

ASEAN Matters

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The ASEAN Regional Forum: Genesis, Development, and Challenges

Termsak Chalermphanupap

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) marks its 25th anniversary in 2018. It was first mentioned in the Joint Communique of the 26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 1993, held in Singapore. Singapore's Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng noted that the ARF was "a unique occasion and a significant milestone to ASEAN's effort to promote dialogue on regional security".

The ARF today continues to be the key region-wide forum dealing with political and security issues in the Asia-Pacific. No other regional security mechanism involves as wide-ranging a participation as the ARF's current 27 members: the ten ASEAN countries, ASEAN's ten Dialogue Partners, Papua New Guinea, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and Timor-Leste. Yet, the emergence of other regional security institutions such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM Plus have caused some recent soul-searching.

It is worth re-examining the global and regional context that motivated the ARF's conception, and the ASEAN-centred mechanisms that the ARF has introduced.

GLOBAL CONTEXT AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The changing global environment in the 1990s compelled ASEAN member states to conceive the notion of a forum for strategic multilateral discussions with world powers. The strategic landscape of the region had changed from

the Cold War exigencies at the time of ASEAN's founding. The end of the Cold War also began to erase the ideological divide between communist and non-communist states in Southeast Asia. Laos and Vietnam acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 1992. Vietnam, a communist state, became an ASEAN member in 1995.

ASEAN itself was undergoing a sea change in its attitudes towards regional peace and stability. The Fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore in 1992 called for ASEAN's Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMCs)¹ with Dialogue Partners to focus more on political and security dialogue. Prior to 1992, the PMC agendas had been heavily dominated by economic and development projects. ASEAN's new approach to the PMC discussions naturally struck a responsive chord among the Dialogue Partners.

ASEAN CENTRALITY

The ARF's establishment was the first instance of using the ASEAN model in a multilateral setting involving non-ASEAN partners. ASEAN's commitment to dialogue and consensus decision-making stems from its principle of sovereign equality among the diverse membership. Dialogue thus became the preferred mode for confidence-building towards regional stability. This was applied to the ARF, to allay concerns by individual ARF participants (such as China) over the pace of security discussions.

ASEAN's inclusive engagement creed formed the basis for ARF. This was demonstrated prominently in 2000 with the admission of the DPRK into the ARF. ASEAN can claim some credit for giving the DPRK a diplomatic lifeline outside of the UN system, so that it could learn from other ARF participants about dialogue and mutually beneficial cooperation.

INCREMENTAL INSTITUTIONALISATION

The ARF's first working session was convened in Bangkok on 25 July 1994, with foreign ministers of 18 participating countries.² ASEAN deliberately kept this inaugural session

¹ The PMC is the process whereby ASEAN Foreign Ministers hold an annual meeting with their counterpart from each of the seven Dialogue Partner countries (Australia, Canada, the EU, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), New Zealand, and the US) separately, and with all of the seven collectively afterward.

² Six ASEAN members (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand); seven Dialogue Partners; China and Russia (which were then Consultative Partners of ASEAN), Laos and Vietnam (Observers in ASEAN) and Papua New Guinea (Special Observer).

loose: an exchange of views on the broad topic of challenges and opportunities for security in the Asia-Pacific, instead of a formal discussion agenda. The first ARF also scoped its purposes and pace. This was spelled out in the ARF Concept Paper adopted at the Second ARF in Bandar Seri Begawan in August 1995. The ARF envisaged evolving regional security cooperation in three stages: confidence-building; preventive diplomacy; and conflict-resolution.

The ARF's annual ministerial meetings are supported by a Senior Officials Meeting (ARF-SOM) and the Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures (ISG-CBM). An ARF Unit in the ASEAN Secretariat provides secretarial support. Four Inter-Sessional Meetings (ISM) have been created to promote cooperation on disaster relief, maritime security, counter terrorism and transnational crime, and nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

Policy and research input to the ARF are provided by the ARF Experts and Eminent Persons (EEP), as well as by the network of ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP).

LIMITATIONS, NEXT STEPS

The ASEAN Way of decision-making has limited the ARF's success. While the modality of progressing "at a pace comfortable to all" suits ASEAN and non-ASEAN participants alike, it has also hampered the pace of institutionalising confidence-building (and moving beyond it). In 2006, the ISG-CBM was renamed Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy (ISG-CMB & PD) in recognition of the overlap between confidence-building and preventive diplomacy.

The ARF now seems stuck at the preventive diplomacy stage, with differing views on what it entails. One perspective embraces preventive diplomacy in its fullest sense, including diplomatic, political, military, economic and humanitarian actions undertaken by governments, multilateral (UN and regional) organisations and international agencies (including non-governmental actors) to address disputes and conflicts between states as well as within states. Another (narrower) interpretation prevents the discussion of domestic political and security issues under this rubric.

All this has somewhat diminished ASEAN's claim of centrality for the ARF. Impatient with the ARF's pace of security dialogue, the US, Japan, Australia and India have opted to forge their own quadrilateral security cooperation under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept, as a potential parallel track to the ARF. The advent of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010 also poses another parallel. Eighteen of the 27 ARF participants are in the ADMM-Plus. Four of the seven expert working groups under the ADMM-Plus address the same non-traditional security challenges as the ARF. Additionally, the ADMM-Plus has taken on military medicine, peace-keeping operations, and humanitarian mine action (removal of land mines

and unexploded bombs) in an expanded scope for regional security cooperation.

That the ARF is now at its quarter-century mark belies the doubts on its viability beyond a single meeting. It may now be timely for the ARF to revisit its *raison d'être* such that it can provide a clear and distinct differentiation as the premier ASEAN-led security dialogue process, if it is to ensure its future relevance. 🇲🇲

Dr. Termsak Chalermpanupap is Lead Researcher I (Political-Security) at the ASEAN Studies Centre of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

ARF Activities (August 2017 – August 2018)

Track 1 (Policy Track)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ARF annual ministerial meeting - ARF Senior Officials Meeting (ARF SOM) - ARF Security Policy Conference
Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence-Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy (ISG-CMB & PD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshop on Peacekeeping Operations Cooperation in Capacity Building and Developing Partnership with the UN - ARF Defence Officials Dialogue (DOD) - Workshop on Preventive Diplomacy: Skills and Tools towards Effective Peace-building
Inter-Sessional Meeting on Disaster Relief (ISM-DR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training on Disaster Loss and Damage Awareness and the Recovery and Reconstruction Capacity Building - Workshop Typhoon Disaster Risk Reduction and Damage Mitigation - Senior Training Course on Urban Search and Rescue Capacity Building
Inter-Sessional Meeting on Non-proliferation and Disarmament (ISM-NPD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshop on Raising Awareness and Promoting Cooperation on CBRN Risk Mitigation
Inter-Sessional Meeting on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (ISM-CTTC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshop on Urban Emergency Response - Workshop on Aviation Security and Information Sharing
Inter-Sessional Meeting on Maritime Security (ISM-MS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshop on Ferry Safety - Workshop on Best Practice in Using Maritime Data to Strengthen Regional Maritime Security - Workshop on Enhancing Regional Maritime Law Enforcement Cooperation - Workshop on Maritime Domain Awareness - Workshop on Sustainable Fisheries Management and Food Security - Workshop on National Single Points of Contacts
Inter-Sessional Meeting on Information and Communication Technologies (ISM-ICTs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open Ended Study Group on Confidence Building Measures to Reduce the Risk of Conflict Stemming from the Use of Information and Communication Technologies
Track 1.5 (Policy Research Track)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ARF Experts and Eminent Persons Meeting