

# Multilateralism and Regional Security: Can the ASEAN Regional Forum Really Make a Difference?

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# Asia Pacific

## I S S U E S

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*The AsiaPacific Issues series contributes to the Center's role as a neutral forum for discussion of issues of regional concern. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Center.*

**S U M M A R Y** Continuing political uncertainty in the Asia Pacific region following the end of the Cold War led to the formation, in 1993, of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The first security institution created just for the region, the Forum's original aim was to facilitate constructive dialogue among its members. But it soon elevated its goals and now, despite formidable obstacles, the Forum aspires to resolve regional conflicts. Chief among the obstacles it faces are addressing the divergent expectations of its members, reconciling the perceived tensions between multilateral and bilateral relationships, assuring that the interests of weak as well as strong states are represented, balancing the agendas of its great power members, and becoming a relevant player in Northeast Asian regional politics—all while operating in the “ASEAN way” of consensus politics. Most recently, the Forum's failure to respond to regional crises has dulled enthusiasm for the ARF, though many of its critics and supporters alike hope that more substantial and effective actions are in its future.

*The continuing search for a suitable security architecture is indicative of the region's great complexity*

The end of the Cold War brought political uncertainties to the Asia Pacific that today continue to trouble analysts and policymakers alike. Concerns include tensions in the Taiwan Straits, uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula, confrontations in the South China Sea, and hostility in South Asia, as well as ongoing territorial and maritime disputes, armed insurgencies, and ethnic strife. The already volatile situation is complicated by historical animosities, mutual distrust, economic inequality, pressures of modernization, multiethnic tensions, and a shortage of strong democratic institutions. In the short-term, territorial problems may prove to be the most delicate, but the rise of new power centers with clashing interests will likely become the greater concern of the future. There are still no effectual alternative structures through which to deal with Asia Pacific problems, and the continuing search for a suitable and sustainable security architecture is indicative of the region's great complexity.

In 1993, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was founded as the first intraregional security institution encompassing the Asia Pacific region. Initially envisioned as a forum for constructive dialogue between nations, the ARF has since elevated its stated goals—the organization now aspires to be an active force in the resolution of regional conflicts. However, if the ARF is to fill this expanded role, it will have to address a number of issues and practical dilemmas in the region's security landscape.

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#### **The Emergence of the ARF**

It was a decade ago that Australia and Canada first advocated a multilateral institutional structure in the Asia Pacific along the lines of those in Europe.<sup>1</sup> At that time most countries—including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the United States and China—were skeptical about multilateralism's viability in the Asian context. The closure of America's largest overseas bases in the Philippines in 1992 raised new concerns about the future of U.S. involvement in the region. Regional powers such as China, India, and Japan, which had remained on the margins of the bipolar Cold War security order, were becoming stronger and more assertive. As

superpower military disengagement grew more palpable, the strategic debate was dominated by fears of a possible power vacuum and resulting competition and clashes among the regional powers. These concerns were compounded by the reemergence of a number of long-dormant territorial disputes.

Eventually, the very complexity and seriousness of these issues led to a growing recognition of the need for an intraregional institution to deal with security matters, or at least a regional forum where views could be exchanged and differences discussed, reducing the chances of open conflict. Although the Asia Pacific had no previous experience with such region-wide institutions, and despite apprehensions and doubts, support for the basic concept increased. Proponents of multilateral institutions argued that Asia Pacific nations shared certain common, neutral interests, particularly the pursuit of economic development, which would be major incentives for cooperation. The rationale was that, as economic interdependence grew, webs of overlapping institutions would gradually emerge that would motivate nations to maintain peace and stability, would generate common security concerns, and help build confidence. A regional security institution, they reasoned, would advance this processes by promoting greater transparency and more predictable patterns of relationships, thus deterring nations from resorting to force.

Opponents of this approach contended that there was no evidence to suggest that regional institutions could either stop conflicts from breaking out or resolve them. They argued that such institutions are afflicted from the start by the question of who gains greater benefit from them, and ultimately depend upon the support of the great powers, which generally act toward their own interests rather than the common good. Finally, they pointed out that the deterrence and balance of power approach had a relatively good track record of maintaining peace and stability. In this view, the key determinants of regional security would be the balance of power and nature of the relations between the great powers, rather than any regional institutions that might exist.

When a regional security institution finally materialized in 1993 in the form of the ARF, there was

no common understanding among participants as to what its actual role would be, except that it could create a congenial atmosphere through regular multilateral interactions. Expectations clearly varied from country to country. China's support was probably based on the assumption that multilateralism would undercut the U.S.-led alliance system and enhance its own importance, whereas the United States saw multilateralism as a complement to its time-tested strategy of forward deployment and bilateral security arrangements. Japan perceived an opportunity to increase its political profile in the region without jeopardizing its links with the United States, while South Korea's interest focused on enticing North Korea to the negotiating table. As for the other regional powers, Russia had ceased to be a major factor in Asia Pacific security, and India was neither an initial member nor involved in the deliberations. ASEAN, for its part, sponsored the ARF to ensure that its own position in the region would not be diminished by the establishment of a security institution, and because the ARF offered opportunities to advance the interests of the smaller powers.

Thus, from the start, the ARF had to take into account diverse interests and varied expectations while simultaneously attempting to produce discernible, positive results. This backdrop of the circumstances in which the ARF came into existence should be kept clearly in mind when assessing its progress, limitations, and prospects for the future.

At its first meeting, the ARF's objectives were stated as being "to foster the habit of constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern"<sup>ii</sup> leading to predictable patterns of relations in the region. By the second ARF meeting in Brunei in 1995, a more ambitious Concept Paper set out a three-staged approach to enhancing regional security: Confidence-Building Measures, Preventive Diplomacy, and, finally, Conflict Resolution mechanisms. (At China's insistence, the last stage was renamed "Approaches to Conflict Resolution.") Thus, within two years of its inception, the declared goals of the ARF had evolved from being merely a consultative forum to an institution facilitating conflict resolution (although no timetable

was laid down for this evolution). The ARF must overcome a number of complexities and practical dilemmas if it is to progress toward these more ambitious objectives.

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### **Bilateral-Multilateral Tensions**

Substantial American military engagement, premised on balance of power and deterrence, has been the linchpin of Asia Pacific security since the end of the Second World War. The backbone of the successful U.S. dominance is its forward deployed military and a network of bilateral alliances. This policy does not seem likely to undergo significant change.

Since the Clinton administration first gave a green light to the creation of new multilateral institutions, it has made clear again and again that multilateralism would *supplement* basic U.S. policy and not *supplant* it.<sup>iii</sup> The conditional U.S. support for multilateralism was a response to changed political conditions. In the absence of the global threat posed by the former Soviet Union, the U.S. government faced domestic pressures to delegate more of the security burden to its allies and to reduce the chance of American military involvement where American interests were not critically at stake (such as the territorial disputes in the South China Sea). But it is important to recognize that this did not constitute a fundamental shift in strategy.

U.S. commitment to its bilateral relationships could present problems for the development of multilateral security arrangements in the region, because alliance systems are not necessarily compatible with multilateral approaches. In the post-Cold War period, U.S. officials have argued that alliances can be interest-based rather than threat-based, and thus can continue to have utility in promoting general stability rather than deterring specific opponents. In this view, alliances and multilateral institutions can be mutually supportive. However, to some degree this is an argument of convenience, justifying the continuation of arrangements whose original reason for existence has disappeared. The more traditional view of alliances is that the "target of an alliance's attention is an outside state or coalition of states, which the alliance aims to deter, coerce, or defeat in war."<sup>iv</sup>

***Multilateralism  
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not supplant it***

*What China expects from multilateralism may be quite different from what the region expects from Chinese participation in multilateralism*

Thus a traditional alliance is externally oriented, toward a threat, while an institution such as the ARF is internally oriented, striving to forge security cooperation among its members. Therefore, there is at least a theoretical conflict between the two approaches, and it has yet to be proven that they can successfully coexist.

One means by which this contradiction could be reconciled would be if the American security commitment to the Asia Pacific were to progressively diminish. However, evidence suggests that American interests are growing more rapidly in Asia than in any other region, and that the U.S.-led alliance system is being strengthened. Moreover, the U.S. is seen as a major stabilizing factor in the region's security due to its dominant position and its general reputation as a benign hegemon. For these reasons, the United States and some others in the region would likely resist any evolution in regional multilateral institutions that appeared to threaten the alliance system. Thus, the more successful the ARF is in pursuing its more ambitious goals, the more tension it may generate between multilateralism and the alliance system. This could pose a major obstacle to the Forum's success.

**The China Factor**

From any perspective, the ARF's fate is critically dependent on the attitude and behavior of China, a rising power whose interests are not clearly defined and whose longer-term ambitions remain vague. What China expects from multilateralism may be quite different from what the rest of the region expects from Chinese participation in multilateralism. One Chinese scholar has expressed the view that the "Cold War mentality" and military alliances are the biggest obstacles to building a genuine cooperative security framework in a multipolar world.<sup>v</sup> At the 1999 ARF meeting China's Foreign Minister explicitly stated that: "The tendencies of strengthening military alliances and stressing intervention that go against the historical trend are growing..."<sup>vi</sup> While emphasizing the significance of a cooperative framework to the peaceful resolution of disputes, he pointed to the destabilizing nature of the U.S.-led alliance system: "To strengthen military alliances and engage in armament

expansion will only aggravate distrust among nations, bring about new instabilities, and even generate confrontation."<sup>vii</sup> China's support for the ARF presumably is based at least in part on the calculation that the U.S.-led alliance system is primarily aimed at China, and that the best way to reduce the significance of American bilateral arrangements is to promote multilateralism as an alternative.

The ARF is also useful to China as a conduit for improving China's relations with the states of Southeast Asia. From a Chinese perspective, ASEAN's leadership is also a stabilizing force in the China-Japan-U.S. triangular relationship. By the same token, most observers assume that if China does not support the Forum, it stands to lose a great deal. In addition to possible erosion in its relations with neighbors, especially in ASEAN, a major setback in Asia Pacific regional development would hurt China's economic interests. This in turn could lead to domestic challenges to the government's market-oriented economic program.

China's attitude toward the ARF has come a long way, from total reluctance to cautious support. This evolution has been especially noticeable since the March 1996 Taiwan incident. Apprehensions persist, however, concerning China's commitment to multilateralism. China's participation has been conditioned on the assurance that Taiwan will not become a member of the ARF and that Taiwan will be treated as an internal Chinese matter. Likewise, regarding disputes in the South China Sea, Beijing has maintained since the first ARF meeting in 1994 that these should not be part of the Forum's agenda. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea is bound to remain a sore point with other ARF members. China's growing military capability—especially its navy and ballistic missiles—coupled with its intermittent saber-rattling and threats to use force if necessary to establish its sovereignty over disputed territories, have disquieted many in the region.

From the beginning it has been clear that China "did not want the ARF to evolve into a conflict resolution mechanism."<sup>viii</sup> China has expressed strong reservations about the Forum moving on to the next stage—preventive diplomacy—on the stated grounds

that the Confidence-Building Measures process is still incomplete. At the most fundamental level, if the ARF aim is to create certain basic rules of the game, and if China perceives that its freedom of action to defend its interests is constrained by multilateralism, this could lead to serious problems. China could refuse to conform to the new norms, or it could even stall the progress of multilateralism altogether. China's support is almost a prerequisite to the advancement of the ARF.

The ASEAN approach to this has been to pursue an "enmeshing" strategy, constructively engaging China in various multilateral mechanisms. Examples are the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences (ASEAN-PMCs), the ASEAN+3 meetings (annual informal summits of ASEAN, China, Japan, and South Korea), ASEAN-China dialogues, APEC, and the ARF. Simultaneously, most ASEAN nations are beefing up their defense forces and are strengthening their existing security arrangements or have entered into new arrangements: the Philippines and Singapore with the United States, Indonesia with Australia (before the East Timor crisis), and Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam with India. ASEAN is playing a crucial and delicate role here, attempting to facilitate dialogue and prevent misunderstandings while preserving and enhancing a tacit balance of power to reinforce its overall strategy.

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### **Great Power Relations**

Asia Pacific security and the future of multilateralism continue to depend fundamentally on relations among the major powers—United States, China, Japan, Russia, and India—and the dynamics of power politics among these states. The bilateral relationship between China and the United States is probably the most critical. Since the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, and especially after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, Sino-U.S. relations have been rough, and a series of recent events have made them quite volatile. The differences are not confined to the Taiwan issue. The United States has a vested interest in the promotion of democracy and human rights, while China considers this to be interference in China's internal affairs. From the other side, China's rhetoric—

aversion to "hegemonic and splittist forces" and their "neo-interventionist" policies—which is essentially aimed at Washington, can whip up nationalist sentiments and could spin out of control.<sup>ix</sup>

China is acutely aware that in its current engagement with the United States it is very much the "junior partner" and that the dialogue is between two unequal powers. The United States is equally conscious of China's ability to undermine American interests, for instance in containing the spread of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and ensuring stability in the Asia Pacific. Beijing obviously considers a number of recent American actions as primarily aimed at the containment of China. These include the development of Theater Missile Defense, the enhanced security role of Japan under the Revised Defense Guidelines, the Visiting Forces Agreement between the United States and the Philippines, enhanced U.S. security relations with Australia, U.S. plans to merge four bilateral exercises in the Asia Pacific into one (Team Challenge) in 2001, and the U.S. initiation of a dialogue with India concerning Asian security. The United States asserts that these are reasonable steps taken to protect its interests as well as those of its allies, but Beijing is clearly unconvinced.

Problems involving the other major regional powers can also affect the ARF. A resurgent India, with nuclear weapons and a formidable conventional military prowess, has emerged as very important in the Asia Pacific balance. India's strategic interests in the region are growing, and suspicions linger that China might undermine those interests. It is also widely recognized that Japan is striving to become a "normal" state and is building its capability to protect its growing economic and strategic interests in the region. However, any efforts by Tokyo to strengthen its defense capability inevitably ring alarm bells in the rest of the region. Thus, the ARF is in constant danger of becoming hostage to major power rivalries and actions on various fronts.

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### **Dangers in Northeast Asia**

A quick look at the Asia Pacific reveals that the greatest potential dangers are in Northeast Asia, especial-

*The Forum is in constant danger of becoming hostage to major party rivalries*

ly those surrounding the Taiwan issue and the Korean Peninsula. However, the ARF framework appears unsuitable for addressing these problems. Since Taiwan is not a member, the Forum's ability to deal with the Taiwan issue is very limited. While the recent North-South Korean summit and Pyongyang's desire to join the ARF have created propitious conditions for the reduction of tensions there, the Forum played no role in this.

Northeast Asia is where the interests of major powers are likely to clash most sharply. Thus, creation of a separate forum or dialogue for this region may be more appropriate than relying on the ARF. And yet a separate dialogue in Northeast Asia would surely erode the ARF's importance. Because there are so many linkages between Northeast and Southeast Asian security issues, the ARF will have to develop suitable inter-institutional mechanisms if it hopes to deal with them. It is another major challenge.

*Is the  
'ASEAN way'  
of consensus  
politics still  
effective?*

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#### **Can ASEAN Run the ARF?**

ASEAN's decision to be the leading force in organizing and running the ARF was generally welcomed. ASEAN had ample experience in multilateralism, not only among its member states but also with outside powers through its Dialogue Partnership meetings. Moreover, only an ASEAN-led initiative could have ensured China's active participation. ASEAN's leadership in the ARF and its consensus-oriented approach to conducting business were politically convenient.

However, ASEAN's leading role is not without problems. The ASEAN approach is not necessarily the most suitable one for dealing with some complex issues. Itself a product of the Cold War, ASEAN until recently confined its membership to a limited geographic area within Southeast Asia, and its member states generally have shared common interests and concerns. The only major diplomatic initiative ASEAN has undertaken to date is with regard to Cambodia, and even there ASEAN found itself insufficiently equipped—in order to achieve a settlement, it had to obtain assistance from the major powers and the UN.

Further, threat perceptions vary among ASEAN members, and defense policies are not coordinated.

Fundamental differences have always existed among the member states over how to deal with the great powers, especially with China's growing military power; approaches ranged from Singapore's pragmatic balance of power policy to Vietnam's commitment to containment. Serious differences have appeared in recent years even among the original five members about the proper operation of the so-called "ASEAN way."

Even more fundamental questions have been raised about ASEAN's cohesion following its expansion to include all ten Southeast Asian states. These are mostly weak states, many of which face enormous domestic problems and continue to be vulnerable to external pressures, and ASEAN must overcome a number of challenges before it can emerge as a cohesive power center. The earlier advantage of having a small core group steering ASEAN politically is being lost. Periodic outbursts of nationalistic feelings, continued mutual suspicions, and numerous unresolved maritime boundary and territorial problems within ASEAN have been exacerbated by events such as the financial crisis. Indonesia, the linchpin of ASEAN and its success, is struggling against possible political and social collapse.

Not surprisingly then, questions are being raised about ASEAN's ability to maintain itself as a united entity, much less to lead the ARF. Consolidation of ASEAN can be considered another requirement for the ARF to succeed. This will probably necessitate a serious reexamination of the ASEAN way and its applicability to the conduct of ARF business.

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#### **Confidence-Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy**

The Chairman's Statement at the first ARF meeting declared that the principal objective of the Forum was to "foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern and to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region." As previously indicated, the statement at the second meeting set out ARF objectives more explicitly and added the concept of conflict resolution. However, the ARF's

record of practical achievements in these areas is quite patchy. The much-talked-about transparency in defense matters has yet to emerge. Many members do not publish Defense White Papers and those who do reveal little that is unknown. The official defense-spending figures presented by certain members are simply not trusted by others.<sup>x</sup>

The earlier plan to create a regional “Arms Register” for conventional arms transfer had to be watered down to encourage members to actively participate in the UN Arms Register. There is no agreement on advanced notification of joint exercises conducted by member states outside of their home territory. Contacts among senior defense officials of the member states have been sketchy and irregular. Accepting that there are practical limitations to military Confidence-Building Measures, the ARF could at least have undertaken constructive initiatives in less sensitive areas of confidence building and cooperation. But it has not done so. ARF has no concerted plan either to curb drug trafficking or to curtail the rapid spread of light weapons to the region’s various criminal and rebel groups. Similarly, no coordinated activity has been initiated around the issue of piracy, which is a major menace in the region. Only outside the ARF are some ARF members attempting to harmonize patrolling activities, and they do so in the face of Chinese reluctance.

One means for the ARF to enhance its credibility would be to seize whatever opportunities present themselves for cooperative action, much as ASEAN enhanced its standing by taking the initiative on Cambodia. However, in the one major regional security crisis since the formation of the ARF, the 1999 East Timor crisis, the ARF played no role. The ASEAN members looked on the East Timor situation as the internal problem of a fellow member, and ASEAN’s longstanding operating principles proscribed interference. Yet this situation did offer opportunities for the ARF to take constructive initiatives, at a minimum through convening informal meetings to facilitate dialogue between Indonesia and the ARF members supporting the UN intervention. Had the ARF been able to play some role relating to the peacekeeping operations in East Timor, this could have established

a precedent and foundation for further such activities in the future. However, the opportunity was missed, to the disappointment of many ARF supporters.

Besides the definitional problems involved in both preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution, practical efforts in these areas require that certain basic instruments be in place. Examples are early-warning procedures, good offices or fact-finding arrangements, and possibly even procedures for preventive deployments in the early stages of potential emergencies. But to make any such measures possible, an appropriately institutionalized normative structure is essential. One means of working toward both objectives is the establishment of a peacekeeping training center. This would serve the dual function of building trust and interactive experience among the trainees, and would also provide a pool of available personnel familiar with regional conditions for potential deployment in future crises. The ARF has so far been unable to make any moves in this direction.

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### Conclusion

Confronted with post-Cold War strategic uncertainty, it was anticipated that a less legalistic and more flexible multilateral security venture might be best suited to building a new era of cooperation in the Asia Pacific region. Admittedly, institution building is neither a rapid nor a straightforward phenomenon, and it is particularly a challenging task in the Asia Pacific given the widely differing characteristics and interests, and even potentially incompatible objectives, of its constituent states. Nonetheless, the failure to respond to crisis situations such as the recent violence in East Timor or the earlier Asian economic crisis, inevitably dampens confidence and enthusiasm in institutions such as the ARF or APEC. These developments have sharpened the debate about the role of regional multilateral institutions and their future. Alternative ideas such as the creation of a concert of great powers in Asia or building a classic robust balance of power reflect disenchantment with the performance of regional institutions, and are beginning to attract more serious discussion.

Soon after the ARF was established, it emerged that the Forum needed to move beyond the earlier

*The ARF missed its chance to play even a small role in the East Timor crisis, disappointing many of its supporters*

*To be a credible forum, the ARF will have to show tangible progress*

role of a dialogue facilitator. We have seen that even as the ARF embarks on a more ambitious agenda, there are a number of challenges it will have to address in order to realize its ambitions. The great powers, which continue to be the key players in shaping regional security in the Asia Pacific, have divergent expectations from the ARF. China has already questioned the viability of multilateralism in an environment dominated by the U.S.-led alliance system, but the United States is most unlikely to radically change its basic policy. While it was convenient to employ the "ASEAN way" in the beginning, there are increasing questions about its adequacy as an instrument for bringing about a new regional security architecture in the vast Asia Pacific.

It also appears that the ARF framework is unsuitable for addressing security issues in Northeast Asia, and hence these will need to be dealt with outside the ARF. It may help the cause of institutionalism if a separate forum for Northeast Asia is created, with institutional linkages to the ARF. The Forum's failure to take timely action when warranted has contributed to growing skepticism about its future.

The ARF cannot be realistically expected to play a pivotal role in shaping a new regional order if it remains merely a consultative forum. To be a credible forum, it will need to show tangible progress and begin addressing the challenges it faces. Only then will it be able to carry the process forward and rebuild faith in multilateral institutions.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> For instance, Australia proposed a Conference on Security Cooperation in Asia (CSCA) akin to CSCE in Europe.

<sup>ii</sup> Chairman's Statement at the end of the First ARF Meeting, Bangkok, 25 July 1994.

<sup>iii</sup> See U.S. strategy documents, such as *The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia and Pacific Region, 1998*, and official testimonies to the Congress.

<sup>iv</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "A Realist Reply," *International Security*, Summer 1995, p. 83.

<sup>v</sup> Zhu Liqun, "Cooperative Security and China's Stand," *Foreign Affairs Journal* (Beijing), December 1999, pp. 33–43.

<sup>vi</sup> See The Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan's address to the ARF on 26 July 1999.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Stephen Wrage, "Asia, Help Thyself," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 4 May 1995.

<sup>ix</sup> For instance, the violent demonstrations at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing after an accidental American bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999.

<sup>x</sup> To what extent the proposed voluntary Security Outline documents to be published from this year by the member states will be transparent is yet to be seen.

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