

An analysis of the asean regional forum politics essay

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The end of the Cold War brought a fundamental change of security environment in Asia. As the East-West confrontation ended, US security policies became unclear. A power vacuum had been created in the region after the Soviet armed forces withdrew from Far East and Indochina, and the Chinese political influence was rapidly increasing. A multilateral forum for regional security was therefore ASEAN's solution to the challenges that arose. In spite of the end of the Cold War, Asia still had problems such as tension on the Korean Peninsula, territorial disputes over the Spratly Islands, civil war in Cambodia and tension across the Taiwan Straits. These were problems that posed the threat of becoming severely destabilizing factors in the region.

Although the United States had become the world's only military superpower, in terms to burden sharing, its domestic economic problems as well as the global nature of all its affairs placed more demand on Asian countries. Therefore, Asian nations were preoccupied with this new set of circumstances in terms of security and how to get through the post-Cold War transitional period, while maintaining stability in Asia and ensuring its further development. The fundamental views of that emerged in the context of the above security threat were:

In an uncertain post-Cold War era, promotion of confidence-building measures among Asian countries will be increasingly necessary.

The Asia Pacific region will soon be facing new global issues such as the environment, terrorism, and drug trafficking. In order to address such issues, a regional cooperative framework is crucial and should be enhanced.

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a period of strategic shifts and uncertainty for Southeast Asia. Incorporating China and Japan into the web of interdependence with the rest of the region became imperative.

It was recognised that United States' engagement in the Asia Pacific region is indispensable for the stability and prosperity of the region.

Thus, the ARF emerged. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is the principal forum for security dialogue in Asia, complementing the various bilateral alliances and dialogues. It provides a setting in which members can discuss current regional security issues and develop cooperative measures to enhance peace and security in the region. It draws together 27 countries which that include the 10 ASEAN member states (Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam).

To begin with, it is not hard to miss that the ARF's scope in terms of its member states goes far beyond South East Asia such that it includes a large number the developed and emerging powers of the world. In my view, this is an important characteristic of the ARF, which makes it unique compared to other security forums around the world. The reason behind this could be the idea of collective security. Most conflicts tend to involve national interests of major powers of the world. Therefore, their inclusion in the forum in a way ensures their consent or commitment towards peace and stability in the region.

Formation of the ARF

The ASEAN Regional Forum was primarily the outcome of states' response to regional security problems that emerged post Cold War. The reasons for its formation can be looked via the two contrasting lenses of Realism and Idealism in order to grasp a wider interpretation. According to Realism, state action is a result of its national interests and a constant " security dilemma" that it faces. The concern for " security" motivates states to behave in a certain way, which in this case, was to come together and form a multilateral institution. Post-Cold War, there was a concern about changing strategic situation of South East Asia, wherein there was the fear that the attention and aid that the United States had showered during and before the Cold War would wane away. Moreover, the rapidly rising power of China was extremely worrisome and there was still a trust deficit that existed among the ASEAN countries and Japan- a hangover of Second World War ASEAN saw the ARF as a way to keep the US in, and China and Japan down. Moreover, the ARF could be seen as ASEAN's way to maintain a " balance of Power" among the South East Asian Nations themselves.

However, the realist interpretation of ARF's formation has a serious limitation. While it explains why the ARF was formed, it fails to explain why the forum was formed in spite of different interests that persisted among the ASEAN nations. What motivates countries to come together and trust each other, in spite of having varying goals and the constant " security dilemma" that was mentioned above. This limitation in explaining ARF's formation can be overcome by the explanation provided by the Idealist School of Thought. Idealists hold the view that " shared" norms and principals, as well as shared

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security concerns is what brought the ASEAN countries together to conjure up the idea of this forum. In an uncertain post-Cold War era, promotion of confidence-building measures among Asian countries became increasingly necessary. A serious threat was perceived to be posed by new global issues such as the environment, terrorism, and drug trafficking. In order to address such issues, a regional cooperative framework is crucial and should be enhanced. However, it is important to note that these nations didn't come together based on the above realization by themselves. Important track 2 level actors were involved to bring about this realisation about these shared norms, mutual benefits of forming ARF such as ASEAN-ISIS (Institutes of Strategic International Studies).

Even so, besides the above reasons behind ARF's formation, what was it that motivated the major powers to join this forum? The consensus of the US is believed to be a result of US strategic reorientation post Cold War. The United States viewed ARF as a useful device to rein in China. Also, it saw the forum as an alternative way to deal with Asia-Pacific regional security without invoking bilateral ties which may have provoked China. China's joining is attributed to the fact that Beijing no longer saw multilateralism as a noose around its neck, but as an opportunity to make itself heard and understood by its neighbors on security and economic matters. This was a major change from China's view in the early 1990's.

It is important to look deeply into the intricacies involved in the formation of the ARF because it gives us a deeper insight in the organization's role in

Conflict Prevention and Confidence Building, which are important elements of Peacebuilding.

The idea of forming a policy-oriented, security related dialogue with ASEAN at the centre- first proposed at ASEAN-Post Minstrel Conference (PMC) in Kuala Lumpur in July 1991. In January, 1992, an agreement was reached to strengthen political and security dialogue with non-ASEAN countries. In July, 1993, an agreement was reached to establish ARF, to include China and Russia. Finally, in July, 1994, 1st ASEAN Regional Forum was held in Bangkok.

The Deepening of the ARF- Guiding Principles

At the inaugural ARF in 1994, eighteen foreign ministers conducted a free discussion, without a prepared agenda or speech text. It served well to increase mutual understanding among the participants. Russia was unexpectedly active, while the Chinese attitude was cautious. China negatively reacted to the idea of using ARF to deal with specific security issues such as North Korean nuclear capability. After the discussion, though, all involved shared the view that the time was ripe to have security talks at the government level. They agreed to adopt the following as guiding principles for future dialogue.

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia: It was signed in Bali Summit of 1976, responsible for changing ASEAN's vision and future course.

The United Nations Charter

The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which are as follows:

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Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all participating nations;

- The right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;
- Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
- Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means;
- Renunciation of the threat or use of force.

The Zone Of Peace, Freedom And Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia:

This Declaration committed all ASEAN members to exert efforts to secure the recognition of and respect for South East Asia as a Zone of Peace, free from any manner of interference by outside powers. The Declaration called upon all members to broaden the areas of cooperation which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationships.

The concept of the South East Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ):

At the Bangkok Summit (1994), the ASEAN leaders signed the Treaty on the South East Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, stressing its determination to contribute towards general and complete disarmament and the promotion of international peace and security. The Treaty also aimed at protecting the region from environmental pollution and the hazards caused by radioactive waste and other toxic materials.

In its first sixteen years, the ARF has focused on confidence building measures and has made modest gains in building a sense of strategic

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community. But efforts to develop tools of preventive diplomacy and conflict management are still at an early stage.

At the ARF Ministerial Meeting in July 2009, a Vision Statement was endorsed providing a roadmap to guide the direction of the ARF to 2020. The Statement includes an undertaking to develop an ARF preventive diplomacy capacity. In order to achieve this, ARF Ministers agreed that a Work Plan for Preventive Diplomacy be developed in the 2009-10 ARF cycle.

ARF meetings and processes

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has responsibility for ARF policy, in consultation with the Department of Defence. ARF meetings are held at Foreign Minister level, annually in July/August in conjunction with the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC). The chair of ASEAN, which rotates on annual basis, is also the chair of the ARF. The principal formal ARF document is the ARF chair's statement issued after every ARF Ministerial meeting.

The ARF is supported by the ARF Senior Officials' Meeting which meets annually in May or June. Two ARF Intersessional Support Group (ISG) meetings on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy are also held at officials' level each year, co-chaired by one ASEAN and one non-ASEAN member. Recommendations and outcomes of these ISG meetings feed into the ARF Senior Officials Meeting. The ARF conducts four Inter-Sessional Meetings (ISM) annually that represent focus areas of the forum. These are ISMs on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime, Disaster Relief, Maritime Security, and Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.

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Second-track (non-official) institutions, such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN ISIS), have been instrumental in generating ideas and inputs for ARF (“ first track”) consideration. The second-track institutions and networks conduct a number of seminars and working groups on regional security issues, involving academics, security specialists and officials participating in a personal capacity. Through its discretionary grants program, the Department supports the activities of AUS-CSCAP (the Australian Member Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific). The merit of track two level institutions is that they manage to deal with sensitive issues without creating tensions among states. This leads to fresh approaches, early warning mechanisms, etc.

The inclusion of Track 2 level diplomacy is a unique feature of the ARF as a security forum. No other major security forum in the world employs this approach.

ARF’s Role in Conflict Resolution

In ARF’s 1995 concept paper it was recognized that the forum is relatively new and would take a gradual evolutionary approach towards building a conflict resolution capacity, rather than trying to tackle security challenges without having the appropriate capability to engage itself in the same.

A consensus was reached on how this evolution can take place in three stages:

Stage I : Promotion of Confidence-Building Measures

Stage II: Development of Preventive Diplomacy Mechanisms

Stage III: Development of Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms

In the first 16 years since its inception, the ARF's activities have mainly revolved around building trust and confidence in the region, a practice whose basis lies in ASEAN's well established practices of consultation and consensus (musyawarah and mufakat)

The participants of the first ARF Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok in July 1994 agreed on " the need to develop a more predictable and constructive pattern of relations for the Asia-Pacific region". In its initial phase, the ARF committed itself to therefore concentrate on enhancing, the trust and confidence amongst participants and thereby foster a regional environment conducive to maintaining the peace and prosperity of the region.

In promoting confidence-building measures, the ARF adopted two complementary approaches. The first approach derives from ASEAN's experience, which provides a valuable and proven guide for the ARF. ASEAN has succeeded in reducing, tensions among, its member states, promoting region cooperation and creating a regional climate conducive to peace and prosperity without the implementation of explicit confidence-building measures. ASEAN's well established practices of consultation and consensus (musyawarah and mufakat) have been significantly enhanced by the regular exchanges of high-level visits among ASEAN countries. This pattern of regular visits has effectively developed into a preventive diplomacy channel.

The second approach was the implementation of concrete confidence-building measures. The first ARF meeting, in Bangkok entrusted the next Chairman of the ARF, Brunei Darussalam, to study all the ideas presented by ARF participants and to also study other relevant internationally recognised norms, principles and practices. After extensive consultations, the ASEAN countries have prepared two lists of confidence-building measures. The first list spells out measures which can be explored and implemented by ARF participants in the immediate future. The second list is an indicative list of other proposals which can be explored over the medium and long-term by ARF participants and also considered in the immediate future by the Track Two process. These lists include possible preventive diplomacy and other measures.

It was decided that given the delicate nature of many of the subjects being considered by the ARF, there was merit in moving the ARF process along two tracks. Track One activities will be carried out by governments. Track Two activities will be carried out by strategic institutes and non-government organisations in the region, such as ASEAN-ISIS and CSCAP. To be meaningful and relevant, the Track Two activities focus, as much as possible, on the current concerns of the ARF. The synergy between the two tracks would contribute greatly to confidence-building measures in the region. Over time, these Track Two activities should result in the creation of a sense of community among participants of those activities. This is another unique strategy adopted by the security forum in addition to its controversial strategy of non-interference.

There remains a residue of unresolved territorial and other disputes that could be sources of tension or conflict. If the ARF is to become, over time, a meaningful vehicle to enhance the peace and prosperity of the region, it will have to demonstrate that it is a relevant instrument to be used in the event that a crisis or problem emerges. The ARF meeting in Bangkok demonstrated this by taking a stand on the Korean issue at the very first meeting. This was a signal that the ARF is ready to address any challenge to the peace and security of the region.

Over time, the ARF must develop its own mechanisms to carry preventive diplomacy and conflict-resolution. In doing so, the ARF will face unique challenges. There are no established roads or procedures for it to follow. Without a high degree of confidence among ARF participants, it is unlikely that they will agree to the establishment of mechanisms which are perceived to be intrusive and/or autonomous. This is a political reality the ARF recognises.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above analysis that the ARF must be accepted as a “ sui generis” Organisation. It has had no established precedents to follow and has carved out a unique path for itself as a security organisation. A great deal of innovation and ingenuity will be required to keep the ARF moving forward while at the same time ensure that it enjoys the support of its diverse participants. This is a major challenge both for the ASEAN countries and other ARF participants. The UN Secretary-General’s “ Agenda for Peace” has recognised that “ just as no two regions or situations are the same, so

the design of cooperative work and its division of labour must adjust to the realities of each case with flexibility and creativity”.

It has been 16 years in the formation of the ARF and in its first fifteen years, the ARF has focused on confidence building measures and has made modest gains in building a sense of strategic community and having achieved the status of being one of the most peaceful regions of the world. But efforts to develop tools of preventive diplomacy and conflict management are still at an early stage. And one can only wait and watch how the vision 2020 moves towards the 3rd stage of Conflict Resolution.

ARF's approach has of course earned a lot of flak, especially for its policy of non interference. It is often argued and wondered as to how a security organization can ensure security in a region if it does not make efforts to stop internal conflicts. After all, in the present age of globalisation, even conflicts no longer restrict themselves to boundaries and are bound to become transnational sooner or later. The ARF has even earned the nickname of a “ talk shop” in certain critiques.

However, it is imperative to recognize that the ARF by running on the basis of ASEAN values has played a much more important role with regard to creating a basis of trust and confidence in order to achieve mutual benefits in the region. In the words of Winston Churchill, “ To jaw-jaw is better than to war-war”. And this is where the ARF has scored. The fact remains that today, the region of South East Asia remains one of the most peaceful and stable regions in the world, and it has managed to do so, on the basis of “ shared

norms and values” rather than “ realpolitik”. And the world can learn a lesson from that.