15

Human security and the ASEAN Regional Forum: Time for a rethink about regionalism?

Chandran Jeshurun

The *fin de siècle* is always a time for much pondering over what has been experienced for almost a hundred years as well as for a feeling of anticipation and even trepidation about the likely course of events in the new century. It is also a time when each person tends to reflect about her or his own role and destiny in a changing environment – to ponder how she or he might fit into the broader landscape of ''human security.'' For the people of East Asia in particular, disturbing and challenging questions pertaining to their future livelihood and, indeed, their very survival were looming as we approached the new millennium.

The last decade of the twentieth century certainly provided drama and excitement *par excellence*. First, with the end of the Cold War (in a not necessarily predictable way) the meaning and direction of regional and international security are unclear. Secondly, the whole complex process that is generally known as ''globalization'' has produced such a fundamentally new world economic situation that the relevance of existing institutions and accepted norms in international trade and commerce is being questioned. East Asia, which experienced the most unprecedented and rapid economic growth of the century, has become the most severely affected by the unexpected recession and ensuing financial turmoil precipitated in mid-1997. The economic crisis that countries in the region are battling undoubtedly provides as appropriate a time as any to re-examine some of the logic as well as the practicality of various forms of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific that have been attempted so far.

This chapter will briefly examine one of the direct results of the end of the Cold War in security terms in the subregion of South East Asia, namely the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (the ARF) in 1994 by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). It intends to focus particularly on the downside of efforts to develop regional security cooperation through the ASEAN format and to relate this to the broader question of the future security architecture of the East Asian region as a whole. An underlying premise of the chapter is that structural questions such as these *do* matter in how the politics of human security will unfold over the next few generations. A more stable regional security architecture would release policy-makers to devote greater attention and energy to addressing fundamental ''quality of life'' issues than would otherwise be the case.

It must be emphasized that an assessment of the ARF's difficulties is not merely an exercise in listing the inevitable weaknesses of an organization such as ASEAN in a highly heterogeneous region. Rather it is a conscious effort to evaluate the potential for a more truly representative structure of East Asian cooperation. Inevitably, the emergence of other forms of regionalism over the past decade or so have put a less than proactive organization such as ASEAN in a rather defensive posture. Most notably, the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum posed a direct challenge to the somewhat laid-back approach that had hitherto typified the ASEAN economic model. Since then, however, it can be argued that APEC's existence has resulted in a somewhat diminished role for ASEAN in bringing about more meaningful and structured changes in regional economic cooperation within South-East Asia.

It is in this context that the prospects for a new look at the potential evolution of regionalism in East Asia and its broader Pacific rim environment should be examined. Particular emphasis should be assigned to both the security and economic imperatives that are increasingly determining the national priorities of countries in this region. By the late 1980s, as the ''core'' ASEAN states of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand showed clear signs of recovering quickly from the economic recession that they had just experienced shortly before, the more ambitious among the region's leaders were already looking around for some form of regional cooperation well beyond the subregion of South-East Asia. This was in fact a revival of the much earlier search for building ties with the major economic powerhouse that Japan had become in the 1960s and 1970s as well as with budding newly industrializing economies such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The idea of some form of cooperative framework among the key countries of North-East Asia and South-East Asia was also undoubtedly moti-

vated by the security imperative. The approaching end of the Viet Nam war and the establishment of formal relations between China and the United States reinforced this by presaging major strategic realignments in the region. Thus, we find a number of embryonic attempts during the period of the Cold War (mostly initiated by staunchly anti-communist political forces) to forge some sort of regional caucus that would provide for greater solidarity among South-East Asia's non-communist governments. A sense of common security was cultivated in the face of changing regional geopolitical circumstances.

ASEAN's downside

The birth of the ARF, on the other hand, was as much an ASEAN-inspired initiative to pre-empt other forums that would focus on regional security as it was a vague revival of efforts within the region to contain and manage the power and influence of major external forces. That its progress, or lack of such, so far reflects rather accurately the state of disarray regarding strategic matters and fundamental economic policies within the inner circles of ASEAN itself, especially among the core member states, is telling. Although various efforts have been made to give substance to its stated goals of achieving a more constructive regional security dialogue, the ARF has been severely constrained by two contentious organizational problems. The first has had to do with the nature of its membership formula. At the outset, this was forced rather haphazardly, with only the main regional parties in East Asia apart from the ASEAN members themselves and those external powers that had been participants in the Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC) process invited to join the new forum. There were subsequent accessions by other countries, notably Russia and India, and there is now still pending a waiting list of disparate states ranging from France and the United Kingdom, on the one hand, to North Korea on the other. It would appear that part of the reluctance of the core ASEAN member states to admit all and sundry into the ARF is due to the fear of having too many conflicting interests that would in effect slow down its functioning as a meaningful security dialogue.[1]

Fundamental to the evolution of the ARF process has been the extent to which the ASEAN initiators of the whole idea would surrender their control of its agenda and, therefore, its main direction. Led by the Australians at the start but apparently gaining support from the other non-ASEAN states as well, there is now significant disagreement between the ASEAN member states, and the others, over the management of the ARF's dialogue process and in setting its overall agendas and priorities. Clearly, if the ARF were to be overwhelmed by some of the more pow-

erful members, then the whole purpose of having set it up in the first place – to serve the primary security concerns of the ASEAN member states – would be defeated. At the same time, without the cordial and friendly support of dialogue partners such as the United States and Australia it would be a tedious and unpredictable exercise for ASEAN to try and nurture the ARF process in such a way as to fulfil ASEAN's own security goals. Faced with this dilemma, the whole future of the ARF as the credible and effective security dialogue apparatus for the larger region of East and South-East Asia is in some doubt and any perceived delaying of its evolution will only give rise to alternative channels of regional security cooperation.[2]

ASEAN has also become well known for what its own members have come to regard as the ''ASEAN way'' of conducting their affairs both among themselves and in their relations with others. In the days when everything was going well for the organization and particularly during its successful campaign for a resolution of the Cambodian problem through UN intervention, no one took much note of its methods and there was some general appreciation of a peculiarly South-East Asian diplomatic work ethic. But once the transformation had been made from the PMC level of regional interaction and the ARF had been convened as a purposeful mechanism for regional security dialogue, many of the non-ASEAN states came to view this ''ASEAN way'' approach to vital strategic and military issues as somewhat inappropriate. Besides, there is also a common perception among the external powers that ASEAN's way of conducting business has not really shown any ostensibly impressive achievements, even in the area of economic cooperation. Indeed, the whole exercise by ASEAN to combat the economic and financial crisis has been described as ''business as usual'' without appearing to demonstrate any real appreciation of the social and political dangers it poses to the region. Thus, the adoption of an ''ASEAN way'' in handling as difficult and complex an issue as the future regional security architecture of the region is unlikely to find much favour with most of the non-ASEAN members of the ARF.[3]

Quite apart from the ARF itself not having much of an institutional format more than five years after its formation, it is even more disturbing that the member states of ASEAN have been unable to reach agreement on the role and character of the ASEAN Secretariat based in Jakarta. As late as February 1999 there had been discussions among officials of the member states that the Secretariat ought to be revamped and its role more clearly defined. The task was farmed out to a private management company, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, which subsequently came up with some recommendations. The fact that, in the end, ASEAN preferred to carry on with the Secretariat playing a coordinating role, however, speaks volumes about any mood for change. One of the consultant's proposals

actually envisaged a much more proactive function for the central coordinating body of ASEAN (although nowhere near the institutional supremacy of the European Union's headquarters in Brussels), but this was apparently deemed to be premature.[4] Given the prevalence of such conservative attitudes within the organization, then, it should come as no surprise that any interest among the partners in the ARF in moving forward to more institutional arrangements will be actively opposed by ASEAN as a bloc. Thus, the prospects for ARF getting to grips with the key security concerns of the region and progressing in fairly concrete directions towards more meaningful regional cooperation cannot be considered to be very great.

The pressures on regional security

Moving on from the structural and political problems related to the functioning of ARF as an essentially ASEAN-led initiative, a more pressing concern for its future in the rearranging of the regional security architecture is the pace of change in the strategic and geopolitical situation. One might have imagined that a major priority for ARF at the moment would be to anticipate as much as possible the likely realignments in the power balance of the Asia-Pacific theatre as a consequence of ongoing developments in other regions, more especially where it involves the commitment of US forces. However, there has been relative inertia in East and South-East Asia compared with the dynamism of players in the European theatre, as exemplified by the recent expansion of NATO's membership. In this respect, France has been remarkably astute and intrepid in moving into the Asia-Pacific with some bold proposals for creating a new security-based alignment of forces in East and South-East Asia. Its defence minister's tour of the region in 1999, visiting Japan, Korea, Brunei, Singapore, and Thailand, suggests a direct link between the stabilization of the security framework in Europe and the need for some fresh thinking about the future of the Asia-Pacific. The European interest in engaging parties from that region in security dialogue and strategic thinking is linked to the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) format and is in no small way concerned with the potential roles of Russia and China in the evolution of the regional balance of power. The French defence minister's talks with officials in the region did not stop simply at the level of establishing a high-powered security dialogue but actually held out the potential of a contribution by France of its military forces for any Asian eventuality.[5]

It cannot be denied that the doubts at the back of most people's minds in thinking about the security of the region are invariably associated with the potential roles of major powers such as China, Russia, and Japan. There is already an unspoken feeling that China, in particular, is greatly

benefiting from the disarray among ASEAN members and its other external partners in the aftermath of the social and political turbulence that the recent economic downturn has caused in the region. Indeed, it would not be too far-fetched to say that it is this perception of a resurgent China emerging as a more influential and decisive factor in the regional security scenario that primarily drives the quiet activity among various local and external players for a ''quick-fix'' solution should the ARF, for instance, be unable to rise to the occasion. Consequently, we find that the spontaneous response of some of the regional states is to fall back on the tried and tested remedies of the past, with expectations necessarily being pinned on the continued forward deployment of US forces for the foreseeable future. As late as in February 1999, for example, both Australia and Singapore were openly declaring their belief that only a US presence would guarantee the peace and security of the region in the absence of other strategic realignments in the future.[6] At the same time, there have been calls among Japanese opposition groups for a revision of the guidelines for elements of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) being sent on overseas missions either to take part in peace-keeping operations or in defence of Japanese nationals.[7] On the other side of this trend is the unequivocal commitment of Thailand to keeping itself in the good books of its great northern neighbour (China), as witnessed by the signing of an all-encompassing Sino-Thai bilateral agreement in February 1999.[8] All this obviously demonstrates an urgent need for a more determined and clear-headed approach to the task of building the future security architecture of the region, something that the ARF is still very far from being able to handle, much less initiate.

There are at least two important conditions that have to be borne in mind when the question of how the future of regional security in East and South-East Asia can best be managed by the parties with vested interests in it. One is generating collective approaches and solutions for modifying and, eventually, resolving the Asian financial crisis. This is absolutely imperative if the region is to avoid the sort of social upheaval that has already been presaged by the ugly ethnic and religious disturbances in Indonesia for over a year. The other is to reconcile a sustained and credible US strategic presence in the region with a relatively stable and benign regional balance of power.

The first concern is undoubtedly the more critical at the moment in view of the devastating effects of the economic crisis and the growing realization by all affected parties that a realistic review of the existing state of the global financial order is needed. Because this issue involves Japan and the United States, and their respective policy approaches are often seen to be in conflict, many Asian nations have been caught in the dilemma of demoting some of their real security concerns in favour of economic priorities. Japan has responded to the Asian crisis by coming

forward with generous contributions to the various rescue packages led by the International Monetary Fund for countries such as South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia. Even though Japan has come under some criticism for not playing enough of a leadership role in this effort to move the recovery process forward, it has also distanced itself from the United States by boldly proposing an Asian Monetary Fund for future contingencies.[9] It is, however, implicit in the demands being made of Japan to be more proactive in the economic sphere that it would conceivably contemplate a political quid pro quo whereby it could, for example, play a more seminal part in the work of the ARF. It is in this sort of tricky equation that the place of China becomes critical to the ASEAN states. Thailand is a particularly good example of an ASEAN member state that has recognized the potential impact of growing Chinese influence in South-East Asia by intensifying bilateral ties.[10]

The inevitable corollary to dealing with both China and Japan in framing the parameters of closer economic cooperation in the region is the continued strategic involvement of the United States in East Asia. From the purely economic standpoint, the United States has been roundly condemned by the regional states for its propensity, as the critics allege, to dispense advice and theoretical remedies during their troubles while not being very forthcoming with the dollars and cents that they are in need of so badly. On the other hand, the high moral ground that the Clinton administration has held on to in such matters as the democratization process and human rights has led the United States into direct conflict not only with China but with much of the rest of South-East Asia as well. This has in turn greatly embarrassed those who are staunchly in favour of a continued US security commitment to the region for as long as there is no other alternative mechanism for maintaining the peace and stability of East and South-East Asia. Thus, it is this juxtaposition between the economic imperatives of greater regional interaction and the unavoidable security implications of a region without the US presence that has characterized the paradigm shift in the regional geopolitical scene for the past decade or so.[11]

The new regionalism: An EARF?

One of the unexpected outcomes of the ferocity of the economic maelstrom that swept through the entire region, especially during 1997–1998, is the much more realistic appreciation of what constitutes regional interests and, particularly, of how closely intertwined they are. As was pointed out at the outset of this chapter, there had been a growing appreciation among the more robust economies of the region for some time

that the rigid notion of East Asia being somehow detached from South-East Asia was increasingly irrelevant. Various economic interlinkages had been developing even before the coming into being of APEC and there was, therefore, a much better sense of being part of a single region by the early 1990s. Nowhere was this as vividly demonstrated as the attempt in the mid-1990s to forge a regional quadrangle of growth encompassing northern Thailand, the Shan States in Myanmar, Yunnan in south-west China, and Laos with the support of the Asian Development Bank, Japan, and ASEAN. Less noticeable was the increasing integration of Australia and New Zealand into this booming economic portion of the Asia-Pacific. This could be attributed partly to certain unfortunate political differences, especially between the leaders of Malaysia and Australia. There is, however, an interesting contrast between then and the post-1997 period in so far as the apparent link between the economic prospects of the region and its security imperatives was concerned.

It is a testimony of the degree to which the geopolitical situation has changed that security can no longer be divorced from the fundamental economic problems that countries such as Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand are experiencing. In the most severely affected states, such as Indonesia, the very cohesion of the nation itself is being threatened, and the breakdown in law and order portends major political change that would have an unavoidable ripple effect on its neighbours. In the pre-crisis period, such potential for a geopolitical rearrangement of the regional map had never been thought likely although the very size of Indonesia as the world's fifth-largest nation was a constant reminder to the rest of the region of the incalculable impact that destabilization in that country would have on others around it. In strictly security-related terms, too, the sudden loss of hitherto ample government revenues, which had enabled many of the regional states to embark upon what is euphemistically called ''force modernization,'' produced the effect of a rundown in military expenditures. It has been estimated that the consequence of this change in the defence profile of most of the regional armed forces, with the notable and worrying exception of Singapore, which is building up relentlessly, will be severely felt in future regional security arrangements because some of them can hardly support even modest joint military exercises with their treaty partners.[12]

Although one would have thought that the onset of a major destabilizing event such as the economic downturn might have induced states that had been hitherto less than cooperative in various regional efforts for economic solidarity to be more receptive, all the evidence so far points to the reverse being true. Not only have practically all the much-touted growth triangles for economic cooperation projects more or less ground to a halt, even the core ASEAN states have been engaged in bitter ri-

valries and quarrels among themselves over fundamental fiscal and monetary policies. All this naturally does not augur well for any move in the direction of achieving closer and fuller integration of economic and security cooperation within the ASEAN region. There are, therefore, some grounds for scepticism as to the willingness of these South-East Asian states, embroiled as they are in their own intra-regional disputes, to contemplate the establishment of a much broader based Asia-Pacific-wide framework of economic and security understanding. By the same token, however, it can also be argued that because of the very realization of just how much momentum ASEAN has lost, particularly since it brought Viet Nam, Myanmar, and Laos into its fold, interest may now actually be growing in an alternative forum with a more meaningful and substantive agenda. Such a concept, to be attractive to countries in both East and South-East Asia, must necessarily incorporate, from the outset, the twin goals of maintaining economic stability and buttressing regional security.

Faced with these stark economic and security realities there is obviously a need for the regional states to indulge in a certain amount of constructive rethinking as to the ideal form of regional cooperation where their vital interests would be more securely protected. It is in this context that the comment by the erstwhile prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir bin Mohamad, that the APEC forum has become increasingly ineffective and has degenerated into nothing more than a talkfest should be taken seriously.[13] He is, of course, best remembered for the then controversial proposal in 1989 that the countries of East and South-East Asia should get together in a thinly disguised trade forum to be known as the East Asian Economic Grouping. The idea never had much chance of gaining popular acceptance, however, in the face of the refusal of the United States to countenance any such exclusive arrangement. Even after it had been changed to the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) there was not much support within ASEAN itself. At that time, the objections by the United States were presumably based purely on economic grounds but, just as there has been some discussion of the APEC forum looking at security matters, it cannot be ruled out that some possibility of EAEC taking on a political role might have been considered too.

Today the whole scenario has been dramatically altered as a result of global shifts in the deployment of *force majeure*, as evidenced by what is happening in Europe and in its relations with Russia. Moreover, economic goals and security imperatives have become even more inseparable, as is becoming increasingly clear in the disagreements over the need to review the existing world economic order and the transitory nature of existing security arrangements in East and South-East Asia. Most importantly, there is now a perceptible ground-swell of popular feeling in the region for clearly defined aspects of human security to be prioritized in any future multilateral exercise in regional cooperation. This has been

more than borne out by the embarrassingly public differences among ASEAN leaders over fundamental questions of natural justice and human rights in connection with the treatment of the former Malaysian deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim. The time may, thus, be ripe for taking another look at the prospects for a regional organization that would handle not just the obvious economic and security issues in the first instance but also the equally vital elements of human security before they are brought to an international forum. Having noted that the present ARF would be unable to rise to the occasion in view of its internal difficulties and its lack of leadership, the new body should have a much more specific mandate on its membership and working principles. Clearly, the question of who should be qualified to join the organization will lead to endless debate, although a discussion in Australia to redefine the region as an ''Eastern Hemisphere'' may hold the key to a possible solution.[14] By including Australia and New Zealand in the gathering on both economic and political grounds, it might conceivably be possible to determine the rest of the membership on the basis of the East and South-East Asia format. We would end up, in effect, with an ARF minus its extra-regional partners, thereby comprising the 10 South-East Asian states, Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand. It would, therefore, be entitled to be known as the East Asian Regional Forum (EARF) and work essentially within the bounds of that geographical definition.

Such a proposition naturally begs the question of the current status of the more important external partners of some of the regional states, notably the United States, which is still underwriting much of the region's de facto security. Although the definition of the EARF's membership may appear to be unrealistic for that reason, it could be easily resolved by providing for the organization's functional structure to be inclusive of any other non-member parties that have a vital interest in its well-being. The involvement of such countries or even the EARF's relations with them could very sensibly be determined by the temporary exigencies of ongoing defence pacts, treaty arrangements, and such-like diplomatic conventions that are of a multilateral nature – in other words, those ongoing security arrangements in which more than one of the EARF's members is a signatory. In effect this would provide for the continued presence of US forces under existing arrangements but with the clear proviso that they will be phased out over time. This is somewhat similar to the convention used by Malaysia when it joined the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1960s to explain away the presence of Commonwealth forces on its territory.

In any case, the main argument of this chapter rests on the premise that in the long term the United States is, if not a transitory power in the region, at least one that intends to achieve a more equitable sharing of the defence burden with as many of the regional states as possible. Its other

major presumption is that any future cooperative security effort on a regional basis is most likely to be effective and longer lasting if it does not exclude China.

Perhaps most importantly, the region's future security orientation must not be premised solely and blatantly on a potential threat from China. Not only would such an outcome have unpleasant ramifications for policy-makers who view security primarily from a ''state-centric'' vantagepoint. It would also augur ill for the Asia-Pacific region's individual inhabitants who desire greater opportunities for addressing and overcoming more fundamental human security problems related to their own ''quality of life.'' Any future regional security order, then, must be geared toward a general quest to achieve the higher levels of regional stability and prosperity needed for all Asia-Pacific polities to have a reasonable chance of pursuing such a quest.

Notes

1. See Kavi Chongkitavorn, ''Asean Can Learn about Security from Nato,'' *The Nation* (Bangkok), 15 March 1999.
2. Kavi Chongkitavorn, ''ARF Faces Dilemma over Future'', *The Nation* (Bangkok), 22 February 1999.
3. Michael Richardson, ''ASEAN Struggles to Change its Reputation as Weak, Helpless and Divided,'' *International Herald Tribune*, 22 April 1999; and Beth Duff-Brown, ''ASEAN Policy Put to the Test,'' *Los Angeles Times*, 9 December 1998.
4. ''Asean Group Reviews Role of Secretariat,'' *The Nation* (Bangkok), 19 February 1999.
5. ''The French Connection: Interview with French Defence Minister Alain Richard,'' *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 24 February 1999; ''France Calls for Europe–Asia Security Dialogue,'' *The New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), 25 February 1999.
6. ''Australia, Singapore for U.S. Presence in Region,'' *The Hindu* (New Delhi), 24 February 1999.
7. ''Japanese Factions Accept Expanded Role for Military,'' *Global Intelligence Update*, 26 February 1999. This report can be retrieved on the Internet at http://www.stratfor.com/services/giu/022699.asp.
8. A text of this ''Plan of Action'' was issued by *Xinhua*, 30 April 1999, and reprinted in FBIS-CHI-1999-0503.
9. Andrew Cornell, ''Japan Pushes for Asian Version of IMF,'' *Australian Financial Review*, 24 February 1999.
10. ''Regional Perspective: Thai Policy Meets China Challenge,'' *The Nation* (Bangkok), 2 February 1999.
11. Cameron W. Barr, ''US Bullies from a Pulpit That Asia May Not Heed,'' *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 February 1999.
12. Peggy Hu, ''Economic Crisis Has Affected S.E. Asia's Security Priorities,'' United States Information Agency, 5 February 1999.
13. ''Mahathir Rejects APEC as Talkfest,'' *The Age* (Melbourne), 14 January 1999.
14. Kavi Chongkitavorn, ''Stamping a New Label for East Asia,'' *The Nation* (Bangkok), 29 September 1998.