



Next Generation Views on
Preventive Diplomacy:
The Role of the ASEAN Regional Forum



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Reinvigorating the ASEAN Regional Forum: Preventive Diplomacy and Beyond

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Created in 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is the only forum for security dialogue in the Asia-Pacific, its 27 participant countries rendering it the most expansive of the region's groupings. Despite its potential, however, the ARF has had difficulty making progress in its mission to move from confidence-building measures to preventive diplomacy to conflict resolution, seemingly stalled in the first step of this ambitious process. In this paper, we argue that the ARF needs to reconcile its commitment to preventive diplomacy with the realities of the region to ensure that it remains relevant to member countries. We begin by outlining three challenges currently faced by the ASEAN Regional Forum: 1) lack of institutionalization, 2) the continuing debate over the definition of preventive diplomacy, and 3) incorporating increasingly important nontraditional security issues into its mandate. We then suggest concrete steps for the forum to move forward.

Assessing the ARF: challenges and dilemmas

In the one and a half decades since its inception, the challenges faced by the ASEAN Regional Forum have gradually come to light. The first and most concrete involves the forum's lack of institutionalization and the limitations that this poses for its functionality and relevance. Despite the fact that the ARF encompasses a large number of countries and a potentially broad security agenda, it does not have its own Secretariat. Like other institutions in Asia, ASEAN provides the driving institutional and organizational force for the forum; its staff consists of a small ARF Unit within the hectic ASEAN Secretariat. Though it sounds trivial, this poses significant limitations on the activities of this institution and leads countries to dismiss it as useless or irrelevant. How can the ARF play a role in regional crisis resolution if no one knows who to call to ask for dispute mediation? In the event of a regional crisis, the ARF, in its current weak state, is incapable of acting as a third-party arbitrator or even of providing assistance to parties involved. Its current role of providing channels and platforms for multi-level dialogue is meaningful, but there is a need to reinforce member adherence to the organization and to strengthen the central organization of the ARF in the long-term.

Second, the ARF has been plagued by a long debate about the definition of preventive diplomacy. Countries such as Japan envisioned preventive diplomacy measures as encompassing practical solutions to regional problems, including involvement in intrastate conflict, with the consent of involved parties; other countries such as China, Vietnam, and Myanmar (Burma) prefer that the ARF remain a forum for discussion and balk at tampering with the principle of nonintervention in states' domestic affairs.² Debates among members fundamentally involve the issue of sovereignty and interference on the part of great powers. Far from playing a productive role in the evolution of the ARF, however, these debates have

² Yuzawa, Takeshi. "The Evolution of Preventive Diplomacy in the ASEAN Regional Forum: Problems and Prospects." *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, Issue 5, 2006. pp. 785-804.

largely served to exacerbate its stagnation. The fact that ARF's definition and incorporation of preventive diplomacy is still being debated 13 years after the penning of the 1995 concept paper is a real problem. This issue needs to be resolved before progress can occur.

Third, the region has witnessed a dramatic increase in the importance of nontraditional security issues over the last two decades. "Nontraditional security" issues arise primarily out of nonmilitary sources, such as climate change, resource scarcity, infectious diseases, natural disasters, drug and human trafficking, and transnational crime. These dangers are often transnational, defying unilateral remedies and requiring comprehensive political, economic, and social responses. Many of the ARF's greatest successes have come in the area of nontraditional security, and this is the area in which it seems to have the biggest contribution to make in the short-term. However, the ARF lacks a clear conception of how these issues relate to its primary institutional mandate of preventive diplomacy; consequently, it cannot embrace nontraditional security with a coherent plan, and it is less able to claim successes in this arena as achievements for the forum. Nontraditional security represents a real and important area of potential cooperation for ARF participants, but its secondary status among the ARF's goals remains problematic.

Improving the ARF: steps toward greater regional relevance

In order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the ASEAN Regional Forum, we propose the following recommendations:

The ARF should pursue greater institutionalization. The ARF leadership should tackle the task of internal institutionalization with the support of a CSCAP study group. The most immediate and critical concern is the establishment of an autonomous Secretariat with sufficient personnel to handle ARF affairs year-round. In addition, ARF member states should establish a Regional Risk Reduction Center. This Center has the potential to be an important first step in linking ARF to meaningful cooperation, working in tandem with a regional crisis monitoring network composed of specialized centers from individual member states. Under the supervision of the ARF Secretariat, the crisis network will ensure appropriate allocation of regional resources in the event of a regional disaster or security threat.

The ARF should strive to definitively conceptualize preventive diplomacy, but not to the obstruction of institutional progress. The ARF should draft a new concept paper to definitively address the issue of preventive diplomacy. The concept paper will reexamine state-to-state applications of preventive diplomacy, distinguishing preventive diplomacy procedures from subsequent crisis management measures. Continuing disagreement about the definition of preventive diplomacy should not be allowed to contribute to the forum's stagnation. Instead, preventive diplomacy and crisis management should be folded into a broader mission for the ARF, one that places greater emphasis on increasingly salient nontraditional security issues.

The ARF should broaden its mission to officially incorporate nontraditional security issues. The ARF has made important inroads into traditional security, holding the first-ever joint security exercise by ARF states last spring, for example. However, the forum should also recognize that nontraditional security challenges pose some of the most pressing threats to the Asian region and are no less worthy of treatment than more traditional security issues. ARF should more fully embrace nontraditional security as part of its regional role. This will allow the ARF to evaluate its successes in nontraditional security as real and meaningful successes for the forum itself. It will also establish nontraditional security as a primary institutional domain of the ARF, discourage unnecessary duplication of efforts by other forums in the region, and encourage relevant organizations to partner with the ARF to address nontraditional security concerns.

The ARF should clearly delineate its relationship to other regional institutions. In recent years, Asia has witnessed a proliferation of regional institutions; it is now home to five forums and organizations: ASEAN, APEC, ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit, and the ARF. While these institutions have different areas of focus, their boundaries are often blurry, leading to a problem of “product differentiation.” For example, all five institutions currently address differing combinations of nontraditional security issues. In order to ensure its relevance to regional state actors, the ARF must clearly define its mission; in situations where cooperation between forums is appropriate, ARF should take the lead in its respective domain (by coordinating regional nontraditional security efforts, for example).

The ARF should address the concept of enhanced engagement. It is necessary to clearly identify the principle, goal, operational definition, and practical measures of enhanced engagement. Enhanced engagement offers an alternative approach to reduce the severity of regional crises. By engaging the party concerned, it supports third-party activities on good offices, negotiation, mediation, and effective arbitration, not only at the inter-state level but at the domestic level as well.

The ARF should reexamine the nonintervention principle. The ARF must provide a working definition of intervention, elaborating on potential scope and action, and distinguishing between intervention and interference. The ARF could initiate an *ad hoc* moral clause, allowing ARF members to express concerns or take actions to ease the degree and scope of a crisis, should it occur. The ARF could enhance provision of international resources to a crisis-stricken area and ensure accountability of any final resolution, both positive effects of intervention. Moreover, the ARF Secretariat could partner with regional and international NGOs to play a more active role in promoting regional cooperation and easing domestic disputes.

The ARF should frame a vision paper. Finally, the ASEAN Regional Forum should draft a vision paper, emphasizing the importance of immediate reform and addressing the aforementioned ideas. It should also draw on suggestions from CSCAP, which has had an extremely productive symbiotic relationship with the forum. The paper and agreed-upon solutions should then be presented at the ARF ministerial meeting.

The ASEAN Regional Forum can play an important role in enhancing the security of the Asian region. While it is challenged by weak institutionalization, ambiguous self-definition, and a shifting organizational mission, all is not lost. Our suggestions represent concrete and feasible steps that can enhance and solidify the ARF's relevance. By continuing to work productively with member states at the official governmental level and with other partners at the track II and track III levels, the forum can make headway on a number of vital issues. China could lead the establishment of an ad hoc study group with ASEAN states, bringing together regional experts to find feasible solutions to territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Different combinations of states could tackle nontraditional security threats by encouraging track II proposals and by collaborating with local and regional NGOs. The possibilities are numerous and promising. By facilitating such endeavors, the ARF can craft a unique and meaningful role for itself and help to ensure the peace and prosperity of Asia in the years to come.