

The ASEAN Regional Forum: Multilateralizing Security in the Asia-Pacific

MARIA CONSUELO CASIMIRO-ORTUOSTE

With the Cold War over, the Asia-Pacific region is in a state of flux. The emerging regional security environment exudes both uncertainty and optimism, even as traditional conceptions and principles of security have suddenly become inadequate, if not obsolete, begging for a thorough reexamination and redefinition. It is clear, however, that in the post-Cold War world, security can no longer be achieved merely by the bilateral, much less unilateral, actions of states but also through coalition-building and multilateral endeavors. The ASEAN Regional Forum, with its emerging role as a facilitator of dialogue and a key instrument for the development of confidence-building measures for the region, appears headed towards creating a breakthrough in multilateralizing regional security. The challenge is for ARF participants to consolidate their gains and build on the ARF process. To meet the challenge, member-states need to agree on a collective vision for the ARF; the pacing of its activities; the degree of its institutionalization; the extent of its membership; and the nature of its linkages with subregional and global processes.

The Situation in the Asia-Pacific

The end of the Cold War has left the Asia-Pacific bereft of an organizing principle for security. Not only have traditional alliances and groupings centered around a superpower suddenly become inadequate, but several traditional concepts of security have also become obsolete. Out of these circumstances was born the critical need to re-examine and re-define security in terms of its scope and sources, and identify the actors in a new regional security environment.

Consequently, there is a growing appreciation that security encompasses not only defense-military equations, but also the interrelation of economic, social, ecological and political factors. Security threats can arise from the overexploitation of fishery resources as well as from resurgent ethnic disputes.

It is also becoming clearer that security is not limited to the unilateral or bilateral actions of states and that coalition building and multilateralism have gained acceptance and prominence. While the predominance of the state still persists, civil society actors are

pursuing, through track-two processes, a more active role in the realm of international security. These alternative processes have not only counteracted the influence of political elites but also set the agenda in various international fora, and usually led the way for initiatives later undertaken by governments. In the area of security alone, the proliferation of channels for dialogue and contact has been remarkable:

In 1989 there were only three or four channels for trans-Pacific discussion of political and security matters in a multilateral setting. By 1994...there [were] some 50 ongoing dialogue channels in the Asia-Pacific region and approximately 40 projects and programs focusing on South Asia. A recent calendar in Australia indicated more than 70 multilateral security dialogue meetings scheduled for or already held in 1994.³

These channels, many of which are governmental, tend to dismiss another traditional concept of security, i.e., that defense and security cooperation is best undertaken by like-minded states. Now, there is an increasing awareness that there are issues, such as international drug-trafficking and transboundary pollution, which cut across borders and economic-political systems and necessitate a common response. As a consequence, engagement (even if initially at low levels) is important for developing solutions to common security problems, and for mitigating misunderstandings which potentially may lead to open conflict. Isolation has proven to be neither effective nor feasible in a more interconnected world.

However, the validity of certain assumptions remain. There is still a need to involve major powers in efforts to maintain regional peace and stability, but smaller states now feel that such a role must be determined by the rest of the region. Subregional groups have more freedom to determine their own roles in a new regional security environment, but they also need to associate themselves with other processes in order to become more relevant. Unresolved disputes (which were partially controlled by superpower contrivance) still pose a great risk to Asia-Pacific states.

Thus, the region confronts a fluid situation of both uncertainty and optimism. With the Cold War over, the region can examine other issues affecting peace and stability and undertake new cooperative endeavors in

security. However, it must also be noted that there is uncertainty on how to organize a new regional framework for engagement, and how to prevent a scramble to fill a so-called power vacuum in the Asia-Pacific.

Dabbling in Discourse: Evolving the ASEAN Regional Forum

The synergy of these processes have resulted in the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1993. This evolution highlighted the role of track-two initiatives and the strengths of the ASEAN.

The ARF actually began with proposals in track-two fora² for states to establish an informal dialogue process or mechanism involving all Asia-Pacific states with ASEAN as its foundation. At first, only individual states like Japan and the Philippines advocated such a venture. Later, the ASEAN and its dialogue and consultative partners endorsed the establishment of a dialogue process.³

The first ARF meeting was held in 1994 as a loose three-hour free-wheeling discussion about the security concerns of Asia-Pacific states — the North Korea-South Korea divide, the South China Sea conflict and transnational pollution, among others. That year's Chairman's Statement noted that the participants agreed that the ARF would be a "high-level consultative forum" that can "make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region."⁴ They also endorsed the Treaty for Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TACSEA), a basic document of the ASEAN, "as a code of conduct governing relations between states and a unique diplomatic instrument for regional confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and political and security cooperation."⁵

A flurry of activities, pioneered by ASEAN, followed in preparation for the second ARF meet. Task force meetings, senior officials meetings and three track-two seminars⁶ were held exploring several possibilities for confidence-building measures (CBMs) and preventive diplomacy, cooperative security ventures, and even the direction of the ARF. The result was a program of action (drawn up mainly by ASEAN) that envisions the evolutionary method and approach of the ARF from confidence-building and preventive diplomacy to the elaboration of approaches to conflict. The program also identified activities to be implemented or explored by the ARF member-governments and by non-

governmental organizations (NGOs). The 1995 Chairman's Statement even noted that security should be treated comprehensively involving military, political, economic, social and other issues. Furthermore, it recognized the importance of track-two activities, and formed three Inter-Sessional Support Groups at the inter-governmental level to deal with confidence-building, peacekeeping operations and search and rescue coordination and cooperation.⁷

Thus, the ARF provided "the critical chance for the region to drop diplomatic hypocrisy, step up communication and cooperation, both formal and informal, so that all parties are engaged in constructive and frank dialogue and exchanges."⁸ The strong support given by the participants to the ARF program of action is indicative of their intention to push the process forward from mere talk to action.

All these are positive steps with the ARF providing the opportunity for both big and small countries to exchange views and understand each other's intentions and expectations.⁹ But the question arises about the viability of the ARF to sustain dialogue and eventually to make significant contributions to preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution. Whether or not the ARF makes the transition from a "talking shop" to a mechanism for confidence-building, preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution will, to a large extent, depend on the ability of the participants to optimize the strengths of the ARF in order to overcome the inherent difficulties it faces. The main issues which will determine the success (or failure) of the ARF are: (1) agreement on visions and principles; (2) pacing of the activities; (3) degree of institutionalization; (4) membership; and (5) its links to other sub-regional and global security processes.

Agreeing on the Foundations of Security

While the 1995 ARF Chairman's Statement already mentioned that the participants recognize the comprehensive scope of security, this should only be the beginning. Attaining preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution would require a collective vision for the Asia-Pacific, the member-countries' respective roles in the regional security environment and the prioritization of threats whether they be issues or actors.

Although the TACSEA has been endorsed as some sort of a code of conduct for the region, it is still debatable if it can serve as the backbone of the ARF process. If so, ASEAN states should pave the way and compose protocols or modes of association consistent with the TACSEA. This would eliminate much haggling over new security principles or principles of cooperation and, at the same time, assure ASEAN prominence in the ARF. Without such a common framework, the ARF will be left vulnerable to vacillating political support from the participating states.

Since the ARF participants themselves have various priorities and conceptions of security, it is clear that a common denominator has to be found to serve as the basis for cooperation. Moreover, the adoption of a comprehensive concept of security means that the ARF must delineate what security issues it wants to tackle adequately and those that can be left to other existing institutions (e.g., the United Nations or even the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation or APEC). The ARF would have to address the South China Sea conflict, the problem in the Korean peninsula, the engagement of China and new issues of security. This will not be easy considering the diversity among the Asia-Pacific states in terms of population size, economic wealth, culture and ideology.

How Fast is Slow: Pacing the ARF Process

Pacing the ARF process is crucial in addressing the aforementioned regional security issues. This becomes even more important in the face of the emerging divergence of views between the "Western" and Asian countries.

Western participants — the United States, Australia, Canada, the European Union, New Zealand and even Japan — already have ample experience with multilateralism, dialogues and CBMs. Thus, they are more keen than the other participants in wanting to drive the process faster, with concrete CBMs implemented as soon as possible.

While the ASEAN states have also had relevant experience in dialogues and cooperative activities, they have always taken a slow and consensual approach. China, at the other extreme, is still relatively a newcomer in the multilateral fora. It is not surprising that it would opt to slow down the pace in discussions and CBM implementation to ensure non-interference in its domestic affairs.

While a slow pace is not necessarily negative, certain issues may arise which demand immediate response. Preventive diplomacy requires quick response from the members of a regional grouping. But in implementing CBMs, the participants may adopt an incremental or a "building-block" approach — starting out with the least contentious measures and slowly progressing to those which are more sensitive.¹⁰ Perhaps bilateral arrangements can eventually be widened to include more ARF participants. Furthermore, it should be noted that in implementing CBMs, the ARF faces circumstances different from those which confronted the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) — while the latter had to deal with open hostilities between the Soviet and American camps, the ARF is operating in an essentially uncertain environment where there are no really clear enemies or threats. Thus, CBMs would have to be more sensitive to Asia-Pacific conditions and should not simply be imported wholesale from other regional groupings.

Institutionalizing the ARF

Despite the affirmations contained in the two ARF Chairman's Statements, there is still no consensus on the institutionalization of the ARF. At present, the ARF is still considered a process — ASEAN members, on the one hand, prefer to maintain it as such to take advantage of its flexibility and assure ASEAN control over its evolution; Western states, on the other hand, want something more permanent.

But eventually, with the implementation of CBMs, some sort of permanence or administrative structure such as a secretariat would be needed to: (1) oversee the implementation of CBMs and act as the verification mechanism for certain CBMs; (2) become the repository of information from dialogues, regional arms registers and the like; (3) gather information on incipient conflicts, their possible solutions and possible actions of members to realize preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution; and (4) help turn track-two processes and initiatives into governmental policies and programs.

Inclusiveness in the ARF

Since the ARF brings together former "enemies," it is an ideal forum for facilitating mutual understanding. Several states already recognize this function, giving rise to calls to broaden the membership

of the Forum. India has signified its interest in joining the ARF, and the United Kingdom has expressed its opinion that all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council should be ARF participants. It would be important to include the major players in the Asia-Pacific — the United States, Russia, Japan, China and even India, Taiwan and North Korea. The inclusion of the last three states would have to be accomplished if the ARF is to be a truly Asia-Pacific-wide initiative, and to make important contributions to regional security.

But it is also important that the ARF first consolidate its own processes before admitting any new members. In consolidating its structures, the ARF participants would have to determine the criteria for admission of new members, the possibility of bringing in observers and even the composition of a possible membership committee and the manner of voting or arriving at a consensus.

Linking the ARF to other Subregional and Global Processes

The ARF should complement other regional (and even global) processes. Since the ARF cannot be expected to deal effectively with all the security issues in the Asia-Pacific, subregional groups would enable the concerned parties to deal with the specific nature of their problems. The ARF can provide some sort of organizing framework within which to deal with subregional security issues.

Other complementary arrangements can be the bilateral or trilateral security arrangements and the track-two fora (ASEAN-ISIS, CSCAP) utilizing inter-sessional or informal arrangements like workshops and seminars on security cooperation. Moreover, complementing arrangements can take the form of linking the ASEAN with the South Pacific Forum to form a future Northeast Asia Security Dialogue Forum.

Dealing with the ARF: Implications for the Philippines and ASEAN

The birth of the ARF could impact positively for the Philippines. Endowed with neither substantial military nor financial resources, the Philippines can better assure peace and stability by engaging its neighbors in dialogue. However, the Philippines should learn to adjust

from a bilateral or subregional scale to a wider multilateral one. The Philippine government should also answer some questions. How should the Philippines articulate its interests within the ARF? How can it contribute positively to drive the process forward? How should China be engaged in the process so that it is not unduly inhibited from trying multilateral processes? What issues should the Philippines place in the ARF agenda, and which should be limited only to the ASEAN?

For ASEAN, the immediate impact of the ARF has been positive. The establishment of the ARF, with the ASEAN as foundation, is some sort of vindication for the Association which was largely relegated to the sidelines. It is proof that a slow and consensual approach also has its merits.

However, there are still some caveats. Is the ARF really a culmination of ASEAN diplomacy? Or does it spell the beginning of the end of any meaningful defense-security cooperation within the ASEAN? Would it not dilute any ASEAN effort to maintain stability in Southeast Asia without the big boys? And would ARF help further ASEAN interests, or would they, once again, be sacrificed for the interests of the major players?

The ASEAN is, therefore, in a dilemma. While most of its members have the economic resources to improve their respective defense establishments, and their own style of diplomacy has increased mutual confidence, Southeast Asian security still needs (at least in the medium-term) to be guaranteed by major powers.

The ASEAN members continue to shy away from becoming an overt security organization (which might be perceived as forming a bloc against another power). Security cooperation is only slowly becoming trilateral among its members and they are still trying to discuss sensitive security issues. The establishment of the ARF may lessen the sense of urgency for ASEAN member-states to cooperate among themselves.

Another important issue is the question of ASEAN solidarity. The ASEAN members do not usually share the same prioritization or identification of threats to their security. A powerful ASEAN voice in the ARF may be jeopardized by the members asserting their own security concerns over others. Complicating this possibility is the difficulty of assuring ASEAN unity with the increase in its membership. New members are not yet familiar with the "ASEAN way," and the existing ASEAN members may not

know how to deal with these newcomers yet. Such will surely weaken the position of ASEAN in the ARF.

The ASEAN members also do not have a common concept or vision of what regional strategic environment they want. Do they want a unipolar one with the United States providing a security umbrella? Or a bipolar one, balancing the United States and China? Do they want a multipolar environment with ASEAN playing a key role in maintaining regional peace and security? The members would have to decide what level of commitment and cooperation they are willing to make.

Finally, ASEAN would have to determine its part in the ARF. Does ASEAN want the ARF to tackle Southeast Asian security issues? If so, what role does it want the ARF to have? Does it want non-claimant countries to become involved in the South China Sea dispute? Does it want a collective security regime? Or would it be better for specific subregional issues to be tackled by the ASEAN thus ensuring no undue external intervention and even strengthening the ASEAN?

If ASEAN is to maintain a position of dominance in the ARF, the members would inevitably have to answer these issues.

The ARF Experiment: Prospects for the Region

The ARF is a first step in the right direction. Ensuring regional peace and security through cooperative processes would be more effective than slugging it out in a costly war. For now, what is emerging is its important role as a facilitator of dialogue and a key instrument in the development of CBMs for the region. The initial major role of ASEAN in the ARF means that Asian countries are finally going to take the leap in ensuring regional peace and security. But the challenges which face Asia-Pacific states now revolve around how to consolidate their gains and how to build on the ARF process.

In the short-term, the ARF would mainly be holding exploratory talks on specific CBMs. But the pace would inevitably have to be balanced. It must be fast enough to maintain the interest of the Western countries and remain relevant to Asia-Pacific circumstances. But it must also be slow enough to allow for consensus and incrementalism in this regional security experiment.

To become a key factor in preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution, the ARF participants would have to decide: (1) how far and how fast to drive the process forward; (2) the mechanisms they would need; (3) the members who should be involved; (4) their links with ASEAN, other subregional processes and the United Nations; and (5) what their common vision would be for the Asia-Pacific region.

Ultimately, the success of the ARF will be gauged by one criteria — does it further the participants' national interests? While the ARF is a step in the right direction, whether it stays on the right path will depend, to a large extent, on the ARF members' degree of commitment to a peaceful and secure Asia-Pacific. ●

Notes

- 1 The calendar referred to is the "Regional Security Dialogue: A Calendar of Asia Pacific Events, January 1994-December 1994," prepared jointly by the Regional Security Section, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra; and the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University. Paul Evans, "Existing Regional Security Dialogues in Asia Pacific," prepared for the Second United Nations Disarmament Conference "Transparency in Armament, Regional Dialogue and Disarmament," Hiroshima, Japan, 14-17 May 1994.
- 2 Particularly the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) and the Asia-Pacific Roundtable Conferences since 1990.
- 3 The participants in the ARF are: the seven ASEAN members (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam), the two consultative partners (China and Russia), the seven dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, European Union, Republic of Korea, USA) and two observers (Laos and Papua New Guinea).
- 4 Chairman's Statement of the First Meeting of the ARF, 25 July 1994, Bangkok, Thailand.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 These were: (1) Seminar on the Building of Confidence and Trust in the Asia Pacific, 23-25 November 1994, in Australia; (2) Peacekeeping: Challenges and Opportunities for the ASEAN Regional Forum, 08-09 March 1995, in Brunei Darussalam; and (3) Seminar on Preventive Diplomacy, 08-10 May 1995, in the Republic of Korea.
- 7 Chairman's Statement of the Second ARF, 01 August 1995, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam.
- 8 Al Dizon, "ASEAN Regional Forum: Another Day Dawning," *BusinessWorld*, 01 August 1994, p. 6.
- 9 Regional Desk, "ARF: A Test for ASEAN Solidarity and Stability," *The Nation*, 21 November 1995.
- 10 On this approach, see Desmond Ball, *Building Blocks for Regional Security: An Australian Perspective on Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1991).