

The ARF in Transformation

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The year 2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Established during the tumultuous Cold War period, the group is now proud of playing a significant role in the Asia-Pacific. As the Philippines' Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alan Peter S. Cayetano put it during the 50th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and related Meeting in Manila in August 2017, ASEAN is now “respected, resilient and dynamic, enjoying the respect and admiration of many other countries and other regional organisations around the world”.¹ However, during those very events, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), one of the ASEAN-led mechanisms, had to cope with ever-growing conundrums. Since its establishment 23 years ago, the ARF has been facing multi-faceted challenges and even criticisms of its relevance to the ongoing developments in the region, especially its capacity to help resolve potential regional conflicts.

TIME TO CHANGE?

It must be admitted that in the post-Cold War context, the ARF became a useful venue for nations from both the Western and Asian continents, either big or small, rich or poor, to promote dialogue and build mutual trust. At its founding, the forum was not intended to resolve critical issues; nor did it seek to be a negotiating forum. Nearly a quarter of a century later, however, the regional landscape in the Asia-Pacific has completely changed. The region has been witnessing the dramatic rise of China, challenging the long-established role of the United States (US). Contentious issues such as territorial disputes and maritime conflicts have been overshadowing regional peace and security. And yet it has been shown that the roles of the ASEAN-led mechanisms, among them the ARF, are considerably limited.

Against this backdrop, there are at least five challenges that the forum has to cope with. First and foremost, the unpredictable foreign policies and tremendous

* This article was submitted on 28 August 2017.

¹ “Speech by H.E. Alan Peter S. Cayetano at the Plenary Session of the 50th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting”, Manila, 7 August 2017, available at <http://www.asean2017.ph/remarks-of-secretary-of-foreign-affairs-alan-peter-s-cayetano-during-the-amm-plenary-session/>.

competition among major powers, especially between the US, its allies and China, have created a lot of uncertainties in the region. Second, there are more security-related threats in the region, both traditional and non-traditional ones. Third, differences among the member states of the ARF have been growing, even leading to mistrust and less understanding than decades ago. Fourth, the forum has weak coordination capabilities and its responsibilities even overlap with other regional security mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), 6-party talk and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Last but not least, the question of redefining its role in an evolving regional architecture has become ever-more pressing. Facing such tremendous external and internal challenges, it seems that the ARF, which used to be a unique forum that observers had high expectations of, has been losing momentum since it is struggling to achieve its core mandate of preventive diplomacy (PD).

PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY AT A CROSSROADS?

In 2013, two decades after its formation, the ARF put forward the “Concept and Principles of Preventive Diplomacy”². This was supposed to encapsulate a common vision and understanding of the concept of PD and the guiding principles to govern its practice. Since then, all participating countries have, to some extent, shared a willingness and common interest to push the process forward. Nevertheless, there is a huge gap among the member states in terms of approaches, concerns, and measures to translate all the commitments into reality. A series of factors have been identified to explain the shortcoming in the field of PD, including the ARF's large membership, weak institutional structure, and strict adherence to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) and the ASEAN Charter, which contradict the objective of effective implementation of PD measures.³

Many participating countries, especially China, have stated that the ARF's large membership has constrained its capacity to maintain internal coherence and move ahead. In comparison with the EU, the ARF encompasses a considerably larger geographical space and population size as well as highly divergent cultural, economic, ideological, and strategic outlooks among its participants.

Moreover, although the ARF has made considerable contributions to providing venues for dialogue and consultation among participating countries and engaging major powers, it seems that the forum no longer remains relevant to the

² ASEAN Regional Forum, “Concept and Principles of Preventive Diplomacy”, 2013.

³ Ralf Emmers and Tan See Seng, “ASEAN Regional Forum and Preventive Diplomacy: A Failure in Practice”, RSIS Working paper No. 189 (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2009), ii.

implementation of PD due to its weak institutional structure and respect for the non-interference principle. As a matter of fact, the ARF is now purely a forum of both ways of diplomacy, one of those is to promote occasional engagement among participating countries, including all major powers, in PD practice and the other is to reserve full respect for sovereignty and non-interference principles. Therefore, ARF participants can only engage in limited PD without taking any ambitious and political steps to fundamentally upgrade the forum towards attaining a more effective and practical stage of PD measures.

The progress to such a stage has also been undermined by the debate over the definition and scope of PD. Some participating countries see PD as a more threatening form of cooperative security that might, in some instances, lead to interference in the domestic affairs and sovereignty of member states, thus causing an erosion of mutual trust and confidence among member states.⁴

Emmers and Tan emphasised that ARF participants had shown varying degrees of willingness and preparedness with regard to the development of PD measures as well as contrasting strategic perspectives.⁵ Western countries/participants such as the US, the EU, Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are very active advocates for developing more concrete PD measures and institutionalising the forum. Several ideas for rotating the chairmanship role to the non-ASEAN ARF members have also been raised, but never been discussed in detail. China, Russia, India, and almost all the ASEAN Member States have shown their reluctance with regard to the idea of moving the ARF towards the PD stage as well as questions regarding ARF's institutional structure. They may harbour a fear of losing ASEAN's centrality and concerns that the current vague definition of PD measures could pose threats to security problems involving national sovereignty and internal affairs.

It has also been argued that the ARF's failure to progress towards the PD stage could be due to the "ASEAN Way" approach on regional diplomacy and security. There have been arguments that the ASEAN Way, or consensus principle, has become irrelevant in regard to regional security challenges. The transition from a flexible regionalism to a rules-based regional order in Southeast Asia requires more than a consensus approach, neutral stance or non-interference principle.⁶ Furthermore, the reluctance to institutionalise the ARF also stems from ASEAN's weak capacity in leading the agenda setting. At the moment, ASEAN only serves as the driver of a weakly-integrated ARF for PD, but sooner or later it may become a pure passenger if ASEAN Member States are not well prepared, both in terms

⁴ Mohd. Aminul Karim, "Should the ASEAN Regional Forum Revisit its Core Areas", *AEI Insights* Vol. 2 No. 1 (2016): 7.

⁵ Emmers and Tan, "ASEAN Regional Forum", 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

of political will and capacity building, for a more institutionalised and substantive ARF.

ARF VERSUS ADMM+

Four months before the inauguration of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) on 12 October 2010, the issue of possible duplication between the ARF and the ADMM+ was brought to the fore at the 43rd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Hanoi, Viet Nam. However, it was not until June 2011 that four potential overlapping areas between the two mechanisms, namely Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, Counter-terrorism and Transnational Crimes, Maritime Security and Peacekeeping Operation, were raised for discussion.

Area of Cooperation	ARF	ADMM+
Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)	- ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Disaster Relief (ARF ISM DR) - ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF DiREx)	ADMM+ Experts' Working Group (EWG) on HADR
Counter-terrorism and Transnational Crimes (CTTC)	- ARF Work Plan on CTTC (2009) - ARF ISM on CTTC	ADMM+ EWG on Counter-terrorism
Maritime Security	ARF ISM on Maritime Security	ADMM+ EWG on Maritime Security
Peacekeeping Operation (PKO)	ARF Peacekeeping Expert Meeting	ADMM+ EWG on PKO

Source: Concept paper by Indonesia presented at the 8th ARF Security Policy Conference (ASPC) in Surabaya, Indonesia, 8 June 2011.

However, each of the two fora has its own emphasis based on the fact that the focal point of the ARF is the Ministers of Foreign Affairs while for the ADMM+, it is the Ministers of Defence.⁷ The ARF has been focusing on the broad strategic objectives of fostering constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interests and concerns, and contributing to efforts of confidence building, PD, and conflict resolution. Meanwhile, the ADMM+ has set up practical and specialised purviews to promote trust and confidence, and enhance cooperation for the maintenance of peace and stability in the region.

To promote synergies between the ADMM+ and the ARF, a number of suggestions have been officially raised and discussed since the first ADMM+ meeting, in which participating countries seem to hold three common views:

⁷ Indonesia Delegation, "Synergy between ARF and ADMM+ to avoid duplication of activities" (8th ARF Security Policy Conference, Surabaya, Indonesia, 2011), 2.

First, the ARF should continue to focus more on key policy issues pertaining to regional security challenges, non-proliferation and disarmament, counter-terrorism, and regional security architecture while the ADMM+ should focus more on specified and action-oriented defence issues such as defence policies, modernisation of defence forces, as well as regional trends affecting these policies.

Second, as the ARF has progressed in developing policy frameworks for cooperation, the ADMM+ could focus on operational aspects within these frameworks to practically respond to non-traditional security challenges.

Third, the ARF should continue to pursue the strategic objectives of developing PD measures and taking pragmatic approaches to achieve conflict resolution, while the ADMM+ should function as a forum to undertake further discussions on specialised issues such as defence industries and welfare of defence personnel.⁸

However, there still remain huge challenges to taking up the above-mentioned suggestions as the issues that the two mechanisms are mandated to cover include both broad policy discussions and practical cooperation. It is therefore legitimate for each of them to conduct a comprehensive deliberation on all aspects. For instance, besides the promotion of practical cooperation, the ADMM+ also operates as a security dialogue mechanism. Exchange of views on regional security issues has been stated as one of the main agenda items in accordance with the modalities and procedures of this mechanism. The ARF has, at the same time, undertaken practical activities through workshops and seminars on concrete issues or through other forms of cooperation initiatives such as the ARF Voluntary Demonstration of Response (ARF VDR) or the ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF DiRex).

Despite those overlapping mandates, according to the assessment of the Philippines' Assistant Secretary of National Defence Raymund Jose G. Quilop at the 25th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, the ARF still has the advantage of a two-decade existence with a greater number of participants (27), including all major countries, from both the foreign affairs and defence ministries.⁹ The ARF also possesses more avenues for cooperation through various thematic groups and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (a track-2 diplomacy tool). It is also undeniable that this mechanism has promoted dialogue and consultations on a wide range of issues that have substantively contributed to confidence building and, to some extent, PD, as well as the continued enhancement of peace, security, and stability in the region. Meanwhile, the ADMM+ consists of a smaller but more specified group of officials (18) from the ministries of defence only, which could strengthen the effectiveness and legitimacy of its cooperation.¹⁰

⁸ Raymund Jose G. Quilop, "The ADMM Plus: Yet Another Layer in the Region's Dense Security Architecture? A Perspective from the Philippines" (Plenary Session, 25th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, 2011), 5.

⁹ Ibid., 6, 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

One of the positive factors is that all 18 ADMM+ members are also participants of the ARF. In order to sustain the momentum of promoting practical cooperation, the ADMM+ has been attempting to deal with huge challenges pertaining to regional uncertainties and the erosion of trust and confidence among member countries. In this context, the ARF should continue the momentum of prioritising practical activities in further promoting confidence building among its members, with a step-by-step transition to the next stages of PD and conflict resolution. This could avoid possible overlapping and may even support the practical mandate of the ADMM+.

BIG, DIVERSE BUT STILL RELEVANT AFTER ALL

It has to be admitted that the ARF has evolved as a big group of countries with diverse interests, concerns, levels of development, foreign policies, political systems, and even strategic competitions among major powers, especially between the US and China. The diversity poses enormous challenges to achieving and then implementing concrete agreements and practical cooperation among participating countries. The ARF's success might be further limited due to ASEAN's disunity in some security issues, especially maritime security and the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and differences among participating countries, particularly between the Western and Asian members, concerning the idea of an institutionalised and legalistic rules-based ARF.

On the other hand, the forum has also demonstrated the significant role it can play in regional security by consistently providing a good venue for dialogue and consultation among a large group of stakeholders on broad strategic and security issues for the maintenance of peace and stability in the region. Furthermore, with the adherence to the ASEAN Way, the ARF has contributed to fostering voluntary cooperation¹¹ where all members are encouraged to establish networks of cooperation in a positive atmosphere and based on shared norms.¹² Consequently, the forum has steadily shaped common norms for all members on the importance of regional peace and stability for development – internally and internationally, bilaterally and multilaterally.

FUTURE OF THE ARF

The future of the ARF depends on how well it copes with external and internal challenges. The external factors might include the complex regional and international

¹¹ Jerry Lee Kwok Song, "The limits of the ASEAN Regional Forum" (Calhoun Institutional Archive of the Naval Postgraduate School, 2015), 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

landscapes and the major-power competitions. It cannot be denied that the Asia-Pacific region has been witnessing an animated strategic competition and a new correlation of forces among the major powers, especially between the US and China, that might have direct influences on the interests and strategic postures of countries in the region. Due to unpredictable foreign policies and unexpected reactions from the Trump administration and a rising China that intends to claim a larger role in international and regional affairs, the competition aspect between these two powers might increase tremendously in the next decades. Both the US and China are maintaining tough positions and are limited in their willingness to make compromises. Areas concerned include extreme nationalism and protectionism on regional flashpoints such as economic cooperation (trade deficit), strategic interests (South China Sea and Korean Peninsula issues), regional order (regional architecture), and international laws, norms, and values (democracy, human rights, freedom, and religion). Although they are also involved in and affected by the US-China competition, other emerging major powers such as India, Russia, and Japan have also staked their claims for more important roles, particularly in regard to issues of national interests.

In addition, emerging non-traditional security challenges such as terrorism, organised transnational crimes, climate change, water security, food security, and maritime security are posing enormous threats that cannot be resolved by a single country or organisation, but require collective efforts from all stakeholders, including the promotion of strategic trust and predictable foreign policies in the region. Therefore, regular engagement for dialogue and consultation through the regional fora, particularly the ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ARF, East Asia Summit (EAS) and ADMM+, still remains relevant for the maintenance of peace, security, and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

Regarding internal factors, the future of the ARF will depend on how participating countries respond to the following issues and whether they find a common approach: 1) ASEAN's leading role towards the objectives and legitimacy of the forum; 2) harmonisation of interests between ASEAN and other major countries, especially the US, China, India, Russia, Japan, and Australia; 3) common understanding on the definition of PD; and 4) measures to secure a balanced and successful approach that would not excessively affect the core principles of sovereignty and non-interference.

After more than two decades of existence, the ARF has, to a greater extent, proven that its modalities and principles have sustained the highest common denominator of interests and concerns among its diverse members, particularly in terms of maintaining a peaceful and stable environment for dialogue, consultation for cooperation as well as responding to emerging multi-faceted security challenges in the region. Furthermore, as said by Barry Desker, the ARF might not resolve disputes or prevent the outbreak of conflicts but it could be a useful mechanism to

minimise the impacts of different perceptions and interests among member countries as well as evolve as a process of creating predictable and stable relationship patterns among regional states with new established norms, values, and principles.¹³

Therefore, the ARF should still continue its current momentum with step-by-step adjustments in compliance with new security developments and the increasing strategic competition among the major countries in the region. To accommodate this, the ARF should focus on the following directions:

First, consolidation of the ASEAN Centrality. Given the recent regional upheaval, the role of ASEAN is questionable. In light of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, ASEAN has reaffirmed the importance and priority of maintaining and enhancing the ASEAN Centrality in the evolving regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific, including through strengthening ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the EAS and ARF. But in reality, this centrality is in doubt due to the disunity among ASEAN Member States over several regional issues. In consideration of its existing capabilities and resources, ASEAN has a prime interest in maintaining the current modalities of the ARF that both facilitate frequent dialogues with external partners and sustain ASEAN's core principles such as consensus and centrality.

Second, manage the role and perception of the major countries. The existing modalities of the ARF have created the necessary flexibility to harmonise the diverse interests among the major countries. In addition, all the major countries have expressed their support for the ASEAN Centrality in the ARF to avoid the prospect that one major power and its allies could dominate the whole process, thus affecting the security situation in the region. However, there are some indications that China has increasingly imposed its influence upon the future direction of and cooperation within the ARF. Meanwhile, the new US administration has not articulated a clear regional strategy.

Third, the ARF should consider raising the level of defence involvement in its process. This would help to increase awareness of a changing regional and global security landscape, reduce the risk of misperception or misjudgement, and create momentum for cooperative security endeavours to prevent any outbreak of conflicts and tensions.¹⁴

Last but not least, facilitate a successful transition to more practical PD. The ARF still lives up to the expectations of almost all participating countries, particularly in promoting the principles of dialogue, consensus, and non-interference. However, these principles could be obstacles in its transition into a more concrete PD. The nature of PD, particularly preventive measures on the ground or responses to conflicts, requires that participating countries have to "give up", to some ex-

¹³ Barry Desker, *The Future of the ASEAN Regional Forum* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2011), 1, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

tent, their sovereignty rights, thus going against the non-interference principle. Furthermore, the ARF includes all the major powers, but it is led by a group of small countries with limited leadership capacity and resources as well as weak regulations, which is therefore unable to promote strong PD measures to achieve the ARF's objectives. Therefore, the question is to what extent participating countries could “give up” their own rights and how ASEAN can streamline and strengthen its own principles and mechanisms to be a true driving force of the ARF.

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