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Enhancing Security in the Asia-Pacific
European Lessons for the ASEAN Regional Forum*

While security and stability in the Asia-Pacific are commonly seen as being ensured through US military supremacy and a US-led system of alliances, more and more observers also recognise the value of multilateral security co-operation as support, as a complement and eventually perhaps even as an alternative to the present security order. In this context, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) generally is considered the most important multilateral regional security institution in the Asia-Pacific.

The short history of the ARF is, to some extent, a history of rejecting European role models. From the very beginning, policy makers and academics in the Pacific Asia region have fiercely resisted any attempts at developing the ARF along the lines of OSCE, EU or NATO. Two arguments were usually put forward to justify this position. First and most importantly, many Asians felt that the security environment of their region was quite different from the European one. Thus, it was argued that many countries in the Asia-Pacific were preoccupied with problems of internal stability and economic development because the volatile process of nation-building had not yet been completed, while European states by and large had developed into strong, well-consolidated nation-states (Ayoob, 1995). While Europe is predominantly land-oriented, the Asia-Pacific is a maritime region, and while the European security system had been strongly bipolar during the time of the Cold War, geo-strategic patterns in the Asia-Pacific were more complex, with an overlaying strategic triangle formed by the US, the Soviet Union and China, but stronger local and sub-regional influences than in Europe. The Asia-Pacific is also widely perceived as being qualitatively more heterogeneous, more diverse and more difficult to organise than Europe. Lastly, it was pointed out that Europe benefitted from a dense network of regional institutions, while the Asia-Pacific was institutionally thin. Given all these differences, European security institutions with their focus on issues of military security seemed to be of little relevance (Mack/Ravenhill, 1995).

A second line of reasoning leading to the same conclusion suggested that the institutional structure of European organisations was not in tune with the dominant political culture in many parts of Asia. For example, the processes in the OSCE were seen as too legalistic, formal and rule-based for many ASEAN states who had made consensus-building and informal discussions the cornerstone of their own approach to regional co-operation (Maull, 1997b).

Although some of these objections may have – as we shall argue below – less relevance than often assumed, they had considerable influence on the Forum's development over the past four years. Not the European but the ASEAN model has served as the main blueprint for the institutional make-up of the ARF. The Association's revered principles of »musyawarah« (consultations) and »mufakat« (consensus) now serve as the basic guidelines for the work of the ARF and its various intersessional bodies. The stress is on bringing policy-makers and security personnel from the region together in order to facilitate trust and mutual understanding. This form of security dialogue was regarded as more promising than formal Western-style mechanisms of conflict resolution. Only selected European ideas such as »Confidence Building Measures« (CBMs) have been considered for implementation.[1]

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[1] Even in this case, progress has been quite limited. So far, the ARF has shied away from introducing a rigid CBM regime based on reciprocity, monitoring and sanctioning. All measures carried out under the ARF umbrella, such as publication of defense white papers or observer missions, take place on a voluntary basis.

Notwithstanding the merits and success of the »ASEAN way«, we feel that it was premature to discard the European experience altogether. First of all, there were misunderstandings about the nature of European institutions and their utility as role models. The most prominent one arose from the idea of a Conference on Security Co-operation in Asia (CSCA), a proposal which was first discussed in the late 1980s. At this time, leading politicians such as former Soviet president Michael Gorbatchev and Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans presented plans for a new Pacific security architecture along the lines of the Helsinki process. These initiatives, which were also supported by Canada, met with considerable scepticism in many Asian capitals due to the human rights mechanisms of the Helsinki model (so-called basket three). The truth of the matter was that neither Gorbatchev nor the Australians had any intention of talking about human rights in Asia or transplant CSCE in its entirety. All they wanted was to give multilateralism a chance in a region which was still dominated by Cold War balance-of-power thinking (Uhe, 1996).[2]

Secondly, even if there are differences in the level of development between the two regions, a closer examination of the European experience might tell us more about the conditions for preserving stability at a regional level. During the past centuries, war was the rule in Europe's history and peace was the exception. This »European civil war« ended with World War II, and after 1945, interstate relations in Western Europe changed beyond all recognition – they assumed a completely new quality, especially with regard to the member states of the EU. As a result, relations between Germany, France and Great Britain are a far cry today from what they were during the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Even Russia plays a more co-operative role these days and it is not seen as a threat by most European governments. Contrary to popular belief, this remarkable development has in fact less to do with the wealth and level of development in Western Europe. It is more due to the fact that European diplomacy was transforming interstate relations through the development of regional institutions (EU, NATO or CSCE) and was then itself transformed by these very institutions. Membership in these regional bodies proved to exert lasting effects on the states involved by affecting their very statehood and identity. Hence, if Asia is contemplating its future it might find some guidelines in Europe's present rather than in its past.

The Pacific Asian Security Setting: Interstate and Intrastate Challenges

The future of the ARF as a regional security framework ultimately will depend on its contribution to regional peace and security. This contribution, in turn, will be determined by the availability of alternative mechanisms of stability, by its own evolution, but also – and perhaps most importantly – by the type and extent of regional order challenges it will have to confront. Until now, ARF has been built around three assumptions. The first assumption is that future challenges to regional security and stability will arise only in the context of interstate relations. To enhance stability, mistrust and misperceptions between states had to be removed, their basically benign intentions had to be strengthened – but, according to the second assumption, this could be done and had to be done below the threshold of seriously constraining sovereignty. To the extent that intra-state violence, instability or revolutionary change have been taken into consideration at all, the logic of ARF has assumed (third assumption) that a) the likelihood of those types of violence could be reduced through strengthening member nation states and b) such conflicts could be contained and prevented from seriously affecting interstate relations. ARF thus has confined itself to the agenda of the traditional security dilemma.

But what if those assumptions should turn out to be wrong? European experiences strongly suggest that the ARF's first and second assumptions need to be questioned. There is much evidence that the central challenges to international peace and security today emanate from intra-state violence, which in a world of interdependence easily transcends national boundaries. The international security implications of failing and failed states, rather than their aggressive intentions or misperceptions, may thus be the key to ARF's future (Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1997). Here, the experiences of the OSCE may be relevant for ARF. And the case for strong institutions built on a voluntary transfer of sovereignty and a relaxation of the principle of non-interference may also need to be revisited by ARF. Institution-building may offer ways to weaken and ultimately remove the practical relevance of the security dilemma, and thus offer better prospects for regional peace and stability. We pursue those two points below in some detail. It is however pertinent at this stage to provide a brief outline of the Pacific Asian security scene.

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[2] Interviews by Nikolas Busse in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, September 1997.

Not all challenges to regional security and stability in Pacific Asia relate to inter-state conflict, but many do. This has led some observers to compare the Pacific Asia of today with Europe at the turn of last century: a region beset by Great Power rivalry, obsessed with military power and arms races and often hovering perilously on the brink of war (Friedberg, 1993/4). From this perspective, Pacific Asia seems »ripe for rivalry«. While we consider this view as unduly pessimistic, we do recognise the salience of unresolved territorial conflicts and proclivity towards Great Power rivalry. The most prominent among the many territorial issues in Pacific Asia are the claims by six states to all or some of the Spratly Islands – a set of reefs spread out in the South China Sea. The Spratlys comprise of very little land but cover a huge maritime domain: they are scattered over some 70,000 square kilometers. Although claims to large hydrocarbon resources in the South China Sea are completely unproven and somewhat speculative (Durkee, 1992), conflict over control and sovereign rights in the Spratly Islands has clearly been heightened by such speculation. In the pursuit of maritime territorial ambitions in the South China Sea, there have been both unilateral military acts of establishing de-facto control by several claimants (most recently, and most prominently, by China on the Mischief Reef, which is also claimed by the Philippines) and military clashes – notably between China and Vietnam. China also unilaterally took control from Vietnam of another group of islands in the South China Sea further North, the Paracels (Valencia, 1995). Beyond the conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea, there are also numerous other unresolved conflicts over maritime and land borders. Examples include, among others, conflicting claims to small groups of islands between Korea and Japan (Takeshima/Tokdo), between China and Japan (Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands), between Russia and Japan (Southern Kurile Islands/Northern Territories) and unresolved conflicting claims on boundaries between Malaysia and the Philippines.

Pacific Asia also has seen exhibits of Great Power rivalry and competition for influence, notably between the United States and the former Soviet Union, the United States and China, and – more obliquely – between China and Japan. Those patterns of Great Power competition during the Cold War were submerged, but not completely eliminated, by the broader confrontation between the blocks, with China changing strategic alignments from a pro-Soviet (1949–1965) to a pro-American position (1972–1982), while simultaneously enhancing its margin for independent action. Since the end of the Cold War, elements of Great Power rivalry in Pacific Asia have become more apparent. While Russia has all but been eliminated as a major player in the region, Great Power rivalry and strategic competition has centred on the relationship between China and the US. China and Japan have also moved towards strategic competition. In both instances, however, patterns of rivalry and competition have been moderated by economic and diplomatic co-operation. It is therefore misleading to interpret those relations as determined by considerations of balance of power and geopolitical interests (Ross, 1999): Powerful forces of economic interdependence and shared political interests work towards accommodation, co-operation and even integration (Funabashi/Oksenberg/Weiss 1994; Shinn 1996).

While Pacific Asia thus exhibits considerable potential for conflict and instability emanating from traditional interstate issues, most observers would nevertheless put two different kinds of conflict at the top of their security concerns: Korea and Taiwan. Both represent challenges in more than one sense to regional stability and security emanating from intra-state sources. First, both the conflict between North and South on the Korean peninsula and tensions between mainland China and Taiwan result from unresolved civil wars in which the parties organised themselves into states.

The relationship between those states and the eventual resolution of the issue of national unification remain to be settled. Second, the fragility of existing political arrangements in both North Korea and China, as well as (in the case of North Korea) the blatant failure of the economy, exacerbate tensions between the two sides, albeit in quite different ways. In Korea, the People's Democratic Republic's regime hovers on the verge of collapse, but so far has remained in control through a bizarre and brutal mixture of indoctrination and repression. In China, confrontation between the People's Republic and the Republic of China on Taiwan has been coloured by elements of a struggle between a non-democratic, precariously legitimate and a democratic system of governance. Thus, China apparently sought to influence the outcome of Taiwan's first free presidential elections in March 1996 with large-scale military intimidation through extensive manoeuvres in Taiwan's vicinity.

Another example of a potential regional instability emanating from intra-state sources of conflict is Indonesia. There, the socio-political implications of the Asian financial crisis have produced internal unrest and enhanced secessionist movements. As a result, Indonesia has all but lost its previous role as a source of regional stability and moderation in South East Asia, and it may even change shape through the independence of East Timor.

In short, Pacific Asia represents a complex mixture of open and latent conflicts, which are caused by sources both within and between states. Those sources interact with each other and with the broader forces of globalisation which sweeps international politics across the globe. Globalisation enhances both fragmentation and integration, both the quest for (national, religious or ethnic) identities and the need for joining others, and it puts political institutions under enormous pressure both nationally and regionally. The resulting fragilities of politics are exacerbated in countries which still have to complete the tasks of nation-building and master the transition towards market economies and more responsive and legitimate political systems, while being expected simultaneously to prepare for the age of globalisation (Maull, 1995).

All this sounds familiar to European ears – and while there clearly are important differences between the two regions, the similarities and parallels should also not be underestimated. Thus, experts in the Asia-Pacific security often argue that Pacific Asia really consists of two remarkably different sub-regions: North and South East Asia. While South East Asia is marked by a modest but significant level of economic interdependence (intra-ASEAN trade represents roughly one fifth of total ASEAN trade) and – through ASEAN – by substantial regional institutionalisation, North East Asia shows much more patchy patterns of economic interdependence[3] and only very limited institutional arrangements (primarily in the form of the Korean Energy Development Organisation KEDO and the »four-party talks« between the two Koreas, China and the United States). Again, however, there are parallels to this in Europe: the sub-regional setting in the Balkans differs hugely from that, say, in North Western Europe, the Mediterranean, the Baltic region or Central Eastern Europe.

While European experiences therefore obviously cannot simply be transferred and applied to Pacific Asia, they equally obviously hold useful lessons and can be used as »teaching material«, which, however, will have to be sifted, evaluated in its successes and failures, and adapted to suit the specific circumstances in Pacific Asia. It should also be clear that Europe, too, would benefit from a close look at Pacific Asian experiences, strategies and tools to address issues of regional security and stability. For the time being, however, we will now return to our main theme – the relevance of European experiences to Pacific Asian security and stability and, specifically, to the ARF.

Learning From the EU Experience

At first glance, it seems difficult to imagine that any lesson might be drawn from the EU experience for the further development of the ARF. The reason is quite simple: the EU and the ARF are two very different international institutions with different objectives and different approaches. The ARF consists of an inter-governmental forum for security co-operation which is primarily concerned with building confidence and reducing tension among sovereign states. The EU, on the other hand, has always tried to go beyond mere co-operation and achieve regional integration. The founding fathers of the EU were inspired by a vision of the »United States of Europe« and favoured a gradual transfer of sovereignty from the national level to supra-national agencies. Since the ARF has no plans for a common market, a monetary union or a common foreign policy, there is indeed little that its participants might learn from studying the various institutional mechanisms invented by the EU. As we will discuss below, the OSCE might be much more relevant for this kind of inquiry because it aims at fulfilling functions similar to those of the ARF.

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[3] Only economic interactions between China, Japan and South Korea represent significant levels of interdependence. The economic integration of Russia and North Korea into North East Asia is very limited, although ironically, North Korea, which has remained largely isolated from the world economy, has now become critically dependent on food, oil and currency supplies from China and Japan for its survival.

But there is one important insight that can be gained from studying the history and development of the European Union. The EU is one of the rare examples of a successful process of community-building at the regional level. In other words: it proves that international institutions do matter and that they affect state behaviour over time. This is a fundamental point which sometimes gets lost in the current debate between realists and liberals in Pacific Asia (Busse, 1997). The former have criticised the ARF from the very beginning as having little to offer for the solution of Pacific Asia's pressing security problems. Incidents such as China's gunboat diplomacy in the Spratlys or its wargames off the Taiwanese coast are often referred to as examples which allegedly show that Pacific Asia needs deterrence much more than multilateral security dialogues. From this point of view, the biggest challenge is the future role of China which can only be managed by creating a new balance of power. New alliances for the containment of China might be part of this strategy, as well as stronger armaments of America's allies in the region (Bernstein and Munro, 1997). This line of reasoning even has adherents in some ASEAN capitals which seem to lack full confidence in the ARF, their very own initiative. They privately admit their reluctance to »put all their eggs into one basket«, i.e. the basket of co-operative security, which is why they informally support a stronger US military presence in the region. In this context, bilateral agreements, such as the 1995 Australian-Indonesian security arrangement, are sometimes portrayed as part of an informal spider-web among the lesser powers in the region which functions as a security guarantee against China.[4]

The EU experience shows, however, that there is no need for this kind of double-edged diplomacy. Today, Western Europe lives in an unprecedented period of peace. The relations between the major powers are stable, nobody would seriously consider the use of force against neighbouring states, and conflicts are settled in a civilised manner through legal and diplomatic means. Moreover, with three Central European countries now in NATO, and five negotiating their entry into the European Union, the benefits of this paradigm are now rapidly being expanded into Central Eastern Europe.

This is no mean achievement for a region which has suffered greatly from war over the past centuries and which was captured by exactly the kind of balance-of-power thinking which seems to dominate the informal security discourse in many parts of Asia. What brought about the change? Many observers from the Third World seek explanations in what they perceive as Europe's longer history in the business of nation-building. In this view, Europe has consolidated its economies, increased trade and investment ties among neighbours, and all but completed the task of nation-state building. The combined effects of stable societies and economic interdependence are thus used to explain why European countries can no longer afford to fight wars against each other – favourable conditions which are missing in contemporary Asia (Friedberg, 1993/94). But this hypothesis is less compelling than one might think. First of all, the level of development among the different European states has varied considerably over the past 40 years or so. Some areas of Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy or even Eastern

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4. From the point of view of the two governments, the Indonesian-Australian security arrangement constitutes a confidence-building measure among the two neighbours and not a tacit alliance against China (Interviews by Nikolas Busse in Jakarta and Canberra, May/September 1997).

Germany have economic problems not much different from rural areas in many parts of South East Asia. It is also a myth that the state has consolidated its control over society in all of Europe. Terrorism and separatism are familiar problems to many European countries, including Spain, Italy, Ireland and France, and societies like Belgium are anything else but homogenous nation-states. And even if economic interdependence might be high, this can by no means be seen as a protection against conflicts. In the period before World War One, interdependence among the European economies was even higher than today but this only caused a feeling of vulnerability and led to a major boost for nationalism.

New research in international relations theory suggests that the enduring peace in Europe has different roots. It seems that the existence of European institutions played a decisive role. Over time, the various EU bodies such as the European Commission, the European Court of Justice or the European Parliament did much more than only influence the policies of the states involved. They also changed the identities of the states themselves. Today, there exists a widespread feeling of Europeanness among the elites in the EU which even reaches down to the level of mass public opinion in some countries (Risse-Kappen, 1996: 391). Apart from exceptions such as Great Britain, most EU governments have abandoned old-fashioned strategic thinking when dealing with their neighbours; they have learned to think in regional terms. Balance-of-power theory with its grand coalitions and secret alliances, which has dominated European diplomacy for such a long time, has gradually been replaced by long-term co-operation in almost all areas of public policy. The crucial point is that this state of affairs was not brought about by some pre-existing feeling of common heritage or cultural affinity. Religious, linguistic, or ethnic cleavages are still prominent in Europe and will not cease to influence politics. The underlying cause for change was the adherence to commonly held norms and institutional procedures. These have helped to transform the way how European politicians see themselves and others. As a result of prolonged co-operation, they have begun to see their counterparts as partners rather than rivals and the EU's institutions as legitimate arenas for political decision-making. Constructivism, the theory which examines such processes, calls this state of mind a collective identity. This means that the members of a group of states identify positively with the fate of the fellow members and would not consider the use of force against one of them (Wendt, 1994). This collective identity has probably done more to remove the security dilemma among the EU members than all CBMs, joint military exercises and disarmament talks together.

There are lessons in this for Pacific Asia. These lessons may even be particularly relevant against the background of a financial and economic crisis in the region, which is shaking the political, economic and social foundations of stability. It is hard to envisage how the region could escape from the reverberations of the Asia crisis without significantly enhanced levels of intra-regional co-operation in the economic, but also in the political realm. This applies to the sub-regional contexts of North and South East Asia, as well as to Pacific Asia as a whole. To take the example of South East Asia, the Asian crisis has severely affected both the reputation and the effectiveness of ASEAN, but it has also pushed the strengthening of ASEAN up on the political agenda (Hernandez, 1999). What is now being discussed among ASEAN experts in the region is a move of ASEAN towards further institutionalisation and partial transfers of operational sovereignty much along the lines of the evolution of European integration. The revered principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other member states has openly been challenged by Thailand and the Philippines, and while this challenge has so far been repulsed, it has become clear that these are rearguard actions against an ineluctable trend.

The central lesson of European integration for Pacific Asia, however, concerns not only South East Asia but the whole region, and notably the key relationships between China and Japan, Korea and Japan, China and Korea, and China and the United States. Those relationships need to be substantially transformed if regional security and stability is to be ensured in the long run. Present security arrangements are insufficient to do so: the United States is unlikely to be able to balance a rising China alone, but also unlikely to find willing allies in the region, if China played its cards well. And if Japan tried to balance China (whether in close alliance with America, or on its own), the results could easily be disastrous. A smooth adjustment of regional security arrangements to Korean unification is hard to envisage except in a context of fairly close co-operation of the major external powers; the introduction of a united Korea in a balance-of-power context could easily exacerbate tensions between Japan and China.

ARF could provide a useful institutional framework for redefining interstate relations between China, Japan, Korea and perhaps even the United States. The European experience shows that the social effects of international institutions can hardly be overestimated. States do not only react to military threats and diplomatic pressure, as realists would have it, but also to norms and institutions. The idea of socialising states in world politics is no wishful thinking but a real possibility and definitely a smarter policy choice than throwing more and more weapons into a region. In this context, two policy recommendations might be formulated for the future of the ARF. First, ARF participants should be patient and give the forum a fair chance. The history of European integration has been full of disappointments, problems and setbacks. Many projects failed, others could only be implemented after long delays. The crucial point was that the process of co-operation never came to a complete stop and eventually was seen as legitimate and natural in the eyes of the governments concerned. Hence, Asian governments should remain committed to the ARF, even if this eventually might involve giving up parts of national sovereignty. Renouncing total control over all aspects of foreign policy is the price that states have to pay if they want international co-operation. The history of European integration shows that the pay-off can be the development of a strong collective identity which serves as a protection against armed conflicts. Second, governments in Pacific Asia should avoid any actions that could undermine the process of institution-building. The EU experiment would not have succeeded if the member governments had secretly built up their arsenals and tried to forge informal alliances against each other in the early stages. Hence, Asian governments should be more willing to sacrifice short-term strategic gains for long-term stability. This especially applies to those voices who advocate a parallel strategy of balancing and engagement. The EU's success was based on a deliberate choice for institutionalisation, engagement and co-operation and would probably have failed if some parties had simultaneously followed a realist path.

Learning From the OSCE Experience

Europe's recent history not only provides evidence for the successful transformation of inter-state relations through institution-building, it also amply illustrates the dangers of intra-state violence, its potential for poisoning inter-state relations, and the difficulties of containing such problems. The most obvious and dramatic case in this context is offered by former Yugoslavia – a state which had failed economically, politically and ideologically at the end of the Cold War. Within this state, politics were redefined along ethno-nationalist lines, and the old state in an orgy of violence then fell apart into its separate components. At least one of those component states, Serbia, pursued a strategy of territorial expansion through military force. Thus, the war in former Yugoslavia combined aspects of civil war with that of inter-state aggression. Similar forms of violence erupted in several parts of the former Soviet Union and also threatened to explode stability in Central Eastern Europe. In the case of former Yugoslavia, all major European institutions – the OSCE, the EU, the WEU, and NATO – were involved in efforts to quell the conflict; in Central Eastern Europe, the task fell primarily to the EU and the OSCE (though the prospect of NATO enlargement also played a major role), while in the former Soviet Union, efforts at stabilisation by international organisations were primarily carried out by the OSCE.

The diversity of Europe, and the differences between its sub-regions, are, as we have argued already, hardly less dramatic than those in the Asia-Pacific. Even its institutional framework shows more similarities than is often granted: much of Eastern Europe is seriously under-developed in terms of regional institutions, and the institutions are less different between Asia and Europe than is often assumed if we compare, as we should, the ARF with the OSCE. In fact, there are striking similarities between the two organisations: both provide institutional expression to the logic of co-operative and comprehensive security, both are supplementary, rather than dominant security institutions geared towards prevention and confidence-building, rather than to conflict settlement and enforcement. Both function on the basis of consensus, neither has any capacity to coerce. They also share a preference for informal, discrete and personal diplomacy, and emphasise process over results, dialogue over settlement.

OSCE and ARF differ, however, in their intrusiveness: the catalogue of principles, norms, rules and institutions which the OSCE has developed assumes that a whole range of internal affairs are legitimate concerns for other countries and the institution itself. The notion that »good governance« may be an important precondition for peace and international security is central to the activities of the OSCE. This gives the OSCE a potentially large role in internal affairs and thus qualifies the sovereignty of member countries. While the OSCE and its institutions thus get the right of initiative, however, the countries themselves remain firmly in control: their consent will be needed for any OSCE action.

As the ARF, the OSCE is a young and relatively weak security organisation. Both certainly could benefit from their respective experiences (which, incidentally, suggests that there should be an institutional link, perhaps in the form of observer status for Secretariat representatives). What the OSCE may have to offer the ARF are thus less – as in the case of the EU – the long-term effects of institution-building than lessons from immediate efforts at conflict prevention. The need to secure consensus has been called both the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of the OSCE (Chigas, 1996:27). Much of the considerable institutional innovation and creativity which the OSCE has developed have been rooted in a desire to get around the constraints of the need for consensus. In this effort, the OSCE has developed a whole range of mechanisms and practices (and the experience to go with them, sometimes good, sometimes bad) which could be of potential interest to ARF. Among those are the Permanent Council as an ongoing framework for the discussion of issues of the day, and the role of the Chairman-in-Office of OSCE and of the High Commissioner for National Minorities, both of whom have been involved in informal, personal and discrete missions of mediation and negotiation as »insider third parties« (Chigas, 1996).

The ARF has begun to recognise this connection between domestic and regional instability, and has shown considerable interest in evaluating European experiences in confidence-building and preventive diplomacy. While the initial focus of ARF was on confidence-building, the Forum in 1997 decided formally to move towards a new stage, which is to explore possibilities for preventive diplomacy. In this context, a lot of preparatory work has already been done both in the context of ARF Intersessional Groups and specialised workshops, as well as in so-called »track two« conferences, notably those organised by the Council for Security Co-operation in the Asia-Pacific, the most important track-two security organisation in the region. In terms of substantive proposals, ARF has focused on efforts to promote transparency in security affairs (e.g., through the publication of official »White Papers« on defence policies), and generally to build trust through dialogue (Leifer, 1996). It is clear, however, that results in the military security realm so far have not been very impressive, and almost irrelevant in the context of the major areas of tension.

Intellectually, discussions in the Asia-Pacific about possibilities for confidence-building and preventive diplomacy have concentrated on the development of a regional early warning mechanism (such as a Regional Risk Reduction Center), on the potential for ARF Special Representatives or missions, and an enhanced role of the ARF Chair in mediation. More generally, the issue of norm building to foster co-operative behaviour and peaceful resolution of conflicts has been at the center of the political debate (Tay, 1997; CSCAP-Singapore, 1999). Such efforts have been made most persistently in South East Asia – indeed, ASEAN itself can be seen as a very successful example of preventive diplomacy for relations between member states (Busse 1998, 1999). ASEAN has also tried to shape domestic political developments in its new members Myanmar (through its policy of »constructive engagement« of the Myanmar military regime) and Cambodia (both during the 1980s and, more recently, in early 1997 after the coup by Hun Sen, ASEAN has tried to steer Cambodia towards political reconciliation).

The most important effort at preventive diplomacy relating to a key security concern for South East Asia, which also involves one of the Great Powers of Pacific Asia, China, has been undertaken in the track-two workshops about the South China Sea chaired by Indonesia. While those efforts have led to a series of intensive technical discussions, attempts to develop binding norms (such as a common ASEAN declaration on the South China Sea, which committed signatory states to abstain from any unilateral military steps to promote their claims) were, as Chinese encroachment on the Mischief Reef in 1995 and 1998 showed, unsuccessful. While China diplomatically paid some lip service to the suggested common norms of peaceful settlement and self-restraint (albeit under considerable diplomatic pressure from ASEAN and ARF), its actual behaviour in the South China Sea suggested that Beijing was unwilling to abide by those norms.

China has also refused to let third parties or regional security institutions get involved in its crucial bilateral relationship with Taiwan. The United States, however, clearly already is involved heavily in this relationship, and finds itself in the position of a de-facto mediator and moderator. For its own reasons, Washington has also not been interested in multilateralising the Taiwan issue. China has also been reluctant to see the involvement of regional security institutions in its bilateral relationships with Washington and Japan. On issues surrounding the division of the Korean peninsula, China has abstained from the one important multilateral institution which has potential for managing conflict between the two Koreas, the Korean Energy Development Organisation, but it has allowed itself to become involved on the four-party-talks between the two Koreas, America and China, and has accepted discussions of the Korea problem in the context of ARF.

Overall, the potential for ARF to contribute to regional security and stability has been stymied so far by a lack of political will to compromise sovereignty and foreclose perceived options of independent action. The People's Republic of China has been the most reluctant power from this point of view, while Washington, after considerable skepticism in the past, has in recent years taken a more constructive attitude towards ARF. But the United States, too, shows little inclination to have its own policy options constrained through a multilateral security organisation. The most enthusiastic supporter of ARF among the powers in Pacific Asia has been Japan – but Japan's margin of manoeuvre has been confined by the burden of its past, by its close security relationship with the United States, and most recently by its loss of stature and influence in Pacific Asia as a result of its economic malaise.

Clearly, the ARF, ASEAN and any eventual sub-regional security arrangements in North East Asia still have a long way to go before they can make significant independent contributions to regional security and stability. Yet we argue that this should not discourage the countries of the Asia-Pacific from trying. Analysing European experiences can help in this context. Yet, in evaluating the experiences of the OSCE in preventive diplomacy, confidence-building and conflict resolution, the ARF should learn from failures as much as from successes, and it will have to be aware of the need for creative adaptation of European mechanisms and institutions to a different setting. The real issue for ARF is not so much the applicability or otherwise of European experiences – it is whether Pacific Asia would be willing to accept the link between domestic instability and international security, and to rethink its insistence on non-interference. As the OSCE experience suggests, a relaxation of this principle can be fully compatible with the desire of states to retain control over outside intervention in their internal affairs. So far, the ARF has not played a significant role in any of the key conflicts in the region – be it tensions on the Korean peninsula, across the Taiwan Straits, in the South China Sea or even the East Timor issue, where the United Nations and Portugal have served as intermediaries between the Indonesian government and the autonomy/secession movement. It will fail the region if it continues to follow those issues from the sidelines. ◀

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