

What have been the strengths of the Association of South East Asian (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF)

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The emergence of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 1994 was as a response to the changes in the security environment in the Asia–Pacific following the end of the Cold War as it brought strategic uncertainty to the region. The objectives of the initial formation of the ARF as highlighted by Daljit Singh were based on four important claims:

build trust and confidence among Asia–Pacific states; to engage and integrate China, a rising power, into the regional and international order; to keep the United States engaged as an indispensable component of the Asia–Pacific strategic balance; and to build institutions to enmesh the countries of region noted for paucity of common institutions and abundance of historical rivalries and contemporary, in co-operative endeavours.¹

Since its inception, the ARF has taken the prominent role in the security architecture of the Asia–Pacific to maintain the peace and stability of the region,² that has presently been assessed as having the most potential for serious inter-state conflict. Of the many sub-regions that form the Asia–Pacific, it is the Northeast Asian region that has the most potential for instability.³ The continuing presence of the United States, as well as stable relationships among the United States, Japan and China, and other states of the region will contribute to regional stability.⁴

This paper will attempt to analyse the credibility of the ARF as the Asia–Pacific Security Architecture and thus consider some of its strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the paper will examine the benefit of the ASEAN Regional Forum, particularly in its relations towards China.

Formation and evolution of the ARF

The ASEAN Regional Forum was established by ASEAN to maintain peace and stability in the Asia–Pacific region and to promote regional development and prosperity, by emulating the ASEAN model of cooperative security based on consensus and the identification of shared interests, widely known as the ‘ASEAN Way’. It involved transmitting to the Asia–Pacific, norms and principal of an informal process of dialogue and a mode of conflict avoidance developed by the Association since 1967. From the outset, it should be appreciated that the ARF is not a collective defence organisation nor is it based on collective security.⁵ The ARF was designed with agreed objectives to be achieved by a three stage evolutionary process—the promotion of confidence building measures (CBMs), the development of preventive diplomacy measures (PD) and the elaboration of approaches to conflict.⁶

While the Forum may be seen as ASEAN’s attempt to expand to the wider region its approach to cooperative security, its establishment also involved power-balancing considerations. Ralf Emmers claims ‘the ASEAN states feared in the early 1990s that a reduced United States regional deployment might give rise to regional instability and were concerned about China’s growing influence’.⁷ In this endeavour, the ASEAN countries have served as an honest broker, to ensure fairness in deliberation, help to minimise suspicions in the interest of Asia–Pacific stability. The ARF aim has remained one of helping to develop a more predictable and constructive pattern of relations for the Asia–Pacific. To date the Forum continues to evolve in line with the changes to the strategic setting within the region.

Strengths and weaknesses of the ARF

The ARF is nine years old and it is still alive and well. Indeed many observers felt that the ARF might not survive beyond its initial meeting.⁸ Perhaps it has elicited a significant level of interest as a forum for both regional and extra-regional countries to discuss security related issues of common concern and interest and it has so far been able to expand its membership from the original 18 to 23 countries. North Korea was the last country to join and whilst based on the recent ARF meeting, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Timor–Leste have applied for membership.⁹ They foresee the benefit of the ARF as this would provide them the link to the broader Asia–Pacific region and the three great powers in the context for both economic and strategic reasons.

Despite the diversity of its membership and the vast geographical area it covers, the ARF has been recognised as a driving force and a useful mechanism to promote the habit of dialogue, enhance transparency and to reduce armed conflicts between states in the region. It has also provided an opportunity and framework for discussions between the parties concerned even on sensitive issues. The ARF may claim a very important achievement in being able to bring China into the Forum; a country that remained wary of security multilateralism as this would constrain its regional ambition. The health of the triangular US–China–Japan relationship is critically important for the ARF. Any regression to adversarial relations between these major powers will undermine the ARF, the ARF can make progress only if there is a will on the part of all players to make it work.¹⁰

It is apparent that the ASEAN Regional Forum has successfully implemented its first stage process of confidence building measures with some positive responses and is now moving towards a much more challenging process—preventive diplomacy the second stage of the ARF evolutionary process.¹¹ The importance and the success of the next stage of the implementation process will dictate the future success of the ARF.

Notwithstanding some of its accomplishments, the ARF has also had some signs of weakness that lessened its ability as a credible security cooperation organisation. The ARF has been criticised for not having the capability of developing such mechanisms to resolve conflict. This was quite apparent when the ARF was ineffective in addressing the East Timor crisis in 1990.¹² The influence of the ASEAN Way in the ARF processes has been identified as the cause. From the other side of the coin, the ARF should be assessed for what it is and not what it is not. This is to say that it is already known that the ARF is a cooperative security organisation, not a collective defence agreement like NATO or a security organisation like the United Nations. It should be noted that the ARF is often described as a process, seldom as an organisation or an institution, which implies that it is viewed as an evolving mechanism. It will continue to act as a media for dialogue and discussion. Perhaps it would need a major decision if the ARF is to change its processes of converting words into action and move away from being branded as a forum that is no more than a ‘talk shop’.

There are many future challenges and concerns facing the ARF. If the ARF is unable to function effectively or keep pace with the outside trends, the possibility can not be ruled out that such a vast and loose forum as the ARF could disintegrate, as it is not fully institutionalised, and that the participants could take their own course. If an official Northeast Asian multilateral security forum were to be established, it would have all the great powers as its members. Such development could reduce ASEAN’s role in broader Asia–Pacific issues.

Constructive engagement with China

In the post-Cold War era, China's rising power has been the central issue facing ASEAN members. As mentioned earlier, one of the achievements made by the ARF has been its ability to bring China into a multilateral security framework at a time when a number of differences, even tensions complicate the relationship between Beijing and several capitals in the region, thus making the Forum more comprehensive. The ARF's cautious approach to building a security forum has reassured and tempted China sufficiently to venture into the organisation and, given the rise of Chinese power, this can be regarded as a major gain.

Beijing takes the ARF meetings seriously as is indicated by its willingness to adapt to the ARF's style of functioning and honouring the Forum. The Forum has provided the opportunity for China to interact and discuss security issues with most of the major powers especially the US in pursuance of its national interest. It is a major breakthrough as highlighted by Rosemary Foot, 'It is reasonable to conclude that without the ARF process, Chinese exposure to and debate of ideas associated with cooperative security would have been less complete or not happened at all. At the highest government levels, we have now heard Chinese leaders adopt cooperative security language explicitly and commit the country to the upholding of the norm of the no-use of force to settle disputes in the region'.¹³ To some extent, Beijing's response in producing its Defence White Paper, which was first published in November 1995, indicated the seriousness of the Chinese Government in supporting the confidence building measures as prescribed by the ARF. On the 30 June 2003, it marked another milestone for the ASEAN when China's decided to be a signatory to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

It is noted that the unresolved and competing territorial claims in the South China Sea are a potential source of conflict in the region. The ARF provided a venue to help defuse tensions that had begun in 1995 when China moved on to Mischief Reef. ARF's consideration of the issue led to the formal public articulation by China of its willingness to resolve the dispute on the basis of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), not to use force, to exercise self-restraint, and to put the sovereignty question aside and begin joint development of resources of the area. China appreciated that if the issue was to be badly handled, it could disturb the peace of the region and would raise concern about the freedom of navigation by non-claimant states.¹⁴

Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it is apparent that despite being a young organisation with some shortcomings, the ASEAN Regional Forum has contributed moderately to a more stable regional environment for the Asia-Pacific. With the existing bilateral and subregional security arrangement as its necessary component, the ASEAN Regional Forum has shown itself to have great potential as a credible security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. The ARF was conceived as a process and it is anticipated that it will continue to evolve along with the situation of the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific. Since 9-11, the current agenda of the Forum has evolved in discussing issues pertaining to terrorism and transnational crime.

It is recognised that the ASEAN Regional Forum is the only regional security forum to bring together all major powers from the world. No other forum (apart from UN bodies) brings together the US, Russia, China, Japan, the EU and India to discuss security issues. The management of the US-China relationship as well as China's relationship with its neighbours will remain critical issues in the years ahead. The strategic outlook is that the future of the ASEAN Regional Forum will rest far more in the hands of the ASEAN countries than outside powers.

Endnotes

1. Daljit Singh, 'Evolution of the Security Dialogue Process in Asia Pacific Region' as cited in *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Security*, p. 36.
2. The security architecture in this context may be defined in general terms as those arrangements between states that both define and manage the nature and scope of their strategic interactions. In the academic literature, it is assumed that regional security architecture entails multilateral security cooperation.
3. Northeast Asian region comprises of China, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and North Korea.
4. A statement made by the Chairman during the ASEAN-PMC Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) in May 1993.
5. Maria Consuelo C Ortuoste, 'Reviewing the ASEAN Regional Forum and Its Role in Southeast Asian Security', p. 1.
6. Alan Dupont, 'An overview of Asean Regional Forum'.
7. Ralf Emmers, 'The Influence of the Balance of Power Factor within ASEAN Regional Forum', p. 277.
8. Michael Leifer, 'The ASEAN Regional Forum', p. 31.
9. The Chairman's Statement 10th ASEAN Regional Forum, Phnom Penh 18 Jun 03.
10. Daljit Singh, op. cit., p. 50.
11. The Chairman's Statement 10th ASEAN Regional Forum, Phnom Penh, 18 June 03.
12. Ortuoste, 'Reviewing the ASEAN Regional Forum and Its Role in Southeast Asian Security', op. cit., p. 11.
13. Rosemary Foot, 'The Present and Future of the ARF: China's Role and Attitude' as cited in Khoo How San, *The Future of the ARF*, p. 128.
14. *ibid.*, p. 129.

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