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Strengthening Regional Security Architecture: Ensuring ASEAN Centrality through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)



SUMMARY

ASEAN Briefs is a regular publications about current development on ASEAN regionalism, especially in the Political-Security, Economic as well as Socio-Cultural Pillars.

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Strengthening regional security architecture by ensuring ASEAN centrality is a major agenda for Asia-Pacific's stability. The changing nature of power distribution in the region becomes a major underlying factor to form a wider security platform to create regional stability. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is one such security platform in the Asia-Pacific. Accordingly, ASEAN as the driver of the ARF wants to form the regional security architecture with ASEAN Centrality being the core equilibrium.

Yet, this *ASEAN Briefs* found the ARF still faces several weaknesses in shaping the regional security agenda. First, the ASEAN approach in leading the ARF as a multilateral diplomatic process still heavily relies on consensus. Second, the ARF has structural problems, where each ARF members have their own perception of the security agenda in the region. Third, there is scepticism among the ARF members about ASEAN leadership itself.

In order to ensure ASEAN Centrality within the ARF, this *ASEAN Briefs* conclude three main policy recommendations: (1) ASEAN should focus more on strengthening and improving the "ASEAN Way", moving beyond its comfort zone of non-interference and "the pace comfortable to all"; (2) ARF should focus on pursuing a problem-oriented agenda that could lead to the formation of Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms in the ARF; and (3) ARF should have leadership consistency, in which the establishment of a permanent ARF Secretariat becomes one of the concrete options.

Introduction

After 17 years since joining ASEAN, Myanmar finally received the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN for the first time in 2014. Myanmar endorsed the theme of “Moving Forward in Unity to a Peaceful and Harmonious Community” as the direction for ASEAN under its chairmanship. Myanmar perceives the Unity of ASEAN as the main prerequisites to achieve a peaceful and stable environment that will bring prosperity to the region in the context of economic development (ASEAN, 2014).

In spite of Myanmar’s chairmanship theme which depicts an idealized situation for the region, challenges and opportunities of cooperation and threats have emerged hand in hand not merely to the Southeast Asian region, but also broader to the Asia-Pacific in terms of security and economy. Both security and economic issues are interlinked and undoubtedly put pressure on the region to build a strong foundation as a safe house for both issues. While by the end of the December 2015 ASEAN will face a new step for regional integration with the ASEAN Economic Community, potential for violent conflict that could escalate into a war still remains.

This fact is related to the changing power distribution within the region, particularly among the great power such as the US and China that automatically affects the regional security equilibrium. The issue between the great powers still focuses on that of the South China Sea and broader to the East China Sea, in which several ASEAN member states are involved with other countries within the region. Besides, the current regional security trends tend to produce tensions in the region. Take for instance Japan’s new paradigm of security perception in the region, which is reflected in their new 2014 Defense White Paper, and is perceived by China as a threat to peace and cooperation in the region (BBC, 2014). Relatedly is the dispute over Diaoyu/Senkaku Island in the East China Sea, which both countries refuse to sit together and hold diplomatic negotiations. Meanwhile, the Korean Peninsula crisis still takes place between North Korea and South Korea, affecting the regional stability. Arguably all the major security challenges in the region are basically related to the maritime security, especially about the freedom of navigation in and overflight through the disputed region (ASEAN, 2014).

Challenges also emerged from non-traditional forms of security threats in this region. Challenges can be related to new emerging forms of terrorism such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – a growing concern for the Indonesian Government which has now banned the movement in the country – the development (or lack) of Human Rights progress in Myanmar and Thailand (AFP, 2014), the disaster management in the region, migrant worker issues, the outbreak of the Ebola virus, the Ukrainian situation, and even the worsening situation in Gaza. The many security issues listed above mean the cooperation is indispensable and inevitable, and that concrete actions are needed to reduce tensions so as to ensure path of development in the region.



Foreign Ministers pose for photo session at the 21st ARF
(Image: news.asiaone.com)

The wider security platform that is most relevant to address the aforementioned issues in Asia-Pacific is the ASEAN Regional Forum. Within this context, the 21st ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) conducted on 10th August 2014 in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar had plenty to discuss. The South China Sea became the main discussion of the ARF. Growing concerns by some of the ASEAN member-states about China’s aggressiveness in the South China Sea increased, as depicted by the Philippines proposal for a Triple Action Plan¹ (TAP) which was criticized by China’s Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, as a representation of US interest in the region (Pattiradjawane, 2014). Generally speaking, ASEAN member-states anxiousness about Chinese aggressiveness could also be traced by the AMM Joint Communique, which stated that all parties should commit to avoid provocative actions in order to ensure peace, stability, and security in the South China Sea (Kompas, 2014). Besides, the cool response of ASEAN to a US proposal for a ‘freeze on provocative acts’ in the South China Sea may be seen in this light with ASEAN Secretary-General Le Luong Minh admitting the American proposal was not discussed by ASEAN foreign ministers because existing ASEAN mechanisms were already in place. As one U.S. senior official suggested, “Maybe they (ASEAN) just want to differentiate their proposal from our proposal”. For critics, it suggests that maintaining the status quo is a more preferable option for the region rather than to defuse the tension through effective conflict resolution mechanisms.

Thus, this *ASEAN Briefs* will discuss the importance of the ASEAN Regional Forum as a strategic institutional platform in the Asia-Pacific capable of developing a regional security architecture that will ensure ASEAN Centrality as well as regional stability and peace. This *ASEAN Briefs* will also encompass the evolving concept of Comprehensive Security in within construction of the regional security architecture through the ARF. However, the aim of this *ASEAN Briefs* is to provide recommendations that are relevant to strengthening the ARF process building the regional security architecture.

1 The Triple Action Plan (TAP) is the proposal of the Philippines to manage conflict and reduce tensions in the South China Sea based on three proposition, which *First*, Suggestion on the Moratorium; *Second*, the implementation of the Code of Conduct; *Third*, the involvement of arbitration to solve the disputes.

Development of the ASEAN Regional Forum

As the multilateral consultation forum on political-security issues linking countries in the Asia-Pacific region to sit together in a dialogue, the ARF should discuss the importance of regional security architecture based on the 'ASEAN Way'. The expected outcome of the ARF is the strengthening of the regional security architecture where ASEAN's centrality would play a significant role. Nevertheless, many experts and senior diplomats have not only criticized the ARF process as a loose, multi-layered regional political-security system, but they have also condemned the ARF as a diplomatic 'Talk Shop' (Simon, 2013). Specific criticism also come from Asia-Pacific experts such as John Ravenhill, who stated that the ARF as the primary vehicle of intergovernmental collaboration in the Asia-Pacific and which was established during the post-Cold War era should transform itself to be more adaptable to the changing nature of the regions environment (Ravenhill, 1998). As such, in order to reflect today's world, the ARF needs to become more relevant by tackling imminent threats in the region.

Despite the many criticisms against the ARF, a number of compliments have also been heaped on the ARF. Former ASEAN Secretary-General, Rodolfo C. Severino once addressed the significance of the ARF and reminded us that, "Whatever one thinks of the ARF's efficacy, it does seem better to have a forum where the major powers can talk to one another in a multilateral setting about the regional security in the Asia-Pacific, than not to have one at all" (Severino, 2009). A similar perception with Severino was also shared by Barry Buzan who attempted to depict the significance of the ARF process by linking it to the political-military and economic factors. He argued that "the undeclared aim of the ARF is to defuse and control regional tensions by generating and sustaining a network of dialogues within the over-arching framework of its annual meetings, while the nexus of economic incentive works on governments irrevocably committed to market-based economic development" (Buzan, 1998). Backing Buzan's argument is Yuen Foong Khong, who stated that the ARF as an institutionalization of security dialogue in the region was the most significant achievement and the ASEAN can play a proactive role in making a stable and positive relationship with various actors in the Asia-Pacific (Tan See Seng, 2002). Essentially, all of these critics and compliments to the ARF can be understood as a sign that the evolving ARF process is urgently needed to structure a more comprehensive security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region as well as in ensuring economic development.

The various meetings that have been previously held by ASEAN on security issues have always attempted to place the regional organization as the focal point. Since its first meeting in 1994, the ARF has produced several documents that stress ASEAN's centrality in the ARF process. This can be seen through the three processes that the ARF deals with, as founded in the ARF concept paper of 1995; namely, Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), Preventive Diplomacy (PD), and Conflict Resolution

Mechanisms, These processes could easily be understood as the realization of the ASEAN Way in a wider diplomatic process in a multilateral setting.

Despite there being an existing mechanism to forming a regional security architecture, it cannot be doubted that a formal and concrete platform for regional security architecture remains to be realized. In this sense, stronger commitment from the 27 ARF members also plays an important role and it needs to be measured so that the ARF members' involvement is not merely perceived as a volunteer action to the Forum, but instead reflects their serious concerns to maintaining stability in the region. After the 20 years since their first meeting in 1994, the indicator of the effectiveness among CBMs, PD, and Conflict Resolutions should be assessed and measured. This is especially so because of the changing trends of regional security that threatened regional stability. Thus more importantly, the formalization of the ASEAN centrality in the bigger process at multilateral forums such as the ARF can be accepted as a success narrative by the members.

If not, ASEAN can lose its credibility in ensuring their centrality within the ARF process. Based on this urgency, ASEAN's role in strengthening the regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific is critical to shape the regional security architecture based on the ASEAN way. According to Political-Economy Analyst from the University of Indonesia, Beginda Pakpahan, the uncertainty of ASEAN's role for strengthening the regional security architecture can possibly make other countries (especially the great powers) to overtake the agenda and make ASEAN lose its centrality in forming the regional security architecture (Pakpahan, 2014). Indeed, experts such as Buzan and Ravenhill have already implicitly argued that the ARF should be reconstructed by the great powers, such as the U.S. or China, because it will constitute an effective security regime in the Asia-Pacific.

This proposition is exaggerating, but it has a possibility to become true because many ARF members feel that the current process tends to be a failure. Generally speaking, ASEAN states concurred that the ARF process is moving at a pace appropriate for the Asia-Pacific region, despite some members such as Singapore, Philippines, and Thailand favouring a stronger and quicker institutionalisation. The other non-ASEAN have also expressed similar feelings. Take, for example Japan that on the one hand object to using the consensus as the decision-making procedures in the ARF, while on the other hand, China agreed to the consensus approach as the "ASEAN way" to lead the ARF process because of their intentions to keep the status quo, thus ensuring the ARF process is limited to a voluntarily actions toward CBMs and Preventive Diplomacy. The U.S. has also shared similar views to China on consensus to some extent for the mid-term, but contradicted this when it arrived at the long-term. The U.S. argued that the ARF should develop a more problems-solving orientated mechanisms (Tan See Seng, 2002). Australia even tried to offer a new regional security architecture concept as a criticism to the current ASEAN way conception within the ARF by proposing an "Asia Pacific Community" in

2008 (CSCAP, 2013). These varied views among the ARF members reflecting a dynamism and divergence within ARF in constructing regional security architecture to the region.

Based on the ARF purposes as stated within its original concept paper 1995 and the ARF Vision Statement 2009, three important elements – Confidence Building Measures, Preventive Diplomacy, and Conflict-Resolution Mechanism – are highlighted as medium-term and long-term approaches in order to achieve its primary goals, which is to sustain and enhance peace and prosperity while preserving the ASEAN as a driving force. The three ARF processes should be defined, in particular to ensure its relevance to emerging challenges. The two processes which is the CBMs and PD has already been established and implemented for almost 20 years after the ARF came into force in 1994, while implementation of the Conflict Resolution Mechanisms remains a doubt at the ARF because of the view that the ASEAN model is shaped merely to avoid conflict rather than to be involved in conflict resolution or dispute settlement itself (Ravenhill, 1998).

Confidence Building Measures as the first process at the ARF, defined is as attempts to make clear to concerned states, through the use of a variety of measures, the true nature of potentially threatening military activities (Tan See Seng, 2002). A variety of CBM activities have been held such as conducting information exchange through dialogue or defence white paper publications, statements generalization through the leaders' joint statement/declaration, or even institutionalization of norms through the accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). But these activities are too focused on the declaratory or normative. Other CBM activities, especially those categorized as constraining variables such as prevention of dangerous military activity, or specifically air and maritime keep-out zones have thus far been neglected for implementation at the ARF. Indeed, these actions are relevant to the challenges that are emerging, such as in South China Sea and East China Sea. However, basically these various actions toward CBMs aimed to reduce tensions and suspicions among the ARF members; reducing risk of accidental war or war by miscalculation that could take place in the region, and more importantly it helps develop a greater sense of strategic confidence in the region.

Meanwhile, the Preventive Diplomacy as the next gradual ARF process also played a critical role in forming regional security architecture. In simply logic, Preventive Diplomacy is defined as an action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). The success of PD implementation can be measured through the success of institutional building of norms and avoidance of incidents, particularly to the peacetime responses. Conversely, in crisis-time, the PD's success can be measured in such activities like conducting a fact-finding mission, crisis-management mechanisms, and preventive deployment of troops to prevent conflict escalation (Tan See Seng, 2002).

At this stage, the CBMs and PD remains at the formative stage in the ARF when it comes to the traditional security threat. However, it is effective when it comes to non-traditional security threats. Nevertheless, generally speaking the ARF is frequently weak in addressing many sensitive issues in the context of traditional security threats. The weaknesses of the ARF itself indispensable contribute negatively to the ARF process of CBM, PD, and Conflict Resolution.

There are three reasons that determine the weaknesses of the ARF. *First* is the emphasis on consensus when it comes to the ARF approach in the multilateral process. A non-legally binding and voluntary involvement is perceived by the ARF as "the pace comfortable to all" has affected consensual approach in the multilateral process to the extent that it becomes difficult to produce significant achievements. On the contrary, it tends to only keep the status quo in enmeshing the members, particularly China and the US (Simon, 2013). In addition, this kind of consensual approach in the ARF can only works if the process rests overwhelmingly on political dialogue and if there is transparency on security issues. *Second*, the ARF has a structural problems. As pointed out by Michael Leifer, the ARF has structural limitations in that it could not create a stable balance, despite it relying on one to remain viable (Whelan, 2012). Structural problems posit upon the large membership of the ARF, where each ARF member has a different perception of threat to the region as well as differences in security perception. More importantly, this structural problem is rooted because of the unequal power distribution among great powers, middle powers, and weak powers in the region. *Third*, there is scepticism of the ARF's leadership role. As ASEAN will always be in a driving seat of the ARF, it means also that the "ASEAN way" will always be endorsed. To some extent the ASEAN Way is quite good in reducing tension in the region, but it does not resolve the problems. As noted by Gareth Evans, the ARF was built on Asian styles of diplomacy and was not designed or equipped to resolve problems (Whelan, 2012). This can also be justified by the comments of former member of the Experts Eminent Persons of the ARF, Amb. Wiryono Sastrohandoyo, who stated although ASEAN has the TAC and implemented CBMs as well as PD, it has never moved beyond that (THC, 2014). According to Beginda Pakpahan, ASEAN leadership in the ARF faces several internal challenges, such as limitations in enhancing coherence and coordination amongst ASEAN members (THC, 2014). He pointed out that if ASEAN can resolve those challenges, then ASEAN can contribute significantly to the regional security architecture.

These three weaknesses hamper the ARF process, particularly the effectiveness of CBMs and PD. An assessment of its effectiveness should be seen in real cases that threatened regional stability. Take for example, South China Sea and East China Sea, Nuclear issues in Korean Peninsula, or Human Rights situation in Myanmar. Even in the recent 21st ARF Chairman's Statement, the members shared a standpoint to keep the regional stability, but technically there have been divergence in reality. China and some ASEAN member-states such as the Philippines and Vietnam cannot avoid the use of force over their

claims in the South China Sea, while on the East China Sea, China enforced the Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZ) in late 2013 which caused deteriorating relations with Japan, and South Korea. Likewise, the ARF cannot do much in applying the CBMs or even PD in the Korean Peninsula in relation to the nuclear issues or at least to provide dialogue through the Inter-Sessional Groups (ISGs) meeting in the ARF framework to influence the Six Party Talks process (Miller, 2013). Unfortunately, the ARF prefers to stay away. When it comes to the internal affairs of their members, ARF sensitively does not want to get involved in issues such the Myanmar elections that was assessed by international community as a the violation of Human Rights (Shixin, 2010). Instead ARF was firm in not involving itself.

All of the cases above showed that the ARF's weaknesses occur because of their unusual approach to multilateralism, their structural problems, and also to their inefficient leadership. The process within the ARF became stagnant in the formative form that resulted in limited CBMs and PD. These weaknesses also contribute to restrain the ARF process in finalizing Conflict Resolution Mechanisms. Therefore, strengthening the regional security architecture through the ARF as a multilateral forum that involves 27 countries are critical for ASEAN. If the ASEAN wants to be remain in the driving seat, there should be improvements within the ARF process, particularly if ASEAN eminently desires to maintain ASEAN's Centrality in constructing regional security architecture.

Complex Comprehensive Security as Regional Security Architecture

Comprehensive Security is simply defined as a security of all well being (Dewitt, 1994). Now however it has a broader meaning as defined by Barry Buzan who argued that Comprehensive Security has to be understood not only as military and state security, but also under the aspect of other socio-economic factors and the integrated, subjective feeling or insecurity of individuals in certain society (Holl, 2011). Specifically, the Comprehensive Security concepts include five important factors as their main idea, such as Political, Military, Economic, Societal, and Environment (Buzan, People, State, and Fear, 1991). In simple logic, the comprehensive security also encompasses the human security dimension. According to this context, the ARF shares a similar understanding with the comprehensive security notion since the ARF always tried to include inclusiveness within its process and members when it comes to regional security architecture.

On the one side, within the ARF context, comprehensive security can be understood that the ARF has never tried to create a conventional security organization against others (Ravenhill, 1998). On the other side, comprehensive security is also relevant to the Asia-Pacific development. Therefore, the implementation of comprehensive security in the real policy is also possible in the ARF process. Its relevance could be found in the fact that the idea of using Comprehensive Security as a platform to strengthening



Military personnels from ARF countries take part in joint exercises to implement complex comprehensive security as part of the regional security architecture. (Image: news.cn)

regional security architecture through the ARF is based on the consideration to the importance of other related security issues such as vast economic growth, development, and economic integration. For instance, as the most dynamic region in the world consisting of two-thirds of the global population (UNESCAP, 2013), the Asia-Pacific region is also undergoing a vast economic development that counted as more than 44% of total global trade and 55% of world GDP concentrated in the Asia-Pacific (APEC, 2014). This contemporary Asia-Pacific situation influences regional security in the region. Moreover, based on these factors, the ARF can also keep maintaining ASEAN centrality because the security concept is relevant with the changing of ASEAN's role ahead of their regional integration by the end of 2015.

Given this reality, the concept of comprehensive security basically has been acknowledged by the ARF within its concept paper that highlighted ARF challenges toward their Forum which aimed to sustain and enhance peace as well as prosperity (ASEAN, 1995). Thus, in strengthening the regional security architecture the ASEAN Way should be included and transferred to the Members as a real policy or at least action-oriented agenda rather than a talking shop. The ARF has conducted cooperation related to the security issues that are relevant in non-traditional security perception, such as Disaster Relief, Terrorism, Transnational Crime, Maritime Security, Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. Indeed, the CBMs and PD work effectively in these issues. Unfortunately, the ARF has thus far neglected real threats that caused to regional security stability, particularly those that are categorized in the traditional security perception -as noted before such as South China Sea, East China Sea, Korean Peninsula Crisis, and Myanmar Human Rights issues. The CBMs and PD failed to works on those issues. Thus, Comprehensive Security should be applied by the ARF process not merely to the non-traditional security perception, but obviously also to the traditional security perception as well.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis stated above, this *ASEAN Briefs* would like to offer recommendation to the ARF process in strengthening regional security architecture. The Policy Recommendations can be seen as follow:

First, ASEAN should focus on strengthening and improving the “ASEAN Way”. An over-emphasis on the non-interference principle and absence of collective instruments to provide concrete action and policies will be counter-productive to the ARF process. Worryingly, the ARF acknowledged the notion of “the pace comfortable to all”. Consequently, it will make the ARF stay at the comfort zone of being a mere “Talk Shop” or judged as simply “sweep under the carpet” (Tan See Seng, 2002). The ARF, therefore, should have to move beyond this comfort zone.

This is also related to reaching consensus on internal ASEAN matters, so as to ensure ASEAN’s voice stands united before they enlarge the issue at the ARF. If ASEAN wants to be in the driver seat, a strong and united ASEAN is a must. Furthermore, ASEAN’s centrality will become a critical matter as ASEAN takes the next step forward in the 2015 ASEAN Community. Within this context, ASEAN should also embrace people-to-people contact. A bottom-up process based on people-to-people contact is much more important in shaping a sustainable and genuine regional security architecture that is not simply an elitist process. The ARF should underline to encompass this process.

Second, the ARF should focus on pursuing a problem-oriented agenda within their process that could lead to the formation of Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms in the ARF. A concrete action that could be implemented is adding more concrete Inter-Sessional Groups (ISGs) Meeting within the ARF. The aim of this is to make ARF be more frank and open to conduct a more constructive dialogue and exchange of views. This ISGs Meeting should address sensitive issues that affect regional stability, based on the CBMs and PD such as the ISGs on South China Sea, ISGs on East China Sea, or the Korean Peninsula. As such, the Conflict-Resolution within the ARF does not have to be limited to the one policy, but it could be more thematic.

Lastly, the most critical for the ARF is that it should have consistency in the context of leadership. A rotating change of the ARF chairmanship each year has caused inconsistency or at least stagnancy of the ARF process. This recommendation may lead to a concrete action that can be implemented through the establishment of a permanent ARF Secretariat. The ARF should establish its own secretariat that can work to coordinate the ARF’s policies to its members. In particular, the ARF should coordinate a broader security agenda in the region that is also related to other Asia-Pacific cooperation efforts, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus, or even Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

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The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

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The Habibie Center was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family in 1999 as an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation. The vision of The Habibie Center is to create a structurally democratic society founded on the morality and integrity of cultural and religious values.

The mission of The Habibie Center are **first**, to establish a structurally and culturally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and promotes human rights by undertaking study and advocacy of issues related to democratization and human rights, and **second**, to increase the effectiveness of the management of human resources and the spread of technology.

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