

ASEAN's Role in the ASEAN Regional Forum: Will ASEAN Remain in the Driver's Seat? – A European Perspective

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Introduction

To speak of a European perspective, the question is, is there one? Only the European Union (EU) participates in the meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Other non-EU European countries do not. A country like Norway, which has been active in bringing peace to Sri Lanka, does not participate in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). When it comes to the EU, we have also seen the

United Kingdom and France wanting to participate as individual countries and not as part of the EU. If the United Kingdom and France are there as individual delegations, there will probably not be an overall European position in the ARF. Having said this, is there a European perspective? We can only speak of an EU perspective, if not my own, in this presentation.

EU Representation at the ARF

It is well known that each time the EU participates in an ARF meeting, there is a different Presidency participating in a Troika format (Commission, Presidency and incoming Presidency). The Presidency of the EU is sometimes accompanied by the High Representative for the CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy) and at other times by the Commissioner for External Relations, depending on who is able to attend the ARF. However, officials

from the three institutions are always there. ASEAN has not understood or questioned the EU's representation by a Troika format and for the EU itself, the issue of continuity raised by this rotating Presidency has not been addressed. Some kind of continuity has been assured by the Council Secretariat, but for some this is still unsatisfactory. I also doubt whether the EU could ever be in the driver's seat of the ARF if it cannot get its act together.

Views on the ARF

It is an open secret that in the past there were officials who saw the ARF as a talk shop without concrete outputs and where things moved very slowly. But I think today, with the new rotating staff, there is recognition that the ARF has its usefulness.

It has a role as a meeting point for bilaterals and it affords an opportunity for countries on different sides of the fence to dialogue and negotiate in privacy. For example, at the ARF the EU can speak directly to Burma (Myanmar) about democracy and human rights.

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Viewpoints on the EU in the ARF

The EU may not be in the driver's seat, but it could play a more prominent role. It has experience in confidence-building measures, preventive diplomacy, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peace keeping, peace enforcing, etc. Participants in the ARF can judge for themselves whether the EU has made a contribution. The basic dilemma for the EU is that it is distracted by its commitments to other parts of the world, in other international fora. Unlike the Americans, it does not have sufficient staff to put enough people to work, for example, in the ARF. Participants of the ARF know the size of the EU delegation pales in comparison to the American delegation.

The EU should want to carve out a role for itself in the ARF, as it would not want the United States to dominate or lead the ARF. The EU wants to flex its muscles politically on the world stage, being, as it is, one of the largest markets in the world and one of the biggest aid donors in the world. The CFSP is in the throes of coming into being,

albeit battered by national interests as policy over Iraq has demonstrated, but it is getting there. Hence, it is a common, not a single policy. The EU should be in a position to pull its weight after its enlargement. I assume that ASEAN would like the EU to come in as a counter-balance to the United States. But is this the prevailing view in ASEAN? Is the EU really a match to countervail the United States, especially post-September 11? Since September 11 the United States has taken the lead by coming into an anti-terrorism accord with ASEAN.¹ There is no similar accord with the EU as far as I know.

The fact that the EU has no objections to and indeed supports ASEAN being in the driver's seat of the ARF, was confirmed to me by a commission official I interviewed. In the driver's seat ASEAN assumes a kind of neutral position in the presence of the big powers in the forum. China would not feel comfortable if the United States were in the driving seat of the ARF. I think the EU understands this.

Viewpoints on ASEAN in the ARF

I think if ASEAN loses the driver's seat of the ARF, it will be for reasons internal to ASEAN itself. Yeo Lay Hwee stated that the Asian crisis and the lack of cohesion within ASEAN due to its recent expansion would have a negative impact on ASEAN's ability to lead and to move the ARF process forward. This was stated way back in 1999.² We are way past that now. Cambodia, a not-so-new member, is now taking the helm of ASEAN. It has just hosted the ASEAN summit. Cambodia's effectiveness in chairing ASEAN will also have a bearing

on whether ASEAN will remain in the driver's seat of ARF in the immediate future. It is the same with the EU. What happens next in the EU depends also upon the performance of each presidency that takes over. Today, the common fight against terrorism has brought ASEAN together with its external partners. The Bali Bombing has shaken up Indonesia. A more active Indonesia is expected on this front, which means that at the next ARF, or in forthcoming Intersessional Support Groups (ISG), ASEAN leadership of the ARF could

1. This agreement was made at the ARF, as reported by BBC News, 1 August 2002.
2. Yeo Lay Hwee, 'The Role of ASEAN in EU-East Asian Relations', *ASIZEN* (publication of the Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Asienkunde), No. 72, July 1999, p. 25.

be stronger. An internally stronger ASEAN would put it in a better position to be in the driver's seat.³

One of the reasons for establishing the ARF was to engage China. That was a wise decision. But the Spratly Islands issue is perhaps an example of where ASEAN is not in the driver's seat of the ARF, as some ASEAN countries are in dispute between themselves and with China over those coral reefs, sandbanks and shoals. Disputes between member countries put ASEAN at a disadvantage, as the Association is then not in a position to negotiate collectively with China. China has been able to insist on bilateral negotiations based on a 'divide and rule' policy. Thus the Spratly Islands issue has detracted from ASEAN's leadership in the ARF.

The declaration recently signed⁴ to resolve this dispute through peaceful means is to be hailed. It is a reflection of a 'higher level of political trust', in the words of Zhu Rongji,⁵ and points to the fact that the ARF, though a talk shop, has achieved a confidence-building objective. The meetings held between China and the ASEAN countries within the ARF framework over the years contributed to the building up of confidence between them, so that they were able to reach agreement outside the ARF. The ARF has a *raison d'être*. But a *Financial Times* report⁶ stated the following in its conclusion:

Yet ASEAN, which has always operated on a consensus basis, still lacks the ability to speak with a unified voice on sensitive political issues, which leaves it in a weak position in dealing with China. So, even as it commits to the tighter embrace of

Beijing, ASEAN is courting other powers such as India.

Short of having a united ASEAN, the Association has taken out an insurance policy against being in the embrace of any major power by playing a multi-polar game. Another *Financial Times* report⁷ stated:

Southeast Asian countries would be well advised to respond to China's overtures – while strengthening their relations with Washington as insurance. In integrating China into regional and multilateral organizations, China's neighbours can throw ever more strings over the waking Gulliver.

Engaging China in the ARF, ASEM, ASEAN+3 and now ASEAN+China, resulting in a future free trade area, is a way of taming the giant by giving it recognition. And its place in the world community means that it has to live up to its status and behave responsibly. The *Financial Times*⁸ describes China as determining to act as a responsible regional power, slowly asserting its ambitions to become the hegemon of East Asia, signalling harmonious relations with its neighbours and signalling its collaborative intent through a free trade agreement.

It is notable that the *Financial Times*, a UK-based paper, does not mention strengthening relations with the EU. It is obvious that in the view of the *Financial Times* journalist the EU does not have the military muscle. Does ASEAN really want the EU's presence in Asia, even in a non-military way? Singapore's Minister for Information, Brigadier-General George Yeo, was quoted as saying, at the European Forum in Berlin, that Europe's presence in

3. BBC News, 30 July 2002, report on the ASEAN Ministerial Statement, 'ASEAN nations vow to fight terror'.

4. The Declaration on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, 4 November 2002.

5. *Financial Times*, 'China agrees pact on disputed islands', 5 November 2002.

6. *Financial Times*, 'Beijing looks to bring neighbours under its wing', 5 November 2002.

7. *Financial Times*, 'The Spratly spat', 5 November 2002.

8. *ibid.*

East Asia would not be as decisive as that of the United States, but could be very helpful. In a Pacific power balance, with Japan acting between the superpowers China and the United States, a greater European presence in Asia would be welcomed as it would give everyone more options to play with.⁹ If Yeo's comments can be seen as representing ASEAN, the EU has a place in Asia, albeit not a decisive one, and a reason to be in the ARF.

The EU itself is a coming together of states, but of states pooling their sovereignty towards a common foreign and security policy, and in the process of political and economic integration, which gives them a stronger voice and weight vis-à-vis the rest of the world including the United States. Something could be learned from the EU experience. ASEAN is not integrating, only cooperating. ASEAN insists on national sovereignty, non-interference and national interest. But for ASEAN to be in the driver's seat of the ARF, it will also have to deal internally with the issue of integration at some point in the future. Strength in ASEAN means strength for ASEAN in the ARF. ASEAN's strength can only come from its internal cohesion, otherwise it will always be playing one big power against another as an insurance policy.

The Korean peninsula is one issue, for example, on which ASEAN does not take the lead because neither ASEAN nor any of its members are playing a mediating role. The ARF, so to speak, is the host, or forum, at which the big boys meet the North Koreans, and this gives the ARF a certain *raison d'être*. Here ASEAN provides the infrastructure of the ARF for the actors to meet.

As a forum, the ARF, thanks to ASEAN, is perfect for Asia and its external partners

to discuss September 11 and international terrorism, and to make agreements. Again, on this issue, it is not ASEAN but the United States that is in the driver's seat. It is not always possible for ASEAN to be in the driver's seat on international or global issues, although it did take the lead in bringing peace to Cambodia.

Coming back to the institutional ARF, if ASEAN members themselves make progress in confidence-building measures and in preventive diplomacy towards problem solving, then ASEAN is better assured of remaining in the driver's seat. Its external partners are waiting. They are not about to usurp its position. But if progress cannot be made, then they may conclude that the ARF is just a talk shop and lose interest. For a beginning, to be able to talk to each other is a success, but over time much more is demanded. Being comfortable is accepted, but a maturity of relationships should lead to problem solving. The ball is in ASEAN's court.

It is likely that, if the ARF evolves, even at a comfortable pace for every member, into an OSCE-type of organization, ASEAN may no longer be in the driver's seat. This will require much more than ASEAN is able to offer. Such an organization will require higher levels of commitment and participation from Asian countries. Northeast Asian countries, two of which have observer status in the OSCE, would want to play bigger roles. And would the United States and the EU also be observers in an Asian version of the OSCE? Perhaps the evolution of the ARF will not be in the direction of an OSCE-type of organization. At some point, ASEAN will have to come to terms with the fact that, while it is to be congratulated for initiating the ARF and building it up, in any realization of an OSCE-type of organization, it has to pass

9. See 'The Role of the EU in South-East Asia: A Political, Economic and Strategic Review', Working Paper, Directorate General for Research, European Parliament, External Economic Relations Series, REXT 102 EN, March 1999, pp. 84-85.

the baton on to others. Whatever the evolution, even now within the ARF framework, for the good health of the ARF, some thought should be given to giving a

greater stake to non-ASEAN ARF members. This brings me to the next section.

CSCAP's Paper on the ARF into the Twenty-first Century

The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) published a paper entitled 'The ARF into the 21st Century'. If there is a non-EU European perspective, perhaps it is in this paper, to which CSCAP Europe, of which I am a member, contributed or assented. I received the paper for comments. This paper states a number of things, but my focus here is on the section on the institutionalization of the ARF. There are five points, but I mention only three. One point is on the establishment of an ARF Secretariat. Perhaps it is too much ahead of its time, as it might seem that by suggesting an alternate chairing of the Secretariat by an ASEAN and a non-ASEAN member on one-year terms, ASEAN is being taken out of the driver's seat. It goes further by suggesting the decoupling of the ARF Chair from the ASEAN Chair, as is the practice now, and by proposing that ASEAN countries should be allowed to forego hosting the ARF if they fear they lack the capacity to do so. For a Track Two organization, it is easy to suggest such changes with the long-term view of an

effective ARF, but in politics there are other considerations, such as national prestige. Politicians know better and I am not going to go into this. It reminds me of Luxembourg when it takes over the Presidency of the EU. It has a small administration and so what it does is to turn to the Belgian administration for help. I wonder whether this is thinkable in ASEAN. Possibly not. In the last point entitled, 'Locking in Major Power Commitment', it is suggested that future ARF meetings could be co-chaired with a non-ASEAN member. This simply extends the existing principle as meetings of the ISG are currently co-chaired by a non-ASEAN member. Is this too much? It is important too for non-ASEAN members of ARF to feel that they have a stake, or some 'ownership' of the ARF process, in the language we now use in development cooperation. For example, there could be non-ASEAN staff in an ARF Secretariat. I wonder how this paper was received? Was it discussed? Was it food for thought? Or was it politely received and then filed in the archives?

Conclusions

It has been difficult to write this presentation on a European perspective of ASEAN being in the driver's seat of the ARF, not knowing what non-EU European countries thought, or even what individual EU member states thought. One can only assume that when the Troika speaks at the ARF the positions taken are agreed upon in the General Affairs Council of the EU, and even at a lower level in, what is called

in Brussels lingo, 'COASI' (European Union Council Working Group for the Asia Pacific), which brings together the top people from the foreign ministries of various member states with their Brussels counterparts. It is clear that the EU can offer a specific contribution to the ARF on the basis of its experience with security and in its wish to put itself on the world map via its CFSP on pooling sovereignty.

The EU's presence in Asia is welcomed 'as it gave everyone more options to play with'. Hence it has good reason to participate in the ARF.

What is definitely clear is that ASEAN's continued presence in the driving seat of the ARF is welcomed and accepted in view of the fact that it dilutes the dominance of one power, the United States. The EU collaborates with the United States through their transatlantic partnership but this does not mean that the EU goes along with any United States domination. The increasing tendency of the United States to be unilateralist does not go down well with the EU, which upholds multilateralism. We are here in the field of big power politics and there is an element of rivalry too. This is the short answer in support of the continuation of ASEAN's neutral position between the big powers.

I think that whether ASEAN remains in the driver's seat of the ARF or not is a matter internal to ASEAN. No external partner will take this away from ASEAN. Hence, this paper speaks of the effectiveness of the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN, refers to the cohesiveness of ASEAN by pointing out that being internally weak will not put ASEAN in the

driver's seat of the ARF, with the example of the Spratlys, and that unless it is internally strong and cohesive ASEAN will always have to play off one power against another. Going beyond confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy towards problem solving will ensure ASEAN's leading position in the ARF. One possible way ASEAN might lose its driver's seat is if the ARF evolves into a real, fully fledged security organization, like the OSCE. More resources will be required and higher levels of commitment from Asian countries, in which case they will want more leadership or want to be the driving force in such an Asian security organization. Reference is made to CSCAP's paper on 'The ARF into the 21st Century' which opens the door to non-ASEAN partners to co-chair the ARF to the point that if an ASEAN country lacks the capacity to host the ARF, it can forego it.

Along the way, mention is made of the Korean peninsula and international terrorism. ASEAN is not in the driver's seat on these issues but the ARF nevertheless serves a purpose.

In conclusion, let it be repeated that Europe supports ASEAN's position in the driver's seat of the ARF.

Postscript

In the Joint Communiqué of the Thirty-sixth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh, dated 16-17 June 2003, there was a paragraph on Burma/Myanmar:

We discussed the recent political developments in Myanmar, particularly the incident of 30 May 2003. We noted the efforts of the Government of Myanmar to promote peace and development. In this connection, we urged Myanmar to resume its efforts of national reconciliation and dialogue

among all parties concerned leading to a peaceful transition to democracy. We welcomed the assurances given by Myanmar that the measures taken following the incident were temporary and looked forward to the early lifting of restrictions placed on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD members. We also reaffirmed our continued support for the efforts of the UNSG Special Representative Tan Sri Razali Ismail.

The BBC News of 17 June 2003 considered this statement an unusual departure from

ASEAN's policy of non-interference in member states' internal affairs. It quoted the Cambodian Foreign Minister, saying that ASEAN's ability to discuss the internal issues of a member country were 'a step forward in the relations between ASEAN members'.

No-one knows if this will happen again or what the view of the other ASEAN members is, but it is a step forward. Burma has been an embarrassment for ASEAN countries – at least they have privately admitted this. It has put ASEAN in a fix. ASEAN may have been right in wanting Burma to be part of ASEAN with an eye to China, but whatever decision is taken has a price. The junta's move to arrest and detain Aung San Suu Kyi and her colleagues put ASEAN under pressure and puts into question its constructive engagement policies.

What is important is that ASEAN's ability to solve problems within and between ASEAN member countries will earn it respect and keep it in the driver's seat of

the ARF. It is one thing to be hailed as the initiator of the ARF, but then unable to solve problems within ASEAN. Moreover, trying to deal with Asian security problems in the ARF dents ASEAN's reputation. If ASEAN cannot solve problems within its member states, taking on security problems at the Asian level can be interpreted as deflecting from its internal problems, or inviting external help, or punching above its weight.

ASEAN can learn from the EU how to solve internal problems between member states by facing up to them and not sweeping them under the carpet, finding the consensus to solve them while staying engaged with the world's problems outside. To do this probably requires a big change in the mindset of ASEAN member states. It boils down to a cultural change of mind at the individual level, which is presently too touchy, face-saving and face-losing. An ability to solve internal problems within and between ASEAN countries will strengthen ASEAN and its place in the ARF and give it greater weight on the international stage.

