The ASEAN countries have manifested a marked preference for multilateral approaches to regional security problems. This preference stems primarily from three factors: the proliferation of transnational problems that cannot be solved at the national level, uncertainty about the future of the U.S. security role in the region,\(^1\) and the expectation that locking China into multilateral security arrangements might constrain its behavior and induce it to take greater account of ASEAN interests and sensitivities.\(^2\)

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), first held in July 1994 in Bangkok as a venue for multilateral dialogue on security issues in the Asia-Pacific region, is the institutional expression of the commitment to cooperative security. The ARF is an annual meeting (and associated processes) of 22 foreign ministers. The membership includes, in addition to the ASEAN countries, all major Asia-Pacific powers, including the United States, China, Japan, Russia, Korea, and Australia. Notwithstanding the ARF’s modest agenda and slow pace, there is no support elsewhere in the region for an alternative form of multilateral security cooperation. For better or worse, therefore, the ARF appears to be a permanent fixture on the Asian-Pacific landscape. In this context, what are the prospects that the ARF might

---


draw China into cooperative relations with its neighbors and contribute to regional strategic stability?

In considering the ARF’s potential for establishing an effective multilateral security regime, it is important to bear in mind that ASEAN launched the ARF initiative. It is not surprising, therefore, that these countries consciously styled the ARF’s institutional machinery after ASEAN’s goals, norms, procedures, and experiences. To the extent that ASEAN suffers from intrinsic defects as an effective subregional security organization, these limitations are mirrored in the ARF’s cooperative security arrangements.3

Although observers of the ARF tend to judge its success or failure in terms of whether it prevents conflicts or solves regional security problems, the founders of the ARF set far more modest objectives for their novel enterprise, perhaps reflecting their understanding of the formidable obstacles to true multilateral security cooperation. Unlike European security institutions such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and its successor organization, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the ARF is neither a negotiation process nor a collective security organization. Its objective is to improve the climate in which regional relations take place in an effort to manage bilateral and multilateral problems more effectively.4 This conception of the ARF’s purpose and utility is clearly reflected in the norms and functions established in the charter for the fledgling organization:

- The ARF was intended to evolve in three broad stages: the promotion of confidence-building, development of preventive diplomacy, and elaboration of approaches to conflict resolution.
- The ARF’s rules of procedures would be based on “ASEAN norms and practices.” Decisions would be made after careful and extensive consultations by consensus, without voting. In addition, the evolutionary approach of the ARF would progress “at a pace comfortable to all participants.”

---

4Lim.
• The ARF would play an essentially consultative security role, defined in comprehensive rather than narrow military terms, and would not try to impose solutions on its participants.

Within these parameters, therefore, the ARF’s multilateral dialogue on security issues has evolved in accordance with the political traditions and cultural characteristics of the “ASEAN way.” This distinctive approach to regional security emphasizes the process of building trust and confidence through consultation, dialogue, and transparency. Multilateral security cooperation is to be achieved incrementally, gradually, and informally, with primary emphasis on personal and political relationships rather than institutionalized arrangements. The ASEAN approach focuses on areas of common interest. Decisions are taken only by consensus and divisive issues are deferred for later resolution. This modus operandi has led one prominent Southeast Asian official to observe that “for the ARF, the process is just as important as any eventual agreement.”

ASEAN sensitivities to Chinese views regarding multilateral security cooperation have figured prominently in both the formulation of the ARF’s guiding principles and the evolution of the ARF’s practices and activities. Historically, participation in multilateral security arrangements has been anathema to Chinese leaders. This attitude reflects a realist view that China should rely on a balance of power to protect its security and avoid compromising Chinese freedom of action and sovereignty through entanglements in multilateral organizations. In the Southeast Asian context, China prefers to deal with security issues and problems on a bilateral basis, in which Beijing would retain a significant advantage vis-à-vis any individual ASEAN country. To ensure China’s regular participation in ARF proceed-

---

5 Almonte, pp. 81–82.
6 Evans, p. 211.
7 China has historically been cool to multilateral regional security arrangements. There have been recent indications, however, that Beijing has softened its opposition and is developing a “new security concept” for multilateral security cooperation that would gradually supplant the current regional security architecture, which is based on the U.S. bilateral alliances and American forward deployments. For details on the evolution of Chinese thinking on multilateral security arrangements for the Asia-Pacific region, see Banning Garrett and Bonnie Glaser, “Does China Want the U.S. Out of Asia?” CSIS Pacific Forum PacNet Newsletter, No. 22, May 30, 1997.
The Role of Southeast Asia in U.S. Strategy Toward China

The ASEAN countries have insisted that the ARF follow ASEAN’s format and procedures—which gives China a significant lever to slow the pace of ARF activities—and acceded to Chinese requests to refrain from institutionalizing ARF activities. 8

The ASEAN approach to regional security accounts in large measure for the difficulty it has experienced in forming a common approach to resolving the Spratly Islands problem. Most of the differences revolve around the priority that should be given to the form, structure, and content of discussions on cooperation in resolving the Spratly claims, and the role of external powers and international organizations in mediating the dispute. Not surprisingly, in light of divergent ASEAN views and China’s coolness toward multilateral or formal discussions on the Spratlys and internationalization of the issue, ASEAN’s approach has been weighted toward the path of least resistance. 9

Thus, the ASEAN strategy for conflict management in the South China Sea has revolved around participation since 1992 in Indonesian-sponsored informal, “unofficial” discussions of confidence-building measures (CBMs) and acceptance by the disputants of principles for resolving the conflict. The ASEAN approach appeared to produce results at the ARF meeting in Brunei in July 1995, where Chinese Foreign Minister Quian Quichen expressed China’s readiness to discuss the issue with ASEAN, thereby reversing China’s previous insistence that it would discuss it only bilaterally with individual states. Recent reports indicate, however, that China has gone back on its 1995 promise to discuss the dispute with all ASEAN claimants and has reverted to its original stand. 10

The 1992 “ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea” commits the signatories to use peaceful means to settle their disputes and to promote cooperation in joint development without prejudice to territorial claims. Nonetheless, this statement has had little practical effect.

---

The renunciation of force does not go beyond what ASEAN states agreed to in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. China proposed joint development of offshore oil resources, but Beijing violated the spirit if not the letter of this formula by granting a drilling concession unilaterally to an American oil company in 1992 in waters claimed by Vietnam. Moreover, even though China also renounced the use of force in settling the Spratlys dispute, the Chinese interpretation of this commitment did not preclude their seizure of the unoccupied Mischief Reef in 1995 or subsequent unilateral Chinese moves to improve military installations there.

Thus, even though the current process would at best take years to achieve solid results, if they can be achieved at all, most ASEAN states will be reluctant to abandon this forum until China shows clear signs that it is not prepared to cooperate. That said, ASEAN states have been pragmatic and flexible in giving concrete meaning to the ASEAN approach to conflict management and prevention, as evidenced by the defense and military links they have formed with outside powers and the rather slow pace at which the ASEAN states have attempted to build a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in the region.11

The ARF—or some other regional security architecture—may yet emerge as an effective mechanism for establishing regional order. However, the prospects for such a transformation in the immediate future are problematic at best. ASEAN’s failure to play a role of any kind in the region’s most serious crisis in recent years—the East Timor crisis of August/September 1999—induced many Southeast Asian security analysts to question the value of the organization as a regional security institution. For at least the next decade, the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region will be shaped primarily by the strategic interests of the major powers—the United States, China, and Japan. Barring a major shift in geopolitical relationships and the collapse of American political will and leadership, preserving

---

11 China has been adept at stirring ASEAN hopes that multilateral dialogue on regional security issues, especially the dispute over the Spratlys, will bear fruit. Beijing, for example, has co-chaired ARF working group meetings with the Philippines on military CBMs and in 1996 the countries concluded an agreement on notification of military exercises. The publication in 1998 of the new Chinese Defense White Paper also represented another, albeit modest, step forward in transparency for the secretive PLA.
a strategic equilibrium in Southeast Asia will depend on U.S. bilateral security commitments and the maintenance of a balance of power based on deterrence and U.S. military might, and on the ability and willingness of the United States to contribute to preserving regional order and stability.