

# The ASEAN Regional Forum – The Emergence of ‘Soft Security’: Improving the Functionality of the ASEAN Security Regime

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## *The ASEAN Regional Forum: Concept and Function*

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The concept of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has been to maintain the security viability of the region and to prevent regional disorder. The forum was founded in 1993 as the first intra-regional security institution encompassing the Asia-Pacific region for constructive dialogue between nations and for regional security cooperation.

The objective of the ARF was to create a more predictable and stable pattern of

relationships between major powers and Southeast Asia. Implicit in its conceptualization was the recognition that regional issues required the engagement of the great powers in regional affairs. The ARF introduced a new norm into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) process of cooperative security that emphasized inclusiveness through the promotion of dialogue among both like-minded and non-like-minded states.

## *Evolution and Expansion of the ARF: Institutional Building*

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In the context of regional institution building, the ARF is unique. It was not created in the aftermath of war, unlike European institutions that developed in the aftermath of the Second World War and in the shadow of the Cold War. It was not a treaty or alliance confined to participants from the Southeast Asia region. The ARF considered that the participation of the major powers as well as middle-sized powers such as Australia, South Korea and India could bring positive security relations. The focus was on inclusiveness – bringing in participants with an interest

in broader Asian issues who had traditionally been excluded from the consultative processes initiated by ASEAN in its Post-ministerial Conference (PMC) dialogues with major Western states and China. It is important to bear in mind that the ARF has not claimed to resolve contentious issues nor has it sought to be a negotiating forum. The forum’s objective and function is to build confidence and trust as well as develop cooperative norms of behaviour. Therefore, the ARF adopted a multilateral approach to prevent potential conflicts in the region.

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## ***Emergence of the ARF: The Application of Multilateralism***

During the Second World War, there were basically two types of security arrangements – bilateral and multilateral. But during the Cold War period, multilateral structures were the preferred security arrangements in Europe for a period of over four decades. In the case of the Asia-Pacific region, the application of multilateralism emerged at the end of the Cold War period. Prior to the Cold War, the security structure in the region was more bilateral because of the rise of nationalism as countries in Asia Pacific gained independence from colonial regimes. While communist China's sphere of influence in Asia Pacific, particularly in North Korea and the states of Indo-China (where it found expression in the Indo-China Communist Movement) was evident, the Indo-China states were more independent than their Eastern European counterparts because they were not bound by a formal pact with China, whereas the Soviet Union and Eastern European states were bound by the Warsaw Pact.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the allies of the United States in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia had little in common, and therefore multilateral security policies could not be effectively applied. As a result, security links with both the United States and the Soviet Union remained bilateral. However, changes within the United States' security arrangements in the region became more evident with the demise of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the dominant military presence in the region. This led to the demand for alternative forms of security arrangement. Multilateralism was given more emphasis,

yet without compromising the United States' forward deployment policy.

Nonetheless, it was the absence of a traditional balance of power in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union that compelled members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to adopt multilateralism as a process of identity building, preventive diplomacy, confidence-building measures and security-building measures. As such, the primary function and the principle provisions of the ARF have been to establish a balance of power, regional security, stability, tranquility and conflict prevention through cooperation between multi-actors.

In many respects, the ARF's formula of arrangements brings together countries in a grouping that has an inclusive membership, regardless of regime differences. Within this framework, multilateralism is seen more as a concerted effort of preventive diplomacy. Moreover, the rationale behind the growth of multilateralism has also been the interest and desire of promoting economic growth and of maintaining the continuity of economic interdependence without the risk of war. In the context of security, multilateralism has a more long-term objective. It is perceived as a framework to engage China and keep the United States in the region so as to integrate their presence into the system of regional order, thereby reducing the need for any rigidly oriented strategy of containment.

1. The Warsaw Pact (formally the Warsaw Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance), a military alliance of eight European communist nations, was enacted to counter the rearmament of West Germany, officially called the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and its admission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The treaty was signed in Warsaw, Poland on 14 May 1955, by Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia), East Germany (now part of the united Federal Republic of Germany), Hungary, Poland, Romania and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The alliance was dominated by the USSR, which kept strict control over the other countries in the pact. In 1961, Albania broke off diplomatic relations with the USSR because of ideological differences and in 1968 withdrew from the pact.

## **Function: Dialogue and Conflict Prevention**

A functional analysis of the ARF would be incomplete without understanding the function and process of the ARF. The functional components of the ARF are the forum’s objectives.

As mentioned above, the ARF deliberately sought the participation of the major powers as well as medium-sized powers such as Australia, South Korea and India, as they were viewed as being able to make a significant contribution towards regional development. Its objective was to build confidence and trust as well as develop cooperative norms of behaviour. As such the ARF endorses security cooperation in three categories:

- 1. Confidence-building Measures (CBMs):** a multilateral approach that is based on the perception that there are no specific enemies within the membership. There is an acceptance among member states that territorial disputes and other forms of disagreement and tension can prevail between members. The effectiveness of the CBMs depends largely upon the principle of transparency with regard to military spending and armed forces structures.
- 2. Preventive Diplomacy:** the application of preventive diplomacy seeks to resolve or contain disputes through peaceful non-military methods, such as negotiations, inquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement of disputes and other non-coercive methods of resolution.

One of the ways in which the concept of preventive diplomacy has been advanced is through ASEAN and its dialogue partners. ASEAN is essentially a non-aggression pact aimed at promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes among the

various signatories of the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.

- 3. Non-proliferation and Arms Control:** the idea is to create a perception that there is no hegemony of any major power and that the position of all members is considered to be equal within the ARF. Non-proliferation and arms control should be achieved by arrangements such as the Non-proliferation Treaty, the Missile Technology Control Regime and the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon Free Zone.

One of the most obvious conclusions that can be drawn from the study and observation of the ARF’s objectives is that the ARF has a predominantly ASEAN character. The evolution of the ARF and the principles upon which it has been founded are identified as the ‘ASEAN Way’, which specifically refers to the unique approach of ASEAN towards conflict settlement and regional cooperation. The ‘ASEAN Way’ has been emphasized in both the conduct of inter-state behaviour and in the policy relating to decision making, with its indispensable dependence on consultation and consensus.

An important aspect that has been adopted into the ARF function is the preference for informality instead of excessive institutionalization. Another essential factor of the ASEAN policy that seems to have been incorporated into the ARF is the necessity of continuing bilateral approaches even within the context of multilateralism in the region. This is still the standard framework in which the option of using a bilateral approach remains available, even within the larger framework of a cooperative security arrangement.

However, it is imperative to bear in mind that ASEAN at the time of its inception was a much smaller grouping with lesser challenges than today. The inclusion of new members, such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, brought a variety of new and more complex issues into the association that will require special attention. Furthermore with ASEAN in the driver's seat of the ARF, tensions between ASEAN members could negatively affect the ARF. It would therefore be more realistic to regard the forum just as a modest contribution to the maintenance of the balance of power or distribution of power within Asia Pacific.

The ARF is the only regional forum that discusses sensitive regional issues. It has

even begun to discuss sensitive domestic issues, such as the case of Myanmar. This would have been unthinkable a decade ago. The ARF has built a security environment for cooperative security in a region unaccustomed to cooperative security arrangements. The ARF has developed special regional relationships. It was not created to resolve or prevent the outbreak of conflict, but it is used to minimize the impact of differing perceptions and interests. The ARF has begun the process of creating predictable and stable relationships among regional states. It has engendered an increasing awareness of regional norms among the major powers and new security perception in a globalized world.

### ***Improving the Functionality of the ASEAN Security Regime***

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However, in the light of the concerns expressed about ASEAN's weaknesses and the changing regional environment, one could ask what measures should be taken to strengthen the ARF? How can we ensure that the ARF remains relevant and continues to engage the major powers as well as the ASEAN states?

First, participating states should engage in forthright and constructive exchanges of views to express their concerns, underscore their differences and better understand deviating perspectives. While ASEAN's focus has been on seeking consensus and compromise, the ARF should be prepared to accept differing analyses and agree to disagree where there are fundamental differences of views.

Second, the ARF needs to move from an exchange of views to problem solving. As an exercise in preventive diplomacy, the ARF could attempt to narrow the gap where differences exist on regional issues. By its very existence, the ARF is itself a

confidence-building measure, but it now needs to add substance to the forms of cooperative regional security. The ARF should further develop the meetings of its Intersessional Support Group (ISG), as such thematic discussions would lead to new agendas for regional security cooperation.

Third, the ARF should be specialized by establishing an institutional framework for the implementation of preventive diplomacy. The ARF should consider initiatives such as enhancing the role of its Chair and setting up consultative committees of Eminent Persons as well as a register of experts who could facilitate the resolution of conflicts. The 'Troika' of the past, present and future Chair of the ARF should be used for resolving conflicts, reducing tensions and facilitating discussions and negotiations on issues of critical significance for regional peace and security.

Fourth, as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) is hosted by different states,

rotating on an annual basis, the exercise of chairing meetings of the ASEAN Standing Committee, hosting the AMM, followed by the Post-ministerial Conference (PMC) and the ARF is a major challenge for a number of ASEAN countries. Consideration should be given to de-synchronizing the ARF Chair from the ASEAN Chair. For example, if Laos chairs the AMM and PMC, the ARF could be held in another ASEAN country. Similarly, if ASEAN countries do not feel ready to host the ARF, they should be able to forgo the opportunity. It does not require all ten ASEAN countries to host meetings of the ARF. ASEAN could even take the initiative of suggesting that, while meetings of the ARF should continue to be held in an ASEAN country, future ARF meetings could be co-chaired by an external ARF member. This would extend an existing principle, as meetings of the ISG are also co-chaired by an external member. The effect would be to strengthen the participation of the external powers and give them a greater stake in the ARF process. The objective would be to build a stronger commitment to the ARF as well as a better understanding of the evolving character of the ARF, especially amongst Western powers whose leaderships may change frequently after domestic elections.

Fifth, the ARF should establish a Secretariat adjacent to the APEC Secretariat. This could lead to a symbiotic relationship between these two key institutions for cooperative regional security and regional economic integration.

Sixth, the ARF should consider improving civil-military relations, for example, by holding meetings of senior officials of defence ministries together with meetings of foreign ministers. It would be useful to raise the level of military officers involved in the ARF process. Exposing defence officials to the ARF norms of cooperative security and their engagement in the process of dialogue and discussion could create an awareness of the changing global and regional security environment as well as improve military understanding of the changes in security concepts. The objective would be to reduce the risk of misperception or misjudgement as well as create a momentum for cooperative security endeavours, including the consideration of measures to prevent the outbreak of conflicts and tensions. Eventually, there could be the concurrent convening of meetings of defence ministers and foreign ministers during the ARF.

### ***The Emergence of Soft Security Arrangements: Improving the Functionality of the ASEAN Security Regime***

The emergence of human security, encompassing soft security challenges, may compel ASEAN to adjust its security and cooperation arrangements. But the extent to which ASEAN would improve regional security functionality depends on the objectives and the process of the organization. For example, ASEAN could incorporate the concept and practice of human security in its security and cooperation arrangements.

ASEAN can improve human security in the development context, emphasizing the responsibility of the state to respect and protect human rights.

With regard to the sovereignty argument, perhaps it would help the functionality of the ASEAN Security Regime if concepts of the power and limitation of the state were defined and applied; and if security and defence institutions did not meddle in

civil affairs. For instance, ASEAN endorsed the 'Joint Declaration on Cooperation to Combat Terrorism' at the Fourteenth ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting. ASEAN and the European Union determined to enhance cooperation to fight terrorism in the following ways:

- Universal implementation of all existing United Nations Security Council Resolutions related to terrorism, in particular resolutions 1373 (2001), 1377 (2001) and 1390 (2002);
- Universal implementation of all existing United Nations Conventions and Protocols against terrorism and encouraging states to comply with them and to take effective measures to prevent and combat terrorism, in particular to prevent and combat the financing of terrorism;
- Early conclusion and adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism and the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism;
- Early entry into force of the United Nations Convention against

Transnational Organized Crime and its protocols;

- Exchange of information on measures employed in the fight against terrorism, including the development of more effective policies as well as legal, regulatory and administrative frameworks for the fight against terrorism;
- Strengthening links between the law enforcement agencies of European Union and ASEAN member states, as well as with EUROPOL (European Police Office) and ASEANPOL (ASEAN Chiefs of National Police), to promote practical cooperation on counter-terrorism and organized crime.
- Cooperation to build capacity to assist ASEAN members in the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373, and to address the impact of terrorist activities.

In this regard, ASEAN and the European Union welcome the recent establishment of the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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## Conclusion

While members of the ARF accept a realistic approach on the balancing of power, the organization has applied an interdependent and multilateral approach to conflict resolution. The security arrangement increased the number of stakeholders to create more flexibility. As such, the organization relies on the perception that members are potential allies, but not foes.

As the ARF was not created to be a security institution such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the approach to security arrangements is characterized by cooperative security and dialogue instead

of military deployment, although the forum addresses issues related to hard security matters. Given the process and structure of the ARF, the very function of the organization emphasizes mutual engagement as a way of conflict prevention and deterrence.

The effectiveness of the ARF depends very much on the institutional process of the organization. There are two types of institutionalism: soft and hard. Soft institutionalism means accepting collective values that are least legally binding. Hard institutionalism means the mode of institutional operations is based on legal

jurisdiction and the rule of law. Yet it is the absence of hard institutionalization for which the ARF has been criticized. Critics call it a talk shop without realistic commitments to dealing with security tensions and potential conflicts.

Nevertheless, the ARF is not without potential in dealing with real conflict issues.

The cooperative security arrangements on transnational crime and global terrorism require extensive intelligence-sharing and networking. Based on the observations provided, the ARF is presently most useful in soft security areas, such as anti-piracy and transnational crime, but not in interstate conflicts.

