THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM. A MODEL FOR COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Canberra
March 1998

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication Entry

Leifer, Michael
The ASEAN Regional Forum. A Model for Cooperative Security in the Middle East?.


355.0310959

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ABSTRACT

An examination of the particular circumstances which permitted the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and its subsequent record, suggest that in the case of the Middle East far greater progress towards resolving regional conflicts would be necessary before any such forum for multilateral security dialogue could be established there. The paper highlights the central role of ASEAN in the ARF and the reasons why it has been accepted by the major powers, and the potential, but above all the limitations, of the security dialogue as shown in the meetings of the ARF up to the present.
THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM. A MODEL FOR
COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST?¹

Michael Leifer

The Origins and Nature of the ARF

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a multilateral security dialogue among twenty-one states extending through Asia and the Pacific from India to North America.² It was inaugurated at a meeting of foreign ministers in Singapore in July 1993 and held its first working session at the same level in Bangkok in July 1994. The ARF has been concerned primarily with confidence-building as a way of promoting a stable regional order rather than engaging directly in dispute settlement, for example. Beyond that, its participants have expressed the ambition to undertake preventive diplomacy and engage in the ‘elaboration of approaches to conflicts’ (as opposed to developing mechanisms for conflict resolution). The ASEAN Regional Forum takes its name, in part, from the acronym for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations which was set up in Bangkok in August 1967 by five regional governments.³ It was the geographically more limited ASEAN which assumed the initiative in promoting the formation of the ARF. Moreover, ASEAN has been able to establish and sustain a position of diplomatic centrality within the Forum expressed in a

¹ This paper is a revised version of a lecture given in June 1997 at a workshop at the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, which was supported financially by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. It is reproduced with the kind permission of the Jaffee Centre.

² The initial membership was, in alphabetical order: Australia, Brunei, Canada, China, the European Union, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, the United States, Thailand, and Vietnam. Cambodia was admitted in 1995 and India and Myanmar in 1996.

³ The founding members were: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei was admitted in 1984 and Vietnam in 1995. The timetable to admit Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar simultaneously in 1997 was interrupted by a coup in Phnom Penh in July. Cambodia’s membership was postponed and only Laos and Myanmar were admitted then.
recognition of the Association’s self-assumed obligation to be ‘the primary
driving force’ of the multilateral enterprise.

The ARF is historically unique in its geographic scope and in the locus
of its founding initiative. Such an extensive structure of security dialogue, which
includes all the major regional powers, has never before existed within the
Asia–Pacific. In addition, the initiative for such a concert-type arrangement
concerned with regional order has normally been associated with a managerial
class of states and not with lesser ones, into which rough category virtually
every ASEAN member falls. The explanation for both the geographic scope
and the locus of initiative for the ARF may be found in regional circumstances
at the end of the Cold War. The manner in which the Cold War had come to an
end enabled a settlement of the Cambodian conflict which had been the
defining intra-regional confrontation during the course of the 1980s. ASEAN
had played a prime diplomatic role during that conflict in challenging
Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia and the legitimacy of the government
installed in Phnom Penh. In the event, the Association was pushed to the
sidelines in the ultimate process of conflict resolution effected at an interna-
tional conference in Paris in October 1991, primarily through the collective
efforts of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.
Subsequently, the Association has faced a relatively benign security environ-
ment, but one which was also in a disturbing state of flux.

With the end of the Cold War, the pattern of alignments which had
underpinned ASEAN’s measure of diplomatic prowess over Cambodia began
to change in a way which reflected a revised structure of regional interests.
That registration of prowess had, in effect, concealed a limitation of the
regional Southeast Asian role which had begun to be exposed with the
settlement of the Cambodian conflict. In facing up to the limitations of that
role, the governments of ASEAN were not driven by any shared sense of
imminent tangible threat. Their prime concern was how to cope with an
uncertain security environment expressed in a changing regional balance or
distribution of power. The direction of their shifting attentions was signalled at
the fourth meeting of ASEAN’s heads of government meeting in Singapore in
January 1992 at which a landmark decision was taken to address security
cooperation openly through ‘external dialogue’. It recommended that ‘ASEAN
should intensify its external dialogues in political and security matters by using
the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences’—an annual meeting between the
Association’s foreign ministers and counterparts from industrialised states
 accorded the status of ‘dialogue partner’. That mandate was taken up by
ASEAN’s foreign ministries with the ultimate result being the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

At issue in concerns over the changing balance of power was the likely revision in regional priorities and military deployments of the United States, especially in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the extent to which a rising China, free of the hostile attentions of a global adversary, might seek to exploit a new-found strategic latitude to advance its extensive southerly maritime claims. A collateral set of concerns arising from the possibility of a fundamental change of American policy, signalled by its withdrawal from military bases in the Philippines, was the prospect of Japan reconsidering its comprehensive defence doctrine in the direction of a more conventional and assertive military role which had the potential for reviving Sino-Japanese tensions in an acute form. The course and conclusion of the Cambodian conflict had foreshadowed a geopolitical fusion between Northeast and Southeast Asia which had been pointed up by China’s assertion of extensive claims within the South China Sea. In that strategic context, ASEAN’s governments, which had long held a prerogative approach to regional order, found themselves obliged to come to terms with the limitations of their collective security role. Indeed, although ASEAN as a multilateral security dialogue had repudiated conventional defence cooperation from the outset, its members shared the judgement that a continuing American military presence, together with stable relations among the three major Asia–Pacific powers, were necessary conditions for a viable regional order.

At a seminal meeting of senior officials from ASEAN and its ‘dialogue partners’ which convened in Singapore in May 1993 and which led on to the formation of the ARF, this view was explicitly articulated. It was observed that: ‘The continuing presence of the United States, as well as stable relationships among the United States, Japan, and China and other states of the region would contribute to regional stability’. When the inaugural meeting of the ARF was convened in Singapore in July 1993 at a working dinner of eighteen foreign ministers, the declared common objective was to develop ‘a predictable and constructive pattern of relationships in the Asia–Pacific’. The object of the multilateral exercise was to enable the countries of the wider region to adjust peacefully to those changes in the regional balance or distribution of power set in train as a consequence of the end of the Cold War. To that end, the ARF was established in recognition of the old adage that for every solution, there is likely to be a problem.
The ARF was formally set up through an agreed chairman’s statement and not through a treaty setting out mutual obligations. It was based on ASEAN’s model of regional security whereby a structure of dialogue has served as both a framework and a process for conflict avoidance and management, although some governments entertained initial expectations of engaging in dispute settlement. Like ASEAN before it, the ARF was neither a vehicle for collective defence nor for collective security. It was not defined with reference to any kind of conventional military or economic act of sanction which could be invoked in response to violations of agreed norms of international conduct, although it was certainly an attempt to promote a shared view of, and respect for, such norms. Although some participating governments were involved in conventional forms of defence cooperation which ante-dated the end of the Cold War, there was an absence of a regional constituency for any extension of such cooperation, in part because of the lack of a common strategic perspective or shared sense of external threat.

Seen from the outside, the regional security model inferred from ASEAN’s institutional experience may best be described as that of cooperative security which is sought in collaboration with others, as opposed to against others. Such a model, albeit not articulated explicitly, was at the core of the initiative for the ARF contemplated as an inclusive undertaking with China’s participation an imperative matter, in the light of its irredentist agenda and rising power. The pragmatic view obtained that it would be foolhardy to seek to contain a rising China, especially one which had begun to engage closely with the international economy. China had earlier joined in the multilateral Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) which had become an institutional expression of the dynamism of the burgeoning Asian economies. It was judged that the economic priorities, including an expressed interest in a stable peripheral environment, of a modernising China would serve as an incentive for the People’s Republic to work in active cooperation with its new-found regional partners. Indeed, the ARF was envisaged as the security analogue of APEC. Correspondingly, APEC was envisaged as providing the economic underpinning for the stable evolution of the ARF.

The ARF had attracted America’s interest just as Washington’s long-standing preference for bilateral security arrangements gave way to an interest in multilateral cooperation much encouraged by the break-up of the Soviet Union. The ARF was regarded as a complementary way of addressing regional

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security interests without sacrificing proven bilateral relationships and taking on additional expensive and controversial military commitments. This was also the great attraction for Japan. China was naturally suspicious of the multilateral undertaking, given its strong Western provenance, but the People’s Republic could not afford to remain outside of the extensive multilateral structure. Moreover, ASEAN’s prominent part in its formation mitigated that concern. Indeed, the ability of ASEAN to play a managerial role was a function of a realisation that China would be hostile to any comparable initiative by either the United States and Japan, for example. In the event, the ARF came about without a great diplomatic wrangle because of the extent to which the participating governments were not torn by a defining regional issue of conflict and also because the political costs of participation were deemed not to be of any substance.

**Differences of regional context**

The ARF is a multilateral security dialogue among states which are not riven by an acute pattern of contending alignments which was the experience of East Asia, including Southeast Asia, during the concurrent courses of the last phase of the Cold War and the Cambodian conflict. It expresses in institutional form the end of a defining regional conflict and the onset of a period of transition in the condition of the regional balance or distribution of power. In that respect, the circumstances of East Asia at the end of the twentieth century are very different from those of the Middle East after the Oslo Peace Accords, despite the significant measure of improvement in Israel’s relations with Jordan, for example.

Outstanding irredentisms still obtain in East Asia in the cases of Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and the islands of the South China Sea but, so far, they have not been expressed in any acute regional polarisation. For example, there is no regional equivalent of the problem of Palestine whereby assertions of national identity by a people with an acute sense of dispossession are registered with reference to contested territory which attracts external support. Nor are there, with the qualified exception of Taiwan which does not enjoy conventional international status, any challenges to the legitimacy of regional states of the kind posed to Israel by Iran and Iraq and to a degree by Syria. The ARF is an embryonic structure of relations which it has been possible to establish because polarising issues of conflict within East Asia have either been resolved or have been set aside for the time being because they remain subordinate to other more pressing priorities. East Asia is also different from the Middle East
because it is the locale of a rising regional power with a hegemonic potential but about which there is an absence of strategic consensus which explains the attraction of the model of cooperative security. It is possible, however, to compare one feature of East Asia with that of the Middle East with reference to the countervailing role of the United States registered, for example, in its act of military display off the coast of Taiwan in March 1996 and in Washington’s public commitment to freedom of navigation through the South China Sea. That said, the United States does not enjoy the same mediating role in East Asia that it has sought to play in the Middle East from its post-Cold War unipolar status. The fact of the matter is that the two sets of regional circumstances are notably different. The ARF, in its all-inclusive remit, is a security vehicle, of however limited efficacy, which could only have been realistically established in the wake of the kind of conflict resolution which has marked the end of the Cold War in East Asia. The advent of the ARF reflects that resolution and also acknowledges that the solution to a conflict can give rise to new problems which are not necessarily susceptible to conventional approaches to security.

The Middle East has yet to arrive at such a fortunate condition. Indeed, fundamental to the difference between East Asia and the Middle East in locus of initiative for a regional security structure has been the nature and fact of political life of an entity such as ASEAN which has assumed a diplomatic centrality in the wider multilateral enterprise. From the very outset, ASEAN has sought to express regional reconciliation in institutionalised form, albeit without the structured approaches to confidence-building adopted by the ARF. ASEAN’s formation in August 1967 constituted a notable act of reconciliation between Indonesia and Malaysia, in particular. Indeed, every stage in its enlargement has constituted an act of reconciliation of some kind. Brunei’s entry in January 1984 was such an act with reference to Indonesia and Malaysia, while Vietnam’s entry in July 1995 was an act of reconciliation of historic proportions in the light of the degree of regional polarisation during the 1980s. ASEAN’s timetable for completing its enlargement to include all ten states of geographic Southeast Asia in late July 1997 was interrupted by a coup in Cambodia earlier that month but a driving motive in that abortive enterprise was to sustain the momentum of reconciliation among states whose enmities ante-date colonial intervention. Despite Israel’s relationships with Egypt and Jordan, the Middle East has not reached the stage of a corresponding formative act of reconciliation expressed in the kind of multilateralism exemplified by ASEAN which has served in turn as the model for the wider ARF experiment.
The ARF in structure and performance

The ARF is barely an institution in its current embryonic structure. Its lacks a secretariat, so far, as well as a geographic locus of permanent activity. It is very much a peripatetic entity governed by ASEAN’s diplomatic cycle whereby member governments take it in turn each year to head the Standing Committee, which plays the key role in organising political cooperation, and the annual meetings of senior officials and of foreign ministers. Indeed, the ARF is tied inextricably to ASEAN which provides the chair for its annual working sessions, and for those of its senior officials which negotiate the draft of the Chairman’s statement which serves as a final communiqué. In this privileged position, ASEAN is well placed to influence, albeit not to dictate, the ARF’s agenda. Moreover, an ASEAN government provides the co-chair for all inter-sectinal meetings among officials dealing in turn, so far, with disaster relief, confidence-building measures, search and rescue coordination and cooperation and also peacekeeping operations. In the specific case of the meeting on confidence-building measures, the term inter-sectinal support group has been used deliberately in order to avoid the impression of a permanent activity as a concession to Chinese concerns about being drawn into a multilateral entanglement against their interests. Indeed, in response to this kind of concern, the ARF is comprised of ‘participants’ as opposed to ‘members’ as is the case with ASEAN.

ASEAN has also been able to set terms of reference for the ARF through a ‘Concept Paper’ which was prepared ostensibly by Brunei’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the second working session held in the Sultanate in August 1995. The Concept Paper marked a shift away from a declared informality which had been the hallmark of ASEAN’s dialogue process. It identified standard norms by which the ARF should function as well as outlining its ideal evolution in three stages, beginning with that of confidence-building. In stressing the need for a gradual evolutionary approach to managing security, two complementary approaches were recommended. The first drew explicitly on ASEAN’s modalities and experience in reducing tensions and promoting regional cooperation through informal processes ‘without the implementation of explicit confidence-building measures’. The second approach was based on seeking to implement concrete confidence-building measures drawn from two lists of proposals submitted from the first working session in Bangkok. They were to be addressed in turn, according to their complexity and degree of difficulty, by official ARF participants in their own right and by non-governmental groups drawn from national think-tanks and academic bodies organised institutionally within the Council for Security and Cooperation in the
Asia Pacific (CSCAP). These two sets of groups have become known respectively and colloquially as ‘track one’ and ‘track two’. In point of fact, the lines between the two have become blurred as a number of governments have established the practice of sending the equivalent of official representatives to track two meetings with well-defined mandates which is an indication of the importance attached to such occasions.

In addition to registering ASEAN’s diplomatic centrality, the paper stipulated that the rules of procedure of the ARF should be based on the Association’s ‘norms and practices and that decisions should be made by consensus and without voting after careful and extensive consultation’. Moreover, it was recommended that ‘the ARF should also progress at a pace comfortable to all participants’. The key notion introduced by the Concept Paper was that of ‘comfortable’ which expressed the essence of security culture. The attempt to stamp ASEAN’s propriety hallmark on the ARF did generate a measure of resistance from some participants, however. For example, in the Chairman’s statement to the meeting in Brunei in August 1995, a number of proposals were adopted only ‘in the context of the Concept

And while a reference to ASEAN self-assumed obligation ‘to be the primary driving force’ of the ARF was reiterated, it was preceded, and not followed as in the text of the Concept Paper, by the recognition that a successful ARF required ‘the active, full and equal participation and cooperation of all participants’. In addition, some governments within Northeast Asia have resented the lack of a separate sub-regional security dialogue, despite the fact that its absence has been a function of regional circumstances and not of ASEAN’s doing. That said, the major Asia–Pacific powers, and especially China, have not been sufficiently troubled by ASEAN’s diplomatic assertiveness to take issue with it, even though Japan and the United States, for example, among others, have held the private view that its centrality should be transitional only and that, in time, the ASEAN Regional Forum should give way in nomenclature to the Asian or Asia–Pacific Regional Forum. For China, however, ASEAN’s diplomatic centrality has been preferred as an expression of multi-polarity after the end of the Cold War. Such a view was indicated also by India when it joined the ARF in 1996 because of a common concern with the implications of America’s unipolar status. Irrespective of any underlying differences over the role assumed by ASEAN, its prescription for the ARF’s mode of operation was adopted without dissent. An essentially consultative

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security function was identified for the Forum which was defined in comprehensive terms beyond solely military aspects, while it was made abundantly clear that the ARF would not be used to impose solutions on participants involved in contention. To that end, the language of the Concept Paper was employed in the Chairman’s statement to the effect that ‘the ARF process shall move at a pace comfortable to all participants’.

The ARF is a limited activity in temporal terms. Its first working session began with a three-hour meeting which has since been expanded to a whole day preceded by a working dinner on the previous evening. The substance of the Chairman’s statement is drawn up at a prior meeting of senior officials, in the main permanent heads of their respective foreign ministries, with a collective ASEAN input before then organised through the government holding the current chair of the Association’s Standing Committee. The value of this procedure, which does not cast the final statement in concrete, is that the annual working session permits free ranging discussion and an opportunity for a collegial tone to develop. Controversy has not been avoided, for example, in the case of the South China Sea, but negotiations on specific issues do not take place. Regional problems tend to be addressed in general terms with the underlying object of the exercise being to keep the process of dialogue going so that potential miscreants among the participating governments may be constrained because of an underlying expectation of incurring political opportunity costs.

The East Asian security process is very different from that identified in the Oslo Accords, for example. It is a process without a corresponding commitment to a political route map. Indeed, it is located in a totally different context. In the case of the ARF, there is an absence of a defined conflict comparable to that in the Middle East for which a set process has been prescribed as a way to a solution. A process obtains only in terms of identifying stages of institutional evolution but without reference to a specific conflict and, so far, without much evidence of tangible progress. Within the ARF, dialogue is best contemplated as a process through which norm-observing political socialisation may take place. Process in that sense is not, in itself, a basis for regional order. For example, there is a conspicuous total absence of any mechanisms for addressing particular disputes. Indeed, plans for developing such mechanisms have been deliberately shelved at China’s insistence.

The ARF is also restricted in its remit. For example, it cannot place the problem of Taiwan on its agenda. Unlike APEC, Taiwan does not enjoy representation in the ARF which China would certainly oppose to the point of
withdrawing from the multilateral enterprise, while China would also object to any attempt to discuss a matter, such as Taiwan, which is regarded as being exclusively within its domestic jurisdiction. The Korean Peninsula has been the subject of regular general exhortations of an encouraging nature by the ARF, but the government in Pyongyang has yet to become a participant. In the meantime, the practical problems of maintaining stability have been addressed first at a bilateral level, with the United States taking the lead in dealing with North Korea over the military implications of nuclear power generation, and second, in promoting four power talks involving also China and South Korea which began only in August 1997. As indicated above, the complex issue of jurisdiction over islands in the South China Sea has been addressed but only in general terms and with respect to the modalities which should be adopted in pursuit of competing claims, but the key issue of sovereignty has been avoided, so far. And Chinese concessions in this realm have been ones of form and not of any substance. The experience of an Indonesian-inspired exercise in preventive diplomacy in the form of workshops on reducing potential conflicts in the South China Sea at track two level outside of the remit of the ARF has not been encouraging.

The inter-sessional meetings of the ARF have, in the main, been symptomatic of the condition of the more critical relationships among the participants within the ARF, especially between the United States and China. They all serve a confidence-building function, in principle and to a degree in practice. The regular meeting on peacekeeping would seem to have a general relevance rather than a specific regional application among states that would be unlikely to engage in peacekeeping in Asia–Pacific other than under United Nations auspices. The meetings on disaster relief and on search and rescue coordination have a self-evident utility in terms of declared purpose, and also have a useful collateral role in bringing together members of different armed forces which may serve the cause of confidence-building. The key inter-sessional activity is the Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures which has not made substantive progress since it began work at a meeting in Tokyo in January 1996, co-chaired by Indonesia and Japan. Moreover, the meeting in Beijing in March 1997, co-chaired by China and the Philippines, proved to be a discordant occasion with a tone of confrontation displayed, in particular, between representatives of China and the United States. The conclusion of the

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summary report that ‘[t]he participants had lively and productive discussions in a frank and cordial atmosphere’? was a piece of imaginative diplomatic phrasing. Beyond employing euphemisms to conceal the row that had ensued over military transparency and observer participation in military exercises as well as over America’s interpretation of its regional security role, the report devoted itself to a list of items on which either exchanges of views or exchanges of information had taken place but without being able to record any substantive progress, for example, on declarations to the UN Register of Conventional Arms. The meeting was distinguished, however, by the attendance in most delegations of defence officials which was extended to the following annual working session in Kuala Lumpur in July.

That session in July 1997 found itself caught up with the controversy over the prior violent coup in Cambodia in which ASEAN had a special interest because of its past diplomatic role and commitment to the Paris Peace Accords of October 1991 and the attendant constitutional structure. Indeed, that issue took up most of the time for discussion so that little was added to the senior officials’ draft, with the exception of a laconic paragraph on Cambodia in which concern was expressed over the latest developments and a welcome was extended to ASEAN’s role in helping to restore political stability. In the case of Cambodia, the ARF was willing to support the initiative of its ASEAN core, partly because it was an easy option in the circumstances and also because none of the participants saw the outcome of the coup as an issue in the regional balance of power. There was a total absence of any interest in reviving any process of competitive intervention which had been the experience of Indochina during the Cold War. However, that decision also reflected a considered attempt by the United States and China to repair their bilateral relationship in advance of a visit to Washington later in the year by President Jiang Zemin. That measure of collaboration had a notable affect on the overall tone of the meeting and served to confirm an initial premise about the importance of the contribution to regional stability of the relationships among the major Asia-Pacific powers. In that respect, the Sino-American relationship would seem to be critical, above all, to the progress of the ARF. In a state of disrepair, it is bound to obstruct the constructive evolution of the Forum as a structured dialogue for addressing the climate of regional relations.

The ARF is a minimalist structure of an embryonic kind which profits, however, from the participants general stake in a peaceful environment which

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underpins an increasing range of economic opportunities. Beyond that, as one would expect, its diverse participants have mixed particular interests. For that reason, and it is obliged to work by consensus, it cannot be expected to adopt a robust approach to regional security. Indeed, the extensive scale and diversity of participation makes consensus-building a far more difficult exercise than within ASEAN, especially in its earlier quasi-familial form based on very close personal contact and a relatively homogeneous set of political outlooks. The ARF offers an opportunity to develop and build on personal ties but on a far more restricted basis because of the problems of scale and time involved. Its condition remains embryonic, however, which was well demonstrated by the anodyne statement issued by the Chairman in July 1997 on the future direction of the ARF process which merits reproduction. It declared that:

The Ministers agreed that the evolutionary approach to the development of the ARF process and the practice of taking decisions by consensus shall be maintained, taking into consideration the interests of all ARF participants and, at the same time, demonstrating the continued consolidation of the process through increased activities in relevant areas.  

That statement preceded a concluding paragraph which authorised consideration of a conflation of confidence-building and preventive diplomacy measures, where they overlapped, by the next Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures. Realising that aspiration would seem to be a highly problematic undertaking given the very limited success, so far, in promoting quite limited confidence-building measures alone.

Prospect

It is important to avoid making judgements about the ARF based on false criteria. The ARF is a cumbersome security structure of a limited kind which expresses a lowest common denominator of commitment among a large and diverse group of states. It is a reflection of special regional circumstances attendant on the end of the Cold War and the removal through conflict resolution of a defining issue which had polarised Southeast Asia politically. It represents an attempt to take advantage of a relatively benign security environment at a time of strategic transition and accompanying uncertainty. Although the ARF has not been able to proceed beyond discussion of confidence-building measures and, in principle, of preventive diplomacy without engaging in that

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8 Statement of the Chairman of the Fourth ASEAN Regional Forum, Subang Jaya, Malaysia, 27 July 1997, p. 11.
practice, a general interest obtains among the diverse participants in sustaining the process of dialogue in its different forms. At issue is the extent to which the ARF is only a valuable adjunct to the workings of the balance of power, or is more constructively ‘a mechanism for defusing the conflictual by-products of power-balancing practices’.  

Irrespective of the judgement made, ASEAN has an obvious proprietorial stake in the undertaking which serves to uphold its international standing and to protect its claim to a prerogative regional role. The major Asia–Pacific powers have also come to value the undertaking up to a point. For China, for example, participation serves to overcome a diplomatic isolation on the part of a rising power which does not have any close special international relationships. Moreover, China has been adept at learning and employing the rules of the ARF and so controlling the pace at which the multilateral dialogue proceeds in its own interest. For its part, the United States regards the ARF as a useful complement to a set of more robust bilateral security arrangements which, in the main, have stood the test of time. For example, the manner in which US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, conducted herself at the annual working session in Kuala Lumpur in July 1997, suggests that the ARF has come to be regarded as a useful supplementary vehicle through which to prosecute Washington’s policy of engagement with China. Japan, which played an important part in promoting multilateral security dialogue, has viewed the ARF as a way of avoiding having to make fundamental changes in its own defence policy which would be highly controversial both domestically and regionally.

The question which hovers over the form and limited record of the ARF is to what extent does the multilateral undertaking fulfil the requirements of the trades description act? Is it fit for its declaratory purpose? The answer based on its performance so far is, only up to a point. The ARF is viewed generally among its participants as a useful, relatively cost-free, way of providing additional points of diplomatic contact and even securing an attendant conformity to standard international norms with the prospect of arriving at some kind of security regime. At issue is whether or not the ARF has been at all instrumental in acting to transform the climate of regional relations. Can the institution develop a culture of cooperation which assumes a life of its own? Or is the ARF little more than a reflection of an existing state of international

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affairs and, therefore, only a mirror of regional relations? On balance, it would seem to be an expression of the latter circumstance, although it should be pointed out that the ARF is available for use by governments should they be so inclined. To that extent, the role of the ARF is likely to be symptomatic of the state of the relations and political wills of the key governments concerned.

The ARF, however unique, imaginative and constructive, is an extremely diverse multilateral entity in terms of both political identities and interests. It has been established on the basis of a lowest common denominator of consensus which was well pointed up by China’s Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen, in Brunei in August 1995. He explained that:

The Chinese side advocates the development of regional cooperation in security matters in the spirit of dealing with issues in ascending order of difficulty, and of seeking common ground while reserving differences.\(^{10}\)

For China, cooperation in security matters would be entertained only on the basis of consensus and in non-contentious areas. To that extent, the ARF was not envisaged as guiding China in a direction in which it did not wish to proceed. The United States is no more readily disposed to be led against its interests by a multilateral body. The difference between China and the United states within the ARF is that the former has less of a stake in the regional status quo than the latter. Indeed, this is a matter at issue within the ARF as a whole and, in a fundamental respect, the *raison d’être* for the multilateral dialogue which is subject to a built-in tension because of its inherent diversity.

When the ARF was set up at the initiative of ASEAN states with support from Australia and Japan, among others, there was an undeclared interest in using the multilateral enterprise in support of an acceptable balance or distribution of power. It was seen as complementary to pre-existing bilateral security arrangements involving the United States and, therefore, as a way of providing an additional incentive for the United States to sustain its countervailing regional military presence. It was also designed to avoid any tendency towards a containment of China and to encourage the People’s Republic of the virtues of good regional citizenship. For its part, however, the government of China is not well disposed to those complementary security arrangements, especially that between the United States and Japan which has been the subject of revised guidelines following a visit to Tokyo by President Clinton in April 1996. China does not regard the ARF as a necessary complement to any mutual security treaty involving the United States but

\(^{10}\) *Xinhua News Agency*, 1 August 1995.
rather as a vehicle for promoting a desired multipolarity in a post-Cold War world. The somewhat differing perceptions of the ARF on the part of the key participants on whom its viability depends, is indicative of the problem of managing an inherent tension within the undertaking and of the task of promoting regional security through the modality of dialogue. It has been suggested, however, that to the extent that a country like China seeks to employ the vehicle of the ARF to challenge America’s alliance system in Asia–Pacific, it is likely to find itself more encumbered by international norms and, therefore, more accountable for its actions within the region. Evidence of such encumbrance will undoubtedly be a test of the efficacy of the multilateral dialogue.

The ARF is a geographic extension of ASEAN’s model of regional security which was based on a commitment to reconciliation, above all, by Indonesia which had given up an adventurist foreign policy for one geared to economic development. ASEAN’s degree of success has not been a function of the modality of dialogue alone. It has derived, in great part, from an initial willingness by a potential but economically prostrate hegemon to give up challenging the regional status quo and to work to build confidence and to inspire trust among new-found partners through a self-abnegating political role. ASEAN evolved gradually among a small group of politically like-minded states aided greatly by Indonesia’s redefinition of its regional role in the wake of Confrontation. The ARF was also established in the wake of conflict resolution but one of a different order. Within Southeast Asia, the momentum for reconciliation was revived with Vietnam’s membership of ASEAN. Within the wider Asia–Pacific in one important respect, however, multilateral dialogue has represented accommodation rather than reconciliation with China in the mid-1990s, a very different condition to Indonesia in the mid-1960s.

At the time of the advent of the ARF, China was not only moving vigorously along the road to economic modernisation but was also in the process of replacing a Marxist with a nationalist identity. That registration of identity has been expressed in a reaffirmation of an irredentist agenda justified in terms of restoring the country to its rightful international place after a long period of humiliation. China, which is generally regarded as the regional power with the potential to assert a regional hegemonic position has not, so far, shown Indonesia’s degree of political forbearance in its practice of regional cooperation which has been registered in its steely position on jurisdiction in

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the South China Sea. Because of that key difference, the ARF faces greater impediments in the way of it serving as a fruitful model of cooperative security in replication of ASEAN’s earlier experience and record. Moreover, even ASEAN’s model has begun to be called into question as the diversity attendant on its enlargement, and the problems of consensus-building exposed over trying to respond to the coup in Cambodia, have placed a strain on the cohesion and credibility of the Association.¹²

The ARF provides a structure for dialogue and constraint which participant states may employ for constructive purposes should they deem it in their interests to do so. To that extent, it provides a mirror of a regional dimension of international society and also an opportunity for building security in an East Asia in strategic transition. That opportunity exists, however, in a way that does not obtain, as yet, in the case of the Middle East.

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