

AusCSCAP - 48th meeting report: The ASEAN Regional Forum at 25 years.

The 48th meeting of AusCSCAP was held in Sydney on 14 March 2018 in association with the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA). The theme was 'the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) at 25'.

The meeting followed the ASEAN-Australia Dialogue held in Sydney on the previous day, one of several major events surrounding the Australian Government's first ASEAN-Australia Special Summit (17-18 March 2018). The Dialogue involved nine universities and institutes from across Australia - including AusCSCAP - and attracted senior analysts and specialists from ASEAN.

AusCSCAP took advantage of their presence in Sydney in holding our meeting the day after the Dialogue. The ASEAN participants included -

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong of Singapore;

Ambassador Astanah Abdul Aziz of Malaysia;

Dr Philipps Vermonte from Indonesia;

Dr Dang Cam Tu from Vietnam, and

Mr Kavi Chongkittavorn, editor of the Myanmar Times.

Tan Sri Dato Seri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan from Malaysia accepted, but had to drop out for personal reasons. The meeting booklet (attached) gives full details of our overseas guests and Australian participants, and the agenda.

Findings

In assessing the ARF today, it is instructive to recall the strategic environment that appeared to be taking shape in Asia in the years leading up to the creation of the ARF in 1993. Specifically, there was optimism that the enmities which had underpinned the Cold War were softening, that the change in global politics presented an opportunity for cooperative rather than competitive approaches to international security, and that scope existed for an OSCE-like body in this region. There may also have been anxiety about how the Asia Pacific in particular would cope well with what could follow.

Certainly a key enabling development for the ARF was US acceptance, albeit hesitantly, of multilateral security processes in East Asia alongside its web of 'hub and spokes' alliances. This was critical because, at a deeper level, ASEAN

felt that the end of the Cold War could erode the US commitment to Asia. China was rising in importance at this time, and ASEAN had a preference for engaging a range of major powers.

At an earlier period, ASEAN had favoured keeping all major powers at arm's length. Now the balance of sentiment within ASEAN was moving towards engaging with them and seeking to manage or shape the way they pursued their interests in the ASEAN space. The ARF was seen as an important new tool to advance this broad strategy.

Much of the ensuing discussion in our AusCSCAP meeting addressed the question of whether the ARF had been able to do what was expected of it.

The meeting followed extensive debate in the Dialogue the day before, and our findings stood in some contrast to the Dialogue discussion, where the mood of some of the Australian members of the audience had been one of scepticism and even disappointment with the ARF. Our more collegiate and smaller meeting, drawing on the direct recollections of several participants who were actually present during the ARF's conception, offered more considered and balanced judgements as to the ARF's effectiveness and impact.

By some accounts, the ASEAN Regional Forum was formed in 1993 against reasonably modest expectations, while others felt that the original goals were too ambitious. The Forum was established under the auspices of the ASEAN Foreign Ministries of the then six countries involved (not their respective Defence establishments). The Forum initially brought together 18 states, including the US, China, Japan and Australia. There were significant differences in the political history and composition of member states (including the non-ASEAN members), but it was felt that after a phase (of unspecified duration) of entrenching an array of confidence-building measures, the ARF could begin to think about the more challenging (ie. more politically intrusive) endeavours. These would include preventive diplomacy, and then eventually conflict prevention and resolution.

What was not fully appreciated at the time (especially by non-ASEAN states) was how awkwardly preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution sat with ASEAN's traditional emphasis on non-interference and respect for national sovereignty. What some outside of ASEAN see as seasoned avoidance of difficult issues, others see as ASEAN's unique ability to progress issues informally without confrontation and loss of face. A central core of ASEAN's diplomacy has been

non-interference in each other's affairs and mutual respect for national sovereignty.

It should be recalled that during the early 2000s, the West was developing the concept of 'responsibility to protect' and pressing towards what was considered 'legitimate interference' in states where human rights abuses were evident (particularly in Africa). This approach however was anathema to many in ASEAN. This difference in approach to international diplomacy and dispute resolution has led those with a more robust disposition to consider ASEAN as ineffective, while others see their quiet diplomacy and informal mechanisms as achieving perhaps more modest but durable outcomes.

At our meeting, several participants argued that ASEAN valued 'style over substance,' with a strong disposition to avoiding potentially conflicting debates (eg. the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and South China Sea issues). This was undermining the role of the ARF - so it was argued - with reduced cohesion among its members, weakening ASEAN solidarity and centrality. A rebuttal to this suggestion was the claim that ASEAN itself has maintained considerable unity, and that the ARF at least afforded opportunities for debate on security issues. It was further pointed out that ASEAN's approach to resolving disputes or difficulties is to have closed discussions with the individual countries rather than by way of a roundtable, such as the ARF.

A message that was carried forward from the previous day's Dialogue (by one or two participants who were actively engaged in the formation of the ARF), was disappointment that the Forum appeared not to have moved beyond confidence building. Our meeting suggested that this judgement overlooked the different cooperative endeavours which the ARF has undertaken in recent years – for example the Thai/Cambodia Temple dispute, and others.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the success of informal mechanisms inherent in the structure of the organisation – particularly the less structured discussions and corridor meetings which take place on the edge of ARF meetings. Some of these are bilateral, some multilateral, and they have in certain cases helped to prevent or moderate conflicts. For many Ministers, it was these bilateral opportunities that made attendance at ARF meetings worthwhile

Pre-meeting discussions between the AusCSCAP executive and DFAT officials in Canberra had also stressed the importance of informal and 'non-agenda' debate as a worthy ARF pursuit.

Some at our AusCSCAP Sydney meeting saw a structural problem at the heart of the ARF, particularly now with its expanded membership. They saw the major powers, usually engaged in strategic competition, increasingly calling the shots, and certain ASEAN members falling into line behind their expectations. Furthermore, too many members (27) had produced a 'delusion of cohesion' that was fracturing. The 'footprint' of the ARF, now encompassing South Asia and the sub-continent, was a case of over-reach that was undermining - among other things - the concept of ASEAN centrality and ASEAN in the driving seat. A counter-argument was that rather than undermine ASEAN centrality and unity, the expansion of ARF membership to include more developing countries in the region had diluted the Western influence within the grouping. To some extent this has helped to restore ASEAN centrality within the ARF.

For some, this expansion of the ARF membership had been difficult enough simply to manage, let alone capitalize on. A softer assessment of the Forum, however, was that the presence of so many states at the meeting at least offered an opportunity to survey the full range of security issues across the region. Participants have the opportunity to gain familiarity with tensions or disputes which may at the time be local in character, but nevertheless have the potential to feed into contests between major powers. In terms of ARF membership, it was stressed that the ARF is the only Track 1 mechanism outside of the UN to engage North Korea, and this too in its own region. It is also important to underline that the ARF agenda - the result of senior officials' deliberations - is generally comprehensive, and not so rigid as to avoid debate on last-minute issues.

It was pointed out that the ritual of meeting and discussion (a 'talkfest'), at least granted everyone 'face' and a seat at the table. It also emerged from the discussion that avoiding decisions and taking no action can in fact be a viable and better option than ill-considered and chest-beating blustering. Freedom from high expectations and accountability can be therapeutic, and can lead gradually to some harmonization of views, whereas the definition and codification of an issue in the absence of complete harmonization of views can often be a recipe for the early breakdown of any underlying understanding or agreement.

Many participants were of the view that the ARF was prone to stressing formality and ritual, and this tended to place emphasis on critical opportunities for candid, high-level discussions in the margins. It was also pointed out that

since the Forum had expanded to 27 members, with leaders having less familiarity and experience of each other, participants often had to be reminded to utilize the opportunities for informal discussion. It was seen as important to go beyond the ritualised statements prepared earlier by officials, and to promote genuine dialogue. An ASEAN perspective expressed here suggested that harsh rhetoric and hectoring by western countries on such issues as North Korea and China soon led to a 'dialogue of the deaf'. Others from ASEAN encouraged such an approach, claiming they themselves are unable to adopt such positions.

While the ARF has no formal mandate or mechanism to take its ideas and prescriptions to the outside world, any advances made in its working groups or 'friends of the chair' informal mechanisms, can be developed or deployed by any Foreign Ministry in other processes and forums. Such an assessment reinforces the view that, so long as the ARF has 'convening power' there is no reason to change its modalities and let it remain in the driving seat .

CSCAP had convened a Study Group in 2014 on Regional Security Architecture, and had made recommendations on how the architecture (including the ARF) could be advanced. (See CSCAP website under 'Study Group tab' for details). Reference was made to the memorandum, and the influence it had (particularly in 2015, when Malaysia was chairing ASEAN), but generally ASEAN participants in the meeting saw many challenges in an attempt to forge the EAS, ARF and ADMM + into a more coherent system (as the Memorandum had suggested). The lack of channels of communication today is partly a product of the different institutions possessing different memberships and focusing on different areas of interest. Also, over-scripting the EAS agenda reinforced the descent to pre-prepared statements and the loss of spontaneity – thus compromising the very reason for its establishment.

In addition to the claimed averting of military conflict among ASEAN members since its formation, a further benefit has been exposing all non-ASEAN member states to ASEAN norms and the ASEAN way. The meeting also agreed that building bridges between the Northeast Asian countries ranked among ASEAN's major accomplishments. One view expressed was that ASEAN had been 'allowed' to take this wider-region convening role; an alternative view was that in Asia (unlike Europe) the major powers were unable to work together to provide regional leadership, and that in these circumstances ASEAN had played a creative, and trusted, role. In ASEAN-led institutions the Northeast Asian states

had begun to deliberate together, which has led thereafter to separate trilateral meetings and summits between them. The ASEAN Plus Three (APT) – which brings China, Japan and South Korea together within ASEAN (this emerged during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis after a failed earlier attempt to establish an East Asia Economic Caucus) – was an important development in this process. The APT quickly established itself as the most dynamic and ambitious of the ASEAN forums.

An ASEAN viewpoint here was that the suggestion that the APT was seen in some quarters as potential security space to replace the ARF, and similar arguments regarding the potential significance of the EAS in the security area, misses ASEAN's considered reasons for their establishment. Each mechanism was set up with a particular focus, with their targeted membership meant to give full effect to the individual body. The different levels of engagement (ministerial and summit) was also a deliberate consideration.

Conclusions:

Australian participants more than the ASEANs, saw ASEAN's role in regional architecture as currently facing challenges as a result of shifting power dynamics. The part played by the ARF in support of ASEAN's mandate is predictably receiving attention at present. The advantages and disadvantages of the ARF's very wide membership, the operating principles of the ARF, the specific achievements of the organization, and finally, the way the ARF relates or does not relate to other ASEAN institutions – all these matters deserve careful examination.

Our meeting also brought home that despite 44 years of a Dialogue relationship, there remain important differences in perception and understanding between Australian and ASEAN analysts. This AusCSCAP meeting succeeded in defining some key questions, and the presence of a strong team from ASEAN countries helped to identify the differences in view and aspiration which have to be taken into account in any attempt to strengthen the ARF institution.