THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM: PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS - A View from an ASEAN ISIS Founding Member[1]

Carolina G. Hernandez PhD
Founding President and Chair, Board of Directors
Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Inc.

Introduction

Most of the founding members of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN ISIS) held the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) with a certain degree of pride when the idea behind the ARF was adopted by the member states of ASEAN and its key dialogue partners. Through the initiative of Jusuf Wanandi, they held a brainstorming session with like-minded friends from their numerous networks from Australia, Canada, and Japan in June 1992 in Jakarta, Indonesia for the purpose of responding to the security implications of the loss of the Cold War overlay in a large and highly diverse Asia Pacific region. In this region are located the world's largest powers – the United States (U.S.), Russia, China, Japan, and India – and the European Union (E.U.) has significant economic and diplomatic relations with key countries in the region.

The participants in this brainstorming session agreed to propose to their governments the convening of a regional political security dialogue where all the relevant strategic actors in Asia Pacific security were to participate, particularly targeting those that were still outside of the ASEAN dialogue partnership mechanism which convened annually in the Post-Ministerial Meeting (PMC). ASEAN ISIS requested the support, in particular of the Japanese Foreign Ministry in what was agreed to be an ASEAN initiative, given the fact that no major power in the region had the trust and confidence of other major powers. ASEAN was thought – and rightly so – to be the only player that could launch such an initiative and receive the support of all the region's strategic actors. The reasons are too well-known for a forum such as the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR) to be detailed here.

The proposal was included in an ASEAN ISIS memorandum titled "A Time for Initiative" that is probably the one ASEAN ISIS Memorandum that has made the most impact on regional policy, bar none. Among others, that memorandum urged ASEAN

[1] Remarks for Plenary Session Four, 22nd Asia-Pacific Roundtable, ISIS Malaysia, Hotel Nikko Kuala Lumpur, 2-5 June 2008.

leaders to establish a regional political security dialogue mechanism to be convened a day after the PMC that would have all the region's strategic players on board, to build an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in the light of the rise of a Single Market in Europe and the establishment of the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) that were feared to become closed trading blocks, and to convene a special meeting of political and economic senior officials (Special SOM). All three proposals were adopted by ASEAN, with the ARF being supported by its dialogue partners. The rest is history, so to say.

ASEAN ISIS continued to respond to the requests of members of the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) in thinking of ways by which the ARF (and ASEAN as well, but that is another story) can be an effective regional political security dialogue mechanism, including the development of the 1995 ARF Concept Paper which defined its work in terms of the (1) promotion of Confidence-Building Measures or CBMs; (2) development of preventive diplomacy or PD; and (3) conflict resolution which was later modified into "elaboration of approaches to conflict".

Within the context of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) ASEAN ISIS members who participate in this mechanism have also promoted the ARF as the only regional dialogue mechanism for political security issues. They actively participated in the track 2 meetings to define the meaning of preventive diplomacy, in Seoul, Paris, and Singapore in particular. They have likewise responded positively to the initiatives of associates including the former Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) now the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), among others which sought to improve the effectiveness of the ARF.

In short, ASEAN ISIS has continued to champion the contribution made by the ARF to peace and stability in this huge and tremendously diverse region, often in the face of difficult intellectual challenges articulated by outsiders, both friendly and hostile against a mechanism that is generally perceived as nothing more than "a talk shop". In recent times, its members have actively participated in efforts to get the U.S. to show serious interest in both ASEAN and the ARF in partnership with U.S.-based foreign and security policy think tanks. They assiduously explained the importance of symbols and

process in the "ASEAN way" of doing things, as opposed to other's proclivity to produce concrete results even out of dialogue processes.

Its latest initiative is contained in the "ASEAN ISIS Memorandum No. 4/2007 Rethinking the ASEAN Regional Forum".[2] It is this particular memorandum that I wish to share with you today for two major reasons. The first is the great difficulty of finding new pathways for the ARF to make progress, after various recommendations have been put forward by various studies, including an enhanced role for the ARF Chair, the establishment of the Friends of the ARF, the adoption of the ARF Register of Eminent and Expert Persons, as well as prodding the ARF to move from CBMs to PD without exhausting all the applicable CBMs for the region. ASEAN ISIS has already put much thought and engaged in discussion and consultation to produce this memorandum on the ARF. The second is in order to share to as wide a group of security analysts concerned about improving the security mechanisms located in the region this latest of ASEAN ISIS products which respond directly to this particular plenary session of the 22nd APR.

Rethinking the ASEAN Regional Forum

ASEAN ISIS came to the conclusion that in order to prosper the ARF, there is an urgent need to rethink the ARF itself. After more than a decade, ASEAN ISIS believes that it is time for the ARF to discard the 1995 ARF Concept Paper, drawn up in a regional context so different from that of the present, and after years of failing to make progress perhaps stemming from the mandate of the ARF Concept Paper itself.

ASEAN ISIS Memorandum No. 4/2007 acknowledged the achievements of the ARF as the "foremost inter-governmental security forum in the Asia Pacific" in that it (1) "has successfully engaged a growing number of countries in the Asia Pacific region and beyond", as well as (2) launched a number of important initiatives including regional cooperation in counter-terrorism.[3]

However, the Memorandum also noted the inability/failure of the ARF (1) "to become an effective forum for addressing emerging security issues in the region"; (2) to embark "upon any concrete confidence building or preventive diplomacy measures since

[2] Presumably the other three memoranda of 2007 are those that pertain to the thinking of ASEAN ISIS with regard to the development of the ASEAN Charter.
[3] ASEAN-ISIS Memorandum No. 4/2007 Rethinking the ASEAN Regional Forum.

inception"; (3) to give "sufficient attention to non-military security issues". It also noted "a resurgence of rivalry among the major powers, all of whom are also key participants of the ARF process" [4]

Thus, the Memorandum concluded that there is an urgent need to make the ARF a "more credible and effective forum for addressing security challenges in the region" by a "fundamental re-evaluation and re-thinking of the process to make it relevant to prevailing realities".[5]

Indeed, the ARF is perhaps the world's only regional mechanism in which the world's major strategic players participate. This is very important in the sense that these are the actors that have the greatest potential to make regional security possible, and conversely, to disrupt regional security. However, the fact that the participants of the ARF has extended almost uncontrollably not only to **countries in the Asia Pacific region**, but also **beyond**, as the Memorandum noted could be a problem. Not only would decision making be unwieldy, but the enormous diversity of the context of each participant relevant to political security cooperation would inhibit consensus and action. In the case of the ARF, more is not necessarily better.

Given its member institutes' observations as noted above, the Memorandum proposed that the 1994 ARF Concept Paper that has guided its work is no longer adequate, given the present realities and a new Concept Paper providing for "an operating framework for a revitalized and effective ARF" needs to be adopted. For this purpose, the Memorandum made a number of **key recommendations** which are hoped to be considered by the ARF participants in the new Concept Paper. It also identified **key future activities** of the ARF. These are the following:

1. Impose a moratorium on new participants - There are currently 27 participants that make the the ARF unwieldy, particularly in making decisions. At the same time, new criteria other than "the ASEAN member states, the observers, and consultative and dialogue partners" of ASEAN may have to be adopted. Due to these criteria and the open-door process of admitting new participants, the ARF has included states that have little relevance to Asia Pacific security.

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[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*

2. Expand the "geographical footprint" of the ARF to encompass the Asia Pacific region that includes North America – Even as there has to be a moratorium on new participants, there is a need to extend the geographical footprint of the ARF. The U.S. and Canada "are important and integral components of a regional strategic environment that embraces the Asia Pacific region". In particular, U.S. policies impact directly or indirectly upon Asia Pacific security. Also to exclude North America from the ARF's geographical footprint makes it appear as though North America is a problem and the objects of ARF CBMs.
3. Make "comprehensive security" the organizing security concept of the ARF – This is ASEAN's view of security and the concept applies to both traditional and non-traditional or hard and soft security issues affecting the region. Apart from embracing other concepts of security, including human security, comprehensive security also avoids casting issues like piracy and terrorism as non-traditional when in fact these are traditional security issues in that they have been present in the region for a very long time.
4. Declare the present ARF 3-stage strategy of Confidence Building Measures (CBM), Preventive Diplomacy (PD), and "elaboration of approaches to conflicts" as applicable only to inter-state conflict. – This strategy does not apply to comprehensive security issues like terrorism, transnational crime, and environmental security. The new concept paper must clearly state where this strategy applies.Thus, the performance of the ARF could be based on a wider range of comprehensive security issues instead of solely on CBMs, PD, and conflict resolution. At the same time, this could make progress in these three areas possible if applied only to interstate, rather than intra-state conflict, where the non-interference principle has posed a barrier to PD and conflict resolution, for example.
5. Embark upon concrete CBM and PD initiatives immediately – Among the issues that would be amenable to these measures are apprehensions regarding the rise of China, growing major power rivalry, relations between China and Japan, South Korea and North Korea, and Sino-U.S. relations. The ARf

should also "encourage, endorse and support" various initiatives including "bilateral and third party-initiated CBM, PD and conflict resolution initiatives as part of ARF-endorsed measures to improve security in the Asia Pacific region". It is further suggested that the ARF become an observer in the six-party talks process on the North Korean nuclear issue..

6. Devise ARF mechanisms to conduct CBM and PD – The ARF should be flexible and adopt different mechanisms as appropriate for different situations, including the use of the ARF Chair, conflict mediation institutions, and mobilization of the services of individuals on the ARF Register of Experts and Eminent Persons. The functions of the latter have not been defined, and its use has been so far limited to the consideration in particular of developing a security mechanism for Northeast Asia. Surely, such a group of persons can be put to better use.
7. Make the security impact of global warming and climate change a major ARF project – Global warming and climate change has become a serous security concern for the region. It affects all ARF participants, with life threatening effects on populations. This merits priority attention from the ARF. The establishment of an Inter- Sessional Group on this subject should be seriously considered.
8. Evaluate and improve counter-terrorism measures – The ARF should undertake an assessment of these measures, determine and improve their effectiveness, and reports on the situation, counter-terrorism policies and measures adopted by countries seriously affected by terrorism should be made to the ARF.
9. Widen participation of officials and agencies in the ARF process – Consistent with the concept of comprehensive security, the ARF should not only be a forum for foreign and defense ministers, but should also include other relevant officials and agencies, such as Interior, Health, Environment, Energy, etc.
10. Convene and ARF Leaders Meeting or ARF Summit – These should be convened at regular intervals, possibly held back-to-back with APEC to

facilitate attendance although the participants of the two processes are not fully identical.

11. Set up an ARF Division in the ASEAN Secretariat – The ARF Unit in the ASEAN Secretariat should be upgraded with additional resources and made an ARF Division. Non-ASEAN participants should be welcome to contribute expertise and other resources to the ARF Division. This will enhance non-ASEAN participation in ARF planning and organization and help moderate criticism of ASEAN as monopolizing the ARF process. This should also help expand the sense of ownership of the process and contribute to greater compliance and effectiveness.

Challenges to the Memorandum's Acceptance

Many members of ASEAN ISIS are aware of the difficulty of having this memorandum accepted by ASEAN and other ARF participants. There remains a strong tendency among ASEAN member states to think of the world as essentially the same as when they started building the various mechanisms for regional security, including ASEAN itself, their statements to the contrary notwithstanding. One needs only to look at the kind of charter its bureaucrats, retired and active designed for the grouping. It is a charter that consolidates the ASEAN way of doing things at its very core, one that does not empower the ASEAN institutions to make them more effective by ensuring compliance and by enabling decision making to be made other than consensus and without elevating issues not resolved by consensus to the level of the Summit. This charter will not enable ASEAN to realize the ASEAN Community of three pillars envisioned in the Bali Concord II because it does not solve the problem of lack of implementation and enforcement. Should the ASEAN Community not be realized, then ASEAN's aspiration to remain at the center of regionalism, whether through the ARF or other mechanisms such as ASEAN +3 and the East Asia Summit will not be attained.

ASEAN officials appear to be insensitive to the developments taking place in the relations between and among China, Japan, and South Korea which have been meeting directly among themselves without ASEAN facilitation. Then the desire among China, Japan, South Korea and the U.S. to set up a Northeast Asian security mechanism to deal

with Northeast Asian security issues out of frustration of the ARF's ineffectiveness is certain to persist. These are signs of impatience and determination to move ahead of ASEAN's readiness to meet the challenges of a new demanding 21st century world. Its new Secretary-General remarked that amidst these developments, ASEAN's answer is the ASEAN Charter. But such a document that does not enable and empower will not avert these evolving and emerging regional trends. More than an aversion to pool sovereignty, it is the failure to change mind sets, even as the rhetoric appears *avant garde* that could be ASEAN's undoing, and with it its various mechanisms including the ARF. It does not help that many of its key partners share the same outdated values.