the dispute. For example, China has willingness to enter into a regional code of conduct. It is possible that through the habit of dialogue in the ARF, China and other states are slowly seeing the merits of a multilateral approach.

In addition, there has yet been no reconciliation of diverging views and the ARF is not yet a "consultative" forum. Notably, the only formal document of the ARF reflecting effort at agreement, is a statement issued by the ARF Chair or co-chairs of the ISGs. The ARF participants have yet to give another strong signal of their commitment to the process such as a joint declaration of principles or measures that they will implement jointly.

²¹ These comments are from Marie-France Dejardins (1995), quoted in Pillsbury (1999: 145).

A Predictable Pattern of Relations? Creating a predictable pattern of relations should be seen as part of an ongoing process. It is not enough that principles are enunciated, these also need commitment from all ARF members. At this point in time, the habit of dialogue in the ARF has not yet led to altered state behavior in terms of either greater surrender of sovereign right or increased reliance on multilateral and cooperative security mechanisms. Both great and small states continue to be wary of institutions which can potentially circumscribe their sovereignty. One author has mentioned that:

... the commitment of regional states to the principle of sovereign statehood, though deployed for different purposes by different states, remains intact despite the rapid increase in regional security dialogue. There appears to be little prospect of states 'surrendering' sovereign powers as part of the burgeoning multilateralism in the region. And, above all else, the search for security at a regional level has not challenged the notion that defence of the sovereign state involves an 'ongoing process of defining state boundaries, excluding that which differs from its domains, and punishing those who would challenge it'.²²

Significantly, the ARF has neither prevented actions by any single state to ensure its national security even if such actions tend to destabilize the whole region, nor has the ARF constrained great power posturing or actions. Interaction in the Forum has, however, led to greater awareness of the merits of cooperative security and confidence building. Even preventive diplomacy measures are gaining some ground. For instance, China's *New Security Concept* embodies appreciation for a cooperative security approach within a multilateral setting.²³ Even the US has paid more lip-service to the ARF in recent years with comprehensive security finding its way in the *1998 US Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*. For a region which had shied away from these practices just under a decade ago, this has been quite an advance already.

Managing Great Power Relations. As mentioned earlier, the management of great power relations is also seen as benefiting Southeast Asia. There has been some progress in this area – especially with China and the US. It was observed that "Over time and with enhanced exposure the Chinese delegation spoke more frequently, often without notes in advancing the Chinese position. Both publicly and privately in corridors, what would and would not wash in Beijing was made clear" (Smith, 1997). China is also becoming more accustomed with multilateral processes: it has demonstrated willingness to involve itself in the

²² The last statement is by Klein (1993: 7). The whole paragraph is from Narramore (1988).

²³ For greater detail, see Foot (1999: 123-126).

CBM process such as co-sponsorship of ISG-CBM with the Philippines, and hosting of working seminars the most recent of which was an *ARF Professional Training Program on China's Security Policy* held in Beijing in October this year. To some extent, the ARF has also expanded the avenues for China-US interaction and this has paid off with more bilateral exchanges such as annual Defense Consultative Talks, military exchanges, and possible joint efforts in several areas (Dept. of Defense, 1998).

Having said this, the ARF is not yet in a position to try to mediate among the great powers – their relations are characterized by their own peculiar security dynamics and historical baggage that a grouping such as the ARF is not equipped to deal with. Some scholars have noted that with improving relations between China and the US, the ARF might inevitably become redundant. Probably not in the near future as the ARF still manages to fulfill some of the interests of these two powers. It provides assurance to China that security will not be dominated by the US, and the US is given the chance to “engage China comprehensively”. What would assure continuity for the ARF is if it moves toward crafting a unique security arrangement that would primarily promote regional, rather than national interests, and if it helps develop an Asia-Pacific identity.

Does this minimal contribution to great power management provide for Southeast Asian security? In some ways, yes. Southeast Asia's agenda is taken a bit more seriously now, but this has not really resulted yet in any concrete mechanism to provide for Southeast Asian security. This is understandable as the bulk of issues in Southeast Asia are still largely internal and to resolve such issues, the Southeast Asian states themselves first use national means, then bilateral means, third to ASEAN, and then the ARF.²⁴

The Role of Small States. The ARF has become a venue for intensifying ASEAN relations with its relevant partners. This has facilitated a number of bilateral agreements among the ARF members. The role of the ASEAN, however, is contingent to its developing and maintaining a united voice in the Forum to advance Southeast Asian interests. It is not enough to just push their agenda. More often than not, the participation of ASEAN states in the ARF is marked by differences in their individual security outlooks as well. To retain the driver's seat, the ASEAN needs not only to voice their concerns or push their agenda, but also to set the example of concretely putting regional interests ahead of national interests, of implementing some of the proposed CBMs even within

²⁴ Case in points are: economic crisis, the ASEAN-China SOM as the primary vehicle for discussing SCS issues, questions about foreign involvement in East Timor.

the ASEAN framework. One author comments that: "ASEAN's ability to manage regional security in Southeast Asia has been, and is, limited by two factors: one, the interests and actions of the great powers, which have defined the parameters of ASEAN's security policies; and two, divergent security perceptions and interests within ASEAN ..." (Narine, 1998).

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the ARF as one of the examples of nascent Asia-Pacific regionalism in the post-Cold War era. In assessing what contributions the Forum has or has not made to Southeast Asian and Asia-Pacific security, clearly there was some difficulty. Being still a relatively new endeavor, it was difficult to assign what credit or discredit was due to the ARF. Almost anything could be blamed on the inaction of the ARF and its individual members, in the same way that almost everything lies beyond its control.

Thus, this paper focused on how the ARF has fared in the evolving post-Cold War environment. Within this context, it tried to show the ARF's progress in confidence building and in inculcating the habit of dialogue, and whether these efforts had helped build greater trust among regional states, if a predictable pattern of relations has emerged, and how it has fared in great power management. It also looked at how the ASEAN tried to play its role within the ARF.

The ARF has made some progress in terms of confidence-building measures and even in moving towards some preventive diplomacy mechanisms. These have made some contributions for Southeast Asian security:

- The ARF has widened the networks among participants, thus enabling them to undertake bilateral or multilateral activities with more partners. The transparency measures taken have helped lessen some uncertainty in the environment but not totally as some countries talk about CBMs but undertake what some participants consider as destabilizing moves. There is yet no reconciliation of diverging views in the Forum.
- A predictable pattern of relations should be seen as an ongoing process and this has yet to bear fruit. Nevertheless, there has been more acceptance of multilateral processes by China and the US.
- The ARF has helped provide additional fora for great powers to address and clarify their own concerns. Being a Forum, the ARF has not really (and probably will not) constrained great power actions, it has also not

yet evolved to such an extent to become some sort of mediating influence on great powers.

- The ARF has become a venue for intensifying relations ASEAN relations with its relevant partners. It has enabled ASEAN to set the agenda and the pace of the discussions. Even at this point in time, the ASEAN remains an acceptable “leader” of the ARF.²⁵

In this sense, the ARF is helping lay the foundations for a more peaceful regional environment within which Southeast Asia operates.

Nevertheless, because the ARF is not yet a significant or an independent actor in the region, it is not yet in a position to effectively manage the conflicts in the region. The ARF is actually the subject of state action and of events in the regional system rather than being an active contributor to regional security at the moment.

The events in more recent times have exhibited the growing linkages in aspects of security and the closer intertwining of regional destinies. In this case, it has actually highlighted the need for regional approaches, such as the ARF, in order to manage emerging security issues. In fact, the recent heightening of security concerns appears to have pushed ARF officials to say the forum is prepared to “manage” conflicts not just through the traditional means of “confidence-building measures” but also by utilizing “preventive diplomacy” (Castro, 1999). Instead of being a challenge, this is actually an opportunity for the ARF and its members to firmly resolve to push the multilateral process forward.

In addition, current security issues highlight the increasing permeability of borders at the same time that there is a zealous guarding of sovereignty. This is particularly the case for Southeast Asia where “The economic crisis has created an environment in which disputes could escalate more quickly, and the combination of crisis and strategic tensions will need to be carefully managed if conflict is [to be] avoided” (Dibb, et al., 1999). Moreover, one of the major feature of conflicts in Southeast Asia is its largely internal origin. Clearly, the

²⁵ ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo C. Severino (1997) states that the “... ASEAN serves as the fulcrum in the balance between and among the powers and provides a venue and reference point for the dialogues of the great powers among themselves as well as within ASEAN. Thus, ASEAN manages and moderates, to some extent, the behavior of the great powers, whose presence and influence ASEAN could not keep out of the region anyway, even if it wanted to”.

ARF will be constrained to take action in this regard as it was not originally established to address such internal conflicts.

The same holds true in terms of managing conflicts among the great powers. While the ARF may have the potential to become a mechanism of regulating such conflicts, it still has a long way to go. Moreover, the most that the ARF can do is to provide an atmosphere conducive for constructive dialogue and handling of these issues.

More important than these changes in the regional security environment is the continuity of the bases of international relations that circumscribe the ARF. Despite some encouraging signs of acceptance of multilateralism, there is still a lack of a common security concept and agenda in practice in the region. While this common security concept remains on paper, there would continue to be tensions in pushing a neo-liberal agenda in a neo-realist setting.

Ultimately, the ARF should be seen as a long-term investment – a device which could facilitate learning among the regional states, a means through which a regional community or identity could be defined. As such, the following trends and challenges may be expected.

- There is a need to sustain interest and to make progress in the ARF. This is easier said than done as the ASEAN has to make a delicate balancing act in terms of managing the pace of the ARF.
- The purposes must ultimately be clear. The use of CBMs and even preventive diplomacy only address the symptoms, not the root causes, of conflict. What is important is that eventually the ARF members reach a point when they would be willing and able to address the roots of conflicts in the region within or outside of the ARF framework. This is important as there may be certain conflicts which may lie outside of the purview of the ARF, or their solution would require that only the specific parties be involved. Nevertheless, the ARF can act as some sort of “pressure” to resolve these conflicts as regional interests may be at stake. In this case, other sub-regional initiatives may also be important.
- There are still many issues which need to be addressed if preventive diplomacy is to become a reality through the ARF: the scope of preventive diplomacy if it should also deal with transnational issues; balancing respect for sovereignty vis-à-vis the “interference” which may be perceived in the practice of preventive diplomacy; the actors involved; the use or non-use of force; and the “overlap” between CBMs

and preventive diplomacy measures. What could eventually result is a preventive diplomacy tool, which would be used mainly for inter-state conflicts and possibly even transnational issues. One think tank cautioned, however, that this focus “may involve only normal diplomatic tools to the exclusion of crisis-time preventive diplomacy measures such as good offices and mediation. This could undermine the development of preventive diplomacy.”²⁶

- ASEAN needs to lead the way. It has already taken the initiative in convening the summit of Northeast Asian leaders, and this undertaking needs to be observed further. The effectiveness of ASEAN in promoting regional security rests on its ability to function as a cohesive and independent entity without necessarily yielding to external influence. Some specific steps that could be taken are: implementing some of the CBM proposals on an ASEAN-wide level; and formalizing the ARF secretariat within the ASEAN Secretariat. At the same time, ASEAN also needs to fully realize that it is only one sub region in the ARF and this entails some flexibility about its chairmanship in the ARF.

In a conversation with another student of regional security, he noted that the so-called progress from confidence-building to preventive diplomacy is an illusion as many of the CBMs proposed or are being implemented in the ARF are actually means of preventive diplomacy. But then I asked whether or not having an “illusion” of progress is also necessary, but not sufficient, to retain interest in the ARF? In the end, we agreed that while this semblance of movement may be of some importance, ARF ministers should not believe their own propaganda or the Forum may go the way of the “bubble economy” – a “bubble security regime” which crumbles at the slightest sign of security problems.²⁷

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²⁶ CSCAP Singapore in Ball and Acharya (1999: 313).

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