

From Confidence Building Measures to Preventive Diplomacy: An ASEAN View

Suchit Bunbongkarn

Preventive Diplomacy: Its Origin, Development and Implementation

In 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum, in order to enable the countries in the Asia – Pacific region to develop the consultative habit leading to peaceful settlement of regional conflicts, agreed to move ARF process in three gradual stages, namely, confidence building measures, preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution. To deal with political and security issues in the region, confidence building measures (CBMs) must be fostered first and then followed by the development of preventive diplomacy. Conflict resolution is to be the final phase after the success of the first two. It is expected that once all the three stages are successfully implemented, peace and security will definitely be maintained.

Many countries in the Asia-Pacific region have been enthusiastic to develop CBMs. The track II processes, notably, ASEAN-ISIS and CSCAP, have studied and provided recommendations on how to promote and develop CBMs to the ARF and the countries concerned. They have been well received. Progress to develop preventive diplomacy, or PD, however, has been slow.

Since its early years, the ARF has organized a number of workshops and conferences to come up with a mutually agreed definition and concept of PD as well as to identify issues and obstacles facing the efforts to develop and foster PD among regional countries. There has also been cooperation with the second track processes, especially the ASEAN ISIS and CSCAP, to find ways to address those obstacles, and measures to be undertaken for implementing PD.

In 2001, the ARF agreed to define PD as a “consensual diplomatic and political action taken by sovereign states with the consent of all directly involved parties to help prevent disputes and conflicts from arising between states that could potentially pose a threat to regional peace and stability, to help prevent such disputes and conflicts from

escalating into armed confrontation, and to help minimize the impact of such disputes and conflicts in the region...” (ARF Unit Information Paper: February 2015, 2). It also agreed that the definition, concept and principles of preventive diplomacy are not legal obligation. (ARF Unit Information Paper: February 2015, 2).

The definition, concept and principles of PD mentioned above reflect some difficulties in implementing it. One of them is connected with CBMs since the practice of PD requires trust and confidence between states. Hence, a question arises: how can we be sure that CBMs have been completed? Another problem has to do with one of the principles of PD which relies on diplomatic and peaceful methods. This requires – apart from the development of understanding of essential skills, premises and goals of PD – the expertise in the areas of conflict analysis, negotiation and mediation. Having realized that need, the ARF has set up training courses and sessions in these afore-mentioned areas. But whether the training courses and sessions would be able to contribute to the success of PD remains to be seen.

After slightly over the twenty years of fostering CBMs, the ARF is now convinced that it is ready to enter the stage of preventive diplomacy. In this regard, if ASEAN wants to make its centrality role in the ARF more relevant, it has to strengthen its capacity in this second stage.

Strengthen ASEAN’s Capacities in the Area of Preventive Diplomacy

According to the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint, or APSC Blueprint, by the year 2015 ASEAN will become a community with unity, peace and collective responsibility to resolve regional security issues in every dimension. To achieve that goal, ASEAN has been making a number of efforts through the ARF as well as through the ADMM Plus focusing on confidence building measures and preventive diplomacy. Nevertheless, ASEAN continues to face increasing security uncertainty, both in the traditional and non-traditional aspects.

If we want to strengthen ASEAN’s capacities in the area of conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy, we have to look at existing conflicts or potential

threats with which ASEAN is facing. These issues have been raised and discussed in many fora. But very briefly, ASEAN's security concerns are not confined to the ASEAN region. We are well aware that whatever happens outside the region especially in the Asia Pacific may have some impact on peace and stability in the ASEAN region. The rise of China as a super economic and military power, the role of the U.S. in East Asia and its relationship with China, Japan and South Korea, the North Korea's nuclear threat, the disputes between China and Japan on Senkaku Islands / Diaoyu Islands and between China and some ASEAN members on territorial claims in South China Sea, these are the major concerns of ASEAN. In addition, there exist intra-regional conflicts mostly bilateral in nature, for example, the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over Phra Viharn, or Preah Vihear, temple, and the Philippines' claim over Malaysia's Sabah.

To build up ASEAN's capacities to deal with those issues and conflicts effectively, ASEAN must have an effective security structure or mechanism. At the moment, ASEAN has the ARF and the ADMM Plus, which are tasked to work on conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy. As mentioned earlier, the ARF and the ADMM Plus have done a lot in the area of confidence building measures. But if we want them to be more effective in implementing preventive diplomacy, there are a lot to be done, and these would have a lot to do with ASEAN since ASEAN continues to play a central role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. And ASEAN also wants to maintain its centrality in the evolving regional architecture. Thus, what we need is to increase ASEAN capacities. The question is "how?"

First of all, ASEAN's capacities in the area of conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy are related to the strength of each ASEAN member state in the political, economic and social aspects. If the members are politically weak, with political and government instability, it would be difficult to strengthen ASEAN's capacities. This does not imply a strong leadership and strong government. But it implies political or democratic development that leads to people's political participation, political freedom, equality and political legitimacy. For example in the case of Thailand, political polarization over the past ten years and the military coups in 2006 and 2014 reflected the fragility of its democracy.

Secondly, there must be strong commitment of the ASEAN leaders to the interest of ASEAN especially in the area of peace and stability. There must also be political will on the part the leaders to work together in tackling a numbers of issues facing ASEAN. In some countries, for example, Thailand, its political leaders have been pre-occupying themselves with how to survive politically. They have paid less attention to ASEAN's businesses especially in the areas of conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy.

Thirdly, ASEAN has to strike a balance between regional or ASEAN's interest and national interest. Nationalist sentiment in the ASEAN member countries would make ASEAN's cohesiveness very difficult and, as a consequence, political solidarity of ASEAN would be difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, ASEAN has to perform a delicate balancing act between different major powers competing for influence in the region. China is on the rise, and we want the U.S. to be in but not to contain China. ASEAN also welcomes India to the region. Again, we don't want to make the Chinese feel that we are containing them.

Fourthly, the people and civil society's participation in the processes of security, peace and stability should be encouraged. We must make ASEAN more people-centered.

Last but not least, is it possible to review the ASEAN' principle of non-interference? ASEAN has been proud of this norm or principle: it's often been said that had this principle not been observed, ASEAN would have been disintegrated. Yet, today the international environment and strategic landscape have changed. It has become imperative that the principle of non-interference be reviewed. This does not mean that ASEAN should drop this principle entirely and with immediate effect. But it would be worthwhile for ASEAN to look into a conflict situation, in which ASEAN would be more relevant and capable of handling the conflict more effectively if the principle of non-interference were to be modified.

Conclusion

The ARF process is now ready to move from Stage I – Confidence Building Measures – to Stage II – Preventive Diplomacy. The countries in the Asia-Pacific which are the ARF participants should be ready to pull necessary resources to make PD work effectively so that peace and security will be secured through mutual trust, dialogues, mediation and other diplomatic and political measures. ASEAN, in particular, having maintained its centrality and role in the driving seat, must strengthen its capacities in this regard.