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IS THE ARF OBSOLETE? Three moves to avoid irrelevance

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THE thirteenth meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) will be held in Kuala Lumpur next week on 28 July. The US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, will be attending her first ARF meeting after skipping last year's gathering in Vientiane as the ARF was perceived as a talk shop. If Rice is to be convinced that she should attend future meetings, the ARF needs to be seen as a useful opportunity for the US to network with a range of countries with significant Asia-Pacific interests resulting in substantive outcomes.

The ARF was conceived in 1994 as a process, not an institution. It focused on building mutual trust and confidence and sought to develop norms through confidence building measures (CBMs). The objective was to create a more predictable and stable pattern of relationships between major powers and Southeast Asia.

Despite Pluses, the threat of irrelevance

It would be useful to highlight the benefits of the ARF. It is often forgotten that the ARF is the only regional forum, involving both the states of Southeast Asia as well as major extra-regional powers, which discusses sensitive regional issues. It has even begun to discuss sensitive domestic issues. While there has been little progress with regard to discussions on Myanmar, a process has begun which would have been unthinkable a decade ago. The ARF has also helped to build comfort levels and created an atmosphere conducive to cooperative security in a region that is not used to cooperation on security-related questions. Furthermore, the ARF has facilitated the reduction of tension and the management of regional relationships. It has not resolved disputes or prevented the outbreak of conflicts but it could be used to minimise the impact of differing perceptions and interests. Finally, the ARF has begun the process of creating predictable and stable relationships among the regional states. It has engendered an increasing awareness of regional norms among the major powers and it has alerted the regional states to the changing values and perspectives arising from today's globalised environment.

However, unless a new role is found for the ARF, it will be sidelined in the years ahead. As a foreign ministry-led institution, the ARF does not command equivalent attention in an environment in which heads of government are increasingly involved in the alphabet soup of regional diplomacy through ASEAN, ASEAN plus 3, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the East Asian Summit, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Shanghai Cooperative Organisation (SCO).

As new regional institutions have developed, the ARF is facing the challenge of demonstrating its relevance today. Because of the ARF's focus on confidence building and the lack of movement on preventive diplomacy, the ARF is often seen as a talk shop. There is a growing recognition that the ARF must move from confidence-building to embarking on practical cooperation. The ARF has had an encouraging response to the publication of the Annual Security Outlook (ASO) of its members, which promotes transparency and builds mutual confidence. But it is unlikely that there will be scope for significant movement in areas of traditional security policy such as the prevention of military build-ups.

Three practical steps towards bigger role

To this end, one initiative which could be considered is the development of concrete cooperation in areas such as transnational crime, counter-terrorism, multi-modal transportation security, maritime security, people smuggling, drug smuggling, disaster relief and threats arising from the spread of pandemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, avian flu and SARS. These non-traditional security challenges form a new agenda for security in the next decade.

The ARF has already made a start in this direction by conducting desk top exercises in handling and managing the consequences of a hypothetical terrorist attack in densely populated areas. The ARF should conduct similar desk top exercises and scenario-based planning exercises in maritime security, disaster management, pandemics and peacekeeping operations. Meetings of experts should be held to learn from best practices in this area. A move in the direction of promoting practical cooperation on non-traditional security challenges would result in substantive outcomes and remove the perception that the ARF is only a talk shop.

A second initiative would be organizational in character. As the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) is now hosted by different states rotating on an annual basis, the exercise of chairing meetings of the ASEAN Standing Committee, hosting the AMM, followed by the Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC) and then the ARF are a major challenge for a number of ASEAN countries. We should consider de-linking the ARF Chair from the ASEAN Chair. For example, if Myanmar (Burma) chairs the AMM and PMC, another ASEAN state could host the ARF immediately after the PMC. Similarly, if any ASEAN country does not feel ready to host the ARF, it could forgo the opportunity. It does not require all 10 ASEAN countries to host meetings of the ARF.

ASEAN could also agree to non-ASEAN members co-chairing ARF meetings. The effect would be to lock in the participation of the external powers as well as give the external powers a stake in the ARF process. The objective would be to build a commitment to the ARF as well as a better understanding of the evolving character of the ARF, especially amongst Western powers whose leaderships may change rapidly after domestic elections.

The ARF should also move towards the establishment of an ARF Secretariat. A first step has been taken with the establishment of an ARF Unit within the ASEAN Secretariat to assist the Chairman. The ARF Unit would, among others, update the ARF Register of Confidence Building Measures and serve as a repository of ARF documents. However, as the ARF embarks on concrete cooperation on a range of issues impacting the entire Asia-Pacific region, it is essential that an autonomous secretariat staffed by officials from its member

states handle these issues.

Back-to-back ARF and APEC summits?

A third initiative would be at the heads of government level. If a more synergistic relationship could be developed between APEC and the ARF, it would be possible to hold back-to-back meetings of APEC and the ARF at the summit level. As APEC meets in an ASEAN country once every three years, periodic ARF summits would be possible. This would be beneficial for the ARF. Although APEC was conceived as an economic forum, the annual Leaders' Meetings attended by heads of government has resulted in APEC increasingly discussing security and political issues, even if the fig leaf of holding the meeting in a separate room or issuing a separate communiqué is adopted.

APEC has therefore discussed East Timor (1999), terrorism (since 2001), appointed directors responsible for counter-terrorism and infectious diseases, and is embarking on discussions of political and security issues (which it claims are trade-related) such as supply chain security, maritime security, energy and the environment. China also took the initiative to organise a meeting of APEC foreign ministers in Santiago in 2004, indicating a more active role by foreign ministries in the APEC process. From the Chinese perspective, back-to-back APEC/ARF summits would mean that Taiwan's peripheral role in Asia-Pacific security institutions would be highlighted. While Taiwan attends APEC meetings as 'Chinese Taipei', it is excluded from major regional security dialogues.

However, from the wider ARF perspective, periodic ARF summits would ensure that issues affecting the region would be addressed by global powers. The ARF would thus remain relevant instead of being consigned to obsolescence.

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