

# **The Evolution of the ASEAN Regional Forum: Problems and Prospects**

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# Objectives

- Discuss the utilities and limitations of the ARF with respect to the management of regional security order
- Discuss the problems of the ARF and the ways of increasing its effectiveness



## Main argument

- Although the ARF has contributed to the enhancement of minimal confidence building among participating countries, overall its potential to shape regional security order has been highly limited.
- The ARF is unlikely to move beyond a mere venue for security dialogue unless the forum departs from the “ASEAN Way” of institution-building



## Structure

- Section 1: Assess the effectiveness and limitations of the ARF regarding the management of regional security order
- Section 2: Examine major factors in the stagnation of the ARF process
- Section 3: Consider the possible ways of increasing the effectiveness of the ARF

# The achievements and utilities of the ARF

The ARF has served the management of regional security order to some extent in the following ways

1. The ARF is for participating countries an important tool in reassuring other countries.
  - Japan and the United States utilized ARF meetings to reassure China and other Asian countries about the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance.
  - China used the ARF to reduce regional suspicion about its intentions and policies regarding certain security issues, such as the South China Sea territorial dispute.

## The utilities of the ARF

2. The ARF has provided participating countries with important opportunities to raise concerns and criticisms about each other's security policies.
  - Japan and the USA built an ad hoc coalition with other countries to press the issues of the South China Sea and of China's nuclear testing in order to indirectly apply collective pressure on China.
  - China occasionally united with Russia and North Korea in opposition to the US-Japan alliance and the US Theatre Missile Defense (TMD) program
  - These diplomatic offensives have often generated skirmishes among participating countries . However, the exchange of concerns about each other's security policies and intentions through multilateral dialogue is valuable since in the long-term this will serve the cause of confidence building among them to some degree

## The utilities of the ARF

3. The ARF has helped the great powers to improve the climate of their diplomatic relations with one another to some extent by providing opportunities for bilateral meetings at the foreign-minister level that might otherwise have been politically difficult to set up.
- The United States and China have often utilized the ARF to repair their diplomatic relations after certain crises, including the visit of Lee Teng Hui to the United States in 1995, the 1996 Taiwan crisis, the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the EP3 incident in 2001.
- Overall, the ARF has contributed to the enhancement of minimal confidence building among participating countries by facilitating the exchange of security perceptions and increasing opportunities for interaction among them

# The limitations of the ARF

- **However, these limited accomplishments of the ARF, suggesting that the forum has actually not made substantive progress on its agenda outlined in the Concept Paper, should not be overstated.**
- 1. **The ARF has not been able to contribute to the reduction of mutual suspicion among regional countries stemming from uncertainties about military capabilities.**
- Agreed on a number of concrete Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), but most agreed CBMs are modest and largely irrelevant to the transparency of each country's defense policy, and many measures cannot even be regarded as CBMs.
- Many countries have not regularly implemented important agreed CBMs, including the publication of defense white papers.
- The utility of the ARF in terms of increasing military transparency among participating countries is very doubtful.



# The limitations of the ARF

## 2. The ARF's potential to play a meaningful preventive diplomacy (PD) role has remained highly limited

- Reached an agreement on a working definition of the concept and principles of Preventive Diplomacy and on “the enhanced roles of the ARF chair”, the key to the success of prompting practical PD measures, in 2001
- The ARF's definition of PD excluded all intra-state disputes and even humanitarian contingencies from the scope of PD, thus eliminating the possibility of the ARF dealing with many potential regional conflicts.
- The ARF has ignored any PD measures that have the potential to infringe on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states

# The limitations of the ARF

- 3. The ARF's potential to promote practical cooperation on non-traditional security issues has also been highly limited**
  - Adopted a number of cooperative measures on counter-terrorism, such as blocking the financing of terrorism, and the strengthening of information sharing and intelligence exchange
  - Most agreements remain entirely dependent on the voluntary compliance of participating nations. There is still the question as to whether agreements can be translated into concrete actions
  - The ARF reiterates the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in the internal affairs of states.
  - Such sensitivity to state sovereignty would certainly inhibit the effectiveness of any cooperative efforts against international terrorism and piracy in the region.

# Why has the ARF stagnated ?

- The stagnation of the ARF process has stemmed from not only misgivings in reluctant countries about the forum's active role in conflict prevention but also from the ARF's operating rules of "consensus decision making" and maintaining a "pace comfortable to all participants", both of which allow proposals to be easily vetoed.
- Many proposals for cooperative security measures raised by activist countries were simply dropped or significantly watered down, even though these proposals seemed to strike a fair middle ground between **the two groups**.
- **Activist countries** ( the United States, Japan, Canada, and Australia)
  - Expect the ARF to implement concrete CBMs for greater military transparency
  - Expect the ARF to play active PD roles in regional disputes, including intra-state issues.
- **Reluctant countries** (China, some ASEAN countries)
  - supported confidence building efforts only through informal dialogues and declaratory measures because of deep skepticism about military transparency.
  - Reject any PD roles that have the potential to infringe on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states (Third-party mediation etc)

## Why has the ARF stagnated?

- The consequence of this impasse has been enactment of the lowest common denominator, almost exclusively reflecting the preferences of the reluctant countries.
- In other words, the accomplishments of the ARF have stemmed neither from the emergence of a shared understanding nor from a compromise between the two sides.
- Without serious concessions from reluctant states or fundamental changes in their views of the role of the ARF, such results are almost **inevitable** in a forum that operates under the rules of the “ASEAN Way”.

# How can the ARF be rendered more effective?

- The ARF needs to depart from the “ASEAN Way”. This departure would be only a prerequisite, not a solution.
- There are gradual shifts in ASEAN attitude toward the “ASEAN Way”.
- Some ASEAN states have begun publicly acknowledging the deficiencies of the “ASEAN Way”, as illustrated in the report of the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter which stressed the need to review the ASEAN’s traditional principles of non-interference and consensus-decision making.

# How can the ARF be rendered more effective?

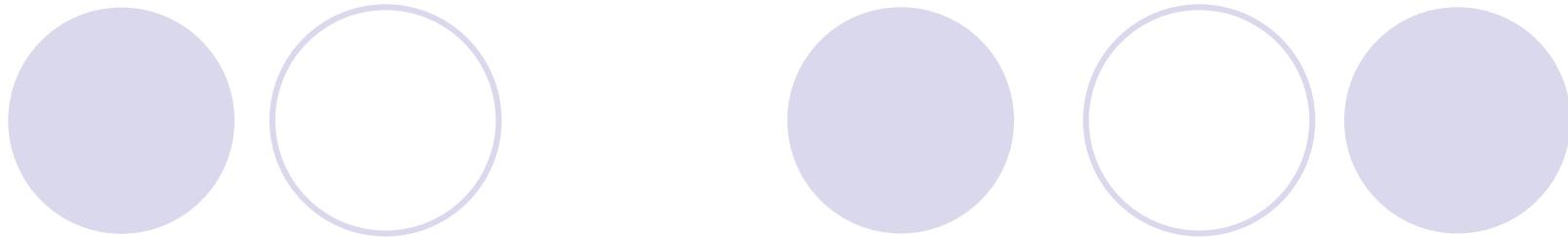
## Two recommendations

### 1. CBMs

- Should consider the possibility of adopting **a legalistic approach**
- For instance, the ARF should **oblige participating countries to implement all agreed CBMs** in order to develop a habit of cooperation among them.

### 2. Preventive Diplomacy

- Should consider the possibility of **mitigating the non-interference principle** and allow the ARF to develop more practical PD measures
- For instance, the ARF should adopt a principle that would allow intervention in intra-state conflicts **if the states involved gave their consent** in order to increase the forum's potential to play a practical PD role.



Thank you