

# Multilateral Mechanisms in the Asia – Pacific Region: Impact on Asean’s Centrality and Implications for Vietnam

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## Abstract

*In the 21st Century, the Asia-Pacific has gained geo-strategic prominence because of its importance for both, regional and global security. Regional multilateral mechanisms have grown after the end of the Cold War. The growth has not only been in numbers, but also in terms of participants, cooperation agenda and programmes. This may either contribute towards strengthening centrality of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), or cause obstacles in its functioning. The influence of ASEAN has decreased in recent years. So far, ASEAN has been considered strategic fulcrum for Vietnam’s foreign policy. Together with other ASEAN members and its partners, Vietnam should make efforts to support, maintain and promote ASEAN’s centrality in regional multilateral security architecture for peace, security and stability.*

## Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, multilateralism has promoted political, economic and security cooperation among states in the Asia-Pacific Region (APR). Till mid-1990s, there was no multilateral mechanism for dealing with security concerns<sup>1</sup>, except the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA).

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Since the establishment of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, the region has had rapid growth of multilateral security cooperation institutions and processes such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Shangri-La Dialogue, ASEAN Defence Minister Meeting (ADMM) and ASEAN Defence Minister Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). Multilateral cooperation has facilitated peace, stability, security and rapid economic growth.

ARF, East Asia Summit (EAS), Shangri-La Dialogue, ADMM and ADMM Plus are examples where ASEAN has contributed towards establishment of these bodies. ASEAN exercised central coordinating role with varying degree of effectiveness. Some members feel that emergence of multilateral mechanisms have undermined ASEAN's centrality in the APR.

### **Multilateral Mechanisms in the APR**

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked end of the Cold War, resulting in turbulent changes in international and regional security environment. A new international political order emerged where United States (US) maintained dominance. Both, the US and Russia reduced their presence in the region, particularly in East Asia, creating concerns among regional states about a 'power vacuum' in the region.<sup>2</sup>

With the American withdrawal from the Philippines; regional countries became sceptical about the US commitment for regional security. At that time China's capacities were limited, but its growing political and economic influence and emergence as a major regional power caused concerns. There were no regional institutions to manage security ambiguity and uncertainty in the region.<sup>3</sup> One option was to establish a multilateral institutional framework that could accommodate US, China, and Japan, as well as cater for needs of smaller countries for a stable region. The stage was set for creation of multilateral institutions with the beginning of ARF.

The 1990s economic boom helped China to improve its power and position in the region. China consolidated its economic and political cooperation through multilateral institutions, including ASEAN. Emerging powers tend to go to war in order to impose their will on others or dominate weaker ones.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, weaker states tend to ally with other powers to improve deterrence capability<sup>5</sup> and improve collective security. Multilayered and

multilateral US-centric cooperation architecture in the region is an example. At the same time, regional countries have made efforts to form a multilateral mechanism to maintain strategic balance of power.

Globalisation, since the early 1990s, has helped in opening up economies, leading to economic boom in Asia-Pacific. In addition to China's emergence, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore are considered 'four economic tigers' of Asia. Their successes have encouraged a number of regional countries to open up their markets and integrate into the world economy, resulting in more interdependence. Economic interdependence promotes cooperation rather than confrontation. The number of free trade agreements (FTAs) has surged bilaterally and multilaterally, leading to explosion of multilateral economic cooperation.

### **New Challenges**

In the 21st Century, security challenges have rapidly evolved. States no longer prioritise their efforts to address traditional challenges, but also respond to non-traditional ones.<sup>6</sup> In the APR, tension due to land and sea disputes has been increasing. At the same time, non-traditional and non-military challenges such as climate change, natural disaster, smuggling, piracy, drug trafficking, cyber-attacks, transnational crime have emerged. These are non-military in nature; transnational in scope; spread rapidly and cause a lot of destruction. Therefore, no country alone can deal effectively with these challenges. Regional and multilateral cooperation<sup>7</sup> is required. The role of defence forces has become more important for ensuring defence cooperation in peacetime.

Firstly, defence cooperation is aimed at building collaborative relationships among allies, friends, partners, and even with previous or potential adversaries.<sup>8</sup> For example, the US and western countries have more recently engaged strategically with both Russia and China through a wide range of military cooperation.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, US, China and Russia are participants in several regional multilateral cooperation mechanisms such as ARF and ADMM Plus. This new approach is named 'strategic engagement' and seeks to reduce potential conflicts and confrontation.

Secondly, defence forces have been assigned new missions, including countering non-traditional challenges. The consequences

of devastation from non-traditional challenges may be beyond the response capability of civilian agencies and even the total capacity of a single nation. Defence forces can be in charge of not only securing national sovereignty, territorial integrity and countering adversaries, but also to be prepared for emergency response to non-traditional threats. For example, natural disasters can cause severe destruction; hence, it is necessary for a state to cooperate with other states to deal with such challenges.

### **Multilateral Cooperation Boom: Four Main Trends**

There are four trends associated with development of multilateral mechanisms in the region. These are:-

- (a) Expansion of new forums that include all ASEAN member-states. ASEAN has a pivotal role by extending its norms and practices to multilateral cooperation among all countries in the APR. Accordingly, “ASEAN’s Way” was applied to new multilateral cooperation such as ARF, ADMM Plus and EAS. ARF adopted norms and practices including mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, equality, and territorial integrity; non-interference in internal affairs; dispute resolutions through negotiation; and renunciation of threat or use of force.<sup>10</sup> “Plus States” to ASEAN as members have to agree to adhere to “ASEAN Way” and sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).
- (b) Establishment of new organisations that involve some ASEAN states reflect interest of those states. Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are examples. These countries have geographic interests. The Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Federation of Paper Traders’ Associations (FPTA) involve states that share mutual interests and security concerns. The relationship between ASEAN and APEC reflects strong ASEAN influence in terms of the normative framework.
- (c) Creation of a small band of organisations without any ASEAN member, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and SCO. These organisations may uphold norms of respecting each other’s sovereignty and non-interference.

(d) Focus on regional multilateral cooperation on defence and security. The focus of ASEAN on security has facilitated a number of security dialogues in APR, such as Shangri La Dialogue, Tokyo Security Forum, Seoul Security Forum, and Jakarta Dialogue.

### **Overlap and Duplication**

Some new organisations do not have geographic contiguity. For example, the SCO expansion, to include Pakistan and India<sup>11</sup> as members, is to include South Asian states who share strategic interests and concerns. FPDA includes two ASEAN members (Singapore and Malaysia), two Oceania countries (Australia and New Zealand), and one European state (Great Britain). These have overlaps and duplications.

Most multilateral mechanisms have security plans that may overlap, differ, and even contradict. APEC, initially a pure economic forum, issued a statement on Counter-terrorism at the 2001 APEC meeting in Shanghai.<sup>12</sup> Just 13 days later, ASEAN issued Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism.<sup>13</sup> As a result, countries who are participants in both ASEAN and APEC had to align with the APEC statement and the ASEAN declaration. Similarly, both ARF and ADMM Plus have coordination plans for Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR). As an organisation, ASEAN and its sub-committees are responsible for coordination in several areas that overlap with ARF and Shangri-La Dialogue.

ASEAN and Shangri-La Dialogue have a number of overlapping functions. Both mechanisms create opportunities for participating countries to promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation. There are a number of such security forums. Shangri-La Dialogue has overlapping issues with Moscow Security Forum, Tokyo Security Forum, Seoul Security Forum and Jakarta Forum. The trends associated with expansion of multilateral institutions may undermine ASEAN's unity, and the central role it plays in regional cooperation, in different ways.

Challenges have emerged to the traditional ASEAN's role due to competition between the world and the regional powers, particularly the US, Russia, China, Japan and India. The US, Russia, China, Japan and India all desire to leverage their influence and compete for leadership. For instance, there was growing

anxiety in China about Japan, India, and Australia's ties with ASEAN member-states. China considered upgrade of India-ASEAN relationship to a 'strategic partnership' level as a measure by ASEAN to balance China's influence in the region.<sup>14</sup> In addition, some regional organisations are regarded by China as tools for the US to 'institutionalise engagement'<sup>15</sup> to contain an emerging China.<sup>16</sup>

### **Implications for Vietnam's Foreign Policy**

As a developing nation, Vietnam has benefitted from long period of peace and stability experienced in the region since Doimoi Policy was launched in 1986. As a result, Vietnam has advanced its security and economic interests, as well as improved its international standing. After becoming an ASEAN member, Vietnam has actively integrated into the region, politically and economically. During this period, ASEAN has been a 'driving force' in monitoring evolution of regional architecture despite the US-China rivalry in the region. It has contributed to peace, security and stability in the region.<sup>17</sup>

ASEAN provides Vietnam a forum to negotiate for peaceful resolution of disputes, conflicts, and differences, including territorial disputes bilaterally and multilaterally. Economically, ASEAN helps Vietnam enlarge its trade and investment markets for national development.

The most noticeable way in which challenge to the ASEAN's centrality, from the rapid growth of multilateral structures, might affect Vietnam is in dilution of ASEAN's influence in international fora. A weaker ASEAN may reduce the profile of Vietnam's stance and position in multilateral forums for it is not being represented or supported by an organisation considered to be a 'driving force'.

The boom of new organisations with participation of a handful of ASEAN members may undermine ASEAN unity because of distraction of members. For national interests, the ASEAN members in new frameworks may compromise on sensitive issues that may jeopardise ASEAN principles and Vietnam's national interests, in particular the ones relating to territorial disputes. Lack of unity in ASEAN may help hegemonic powers to dominate.

It is in Vietnam's strategic interest to consolidate ASEAN's unity and maintain its pivotal role so that the organisation is



respected by big powers.<sup>18</sup> Tension and competition among powers, particularly the US and China, could threaten regional peace and stability that has long been underpinned by ASEAN's 'driving force', while peace and stability are also prerequisites for Vietnam's sustainable development and social stability. Any uncertainty and instability in the region could become a danger to Vietnam, causing it to 'lag further behind' economically.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

A weaker ASEAN role in coordinating regional cooperation mechanisms may be at odds with Vietnam's national interests concerning peace, security, and stability in the region. It will also exacerbate the current challenges that Vietnam faces, such as - the danger of lagging behind economically and encroachment on the country's sovereignty and jurisdiction.

As a member of ASEAN, it is in Vietnam's national interest to pursue a foreign policy to maintain and leverage a robust ASEAN community and to consolidate ASEAN's centrality in regional multilateral cooperation fora. Vietnam should play an active and positive role in consolidating ASEAN unity. It is time to amend some of the principles of the "ASEAN Way" in order to adapt to evolving situations and to the ASEAN community's new status. Vietnam should prioritise its efforts to collaborate with like-minded countries in ASEAN, and with other important regional countries, to consolidate the centrality of the role of ASEAN in the region.

### Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Erik Beukel (2008), "ASEAN and ARF in East Asia's Security Architecture: The role of Norm and Power", Danish Institute for International Studies, Report No. 4, pp. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Alice D. Ba (2016), "ASEAN and the Changing Regional Order: The ARF, ADMM, and ADMM-Plus", *ASEAN@50*, 4 (146 - 157), pp. 147.

<sup>4</sup> Paul T.V., (2013), *International Relation Theory and Regional Transformation*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 8 - 9.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz (1979), "*Theory of International Politics*", Waveland Press In., pp. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Devin T.Hagerty, Michael R. Chambers, and Amy L.Freeman (2012), “Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia”, *Asian Security*, 8:3, pp. 224.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Erik Beukel (2008), “ASEAN and ARF in East Asia’s Security Architecture: The role of norms and powers”, *Danish Institute for International Studies*, pp.20.

<sup>11</sup> Galiyalbragimova, “After 15 Years, the SCO is Ready to Expand”, *Russia Direct*.

<sup>12</sup> APEC (2001), “Statement on Counter-terrorism, Shanghai, China”.

<sup>13</sup> ASEAN (2001), “2001 ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism.

<sup>14</sup> Mingjiang Li (2013), “New Security Challenges for China in East Asia”, in *Prospects of Multilateral Cooperation in Asia Pacific: To Overcome the Gap of Security Outlooks*, The National Institute for Defence Studies, Japan, pp. 64.

<sup>15</sup> SatuLimaye (2013), “Prospects of Multilateral Cooperation in Asia Pacific: To Overcome the Gap of Security Outlooks”, The National Institute for Defence Studies, Japan, pp. 136.

<sup>16</sup> Leonard C. Sebastian, op. cit., pp. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Leonard C. Sebastian, op. cit., pp. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp. 141.

<sup>19</sup> Vietnamese Ministry of National Defence (2009), “Vietnam National Defence”, (*Defence White Paper*), Hanoi, pp. 17.