



Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies

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ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF): What can Bangladesh expect from this security platform?

The end of the cold war led to the quest for newer forms of security arrangements and multilateralism received greater attention than before. In the case of the Asia –Pacific region, such a multilateral structure emerged in July 1994 in the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which is gradually evolving into a platform for the promotion of regional security, stability and tranquility. The ARF has brought together twenty-seven member states— Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Indonesia, Japan, Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Russian Federation, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor Leste, United States, and Vietnam with very diverse political systems, military strength and level of economic development. No other political or security arrangement covers as large and as diverse terrain as the ARF. More to the point, the ARF process embraces states with widely diverging strategic perceptions and priorities, threat perceptions and defense doctrines.

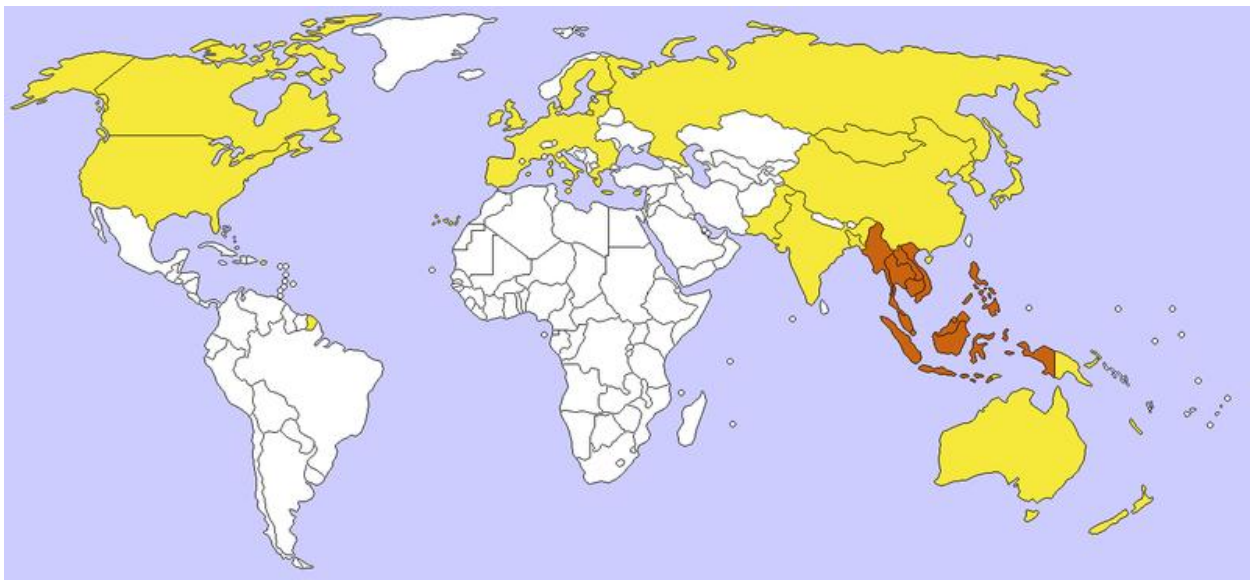


Figure: ASEAN in orange and ASEAN Regional Forum participants in yellow

Achievements and failures

The ARF process allows small and middle powers a significant voice in major regional security affairs and bars the major powers from dominating and dictating the security agenda. The very fact that these states can now come together on a common platform for the resolution and discussion of security issues is an achievement. Moreover, the ARF has succeeded in bring to the forefront various issues related to the security concerns in the region which poses challenges to the security outlook. Several issues have touched notably on non-traditional security issues and cross-border security issues such as terrorism, trafficking in persons, smuggling, global climatic change and its impact on human and societal security, food and energy security. Other issues briefly touched on are the situation in North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan and the territorial claims in the South China Sea.

At present, pertinent security challenges facing Asia-Pacific include a number of urgent issues embracing North Korea and Myanmar; to press North Korea to live up to its international obligations and in case of Myanmar to put in place the necessary conditions for credible elections including releasing all political prisoners, especially Aung San Suu Kyi, respecting basic human rights, and ceasing attacks against their ethnic minorities. It is critically important that Myanmar hear from its neighbours about the need to abide by its commitments, under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, to fulfill its IAEA safeguards obligations and complies with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1874 and 1718 respectively.

Other important themes include climate change, trading and economic integration, democracy and human rights, Afghanistan, Middle East peace process, natural disaster management, pandemics, counter-terrorism and transnational crime. Most ARF member countries consider an all out war between states improbable particularly against the backdrop of economic recession. However, tensions persist on issues such as the South China Sea disputes. Major focus is on: -

- Challenges to Security in the Asia-Pacific;
- Moving from Dialogue to Practical Co-operation: Regional Efforts to Enhance Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) when regional countries are tested notably on disaster relief issues.

The ARF has contained the potential of the threat from China and provided a deterrent against the possible future emergence of militarism from Japan. It has also usefully engaged the US and Russia in a multilateral forum. Within the ARF, all the other member states can keep a watchful eye on the development and ambitions of the four major powers-US, Russia, China, Japan –in the Asia Pacific region .In this respect, the ARF constitutes the key mechanism for maintaining peace and security in this vast region. The opportunity for discussing security issues of the Asia-Pacific region at the only multilateral security forum has been equally useful. It enabled the

member states to have exchanges in an open and frank manner thus contributing to a better 'comfort level' among them.

But at the same time the coin has its other side. ARF does not adequately meet the needs of the region as a whole. There is no particular virtue in preserving the status quo for its own sake; more than anything else it is inertia and the inherent difficulty of taking multilateral diplomacy into new areas that preserves it. Increasingly, the issue that is coming into focus is the modalities of just how a comprehensive framework for regional engagement might be developed from the status quo.

Proponents and critics of ARF describe the consultative forum as either the Asian NATO or an ineffectual talk shop. There is little likelihood that major problems will be fully resolved by the ARF. In East Asia, the US is seen by allies such as Japan and South Korea as a useful counterweight to China. There are other states in the region including Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Cambodia that have various degrees of security relations with the United States. They all conduct military exercises and exchanges with the US. The point about their attitude to the US is that virtually all South East Asian states see the US as a useful regional balancer. They would be alarmed if the US were to cease its regional security role. They would feel much more exposed to China's power as she expands economically and becomes more confident diplomatically and even militarily and strategically. At the same time, anti-US sentiment is growing in Japan because of the Okinawa issue and in South Korea among the young generation. This can effect the US's security calculation relating to the ARF in the long run. The challenge for ARF and its participants is to implement border security and documentation practices that confront the terrorist threat without undermining basic principles that promote common security of this region, including respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Most of its ASEAN partners and Bangladesh deserve credit for launching a meaningful initiative that could in the long run lead to translating Asia's vast diversity into a splendid mosaic of opportunity and unity through meaningful engagement. ARF provides Asian nations, big or small, rich or poor to take advantage of participating in a shared future of prosperity. The time for Asia to bond together seems to have finally arrived. However, reality does not match this potential.

Examining the reports and minutes from the ASEAN Regional Forum's three-day meeting held in March, 2010 to discuss confidence-building measures and development of preventive diplomacy in Vietnam's central province of Khanh Hoa, doesn't inculcate much confidence in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). That's why no one was particularly disappointed that there were no great breakthroughs in resolving the recurrent problems of Myanmar and North Korea, which, as expected, dominated discussions at the high-level meetings. Delegates focused on the preparations for the ARF Senior Officials Meeting (ARF SOM) in May and the ARF Ministerial Meeting in July this year.

The ARF has no enforcement powers and is not a security community, collective defense or collective security mechanism. Yet, it has promoted dialogue on the Spratlys and Korean denuclearization through the Six –Party Talks .It also advanced confidence-building, encouraged participation in the UN register of conventional weapons, and enhanced maritime information exchanges as well.

The ARF may be credited with supporting the basic objectives of ruling coalitions to preserve peace and stability, a prerequisite for East Asia’s emergence as the engine of the 21st century global economy. However, the cooperative security ideology and consensus principles of the ARF have been important in developing habits of cooperation even without material threats, socializing China to accept the legitimacy of multilateralism, transparency and reassurance.

The states in the region are sometimes portrayed as having a unified stance: they are eager to develop closer political and economic relations with China, while maintaining a preference for strong U.S. military and strategic involvement, as a hedge against the possible failure of engagement with China. But there is in fact a range of views and expectations on this issue. Within the new context of counter-terrorism, there are rising worries about the implications of a trend towards unilateralism in American foreign policy. At the same time, China has adopted a more assertive Southeast Asian policy with a decade of successful diplomacy and deepening economic links. These trends present complications and opportunities for Southeast Asian countries, creating important emerging differences in their regional security strategies.

Bangladesh in ARF

In 2006, Bangladesh joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).Bangladesh shares a short stretch of but common boundary with Myanmar, a Southeast Asian country. It is also pursuing the policy of developing close ties with Southeast Asia and East Asia. Bangladesh is a member of BIMSTEC, a sub-regional grouping for economic cooperation of a few countries from South and Southeast Asia. Bangladesh is also a member of Track II Kunming Initiative of four countries, namely, Myanmar, Bangladesh, China and India.

Bangladesh’s relations with a number of Southeast Asian and East Asian countries are growing. In Malaysia and Singapore, Bangladeshi workers are present in large numbers. With China, the bilateral relationship, especially in infrastructure projects is extensive. There is concern in Southeast Asian countries about the problem of Islamic radicalism and terror threat in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh needs to be an effective Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN Regional Forum. Our unique geographical location marks Bangladesh a natural bridge between South and South East Asia. Bangladesh should have to be ready to support all initiatives and efforts to sustain and strengthen bilateral ties in every possible direction. The most important thing for us is to concentrate on our internal construction, to be strong first before we talk about playing an

international role. In any case, we should have a sense of proportion and have a sense of our own limitations.

Bangladesh's engagement as a part of its planned 'Look East' policy is, however, more recent. She has evidently different interests and priorities which seem to depend on a multiplicity of factors such as geography (proximity to or common boundary with Southeast Asia), level (also perceived potential) of trade and investment, diaspora, needs of maritime or energy security etc. Bangladesh has generally admired the success of ASEAN, especially in comparison to SAARC, and should follow, in some way or the other, the steps taken by ASEAN countries towards building infrastructure, poverty alleviation, tourism and overall regionalism, though SAARC has been in existence for a much shorter period.

A large and growing market of 160 million people, a country rich significant with natural and human resources and its strategic location-these assets continue to be valid. Bangladesh and South East Asia can perceive a growing security convergence in a host of areas, traditional or non-traditional security, human, maritime or energy security.

Bangladesh: what issues should top the agenda to extract the best from ARF

Bangladesh's policy should be about the mind-set, creating consciousness and confidence among South Asian countries so that they can work out cooperative relationships based on mutual benefit with the countries of Southeast and East Asia. Since competitiveness is the key to success, it is necessary for the countries of South Asia to compete with East and Southeast Asia across a wide range of goods and services. In Bangladesh's 'Look East' policy it is imperative that the partnership is based on the value addition or complementarities that the countries of Southeast and East Asia look for.

Now, we see a range of overlapping structures from the ASEAN Regional Forum to The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) shaping the framework of cooperation of our regions. What is needed now includes the political will of ARF participants to discuss a wide range of security issues in a multilateral setting; and the mutual confidence and trust gradually built by cooperative activities and the networking developed among national security, defense and military officials of ARF participants.

It is assumed that Bangladesh's engagement with East Asia will economically benefit the country and enhance mutual cooperation. Seemingly, the 'look east' policy has led to a boom in imports to Bangladesh from ASEAN countries. But its exports to these countries have remained unchanged. Bangladesh needs to diversify its export items ensuring better quality products to increase exports to ASEAN. Its overall economic and social indicators are significant compared to those of the new members of ASEAN. Bangladesh's economy is almost equal to the size of the combined economies of the new members of ASEAN and so, does the size of its population. Moreover, the country links up South East Asia with a comparatively vast market of South Asia.

Therefore, ASEAN Regional Forum should consider some collaborative arguments with Bangladesh with a view to making a future bridge between Asia –Pacific and South Asia.

We can expect that Bangladesh will make a constructive contribution to such regional cooperation. At the 2008 ASEAN Regional forum summit in Singapore, Bangladesh and Myanmar pledged to solve their maritime border disputes as quickly as possible. Consequently Bangladesh can use this platform to resolve divergent issues with Myanmar.

As terrorism constitutes a grave threat to stability, peace and security in the Asia-Pacific and beyond which requires a comprehensive approach and unprecedented international cooperation, Bangladesh can call upon ARF participants to become parties as soon as possible to the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, fully implement the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions including Resolution 1373, and remain fully committed to supporting the work of the UN Counter Terrorism Committee and other pertinent UN bodies. Acknowledging that terrorism and its linkage with transnational organized crime form part of a complex set of new security challenges, Bangladesh should stress the necessity to address them urgently in all aspects and in all fora using the platform of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Although the ARF is focused on security and defence issues, disaster relief has been an area for cooperation since 1997, with costs shared among members. Discussions on disaster management gained renewed urgency after the 2004 tsunami. In 2006, the ARF adopted a statement on disaster management and emergency response that includes plans for regional standby arrangements for immediate humanitarian assistance. In 2007, it took up guidelines on disaster relief cooperation. A sense of urgency after several natural disasters has propelled Bangladesh into drawing up "concrete, practical" plans with the ARF to move expeditiously for cooperation in disaster management. In the landscape of strategic and security outlook, Bangladesh should try to take solid action to foster understanding and cooperation in various socio-economic and security issues for amicable co-existence and regional stability. The following set of actions are recommended to extract the best within ARF platform.

- ✚ To promote regional cooperation to harness resources for the betterment of energy production
- ✚ To provide duty free access for each others commodities to promote greater economic cooperation
- ✚ To take prompt diplomatic action to demarcate land and maritime borders in the spirit of justice, equality, and good neighbourliness
- ✚ To work closely to combat sea piracy, illegal arms trade, drug trafficking and human trafficking for the sake of regional security and stability
- ✚ To create a culture of non-interference in each others internal affairs to promote trust, confidence, and cooperation

The way ahead

The uncomfortable reality, of course, is that multilateral institutions are never more than the sum of their parts. They grow up to reflect the preferences of the powerful states that create them, or else the balance of power out of whose shadows they emerge. ASEAN Regional Forum is not an exception.

Bangladesh, which is seen as a land bridge between SAARC and ASEAN, has enormous geographic advantages for its proximity to Myanmar and to other South East Asian nations to promote inter regional economic, political, and security cooperation. Once connected via the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway, South and South East Asian nations will be using Bangladesh as the main transit point to increase economic interactions amongst themselves. Bangladesh, with appropriate policies and infrastructures in place, will be playing pivotal role in defining the direction of economic relations between the two emerging regional groups. Bangladesh can use the platform of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as a vital instrument for the realisation of its aims and objectives to find common ground for achieving mutual economic benefit. Bangladesh's presence in the ASEAN Regional Forum has provided it with an international focus as a voice for managing security issues in the volatile region. This international reputation will serve Bangladesh well in courting the goodwill of potentially hostile neighbours to attract more foreign investment in several sectors, such as in the power sector and disaster management, to build up the future Bangladesh. As an explicit goal of Bangladeshi foreign policy has been to seek close relations with the states of Asia-Pacific, the government should pursue the expansion of cooperation among the nations of Asia pacific bringing the process of betterment of 160 million inhabitants of the country.

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