



IDSS COMMENTARIES (46/2005)

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The ASEAN Regional Forum: Still Thriving After All These Years

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27 July 2005

SHORTLY after the inaugural meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Bangkok, a novice scholar of the region ventured to provide (in Trends, Business Times, 30-31 July 1994) some criteria for assessing the ARF's future success. I suggested then that by the year 2000, "if the ARF is still around, if most East Asians feel as secure as they do today, if the ARF has helped prevent rivalry in the South China Sea from degenerating into warfare and if ARF-sponsored confidence-building mechanisms have checked an arms race, then it may be proclaimed a success".

Conversely, "if the ARF dies -- as did the Association of Southeast Asia, Maphilindo, and SEATO -- or if diplomats consider it nothing more than an annual three-hour venting of national spleens, and if arms racing has become a permanent feature of the East Asian military landscape (perhaps because of violent contentions in the South China Sea), then one must conclude that the ARF had failed". Back then, I wagered my bet on the first scenario and provided reasons why the ARF was likely to go that way.

With the 12th ASEAN Regional Forum before us, it is perhaps opportune to revisit the two scenarios.

The Success Scenario

The success scenario, in my view, beats the failure scenario hands down. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's decision to give the ARF a miss notwithstanding, the ARF has played a useful role in promoting peace and security in East Asia. For this reason, Rice's absence is likely to be a one-off: the achievements and prospects of the ARF suggest that she will want to be back in Southeast Asia next year. And now that Myanmar has decided to forfeit its turn at the ASEAN Chair for 2006-2007, there is even more reason for Rice to join the ASEAN process next year. Some have suggested that her absence this year amounts to an unprecedented U.S. snub of ASEAN -- in particular, the Post-Ministerial Conference and the ARF -- the two formal meetings that Rice would have attended. But this is not the first time that a U.S. Secretary of State has skipped an ASEAN meeting: Warren Christopher missed the 1994 ASEAN meeting, also on grounds of urgent matters in the Middle East. To be sure, ASEAN is making the right noises in criticising and lamenting Rice's absence, even though her deputy Robert Zoellick, who is attending in her stead, probably has deeper knowledge of, and contacts with, the region.

The U.S. factor

The U.S. will return to the ASEAN meetings because it is in its interests to do so. Some argue that the U.S. is tired of leisurely talk shops like the ARF where little is achieved. The biggest blight on the ARF is its glacial pace in moving beyond confidence-building to preventive diplomacy. The ARF also did not anticipate the threat posed by terrorism --but then virtually no security planners, here or elsewhere, did. But since 2002, when U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell showed up to garner ASEAN and the ARF's support in confronting terrorism, the ARF has seen a flurry of cooperative measures on the anti-terrorist front.

More tellingly, if we examine the record of the ARF against the above criteria, it has fared quite well. Compared to the mid-1990s, most East Asians feel more secure today from the kind of inter-state security threats that the ARF was meant to mitigate. The mid-1990s had more anxious moments than today. Back then, there were serious worries about the U.S. retrenching from the region, Japan rearming, China's assertiveness (as in Mischief Reef and test-firing of missiles close to Taiwan), and potential conflict between the U.S. and North Korea over the latter's nuclear ambitions. Prominent security analysts were predicting an arms race in the region, with Asia becoming the cockpit of great power rivalry. These worries have largely dissipated.

Consider the "pluses" to the ARF's record that few of us anticipated: the expansion of the Forum from 18 to 24 members, with others clamouring to join; the inclusion of defence officials in the ARF's activities; the strengthening of the Forum with an ARF unit in Jakarta's ASEAN Secretariat; the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and the readiness with which the Forum was mobilised to cooperate on counter-terrorism measures such as interdicting terrorist financing and beefing up maritime security.

China and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation

But the most impressive achievement of the ARF is the recent accessions, by regional powers, to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which many have called a "non-aggression pact." Associating oneself with the TAC, according to the ARF Concept Paper of 1995, is a "simple concrete way" of extending ASEAN's experience of "good neighbourliness." China's accession is especially noteworthy because a major reason behind the ARF was to enmesh China in a regional nexus of security activities, and to discourage the use of force that characterised the Chinese-Vietnamese disputes (1974, 1988) over the Spratlys. Not surprisingly, China had serious reservations about the ARF; it feared being ganged up upon by the Western powers. ASEAN -- in its role as chair of the ARF -- has since assuaged Beijing's concerns so much so that today, China seems like a more enthusiastic participant than the U.S.

By signing the TAC, China has gone one step further than the most optimistic among us would have predicted. No one anticipated that China would sign an ASEAN-based "code of conduct" for regional relations that proscribed the use of force. And China's signing has occasioned a ripple effect: India, Japan, Russia, and South Korea have also signed. In June, New Zealand decided to join the TAC, and Australia will follow soon, so that it will be able to attend the inaugural East Asian summit later this year. Imagine a region where the most powerful and relevant members have all signed a non-aggression pact: it sets a higher barrier on the use of force against signatory states and in that sense contributes to the peace and security of the region.

“Jaw-Jawing” pays

Yes, the TAC is a mere piece of paper that the great powers may tear up when it suits their security interests. And it is true that neither ASEAN nor its ARF counterparts will be able to apply economic or military sanctions against a signatory who violates, or even resigns the TAC. Even so, nation-states do not sign such documents lightly: if your actions openly flout what you have promised not to do, you suffer severe reputation and prestige costs.

In other words, critics of the ARF are wrong to say that it is just a talk shop. ASEAN can now point to the number of signatories to the TAC to show one of the most tangible results of more than a decade of “jaw-jawing”. Habits of dialogue have been cultivated, comfort levels raised, and security cooperation realised. The ARF has served a useful purpose by being the focal point of security-related initiatives in East Asia.

Yet, as the development of the ASEAN + 3 and first East Asian Summit later this year suggest, multilateral initiatives in which the U.S. is excluded are gathering pace in the region. It is in the interest of the U.S. to work itself into these forums, for the notion of what is “East Asia” is malleable. But the way to do that is not to be absent from the regional forums in which the U.S. is already an influential member.

As Woody Allen put it, ninety-percent of life is about showing up. I bet Rice will take Allen’s advice to heart next year.

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