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THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM FROM AN ASIA-PACIFIC MARITIME SECURITY PERSPECTIVE: TIME TO THINK BIGGER

Anastasia A. GORBATKO¹

¹HSE University, Moscow, Russia,

agorbatko@hse.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0374-7938>

Abstract: The paper reviews the evolution of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and addresses crucial issues the Forum is encountering. Starting from an outline of the ARF's achievements and limitations, the paper further proceeds to exploring the maritime security dimension of the Forum's activity to finally turn to the pivotal task the ARF has to resolve in the present international circumstances. The author argues that the ARF's inability to produce positive results in handling Asia-Pacific maritime security challenges is part of its bigger deficiencies, most importantly, the ARF's failure to offer its participants, primarily, China and the US, a consolidating agenda of cooperation. As long as this problem remains unresolved, the ARF's contribution to keeping Asia-Pacific maritime security challenges manageable will remain minor at best.

Keywords: ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum, China, US, Indo-Pacific Region, cooperative security, maritime security challenges

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РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ФОРУМ АСЕАН В КОНТЕКСТЕ ОБЕСПЕЧЕНИЯ МОРСКОЙ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ АТР: ВРЕМЯ МЫСЛИТЬ МАСШТАБНЕЕ

Анастасия Анатольевна ГОРБАТКО³

¹НИУ ВШЭ, Москва, Россия,

agorbatko@hse.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0374-7938>

Аннотация: В статье проводится анализ эволюции Регионального форума АСЕАН (АРФ) и наиболее существенных проблем, с которыми Форум сталкивается в настоящее время. Определив ключевые достижения деятельности АРФ и факторы, ограничивающие ее эффективность, автор обращается к анализу безопасности на морских

рубежах как одного из направлений деятельности Форума, а также раскрывает существо ключевой задачи, с которой Форум сталкивается в современных международных условиях. С точки зрения автора неспособность АРФ добиться положительных результатов в удержании угроз морской безопасности АТР в контролируемом русле является частью более важной проблемы, главным образом, Форума неспособности предложить своим участникам, прежде всего – Китаю и США, консолидирующую повестку сотрудничества. Пока эта проблема не решена, вклад АРФ в обеспечение безопасности на морских рубежах АТР будет оставаться в лучшем случае незначительным.

Ключевые слова: АСЕАН, Региональный форум АСЕАН, Китай, США, Индо-Тихоокеанский регион, безопасность на основе сотрудничества, угрозы морской безопасности

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Although the fundamental pillars of the present-day security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region were shaped by the bipolar system of international relations, its evolution since the end of the Cold War has not significantly altered them. The US-led hub-and-spoke system, namely, security alliances between the US and its Asia-Pacific partners, is in place¹. Simultaneously, ASEAN-led security dialogue venues – the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) – came into existence. Arguably, this system has elaborated on sufficient safety mechanisms to prevent the Middle East-like or the Eastern Europe-like scenarios in the Asia-Pacific region.

The ASEAN Regional Forum is the pathfinder of the ASEAN-led multilateral venues, as the ARF experience has been of high relevance to the association in establishing and upgrading its cooperative security system. If so, an attempt to trace the ARF evolution, achievements and prospective tasks is timely and relevant.

The ASEAN Regional Forum: A Glass More Half-Full than Half-Empty?

The ASEAN-led multilateral dialogue on security issues, collectively referred to as the Asia-Pacific cooperative security system, started from the

ARF establishment. The way the ARF operates has been and remains premised on the ASEAN modality. Specifically, the Forum prioritizes a three-stage approach to keeping the regional security challenges manageable: moving from confidence-building measures to preventive diplomacy and eventually to a conflict-resolution mechanism².

The privilege to act as the “driving force” of the ARF discussions, namely, to set the agenda of Forum and to monitor the implementations of its decisions, is highly appreciated by the association. Remarkably, although ASEAN has encountered a barrage of criticism since the ARF’s early days, the association still performs this function. Even more importantly, the ASEAN Regional Forum has not experienced Brexit-like events, as so far no ARF participant has attempted to suspend its membership. This fact itself confirms the ARF’s relevance to the priorities of its participants.

At the same time, the ARF cannot boast of truly remarkable achievements. Although North Korea joined the ARF in 2000, this has not influenced on the development of DPRK’s nuclear programs³. Attempts to address the South China Sea issue failed at the second ARF meeting, as no insightful and comprehensive discussion about how to deal with and eventually resolve contradictions took place. Lastly but importantly, the ARF has been unable to harmonize relations between the Asia-Pacific big powers, as trust-building might be good in theory but offers few, if any at all, incentives to refrain from obtaining unilateral benefits.

At the same time, however, the ARF earns praise for its emphasis on promoting dialogue based upon neutrality and inclusivity. The present-day Asia-Pacific region has become one of major engines of world economic growth. Logically, its security challenges, including maritime disputes, are global rather than regional. For instance, the evolution of the South China Sea issue increasingly influences on global trade and energy security. If so, confidence-building is exactly what the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the world at large, urgently needs.

Due to a substantial increase in regional naval build-ups and, by implication, military expenditures, the ARF incentivized its participants to publish annual security outlooks (ASEAN Regional Forum Security Outlook)⁴ to avoid a regional arms race. Regular ARF Inter Sessional Meetings (ARF ISM) on Maritime Security, held since July 2008, allowed elaborating on a holistic approach to assessing maritime security threats, as well as to practically-oriented measures to keep those issues manageable⁵. The ARF meetings are closely aligned with other ASEAN-led frameworks, most importantly, the ADMM Plus and the EAS.

In the present circumstances, the ASEAN-led cooperative security system is encountering grave challenges. To begin, the association cannot effectively perform the function of the “driving force” of the ARF, the ADMM Plus and the EAS, as its partners are in deepening disagreements. To continue, the consensus-based approach might have been good in the early 1990s, but it is hardly relevant today. The reason is clear, as the Asia-Pacific region is undergoing a profound transformation, and the regional conflict potential is steadily increasing. Because of this, events like those happened at the 2022 EAS session or the 2015 ADMM Plus session are hardly surprising. To end, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership as the economic foundation of the ARF – ADMM Plus – EAS paradigm may not live up to high expectations of ASEAN external partners⁶, which will further decrease the significance of those multilateral dialogue venues.

But on the whole, although the ARF has deserved its part of criticism, it remains the only Asia-Pacific multilateral security forum that premises its discussions on inclusivity and neutrality. Amidst the present-day global and Asia-Pacific trends, this is in itself a remarkable achievement.

A Maritime Security Perspective

Asia-Pacific maritime security issues have long loomed large in ASEAN’s priorities. To a significant extent, the South China Sea issue was behind ASEAN’s efforts to establish the ASEAN Regional Forum. After the end of the Cold War, the international situation in the Asia-Pacific region was in a state of flux. The US started to reduce its military presence, Russia’s prospective role, as well as Moscow’s priorities and instruments to substantiate them, was unclear, Japan aimed to revise its security role, while China, developing its naval forces, in February 1992 adopted the PRC’s Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone⁷. In light of this, it is hardly surprising that the association aimed to handle the South China Sea issue with assistance from the participants of the pan-regional multilateral dialogue rather than vis-à-vis China.

Discouragingly, those plans have not been realized. As mentioned earlier, the ARF 1995 session did not produce tangible results on the South China Sea issue. In the years that followed, the ARF participants did not discuss the issue pointedly and comprehensively. On the contrary, M. Allbright’s intervention at the ARF session in 1999 contributed to stirring up the issue⁸. But most importantly, the ARF did not influence upon negotiations on the drafts of the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea

(COC) held between the ASEAN member states and later on between ASEAN and China. More than that, the Forum does not influence the process of ASEAN-China negotiations on elaborating on the Code of Conduct instead of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) signed by ASEAN and China in 2002⁹. At best, the ARF follows the process rather than leads it.

To ASEAN's credence, it would be an exaggeration to say that it allowed the Asia-Pacific maritime security challenges, including the South China Sea issue, to take their own course. The association, at least formally, addressed them at the sessions of the ARF, the ADMM Plus and the EAS. The association established the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF)¹⁰ the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF)¹¹ in 2010 and 2012 respectively. Those factors suggest that the issues have been, at least, closely monitored.

Nevertheless, in the present-day realities, the Asia-Pacific maritime security issues have entered a particularly sensitive stage. On the one hand, the regional long-standing maritime security challenges are far from resolved. Apart from the South China Sea issue, the evolution of other maritime territorial disputes, including those in the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea (the North Limit Line in relations between the ROK and the DPRK), the Japan Sea etc. substantiates this point. On the other hand, those problems are aggravated by a rising US-China competition in the Pacific Ocean and in the Indian Ocean, as the project Indo-Pacific Region aims at countering the PRC's maritime rise. As stakes in controlling vast maritime areas are rising, Beijing's and Washington's increasingly uncompromising positions on maritime security related issues seem very likely.

Against this challenging background, the Asia-Pacific maritime security becomes highly complicated. Again, the South China Sea issue is a relevant example. During the Cold War, the disagreements and, by implication, the controversies related mostly to sovereignty over the Paracel and the Spratly islands. The arguments used by China, Taiwan and Vietnam focused on historical evidence substantiating their positions (ancient emperors sent expeditions to the islands and placed indications of sovereignty there). After the end of the Cold War, the focus shifted to the ASEAN-China level. In the early-mid 1990s, China and ASEAN revealed their positions in the PRC's Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone and ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea issued in February and March 1992 respectively. Later on, negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea were conducted between ASEAN and China from 1999 to 2002 to eventually result in signing the Declaration on the Conduct of the

Parties in the South China Sea¹². In the late 2000s, the South China Sea issue shifted to the US-China level, as Washington and Beijing take different positions on its essence. China-US contradictions focus on the freedom of navigation narrative, a priority of DOC over COC and vice versa, and conditions of exploiting the resources of the South China Sea. The present state of the contradictions relates to a competition, if not an open rivalry, between the US-led Indo-Pacific Region and the PRC-led Belt and Road Initiative. If so, disagreements that previously were not raised even at the visionary level, like laying underwater internet cables through the South China Sea and linking them to the digital infrastructure across the Pacific Ocean, are increasingly shaping the evolution of the South China Sea issue.

As the problem has become more complicated, instruments to keep it manageable are conspicuously stagnating. The global dimension of the South China Sea contradictions is increasing, as their substance has moved far beyond the Asia-Pacific region. Simultaneously, however, global instruments appear to be of limited efficiency. As exemplified by the events that followed the verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in July 2016¹³, no significant changes that would incentivize the parties with stakes in the South China Sea have occurred.

Regrettably, ample evidence suggests that the issue, as well as other Asia-Pacific maritime security challenges, will further increase in complexity in the years to come. The South China Sea issue is closely linked to the Taiwan stalemate. For the PRC, to control Taiwan means not only strategic advantages, but also is an important part of Chinese national mythology. As Taiwan is part of East Asian global value chains that China is presently reshaping, actions made by the US in August 2022 – N. Pelosi's visit and negotiations with Taiwan's semiconductor industry powerhouses on locating manufacturing facilities to the US¹⁴ – predictably provoked the PRC's outrage.

From a maritime security perspective, the ASEAN Regional Forum has to punch above its weight in order to remain relevant. For ASEAN as the ARF coordinator, part of this task is to provide China and the US with sufficient incentives to cooperate.

ASEAN and the ARF: between China and the US

For the association to remain an influential Asia-Pacific actor, with positive ARF-related implications, it must synergize its policy with major priorities of Beijing and Washington. While this task has not been easy since the ASEAN establishment, the present circumstances in which

ASEAN and the ARF implement their policies make it extremely challenging.

ASEAN's leaders have long sought reassurance that the PRC and the US "will not fight one another, collaterally damaging the region"¹⁵. At the same time, an important point must be stressed. While China, with all its deficiencies, shortcomings and criticism, is ready to invest in transnational infrastructure projects across Southeast Asia (the region is part of the Belt and Road Initiative), the US does not offer its regional partners any really strong incentives. On the contrary, what Washington has been doing so far suggests that the cooperation with the US can hardly be regarded as reliable and, more importantly, sustainable. The turns and twists of the US policy (the Obama administration took a great deal of effort to develop the Trans-Pacific Partnership, while the Trump administration withdrew the US from the TPP) coupled with negative aftereffects of the US-China trade and technological war for the Southeast Asia and lack of substance in the long-awaited Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity demonstrate that the US is not as promising partner as China.

This is all the more important since both Trump and Biden administrations make no secret of the US' intention to drag ASEAN in its anti-Chinese game. To exemplify this point, suffice it to look at the provisions of ASEAN-US Leaders' Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The maritime security component is clearly pronounced and includes references to the ASEAN Outlook of the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) etc.¹⁶

Coupled with the recent Quad-related and AUKUS-related developments, this amply suggests that the foundation of the ASEAN-led cooperative security system, part of which is the ASEAN Regional Forum, - neutrality and inclusivity, - is losing substance.

Several factors aggravate the problem. ASEAN-led multilateral dialogue venues have long encountered strong criticism for lack of efficiency. To rectify this situation, ASEAN has to demonstrate impressive results relating to the ARF's real contribution in keeping the Asia-Pacific security challenges manageable. More importantly, this achievement must influence positively on relations between Asia-Pacific major powers, including the PRC and the US. Notably, ASEAN has to perform this task in time-pressing conditions. While any of those tasks is highly challenging, what to say about them combined? The question seems to be open-ended.

Arguably, the ARF's main task is to elaborate on a unifying component in the US-China relations. At the same time, however, the solution must go beyond the maritime security and cooperation dimension. In the present-day realities, this component should embrace many aspects of those relations with a clearly pronounced multiplier effect.

In sum, the association as the driving force of the Asia-Pacific cooperative security system, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, has to resolve a set of challenges it has never encountered before. The extent to which ASEAN succeeds in fulfilling this task will define its international status in the years to come.

Conclusion

Despite numerous challenges, the ASEAN Regional Forum is unique in many respects. Before its establishment, the Asia-Pacific region had lacked any precedent of a region-wide multilateral security forum that premised its activity on the principles of neutrality and inclusivity. The ARF embraces many participants with different political systems, ideologies and views on regional security. The ARF includes a country that does not participate in any other Asia-Pacific multilateral dialogue framework – North Korea. All the factors mentioned suggest that the ARF is a valuable international actor that has sufficient potential to make a positive contribution to the Asia-Pacific security.

Discouragingly, however, the Forum is losing its relevance in the priorities of its participants. To a considerable extent, it has been predetermined by the Asia-Pacific maritime security issues. While the global component in those issues is strengthening, the Forum still operates on the foundations that had been built in the 1990s. This is demonstrated, among other points of evidence, by the ARF's inability to upgrade its normative framework.

To cope with the situation that is evidently evolving contrary to ASEAN's interests, the association as the "driving force" of the Forum has to perform an ambitious task, specifically, to find and develop a unifying component in relations between its most influential participants, primarily between China and the United States. Although this task is very difficult, the present-day Asia-Pacific international milieu does not leave ASEAN any other choice.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

ГОРБАТКО Анастасия Анатольевна,
аспирант НИУ ВШЭ, Москва, Россия

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anastasia A. GORBATKO, PhD Student,
Doctoral School of International Relations
and Regional Studies, HSE University,
Moscow, Russia

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