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ASEAN Regional Forum: Time to move towards Preventive Diplomacy

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ON ITS 40th anniversary, ASEAN's impact on Asian-Pacific security needs to be assessed. To that end, this commentary looks at the contributions by the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which has emerged as the primary security architecture in the region. It reviews the original objectives of the ARF and highlights some of its current shortcomings and constraints. To remain relevant, the ARF should revisit the 1995 Concept Paper and progress to its next stage of development through the implementation of preventive diplomacy.

THE ASSOCIATION of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is commemorating this year the 40th Anniversary of its establishment. In addition to reviewing ASEAN's impact on Southeast Asian affairs, this historic celebration is also an occasion to reflect on the organization's influence on the security environment in the Asia-Pacific. The primary ASEAN-led security initiative at the wider regional level has been the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) created in 1994. The ARF remains the first and only inclusive security arrangement in the Asia-Pacific. It continues to provide a diplomatic avenue to hold multilateral discussions on regional problems, to share information, promote confidence-building measures, and enhance the practice of transparency.

The ARF is, however, in need of some new diplomatic momentum. It is often being criticised nowadays for being no more than a 'talk shop', unable to respond to security developments in the Asia-Pacific. A new sense of direction is needed. This could best be attained by the implementation of preventive diplomacy. To look at this more closely, there is a need to revisit the motivations that led to the formation of the ARF and assess some of the limitations and constraints that it faces today. In this context, why and how preventive diplomacy should be applied by the ARF in the near future should also be examined.

Origins of the ARF

ASEAN's decision to establish the ARF resulted from several motivations. It was regarded by ASEAN as a diplomatic instrument to promote a continuing United States involvement in the region and to encourage China into habits of good international behaviour. The ARF was thus viewed as a means to both socialise Beijing in a comprehensive fashion while keeping Washington engaged in the region. Furthermore, the creation of the ARF was meant to ensure the ongoing relevance of ASEAN. Its members needed to avoid being excluded from a new strategic architecture that was chiefly dependent on a Sino-Japanese-US triangle. ASEAN hoped therefore to consolidate its diplomatic position by further developing its stabilising role in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Close to 15 years later, the original ASEAN objectives have generally been achieved. The US is still deeply involved in Asian security affairs. Its ongoing presence is a great source of stability

although its commitment to multilateral institutions has been uneven in recent years. Washington has given preference to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and preserving its ties with ASEAN but has been less engaged in the ARF. China has added diplomatic activism to its growing economic and military development. China's "charm offensive" toward ASEAN contrasts with its previous suspicion of multilateralism. Finally, most regional actors continue to support ASEAN's position of leadership in seeking to develop a multilateral security structure. ASEAN being in the driver's seat has partly resulted from the fact that no other regional player is in a position to propose the development of a multilateral security dialogue.

More than a talk shop?

Despite these successes, it is now often argued that the ARF has lost its momentum. It is indeed ill-equipped to address a series of security issues in the Asia-Pacific. The forum cannot influence the Taiwan, North Korean, and Kashmir issues in spite of the fact that these flashpoints could seriously destabilise the region. Moreover, the ARF suffers from structural limitations that affect its development. It has 27 members. Finding a general agreement on common objectives is a troubling matter, as deep divisions exist between the participants. Crucial differences also contrast Northeast Asian from Southeast Asian security relations. The territorial disputes in Southeast Asia cannot be compared to the complex security problems that persist in the Northeast for example. The US, Japan, and China also have different expectations and strategic perspectives that cannot implicitly be ignored in an 'ASEAN Way'.

Perhaps most significantly for the ARF, however, is the perception that there might be competing conceptions of multilateralism and regionalism in Asia today. This has come in the form of the ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asia Summit. The goal of these initiatives might well be the building of an East Asian Community which will then form a new security and economic architecture. It is unclear what role the ARF can play in such an emerging architecture. Moreover, it is still to be seen whether all these initiatives will succeed in complementing each other or whether they will instead compete and cancel each other out.

Implementing the Institutional Road Map

How can the ARF find a new sense of direction? One approach is to go back to its Concept Paper of 1995, which was expected to work as a road map for the ARF. The Concept Paper emphasised a gradual approach to security cooperation and conflict management. The ambition in 1995 was to move the ARF beyond confidence-building by aiming, at least in the longer run, to prevent and even solve specific disputes. The ARF was therefore expected to progress over time through three stages of security cooperation: confidence-building, preventive diplomacy (PD), and conflict resolution mechanisms.

The ARF is still today primarily a confidence-building exercise. The initiative to move beyond the promotion of confidence-building measures has been painfully slow. In contrast to confidence-building, preventive diplomacy is meant to focus on specific security issues and to adopt measures to reduce the risks of open conflict. Progress towards the second stage of development has been undermined by disagreements over the definition and scope of PD. Some participants regard preventive diplomacy as a more threatening form of cooperative security, as it might in some instances lead to a breach of national sovereignty. Consequently, many analysts have legitimately questioned whether the ARF will ever succeed to move towards its next stage of development.

Singapore's role as ASEAN Chair

As the current ASEAN and ARF chair, Singapore has a chance to influence the debates on preventive diplomacy. To maintain its relevance, the ARF should move beyond definitional and conceptual

discussions and seek instead to implement PD efforts in an attempt to reduce the risks of open conflict in specific areas. As a first step, such measures could be applied to cases where progress has already been attained through confidence-building initiatives. A first area of implementation could for instance be the South China Sea. The recent de-escalation of the Spratly dispute offers an opportunity for the ARF to discuss and put in place mechanisms to prevent possible clashes of arms among the claimant states.

The ARF certainly remains as important as ever in light of the great complexity of the contemporary security environment in the Asia-Pacific. Yet, to preserve its usefulness, the time has come for the ARF to be bold and move towards preventive diplomacy.

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