

## **Proposal to streamline the ASEAN Regional Forum Senior Officials' Meeting**

### ***Overview***

1. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) is one of the most important engagements in the ARF's annual program of activities. It is the key preparatory meeting ahead of the ARF Ministerial Meeting and an important opportunity to advance the ARF process. However, in recent years the length of SOM meetings has grown considerably, extending from what was originally a half-day meeting to a full day event.
2. A significant portion of the SOM agenda replicates work already undertaken at the officials'-level Inter-Sessional Support Group Meeting on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy (ISG). Given the growing demands on SOM leaders' time in an increasingly crowded schedule of regional meetings, there is a need to more clearly distinguish the roles and functions of the ISG and SOM.
3. Noting the recommendations of the High Level Task Force on Strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat and Reviewing ASEAN Organs (endorsed at the 15<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Coordinating Council Meeting, Nay Pyi Taw, 11 November 2014), which called for, inter alia, simplifying and streamlining ASEAN meetings, we propose a modest reform to the SOM agenda in order to reduce the level of duplication with the ISG, and shorten the meeting.

### ***Background – the roles and functions of the ISG and SOM***

4. The ISG is the key annual meeting for ARF working-level officials. Usually held in May after the completion of the five Inter-Sessional Meetings (ISM) and approximately one month before the SOM, the primary function of the ISG is to table and consider new work plans, activity proposals, and CBM and PD initiatives (such as proposed Ministerial Statements), which are then submitted to the SOM for further consideration. The ISG also provides an opportunity for the co-chairs of ARF meetings and activities completed over the preceding inter-sessional year (including ISMs, the Heads of Defence Colleges/Universities Meeting, and ARF Security Policy Conference) to report on the key discussions and outcomes from these events.
5. As the key preparatory meeting in advance of the ARF Ministerial Meeting, the SOM plays the central role in managing the ARF process. The key functions of the SOM are to endorse proposed ARF activities and meetings, consider proposed ARF Ministerial Statements, discuss ARF institutional matters (such as the creation of new Inter-Sessional Meetings), and exchange views on regional security issues at the senior officials' level. While the Ministerial Meeting remains the final decision making body of the ARF, the work of the SOM enables ministers to focus their discussions on key security issues facing the region, rather than institutional and administrative matters. However, the briefings on the previous year's ARF activities that have been delivered at the ISG are also repeated at the SOM. While a degree of duplication between the ISG and SOM is inevitable, these briefings have no bearing on the ARF's forward agenda or preparatory work for the Ministerial Meeting.

### ***Proposal***

6. To reduce duplication between the ISG and SOM, we propose an enhanced role for the ISG co-chairs, whereby they would present to the SOM a summary report of completed ARF activities based on the presentations delivered to the ISG, rather than the co-chairs' of the various activities presenting individual reports. This would replicate the way track one activity proposals for the next intersessional year are presented to the SOM (presented collectively by the ARF Chair) and substantially reduce the number of speakers under this agenda item. An amount of time could be set aside at the end of the ISG co-chairs' presentation should ISM co-chairs or other ARF member wish to discuss specific issues arising from the completed activities.
7. Outcomes from ARF meetings and activities that have been conducted between the ISG and SOM would continue to be presented to the SOM in the current manner.
8. As the Experts and Eminent Persons (EEPs) meeting often develops recommendations for the consideration of Ministers, we propose that the outcomes from the EEPs meeting continue to be presented to both the ISG and SOM by the EEP co-chairs, as per current practice.
9. If agreed by ARF members, these reforms could reduce the length of the SOM, and afford senior officials more time to discuss substantive issues before the ARF. It would also set a clearer division of labour between the ISG and SOM and reduce duplication between these meetings. Whereas the ISG could serve both as a clearing house for reports from ARF meetings over the preceding inter-sessional year, and for considering activities and proposals over the next ARF cycle, senior officials would have more time to focus on the ARF's forthcoming agenda.

### ***Timeframe***

10. If agreed at the 2019 ISG, SOM, and Ministerial meeting, the new arrangement could be implemented at the ARF SOM in Vietnam in 2020.