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No. 107/2011 dated 19 July 2011

ARF at 18: Crisis of Confidence or Oasis of Opportunity?

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Synopsis

The upcoming 18th ASEAN Regional Forum in Bali will once again provide the international platform for member countries to engage on security issues. Recent events have highlighted the difficulties in reconciling core differences.

Commentary

A CRISIS of confidence or an oasis of opportunity? This is the question that will engage the minds of those attending the upcoming 18th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to be held in Bali, Indonesia on 23 July 2011. Over the years, the ARF has seen its fair share of polarising opinions among government leaders and political analysts. Some have lauded the forum as a platform where political opinions can be robustly debated and defended; others have decried the meetings as simply yet another dialogue process with little constructive outcome to show for it.

Such ambivalence towards the role of multilateral forums like the ARF is not entirely unfounded, considering the historical circumstances surrounding the relationships between member nations and the varied interests – political or economic – that states are wont to maintain.

Difficulty in Reconciling Core Interests

The ongoing territorial dispute between China and various ASEAN countries in the South China Sea is a case in point. It highlights the difficulty at arriving at a consensus when core interests -- in this case, territorial sovereignty -- are involved. Such territorial claims, framed within the assumption that what is at stake is ultimately economic interest, makes it difficult for member countries to negotiate, much less agree with each other. Indeed if the 3.5 million square metres of the South China Sea are viewed as an economic pie that is being geographically defined, then policies which assume a zero-sum-game are certainly not surprising as states aim to get ahead at the expense of others.

Such an approach however, would necessarily lead to greater mistrust and suspicion among involved countries. What is needed instead are confidence-building measures among member states that go beyond the simple promise that regional cooperation would lead to economic benefits. This is not to downplay the importance of economic factors in international politics; rather, it is a challenge for Asia-Pacific countries to look beyond dollars and cents in their decision-making. Indeed, various commentators have challenged the arguments which focus primarily on economic reasons justifying regional cooperation. Their evidence suggests that economic

factors in many instances have been less important in regionalism than states' use of economic instruments to pursue political objectives.

CBMs: More Than Just Economics

Several confidence-building measures (CBMs) are needed then, if Asia-Pacific regionalism is to move beyond the limits of purely economic factors:

Firstly, the ARF needs to develop greater capacity for decision making, in particular among those involved in track two negotiations. Businesses, non-government organisations and financial institutions ought to be given some measure of autonomy from the state in their decision-making in relation to their own stated interests. At present, much of track two discussions are fronted by two distinct region-wide networks of think tanks -- ASEAN-ISIS and CSCAP (ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies and Council for Security and Cooperation in Asia Pacific). More can be done to allow members of these organisations to engage in greater free-flowing and open discussions.

In a concept paper published following the 12th ARF held in 2005, it was proposed that the chairs of the respective organisations be given the opportunity to present written reports at the Inter-Sessional Support Group (ISG) meeting. However, the same report highlighted that the ISG co-chairs would "make every effort to ensure that Track II invitees do not raise sensitive issues". Such limitations are not helpful to the overall conduct of multilateral discussions as substantial issues continue to remain untouched.

Secondly, greater flexibility needs to be accorded to the practice of ARF diplomacy, especially in fields that seem to be the proprietary right of states. For instance, military and security challenges are viewed as diplomatic issues which require formal government intervention. This approach is flawed as it fails to recognise the wide range of diplomatic tools that can be otherwise used.

The ARF has also been criticised by scholars as evolving into a highly formal and inflexible forum, which runs counter to the spirit (of informality) envisaged for the forum. Furthermore, the fact that consultative approaches -- instead of military methods -- remain the preferred means whereby Asian countries resolve their disagreements suggests that the solutions to some of the existing diplomatic problems may lie less with institutions and more with concerned personalities.

Thirdly, greater cultural capital needs to be cultivated among ARF member nations. Indeed, if the ARF is meant to function as a confidence-building platform whereby dialogue and socialisation are emphasised, then member nations need to be sensitive to the various historical-social-cultural factors behind the decisions of their neighbours. For instance, the fact that East Asia was viewed as a bulwark against Soviet communism in the United States' containment strategy formulated in the aftermath of World War II helps one understand the multifaceted support that states in the region received from the US economically and militarily. Likewise, China's seemingly assertive approach ought to be understood from the vantage point of its claim to be the Middle Kingdom (of the world) and its history of being colonised by Western powers.

Such confidence-building measures then, are not an academic exercise nor should they be dismissed as topics for leisurely conversation. As an old Chinese maxim goes, any big historical event is always made possible by three conditions -- heavenly timing, geographic advantages and human harmony. If the rise of Asia proves to be more than a political cliché, then much of how this rise is being conducted will depend on how its members decide to live with each other.

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