

The ASEAN Regional Forum: Pathways to Progress - the Road Ahead
by Ralph A. Cossa

If the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) did not exist, I would be among those calling for its creation, just as I and many of my Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) colleagues called, at CSCAP's inception in 1993, for a track one official multilateral dialogue to address the region's many security challenges and concerns. The region is better off for having the ARF.

I say this to put my remaining comments in context. While the ARF has come a long way in the past 14 years, I believe there is considerable room for additional improvement. The point of this paper is neither to praise nor bury the ARF but to offer suggestions on how an already useful organization can make an even more important contribution to regional peace and security. Many of my recommendations grow out of the work that CSCAP and my own organization, the Pacific Forum CSIS (which serves as the U.S. secretariat for CSCAP) have done to help revitalize the ARF.

As background, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was formed in 1994 with the goal of sustaining and enhancing the peace and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region by enhancing dialogue on political and security cooperation. The 27-member ARF brings together foreign ministers from the ten ASEAN states plus Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Russia, South Korea, North Korea, New Zealand, and the United States, plus Pakistan (since 2004) and most recently (2005) Timor-Leste, (2006) Bangladesh (2006), and Sri Lanka (2007) for annual security-oriented discussions. This brings to mind the first of several questions I was asked to address: *"Is the current geographical footprint of the ARF relevant to the scope of the Forum's security concerns?"* My answer is "no."

The decision to open up the ARF first to Pakistan and subsequently to two other South Asian states, in my view, dilutes and distracts the ARF from what should be its primary focus on East Asia and the greater Asia-Pacific region. There does not seem to be any great desire, and even less capability, for the ARF to take on South Asia security issues; there is a South Asia mechanism – the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation or SAARC – which is supposed to be focused on this. It does change the nature of the organization and the nature of the debate, opening the door to sniping between Pakistan and long-term member India, whose membership in the ARF made more sense, given the important role India plays in East Asia and the direct impact of Sino-Indian relations on regional security.

The decision to open the ARF to other South Asian states (after initially stating that this was not the plan or intent when India first came on board) was not a very transparent decision – I have yet to meet anyone associated with the ARF who can explain either the process by which the ARF decided to expand or, much more importantly, the logic behind the expansion. One hopes that this is the end of expansion activities; bringing in other South Asian (or Central Asian or South Pacific) nations would only serve to further dilute and distract the organization and its deliberation.

Looking more directly at the ARF's current and anticipated mission, it was envisioned that the ARF would achieve its goal of sustaining and enhancing the peace and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region through a gradual evolutionary approach encompassing three stages – Stage I: Promotion of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs); Stage II: Development of Preventive Diplomacy (PD) Mechanisms; and Stage III: Development of Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms. To date, the ARF has concentrated mainly on Stage I and to a lesser extent, concurrently, on Stage II measures.

Various ARF study groups (called Inter-sessional Support Groups or ISGs) have provided the vehicle for moving the multilateral process along in areas such as preventive diplomacy, enhanced confidence building, counter-proliferation, and maritime (including search and rescue) cooperation, all of which help promote greater transparency and military-to-military cooperation. Most importantly, since September 11, 2001, the ARF has helped focus regional attention on, and has served as an important vehicle for practical cooperating in, fighting terrorism and in countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Generally speaking, the ARF seems well-suited to serve as the consolidating and validating instrument behind many security initiatives proposed by governments and at non-official gatherings, and has become a useful vehicle in the war on terrorism. But its contribution to the regional security order remains somewhat constrained. For example, Taiwan has not been permitted to participate and Beijing has insisted that "internal Chinese affairs" not be on the agenda, effectively blocking ARF discussion of cross-Strait tensions despite their obvious broad regional implications. The Chinese have even been reluctant to address conflicting claims in the South China Sea at the ARF, insisting instead on separate talks with ASEAN or with the other claimants on an individual basis.

Few expect the ARF to solve the region's problems or even to move rapidly or proactively to undertake that mission. The agreement to "move at a pace comfortable to all participants" was aimed at tempering the desire of more Western-oriented members for immediate results in favor of the "evolutionary" approach preferred by the ASEAN states, which all too often seems to see the process as being as (or more) important as its eventual substantive products. The Asian preference for "noninterference in internal affairs" also has traditionally placed some important topics essentially off limits, although this may be changing (witness ASEAN's increased willingness to comment on Myanmar's domestic politics). Nonetheless, the evolution of the ARF from a confidence building measures "talk shop" to a true preventive diplomacy mechanism (as called for in its 1995 Concept Paper) will be a long and difficult one.

The above comments suggest the answer to one of the organizers' other key questions: "*What has been the record of the ARF in addressing the comprehensive security challenges in the region?*" The answer: "not too sterling." Generally speaking, the ARF has not yet attempted to fully address the real challenges. This may come as it tiptoes toward embracing a preventive diplomacy role but it is clearly not there yet. This is not necessarily a condemnation of the organization. It has made efforts to build confidence among its members and to raise awareness of the challenges that confront the region and the world. It has made important declarations regarding countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and appears set to

create a new ISG aimed at further addressing this subject. But it has not sought (nor been offered) a role in dealing with North Korea denuclearization, cross-Strait tensions, earlier Sino-Japan tensions, Kashmir, or other long-standing security challenges. As noted above, it has also sidestepped the South China Sea issue and has not had any role to play vis-a-vis Myanmar, other than to offer generally watered down suggestions that the regime there do more to honor its own commitments to move down the “road toward democracy.”

A number of initiatives have been established within the ARF to increase transparency and to encourage the exchange of information between ARF member states. Chief among these have been the ARF ISG on Confidence Building Measures (which has since become the ISG on CBMs and PD). Other Inter-sessional Meetings have also been conducted to promote the sharing of expertise and discussion in such areas as Search and Rescue Coordination and Cooperation, Peacekeeping, Disaster Relief among others. Seminars and expert group meetings have also been organized on such areas as De-mining, Transnational Crime, Terrorist Financing and Prevention, Marine Security Challenges among others, and a number of military to military meetings and exchanges have also been held. It is worth noting that the CBMs undertaken by the ARF are predominantly declaratory in nature, with very few, if at all, being the more constructive (but difficult to obtain) constraining mechanisms.

Despite the stated intention of the ARF to enhance security in the region through PD there has been considerable controversy and debate and a clear divergence in attitudes regarding how (or even if) to go down this road. In its initial stages, this divergence was clearly seen between countries that were active advocates for developing concrete PD mechanisms and those that were reluctant to move the ARF forward to a PD stage. The activist countries stressed the need to implement concrete PD measures such as early warning systems, fact-finding missions and an enhanced good offices role of the ARF chair that would have an active role in mediating in disputes. The more reluctant countries were keen to establish a clear definition of PD before studying specific measures that could be implemented. They also strongly adhered to the principles of non-interference and feared that applying PD to interstate (let alone intrastate) conflicts would justify interference in the internal affairs of member states.

Continued discussions within the ARF as well as within three CSCAP workshops on PD led to the development of a working definition and statement of principles on PD which was adopted at the 8th ARF meeting in Hanoi in 2001. PD was defined as “consensual diplomatic and political action taken by sovereign states with the consent of all directly involved parties”:

1. To help prevent disputes and conflicts from arising between States that could potentially pose a threat to regional peace and stability;
2. To help prevent such disputes and conflicts from escalating into armed confrontation; and
3. To help minimise the impact of such disputes and conflicts on the region.

The Paper also outlined the key principles of PD as drawn from the CSCAP discussions, noting that the principles guiding PD would draw on the approach that has been ASEAN a success including “the non use of force, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in internal affairs, pragmatism, flexibility, consensus, consultation and accommodation. The eight key principles of PD that were outlined were:

Diplomacy: It relies on diplomatic and peaceful methods;

Non-Coercive: Military action and the use of force is not part of PD;

Timeliness: Action is preventive rather than curative; PD methods are most effectively deployed at an early stage of a dispute or crisis;

Requires Trust and Confidence: PD can only be exercised successfully when there is a strong foundation of trust and confidence;

Consultation and Consensus: Any PD effort can only be carried out through consensus after careful and extensive consultation among ARF members;

Voluntary: PD practices are to be employed only at the request of all the parties directly involved in the dispute and with their clear consent;

PD applies to conflicts between and among States;

It is conducted in accordance with universally recognised basic principles of international law and inter-state relations.

While the ARF has not yet formally entered into PD activities, it has established a number of mechanisms that can serve as building blocks to facilitate the performance of a PD function. These are summarized as follows, along with a few ASEAN mechanisms that might also serve to support the ARF PD effort:

ASEAN Troika. The ASEAN Troika is comprised of the Foreign Ministers of the present, past and future chairs of the ASEAN Standing Committee (ASC), which would rotate in accordance with the ASC Chairmanship. However, if the situation warrants, the composition of the ASEAN Troika could be adjusted upon the consensus of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers. The purpose of the ASEAN Troika is to enable ASEAN to address in a timely manner urgent and important regional political and security issues and situations of common concern likely to disturb regional peace and harmony. This standing PD mechanism could serve as a model for the ARF or even expand its mandate to help perform an ARF PD function.

Friends of the Chair. The Friends of the ARF Chair (FOC) assists the ARF Chair. The FOC is an ad-hoc group, constituted for a specific task by the ARF Chair as and when the situation warrants, including instances where emergencies and crisis situations arise which have the likelihood of disturbing regional peace and stability. The Friends of the Chair is a troika composed of the following: (a) Foreign Minister of the incoming ARF chairing country; (b) the Foreign Minister of a non-ASEAN ARF Country; and, (c) the Foreign Minister of the immediate past ARF chairing country. The membership overlap with the ASEAN Troika should facilitate close cooperation and interaction between the two groups. The PD role of the FOC remains to be fully developed and articulated.

Expert and Eminent Persons Group. The experts and eminent persons are nominated and registered by each ARF participant country. The EEPs provide non-binding and professional views or policy recommendations to the ARF through the ARF Chair, or to serve as resource persons to the ARF on issues of relevance to their expertise. EEPs focus on issues and subjects that are relevant to the interests and concerns of the ARF that are not being adequately addressed elsewhere, and to which their expertise is directly applicable. EEPs would not only be available for fact-finding missions but could also play a more active “good offices” role by assisting in mediating disputes and offering practical solutions. The EEPG could also play an early warning role in advising the ARF of potential conflicts that might merit PD measures.

ARF Unit. The ARF Unit’s role and functions are: to support the enhanced role of the ARF Chair, including interaction with other regional and international organizations, defense officials dialogue and Track II organizations; to function as depository of ARF documents/papers; to manage database/registry; and to provide secretarial works and administrative support, including serving as the ARF’s institutional memory. The current manning level makes even these tasks difficult. An expanded ARF Unit seems essential if the ARF is to transition into a PD role.

Annual Security Outlook (ASO). The ASO is a voluntarily produced document that lays out security concerns of ARF members. It is compiled without editing by the ARF Chair. There is no standard format and reporting is inconsistent. There is also no review process and no opportunity to follow up or gain insight into the thinking that went into these reports. This severely limits the current utility of the ASO as a PD or early warning mechanism.

Regional Risk Reduction Center (RRRC). Although it has not been established, several concept papers produced for the ARF have recommended this type of center to monitor crises

and provide an early warning system. While some of its functions could initially be accomplished by the other above-referenced PD mechanisms or could initially be outsourced to track-two mechanisms such as CSCAP, a serious PD effort by the ARF will eventually require some type of adequately staffed, funded, and empowered RRRC.

ARF Secretariat and Secretary General. At some point, an expanded ARF Unit could become a more institutionalized and more broadly manned Secretariat, headed by a Secretary General whose duties should mirror those of the ASEAN Secretary General, but with greater PD focus and authority.

This leads me to the most forward looking of the questions posed by the organizers; namely, “*what concrete initiatives should the ARF undertake*” and “*how can the ARF be rendered more effective?*” Let me preface my more specific recommendations with a more general observation. For PD to be effective, there must be expressed commitment on the part of the organization and its members to peaceful settlement of disputes and an acknowledgment that the organization has a legitimate role to play in bringing this about. Ultimately, *preventing* conflict emerges from the political will to assist people in the face of a perceived wrong. The challenge for the ARF, therefore, is to create a normative framework to define those perceived wrongs, establish mechanisms to respond to violators of those norms, and create local capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully.

To this end and, again, drawing heavily from the work of the CSCAP Study Group on PD that I had the pleasure of co-chairing, I would offer the following additional specific recommendations for advancing the implementation of a successful PD program within the ARF:

- *Create an organizational vision statement* that articulates ARF goals and aspirations for promoting peace and serving as an institution for preventing, mitigating, and resolving conflict in the region. Specific PD-related objectives should be included in this document. This effort should eventually include benchmarks for specified goals and capacities. Developing an ARF mission statement or statement of objectives could serve as a useful first step in this process.
- *Broaden the current working definition and statement of principles* of PD to acknowledge that PD mechanisms can be applied within as well as between and among states, provided there is mutual consent of all the directly involved parties.
- *Clearly define the scope of the ARF's PD effort:* will internal ASEAN disputes be addressed by the ARF or only by ASEAN?; will the focus be on East Asia or will the inclusion of South Asia states in the ARF broaden its PD mandate?; will ARF good offices be offered or extended beyond its membership or extraregionally?
- *Create an institutional capacity for early warning and monitoring of emerging security challenges.* Over the long term, the establishment of a permanent center (RRRC) that serves as a clearinghouse for existing confidence building mechanisms with expanded responsibilities to gather, store, analyze, and disseminate information and issue

warnings

of impending crises can provide basis for establishing a credible and reliable source of information. The center could also play an important role in organizing and providing a regional response capability for disaster assistance.

- *Enhance and articulate the PD role of the Expert and Eminent Persons Group and the Friends of the ARF Chair.* Cataloguing qualifications, creating an advisory council, and encouraging the use of these resources by member countries can be the first step to creating a credible and respected group of individuals that can be relied on to lead fact-finding and goodwill missions and provide timely and accurate assistance to the ARF in response to emerging crises.
- *Standardize the ASO and create a review and feedback mechanism,* possibly involving the EEPG, to enhance its role as an early warning tool.
- *Strengthen and expand the ARF Unit* with an eye to the creation of an ARF Secretariat to include a General Secretary with a clearly defined role and mission. While the various organizations examined in this study provide a variety of mechanisms for filling the Secretarial role, having a senior official who is generally recognized as having both institutional and personal credibility among the leaders of the member states has proven critical to the success of special envoy and operational PD activities. In the interim, develop a mutually supportive relationship between the ARF Unit and ASEAN Secretary General.
- *Identify nontraditional security challenges that might lend themselves to the application of PD.* These could include transnational environmental issues (Southeast Asia haze and Northeast Asia yellow dust), health issues (combating bird flu), and history issues (development of common textbooks), etc. The pursuit of nontraditional security issues should not be used as an excuse for ignoring traditional concerns, such as conflicting territorial claims, which could benefit from outside mediation.
- *Develop procedures and mechanisms that can allow the ARF and/or its various PD mechanisms to be more responsive* to impending or actual emergency situations in order to perform its PD role in a timely and effective manner.

Finally, let me briefly address the last remaining question put forward by the organizers: “*How can ASEAN improve its performance as the ‘driver’ of the ARF?*” Simply put, if you want people/countries to climb (and stay) on board, you have to tell them where you plan on driving or ask them where they would like to go. What is ASEAN’s vision for the ARF? Where does it want it to go? How much energy is it prepared to commit to moving it in that direction? Does it have an adequate roadmap to find the way? And, who is really in the driver’s seat? The ASEAN Secretary General? Or are all ten somehow steering, in the “ASEAN Way.” Is it possible to steer a steady course with ten sets of hands on the wheel? Can you move forward when there are more feet reaching for the brakes than the accelerator? These are the questions ASEAN must deal with, if it is to play a constructive role. Otherwise, it may find it useful to share the driving

responsibilities, once the ultimate destination is agreed upon.

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