



# Policy Brief

European Institute for Asian Studies asbl

*EIAS Policy Brief, 03/01, November 2003, € 10*  
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## *Can the EU play a meaningful role in Asian security through the ASEAN Regional Forum?*

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF) is Asia's only regional security forum. Established in 1994, the ARF has 23 members, including: ASEAN member states Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam; ASEAN dialogue partners Australia, China, Canada, North Korea, South Korea, the United States (US), India, Mongolia, New Zealand, Russia, Japan and the European Union (EU); and Papua New Guinea (which has observer status).

The ARF deals with both conventional security issues, such as nuclear proliferation, as well as non-traditional ones; for example, terrorism, trans-national crime, the arms trade and human trafficking. The organisation operates via both track I diplomacy, including ARF Foreign Ministers' meetings, Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM), and the Intersessional Support Groups on Confidence-Building Measures (ISG), and track II diplomacy, such as non-official seminars, workshops and conferences dealing with Asian security issues.

The ARF is a process-oriented forum rather than the outcome of structural changes in Asia's security structure. In other words, the ARF was not established to necessarily respond to Asia's changing security architecture and threats to regional security, but mainly to discuss Asian security issues informally. Its 1995 Concept Paper formulates three stages of conflict management: (1) confidence-building measures (CBMs); (2) preventive diplomacy (PD); and (3) conflict resolution.

Yet, although the ARF has dealt with a wide range of security issues over the last decade, it has yet to move beyond the stage of CBMs and on to PD. Thanks to its failure to implement and execute PD and the absence of mechanisms and institutions to implement legally-binding policies, the ARF is often referred to as merely a talking shop for regional security issues.

### **The Role of the EU**

In ARF, the EU is represented by the Troika; that is, the present and future EU presidencies, the European Commission (EC), and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Despite its willingness to promote and secure Asian peace and security, it is widely agreed that the EU defines itself as a security actor mainly in its own geographical periphery. As a "distant power" with limited strategic interests in Asia, can the EU play a meaningful role in the region's security through a forum whose character is still mainly consultative and not designed to implement legally-binding policies?

At the 2001 ARF meeting in Hanoi, three official papers were adopted that elaborate in detail: (1) the concepts and principles for PD; (2) the enhanced role of the ARF Chair; and (3) the terms of reference of the ARF Experts and Eminent Persons' Register.

While the EU supports the above three papers, it has a particular interest in developing PD (defined as a strategy to resolve or contain disputes and conflicts through non-military methods such as negotiations, mediations, arbitration, conciliation, etc.). It is arguable that a more pro-active and prominent role of the EU within the ARF mainly depends on the forum's ability to implement and execute PD.

Yet it remains to be seen whether the Asian ARF members—above all China—are interested in seriously tackling PD. China is not interested in PD mechanisms in Asia because they would go against the country's strategy of addressing regional security on a bilateral basis. During the recent June 2003 ARF meeting in Cambodia, the chairman's statement called for the implementation of the "Concept and Principles of Preventive Diplomacy". However, given the inherent difficulties of implementing PD mechanisms and

initiatives, it is realistic to assume that implementing conflict resolution mechanisms in Asia (the last stage of the ARF process) will remain off the agenda for the time being.

There is also a contradiction between the goal of the ARF to establish instruments and mechanisms to eventually enforce collective policies, and ASEAN's charter principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states. While Asian governments argue that the non-interference principle guarantees the sovereignty of member states and prevents interference from "outside", non-Asian member states maintain that the principle is an excuse not to deal with regional issues which could cause controversy and disagreement.

The conflict between the non-interference principle in ASEAN and "interference" as it is practiced by member states of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was illustrated during the recent ARF meeting in Cambodia. Following arguments by non-Asian members, including the EU, that human rights' violations in Burma are a legitimate concern of neighbours and international community, Asian member states agreed to actively deal with the issue. However, this agreement did not signify a change of policy. For example, while the EU and US urged the Indonesian government to strengthen its efforts to find a non-military solution to the conflict in Aceh, the Asian ARF members stressed the country's right to defend itself against armed movements. The principle of non-interference and territorial integrity are very likely to remain "sacred principles" for the Asian members of the ARF, and thus a serious obstacle for a more active EU role in the organisation.

### **Hard and Soft Security**

Within the ARF framework, the EU contributes to both traditional, or hard, security (peacekeeping, anti-terrorism, etc.), and soft, or human, security (cross-border violations, development, etc.). With regard to the former, the EU could become more active, using experience gained from OSCE confidence-building and preventive diplomacy mechanisms and strategies to address conflicts in Asia. For instance, France, Germany, Italy and Britain have wide-ranging experience with fighting terrorism, including intelligence gathering and sharing, drafting and implementing anti-terrorist legislation, and trying and convicting suspected terrorists. In all these areas, the EU could assist Asian member states of the ARF individually, as well as the organisation as a whole: perhaps ARF could act as a centre for sharing anti-terrorist intelligence collated by all its member states.

Similarly, the EU could assist its Asian partners with regards to human/soft security. As well as development security measures (linking national and international security to social stability), the EU could pass on its expertise in implementing cross-border security measures against clandestine labour migration, drugs and arms smuggling, piracy, and money-laundering; all issues which currently threaten regional security in Asia. Moreover, the ARF could be used as forum to set up exchanges between Asian and European police forces.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU emphasises non-military security co-operation. As such, the EU could promote soft/human security issues such as democratisation, the rule of law, and human and civil rights in order to contribute more actively to Asian regional security. However, EU efforts to place such issues on the ARF agenda will continue to face resistance from a number of its Asian members, many of which refer to different concepts of democracy and human rights in Europe and Asia.

Perhaps the best way for the EU to promote soft/human security in the ARF is by supporting the economic development of Asian members. At the 2001 ARF meeting in Hanoi, the chairman's statement concluded that "economic security is fast becoming a major concern of all nations, both developed and developing alike". Technology transfer and European foreign direct investment (FDI) play a crucial role in this context.

### **The Asian Security Paradigm**

The ARF has a predominantly ASEAN character, and the principles upon which the organisation was founded are often referred to as the "ASEAN way" of diplomacy, conflict settlement and conflict resolution. This kind of diplomacy, which mainly relies on the consensus of all parties involved, is incompatible with European-style security policy implementation mechanisms, and significantly limits the role of the EU in the ARF. Given the nature of regional security conflicts in Asia with potentially global consequences (e.g., the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, or a possible China-Taiwan military confrontation), the limits of the ASEAN way diplomacy are obvious and could hinder timely conflict prevention in Asia.

Asian regional security issues are still mainly addressed on a bilateral basis. While this limits the participation of the EU in resolving Asian security issues via the ARF, its contribution to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development (KEDO), and in East Timor have shown that the EU can contribute to Asian security through other channels. Bilateral agreements and initiatives will remain to be attractive as long as the ARF remains unable to facilitate and implement agreements relevant to Asian regional security.

The nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula and the absence of a leading ARF role in defusing the crisis shows that the organisation is still far away from becoming a forum capable of dealing with real security issues in the region. As a solely consultative forum, the ARF has been limited to urging North Korea's leadership to abandon its alleged nuclear weapons programme and revise its decision to leave the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In a summary of this year's ARF meeting in Cambodia, the EU pointed out that North Korea (which took part in the meeting) appeared "isolated" and that all ARF members had called for the "de-nuclearisation" of the Korean peninsula. Concrete proposals, however, on how to achieve this goal were not to be found in the summary.

The ARF also played no significant role in resolving the 1999 East Timor crisis, the first major regional security crisis since the establishment of the organisation. The

failure of the ARF to discuss this crisis may be blamed on the insistence on the principle of non-interference in internal affairs by its ASEAN members, and/or the failure to agree a suitable division of labour between the ARF and the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission in East Timor. Whatever the reason(s), the ARF and its member states could have created a precedent for a more visible and concrete organisational involvement in regional security issues if it had been—willing and able—to play an important role in the UN peacekeeping mission in East Timor.

The ARF does serve as a forum to further integrate China into the regional security structure. In November 2002, China signed an (albeit watered-down) Code-of-Conduct in the South China Sea, agreeing to discuss territorial disputes within the ARF framework. The possibilities of a peaceful resolution to this issue are complicated given that a number of ARF Asian member states dispute ownership of the Spratly Islands and other territories in the South China Sea.

So long as the ARF lacks the instruments and political will to implement its policies, it will continue to remain of limited relevance. Asian governments claim the ARF is a forum for dialogue, not an organisation meant to implement security policies which lack the consensus of all its member states. During the recent ARF meeting in Cambodia, the EU proposal that an ARF Secretariat be established was resisted by Asian members. Given this resistance, it remains very much in doubt whether the ARF will be "institutionalised" enough to make use of PD mechanisms any time soon.

### **European Models**

The ARF could take advantage of Europe's experience with the OSCE to help it turn from a solely consultative forum into a regional security institution with the instruments and competence to implement security policies and initiatives. Yet OSCE mechanisms and instruments, with their emphasis on legalistic aspects, may be too formal and rule-based to be applicable in the more diverse Asian context of the ARF. Similarly, the goals and objectives of the CSFP, as formulated in the Maastricht Treaty ("safeguarding common values, strengthening the security of the EU, strengthening international security, develop and consolidate democracy", etc.) may be too specific to be compatible with the goals and objectives of the ARF.

Given that European states often have different priorities in their respective Asia policies, the loss of continuity caused by the rotating presidency of the EU significantly hinders its effectiveness in the ARF. The enlargement of the EU to 25 Member States in May 2004 is likely to aggravate this problem.

### **Security Cultures**

Non-Asian ARF members tend to concentrate on the structure of Asia's security architecture without taking into consideration complex inter-state relations and cultural differences, as well as the different levels of political and economic development in the region. Such a one-dimensional view of the security environment, argues

Brian Job, is insufficient when trying to understand a security structure:

Structural factors play only a limited role in determining the extent and nature of both multilateral activity and multilateralism in a given regional security complex. It is the cognitive features of the environment—the attitudes of the players toward each other, the rules and norms governing international interaction, the scope and nature of the security dilemmas that the actors perpetuate among themselves.

Thus, while Asian nations perceive security comprehensively—encompassing economic, political and social aspects dimensions of security—the West (above all the US) tends to see security in realist and military terms. Although this might be true of the current American foreign and security policy strategies, it is not necessarily so for the foreign and security policy strategies of the EU in Asia (and elsewhere). Indeed, the argument of differing cultures of security is used as an excuse not to tackle relevant regional security issues.

The recent ARF meeting in Cambodia also made clear that Asian and non-Asian member states continue to disagree on the role civil society should play in regional security. While the EU and Canada agreed to increase the links between Track I and Track II diplomacy, some Asian leaders remained reluctant to include civil society in the official dialogue of the ARF.

### **Conclusion**

Given the difficulties of the ARF to move from CBMs to PD, it remains to be seen whether the organisation will be capable of facilitating co-operation between European and Asian member states over their mutual security concerns in a post-9/11 world. The role of the ARF in Asian security remains limited by:

- An over-emphasis on the non-interference principle of ASEAN members.
- An over-emphasis on a consensus-building approach with regards to policies and strategies.
- The absence of collective action mechanisms and collective action enforcement instruments.
- The absence of a permanent ARF Secretariat.

The ARF cannot be expected to play an important role in regional security issues if it remains a consultative forum. Although the "comfortable to all" pace of the ARF may be appropriate for ASEAN member states, it is too slow to be relevant with regards to potential security crisis in Asia. Little is likely to change so long as ASEAN principles remain the driving force of the ARF.

For all the above described shortcomings, the ARF is proof that Asian countries are willing to include non-Asian states in their region's security issues. Yet optimistic statements and declarations about the importance of the ARF do little to define a truly significant role for the EU in Asian security. So long as the ARF remains stalled on the road from CBMs to PD, the best the EU can do is concentrate on soft/human security issues, promoting peace, stability and security in Asia through investment and economic co-operation.

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