

The ASEAN Regional Forum: Beyond the Talk Shop?

BY *Sheldon W. Simon*

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) emerged in 1994 and, over time, has become the world's largest security discussion forum, encompassing 27 countries plus the European Union. The ARF itself meets for only one day per year—most recently on July 2, 2013—but the forum is the centerpiece of a series of meetings that both precede and follow it. High-level consultations take place informally on the sidelines of the ARF and also at the ministerial meetings that occur immediately prior to the forum.

While the 2013 ARF covered a wide range of political and security topics, the forum—as in years past—mostly provided an opportunity for Asian states and other participating countries to express a general consensus that had been reached prior to the meetings. After nearly two decades, the ARF still serves primarily to build confidence and has yet to move to a proposed second stage of preventive diplomacy or to the long-postponed apex of ARF maturation: conflict resolution. Given this reality, the United States should not expect to move the ARF beyond its confidence-building stage at this time, but should instead focus on encouraging those activities that promote peaceful security relations.

THE STRUCTURE AND GOALS OF THE ARF

Formalization of the ARF occurred as ASEAN realized that, if it was to remain relevant in post-Cold War security affairs, it needed to ensure that its procedures would dominate the Asia-Pacific security discourse and that ASEAN would be a part of all security deliberations. The ASEAN countries also sought to enmesh China, the United States, and

Japan in a security partnership that would commit them to Southeast Asia's stability and discourage adventurism. Nevertheless, the ARF is not a collective security arrangement, nor is it designed to resolve specific regional disputes. Instead, the forum is aimed at achieving long-term peace by fostering a sense of mutual trust.

The ARF reflects ASEAN's preferred strategy of consensus diplomacy, which is to manage problems rather than resolve them. The activist states within the ARF (the United States, Japan, Australia, and Canada) have promoted a more proactive agenda, but "the ASEAN way" of requiring consensus has effectively blocked it. Moreover, the fact that an ASEAN state always chairs the ARF means that disputes between ASEAN and non-ASEAN members can only be deliberated with great difficulty.

The ARF, however, provides other benefits for external powers. Washington uses the ARF to promote dialogue between South Korea and Japan, advocate for enhanced regional cooperation and dialogue on security issues, and address challenges that have regional implications (such as North Korea's nuclear weapons program). Japan and China use the ARF as a vehicle to enhance their regional diplomacy.

THE 2013 ARF: A MOVEABLE FEAST

Among the topics covered at this year's ARF were developments in the South China Sea and on the Korean Peninsula, the Middle East peace process, the civil war in Syria, and nontraditional security threats such as natural disasters, piracy, terrorism, drug and human trafficking, and cybersecurity. As usual, most of the serious discourse, particularly on North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the prospects for a code of conduct on the South China Sea, occurred on the sidelines.

On North Korea, the ARF statement calls for verifiable denuclearization and also urges the North to abide by UN Security Council resolutions.

The “Chairman’s Statement” calls on North Korea to honor its 2005 commitment to give up its nuclear program in exchange for economic and political benefits. But while the ARF meeting brought together all the foreign ministers of countries involved in the six-party talks—the United States, Japan, Russia, China, and the two Koreas—no real progress was made. The United States, South Korea, and North Korea mostly reiterated existing positions.

As for the South China Sea, aware that its unilateral naval moves are causing consternation within ASEAN, China is trying to convince ARF members that it is willing to abide by international law. In May 2013, the new Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, visited Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei and announced that Beijing was finally prepared to engage ASEAN in negotiations on a code of conduct for the South China Sea. Nonetheless, immediately preceding the ARF, the Philippines accused China of a massive military buildup and a Chinese editorial warned that a “counterstrike” against the Philippines would be inevitable if it continues to provoke China.

At the ARF meeting on July 2, Secretary of State John Kerry re-emphasized the U.S. national interest in peace, stability, unimpeded commerce, freedom of navigation, and respect for international law, while at the same time taking no position on the various territorial claims. Kerry also indirectly endorsed the Philippines’ submission to the UNCLOS Arbitral Tribunal by noting that Washington supports “the use of legal mechanisms, including arbitration” to resolve the dispute. The “Chairman’s Statement” welcomed the joint agreement by China and ASEAN to hold negotiations on a binding code of conduct in Beijing this coming September. All of these positions and arrangements were reached, however, prior to the ARF meeting.

IMPLICATIONS

With 27 nations plus the EU gathered for only one day to deal with pressing international security problems, observers should not expect more than a general effort at building confidence, at least in the current format. The only way preventive diplomacy will be possible at the ARF is if the noninterference principle is moderated, the ARF develops more practical measures for such diplomacy, and structural reform occurs that dilutes ASEAN’s dominance. None of these changes appear on the horizon.

Despite these limitations, the ARF as a “talk shop” is still a worthwhile institution for the United States to engage. The forum brings all Asian states together to wrestle with region-wide security concerns, while being linked to other regional security institutions, particularly the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus. Washington uses these annual gatherings to promote and explain its own Asian strategies, currently the “rebalance.” Equally important, ASEAN’s domination of the ARF may well strengthen the United States’ position in the region: the association has never been more supportive of the U.S. presence and more concerned over China’s intentions and growing military capabilities in Southeast Asia. Given this dynamic, the United States should encourage more active cooperation on noncontroversial issues such as joint exercises involving humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The ARF thus still offers good value for U.S. foreign policy, even if the forum cannot be expected to move beyond the confidence-building stage anytime soon. ♦

SHELDON W. SIMON is a Professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University. He can be reached at <shells@asu.edu>.

The NBR Analysis Brief provides commentary on the Asia-Pacific from leading scholars and experts.

The views expressed are those of the author.