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ASEAN Regional Forum at 17: The Curse of “ad hoc-ism”?

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A 17, the ASEAN Regional Forum remains largely ineffectual concerning the region’s serious security challenges. So long as ASEAN — the core of the forum — maintains an ad hoc approach to regionalism, the utility of the ARF as Asia’s premier security institution will at best be limited.

THE ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) celebrated turning 17 this July by fêting “ASEAN Centrality” at its annual confab in Hanoi. The forum also adopted a “Plan of Action” for implementing the ARF Vision Statement. Supporters of the ARF were quick to praise this development as a step forward in the forum’s anticipated evolution from a talk shop to a “more action-oriented” organisation.

ASEAN Safe, for Now

Significant as this latter decision was, it nonetheless played second fiddle to the entrenchment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Asia’s regional architecture. Hailing the gathering in Hanoi as “quite a triumph of ASEAN diplomacy”, George Yeo, the foreign minister of Singapore, went on to note: “All the major powers in the world now accept that the regional architecture for Asia as a whole should be built around ASEAN at its core, and ASEAN should [therefore] play a leading role” in Asia’s security.”

ASEAN’s default position in the “driver’s seat” of Asian regionalism is safe — for now. Yet no amount of self-congratulation can hide the fact that the ARF is woefully inadequate for addressing Asia’s most serious security problems. Contentious issues that have long dogged the ARF continue to hog the limelight — the Korean peninsula, Myanmar, the South China Sea — with no regional solution in sight, none at least that the ARF can satisfactorily furnish. The sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* earned but a terse statement from the ARF ministers, nothing more. Myanmar’s recalcitrant generals continue to defy the international community’s admonitions at will. The South China Sea dispute, relatively tranquil following the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of

Parties in the South China Sea in 2002, has flared again due to the growing assertiveness of some claimant states.

Ad hoc Regionalism

The foregoing problems highlight anew the acute limits of the ARF, notwithstanding its bragging rights as the region's premier security organisation. Students of the ARF explain the forum's ineffectiveness as the outcome of its failure to evolve beyond confidence building to preventive diplomacy, a more intrusive and demanding form of security cooperation. Crucially, that failure is but a consequence of ASEAN's longstanding preference for an ad hoc approach — strategies devised for a specific problem or task — to regional cooperation.

Thus understood, the formation of the ARF in 1993 arguably served a specific purpose: the need (from ASEAN's viewpoint) to stabilise Asia's fluid and uncertain post-Cold War security environment by institutionalising a dialogue process — managed and mediated by ASEAN — involving the major powers and Asian countries. As a talk shop, the organisational features of the ARF— the “ASEAN Way” of institutional minimalism, consultation, flexible consensus and informality — served the intergovernmental forum reasonably well in the early years when its primary activities comprised confidence building measures that were neither intrusive nor binding.

Subsequent attempts by the ARF to adopt preventive diplomacy faltered in the absence of structural attributes and rules-oriented conventions that, together with a requisite collective will, could have made a key difference in the forum's hitherto frustrated quest for deeper cooperation. Ad hoc regionalism would rear its head again in 1997 — with the formation of the ASEAN+3, in response to the Asian financial crisis — and in 2005 — with the creation of the East Asia Summit, in response to a variety of specific challenges.

Reactions against ad hoc-ism

Few today are convinced that the boom in institutions is the right panacea to address Asia's problems. Of late, the ARF has had to contend with rival visions that sought to streamline Asia's cluttered architecture and foster strategic coherence. Proposals from Canberra and Tokyo face a quiet exit in the wake of the unexpected departures of their respective champions, Australia's Kevin Rudd and Japan's Yukio Hatoyama, from high office. Were either vision to be fulfilled — Australia's more so than Japan's — ASEAN would likely have been sidelined in regional affairs, since both proposals emphasise the need for some type of concert of powers at the core of the regional architecture. Ironically, neither proposal found a ready audience among the very beneficiaries who have the most to gain from their realisation.

Washington supported neither proposal. But it has echoed calls to streamline the regional architecture and make problem-solving a key priority for existing organisations. In their own way, the Americans riled ASEAN with talk in 2008 of upgrading the Six Party Talks into the core security mechanism for Northeast Asia. This elicited harried reactions from ASEAN leaders, who feared what such a development could mean for the ARF. With four major powers within its ranks, a successful Northeast Asian security institution could well lead to the marginalisation of the ARF in regional affairs.

Living with ad hoc-ism

The ARF is an ad hoc creation formed specifically in response to post-Cold War uncertainty. Within its limits, the forum has helped to regularise dialogue among former Cold War foes and brought communist China into the regional fold.

Serious problems abound, however. Importantly, it is not just non-ASEAN countries that are unhappy

with the ARF. Arguably, the establishment of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus Eight — comprising ASEAN and eight dialogue partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States)— is an effort by ASEAN to develop practical security cooperation in Asia. Further, the newly enlarged East Asia Summit now boasts the same members as the ADMM+8. The potential for competition between the ARF and ADMM+8 on one hand, and the EAS on the other cannot be ruled out. These developments possibly reflect local disenchantment with the ARF, despite the stock rejoinders ASEAN typically issues in defence of the forum.

Ultimately, it is tempting but incorrect to dismiss regionalism in Asia as an extempore exercise — the other ad hoc-ism, as it were — though one could be forgiven for thinking so when considering Asia's variegated architecture. On the occasion of the ARF's 17th year, it is clear the ad hoc approach to regional cooperation is not going to disappear any time soon, so long as ASEAN leaders believe it useful to their purposes.

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