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Abstract	After thirteen years in existence, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is attracting a review by its founders. Fresh from its ASEAN Charter exercise, this is an opportune time for ASEAN to evaluate and where necessary overhaul the ARF process so that it can better serve the needs of contemporary and future security in the Asia Pacific region.

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Making the ASEAN Regional Forum More Relevant to Regional Security

Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

After thirteen years in existence, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is attracting a review by its founders. Fresh from its ASEAN Charter exercise, this is an opportune time for ASEAN to evaluate and where necessary overhaul the ARF process so that it can better serve the needs of contemporary and future security in the Asia Pacific region.

Many areas can be looked into, from the conceptual to the institutional, resources to membership, and function to activity. Three such areas are highlighted here below.

First, the ARF must alter what it calls its “geographical footprint”, or the area that the ARF will focus its security attention on. At the Third ARF in Jakarta in 1996 it was decided that this area would be “all of East Asia, both Northeast and Southeast Asia, and Oceania”. North America was excluded although Canada and the United States were members (participants) of the Forum.

This was not a very wise decision. It made East Asia the “object” of ARF security concerns (Oceania was largely forgotten). More importantly, it ignored the real security dynamics of the Asia Pacific region, of which the U.S. is a major part. Whether it is security in Northeast Asia or Southeast Asia, or security now in the U.S. which is subject to the terrorist threat, the U.S. is very much a part of the geographical and security footprint of the Asia Pacific. U.S. security policies towards North Korea, China, Japan, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, and the U.S. approach towards terrorism in the region and elsewhere, profoundly influence Asia Pacific security, just as the policies of the other countries do.

The United States must therefore be included within the geographical footprint of the ARF. If the United States is in, so should Canada, which is on the same continent and plays a constructive middle power role in the region. The inclusion of the U.S. and Canada within the footprint will enable the ARF to

also weigh U.S. and Canadian policies and actions in the management of Asia Pacific security, like those of any other participant of the ARF.

Second, ARF strategic thinking is still heavily influenced by the thinking associated with inter-state conflict or the military dimension of security instead of the comprehensive notion of security that ASEAN and the ARF subscribe to. Hence the ARF's 1995 Concept Paper speaks of phased security approaches (confidence building, preventive diplomacy and finally conflict resolution, with the last re-named "elaboration of approaches to conflicts" later) that are only applicable to military security and are completely irrelevant to the other types of security such as terrorism, piracy and transnational crime.

In the review of the ARF, it must be made clear that confidence building, preventive diplomacy and elaboration of approaches to conflicts apply to the military dimension only and not to the other dimensions. In this regard, care must be taken to avoid using the terms "traditional security" to describe security of a military nature like wars and conflicts between states and "non-traditional security" to describe terrorism, piracy, etc. These terms originated in recent American experience and have been uncritically adopted by the Asian security community. There is nothing more "traditional" or of long-standing than piracy or terrorism in Southeast Asia. Calling them "non-traditional security" issues therefore makes little sense.

Third, after thirteen years of procrastination, the ARF must take up the challenge and begin becoming involved in active confidence building and preventive diplomacy initiatives. Tasking track two processes and institutions to undertake repeated studies on the subject is just a way of deflecting calls for serious action. "Passive" confidence building through regular ARF meetings among participants and the like are also totally inadequate, as evidenced by the rising suspicions and rivalry among major powers in the region.

In this regard, the ARF has in fact failed even in the first phase of confidence building, not to mention preventive diplomacy. Acrimony between Japan and its neighbours has grown in recent years. The U.S., Japan, Australia and India

are also strengthening alliances and building coalitions against China, while China and Russia are gravitating more closely towards each other. These are developments with potentially grave consequences for regional security and stability.

Indeed, it would be good if the ARF devised specific confidence building and preventive diplomacy initiatives to address the resurgence of major power rivalry in the region. This is what confidence building and preventive diplomacy are all about – preventing conflicts from arising and escalating into threats to regional security. A concerted initiative to moderate major power suspicion and rivalry should be particularly welcome to countries such as the U.S., Japan and Australia, which have frequently shown impatience with the inability of the ASEAN-driven ARF to engage in confidence building and preventive diplomacy. It should also be welcome to countries like Canada, which holds similar views.

If the ARF review can consider some of these changes and initiatives, it would help strengthen the relevance of the ARF to Asia Pacific peace and security.

(Mohamed Jawhar Hassan is Chairman and CEO ISIS Malaysia. The views expressed here are his personal views).