

The ASEAN Regional Forum : A Concept Paper

Introduction

1. The Asia-Pacific region is experiencing an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity. For the first time in a century or more, the guns are virtually silent. There is a growing trend among the states in the region to enhance dialogue on political and security cooperation. The Asia-Pacific is also the most dynamic region of the world in terms of economic growth. The centre of the world's economic gravity is shifting into the region. The main challenge of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is to sustain and enhance this peace and prosperity.

2. This is not an easy challenge. The region has experienced some of the most disastrous wars of the twentieth century. It is also a remarkably diverse region where big and small countries co-exist. They differ significantly in levels of development. There are cultural, ethnic, religious and historical differences to overcome. Habits of cooperation are not deep-seated in some parts of the region.

3. ASEAN has a pivotal role to play in the ARF. It has a demonstrable record of enhancing regional cooperation in the most diverse sub-region of the Asia-Pacific. It has also fostered habits of cooperation and provided the catalyst for encouraging regional cooperation in the wider Asia-Pacific region. The annual ASEAN Ministerial Meetings have contributed significantly to the positive regional environment today. There would be great hope for the Asia-Pacific if the whole region could emulate ASEAN's record of enhancing the peace and prosperity of its participants.

4. Although ASEAN has undertaken the obligation to be the primary driving force of the ARF, a successful ARF requires the active participation and cooperation of all participants. ASEAN must always be sensitive to and take into account the interests and concerns of all ARF participants.

The Challenges

5. To successfully preserve and enhance the peace and prosperity of the region, the ARF must dispassionately analyse the key challenges facing the region. Firstly, it should acknowledge that periods of rapid economic growth are often accompanied by significant shifts in power relations. This can lead to conflict. The ARF will have to carefully manage these transitions to preserve the peace. Secondly, the region is remarkably diverse. The ARF should recognise and accept the different approaches to peace and security and try to forge a consensual approach to security issues.

Thirdly, the region has a residue unresolved territorial and other differences. Any one of these could spark conflagration that could undermine the peace and prosperity of the region. Over time, the ARF will have to gradually defuse these potential problems.

6. It would be unwise for a young and fragile process like the ARF to tackle all these challenges simultaneously. A gradual evolutionary approach is required. This evolution can take place in three stages:

Stage I : Promotion of Confidence-Building Measures

Stage II: Development of Preventive Diplomacy Mechanisms

Stage III: Development of Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms

7. The participants of the first ARF Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok in July 1994 agreed on "the need to develop a more predictable and constructive pattern of relations for the Asia-Pacific region". In its initial phase, the ARF should therefore concentrate on enhancing, the trust and confidence amongst participants and thereby foster a regional environment conducive to maintaining the peace and prosperity of the region.

Stage I: Promotion of Confidence-Building Measures

8. In promoting confidence-building measures, the ARF may adopt two complementary approaches. The first approach derives from ASEAN's experience, which provides a valuable and proven guide for the ARF. ASEAN has succeeded in reducing, tensions among, its member states, promoting region cooperation and creating a regional climate conducive to peace and prosperity without the implementation of explicit confidence-building measures, achieving conditions approximating those envisaged in the Declaration of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). The concepts of ZOPFAN and its essential component, the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (SEANFWZ), are significantly contributing to regional peace and stability. ASEAN's well established practices of consultation and consensus (musyawarah and mufakat) have been significantly enhanced by the regular exchanges of high-level visits among ASEAN countries. This pattern of regular visits has effectively developed into a preventive diplomacy channel. In the Asian context, there is some merit to the ASEAN approach. It emphasises the need to develop trust and confidence among neighbouring states.

9. The principles of good neighbourliness, which are elaborated in the concept of ZOPFAN, are enshrined in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). One simple concrete way of expanding the ASEAN experience is to

encourage the ARF participants to associate themselves with the TAC. It is significant that the first ARF meeting in Bangkok agreed to "endorse the purposes and principles of ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia 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."

10. The second approach is the implementation of concrete confidence-building measures. The first ARF meeting, in Bangkok entrusted the next Chairman of the ARF, Brunei Darussalam, to study all the ideas presented by ARF participants and to also study other relevant internationally recognised norms, principles and practices. After extensive consultations, the ASEAN countries have prepared two lists of confidence-building measures. The first list (Annex A) spells out measures which can be explored and implemented by ARF participants in the immediate future. The second list (Annex B) is an indicative list of other proposals which can be explored over the medium and long-term by ARF participants and also considered in the immediate future by the Track Two process. These lists include possible preventive diplomacy and other measures.

11. Given the delicate nature of many of the subjects being considered by the ARF, there is merit in moving, the ARF process along two tracks. Track One activities will be carried out by governments. Track Two activities will be carried out by strategic institutes and non-government organisations in the region, such as ASEAN-ISIS and CSCAP. To be meaningful and relevant, the Track Two activities may focus, as much as possible, on the current concerns of the ARF. The synergy between the two tracks would contribute greatly to confidence-building measures in the region. Over time, these Track Two activities should result in the creation of a sense of community among participants of those activities.

Moving Beyond Stage 1

12. There remains a residue of unresolved territorial and other disputes that could be sources of tension or conflict. If the ARF is to become, over time, a meaningful vehicle to enhance the peace and prosperity of the region, it will have to demonstrate that it is a relevant instrument to be used in the event that a crisis or problem emerges. The ARF meeting in Bangkok demonstrated this by taking a stand on the Korean issue at the very first meeting. This was a signal that the ARF is ready to address any challenge to the peace and security of the region.

13. Over time, the ARF must develop its own mechanisms to carry preventive diplomacy and conflict-resolution. In doing so, the ARF will unique challenges. There are no established roads or procedures for it to follow. Without a high degree of confidence among ARF participants, it is unlikely that they will agree to the

establishment of mechanisms which are perceived to be intrusive and/or autonomous. This is a political reality the ARF should recognise. However, it would be useful in the initial phase for the Track Two process to consider and investigate a variety of preventive diplomacy and conflict-resolution mechanisms. A good start was made with the three workshops organised by International Studies Centre (Thailand) and Institute of Policy Studies (Singapore) on ASEAN-UN Cooperation for Peace and Preventive Diplomacy, and the Indonesia-sponsored series of workshops on the South China Sea.

Stage II: Development of Preventive Diplomacy

14. Preventive diplomacy would be a natural follow-up to confidence building measures. Some suggestions for preventive diplomacy measures are spelled out in Annexes A and B

Stage III: Conflict Resolution

15. It is not envisaged that the ARF would establish mechanisms conflict resolution in the immediate future. The establishment of such mechanisms is an eventual goal that ARF participants should pursue as they proceed to develop the ARF as a vehicle for promoting regional peace and stability.

Organisation of ARF activities

16. There shall be an annual ARF Ministerial Meeting, in an ASEAN capital just after the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. The host country will chair the meeting. The incoming Chairman of the ASEAN Standing Committee will chair all inter-sessional Track One activities of the ARF.

17. The ARF shall be apprised of all Track Two activities through the current Chairman of the Track One activities, who will be the main link between Track One and Track Two activities.

18. In the initial phase of the ARF no institutionalisation is expected. Nor should a Secretariat be established in the near future. ASEAN shall be the repository of all ARF documents and information and provide the necessary support to sustain ARF activities.

19. The participants of the ARF comprise the ASEAN member states, the observers, and consultative and dialogue partners of ASEAN. Applications to participate in the ARF shall be submitted to the Chairman of the ARF who will then consult the other ARF participants.

20. The rules of procedure of ARF meetings shall be based on prevailing, ASEAN norms and practices. Decisions should be made by consensus after careful and extensive consultations. No voting will take place. In accordance with prevailing ASEAN practices, the Chairman of the ASEAN Standing Committee shall provide the secretarial support and coordinate ARF activities.

21. The ARF should also progress at a pace comfortable to all participants. The ARF should not move "too fast for those who want to go slow and not too slow for those who want to go fast".

Conclusion

22. ARF participants should not assume that the success of the ARF can be taken for granted. ASEAN's experience shows that success is a result of hard work and careful adherence to the rule of consensus. ARF participants will have to work equally hard and be equally sensitive to ensure that the ARF process stays on track.

23. The ARF must be accepted as a "sui generis" Organisation. It has no established precedents to follow. A great deal of innovation and ingenuity will be required to keep the ARF moving forward while at the same time ensure that it enjoys the support of its diverse participants. This is a major challenge both for the ASEAN countries and other ARF participants. The UN Secretary-General's "Agenda for Peace" has recognised that "just as no two regions or situations are the same, so the design of cooperative work and its division of labour must adjust to the realities of each case with flexibility and creativity".

ANNEX A

I. CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES

Principles

1. The development of a set of basic principles to ensure a common understanding and approach to interstate relations in the region; and
2. Adoption of comprehensive approaches to security.

Transparency

3. Dialogue on security perceptions, including voluntary statements defence policy positions;
4. Defence Publications such as Defence White Papers or equivalent documents as considered necessary by respective governments;
5. Participation in UN Conventional Arms Register;
6. Enhanced contacts, including, high level visits and recreational activities;
7. Exchanges between military academies, staff colleges and training;
8. Observers at military exercises, on a voluntary basis; and
9. Annual seminar for defence officials and military officers on selected international security issues.

II. PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY

1. Develop a set of guidelines for the peaceful settlement of disputes, taking into account the principles in the UN Charter and the TAC;
2. Promote the recognition acceptance of the purposes and principles of the TAC and its provisions for the Pacific settlement of disputes, as endorsed by the UNGA in Resolution 47/53 (B) on 9 December 1992; and
3. Seek the endorsement of other countries for the ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea in order to strengthen its political and moral effect (as endorsed by the Programme of Action for ZOPFAN).

III. NON-PROLIFERATION AND ARMS CONTROL

1. Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (SEANWFZ).

IV. PEACEKEEPING

1. Seminars/Workshops on peacekeeping issues; and
2. Exchange of information and experience relating to UN Peacekeeping Operations.

V. MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION

1. Disaster Prevention

ANNEX B

I. CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES

1. Further exploration of a Regional Arms Register;
2. Regional security studies centre/ coordination of existing security studies activities;
3. Maritime information data bases;
4. Cooperative approaches to sea lines of communication, beginning with exchanges of information and training in such areas as search and rescue, piracy and drug, control;
5. Mechanism to mobilise relief assistance in the event of natural disasters;
6. Establishment of zones of cooperation in areas such as the South China Sea;
7. Systems of prior notification of major military deployments that have region-wide application; and
8. Encourage arms manufacturers and suppliers to disclose the destination of their arms exports.

II. PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY

1. Explore and devise ways and means to prevent conflict;
2. Explore the idea of appointing Special Representatives, in consultation with ARF members, to undertake fact-finding missions, at the request of the parties involved to an issue, and to offer their good offices, as necessary; and
3. Explore the idea of establishing, a Regional Risk Reduction Centre as suggested by the UN Secretary-General in his Agenda For Peace and as commended by UNGA Resolution 47/120 (see section IV, operative para 4). Such a centre could serve as a data base for the exchange of information.

III. NON-PROLIFERATION AND ARMS CONTROL

1. A regional or sub-regional arrangement agreeing not to acquire or deploy ballistic missiles.

IV. PEACEKEEPING

1. Explore the possibility of establishing a peacekeeping centre.

V. MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION

1. A multilateral agreement on the avoidance of naval incidents that apply to both local and external navies;
2. Sea Level/Climate Monitoring System;
3. Establishment of an ASEAN Relief and Assistance Force and a Maritime Safety (or Surveillance) Unit to look after the safety of the waters in the region;
4. Conventions on the Marine Environment
 - Dumping of Toxic Wastes
 - Land-based Sources of Marine Pollution;
5. Maritime surveillance; and
6. Explore the idea of joint marine scientific research.