

The ASEAN Regional Forum in United States East Asian strategy

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Abstract This paper analyses the development of the US approach to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), from 1991 onwards. It examines theories of why a super-power would participate in a multilateral security institution, and investigates the motivations for the attitudes and extent of participation of the George H. Bush, Clinton and George W. Bush administrations towards the ARF. It argues that, in the post-Cold War period and in the face of a rising China, US East Asia strategy has been geared towards retaining the American preponderance of power. Thus, the US has pursued a strategy of containment and deterrence centred upon the regional bilateral alliance structure. Multilateral institutions have been treated as a supplementary means of supporting the secondary strategy of engaging with China. However, the ARF is not viewed as one of the important institutions through which to fulfil this supplementary aim. Because it cannot deal with the key regional security issues, the ARF is seen as a low-stakes arena by Washington. But the paper concludes that US participation in the ARF may nevertheless be crucial in boosting the legitimacy of American security interests in the region, thus helping to safeguard US preponderance.

Keywords ASEAN Regional Forum; United States; East Asia.

Introduction

One of the key rationales for establishing the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), from a Southeast Asian point of view, was to engage the two key Asia-Pacific powers, the United States and China, in regional security dialogue and confidence building. There is a significant existing literature on the ASEAN states' motivations in initiating the ARF, and a growing

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literature on China's participation in the forum (see Leifer 1997; Foot 1998; Yong 1998; Yuan 2001). However, there is very little existing analysis of the US approach to the ARF. Washington initially opposed the idea of a regional multilateral security forum, but subsequently agreed to participate in the ARF. This paper tries to advance our understanding of multilateral security cooperation in the region by tracing the evolution of the US position towards the ARF; examining the extent and significance of American participation; and analysing the reasons for Washington's attitude.

This paper first explores some reasons for which a great power would want to participate in multilateral institutions. It then examines the development of the US attitude towards the ARF from 1989 to the present, which it argues to have been influenced chiefly by strategic adjustments necessitated by the end of the Cold War and the rise of China. On the one hand, the demise of the Cold War led the US to shift from a strategy of containing its Soviet superpower rival, to an apparently less demanding one of maintaining American unipolar preponderance. On the other hand, within the Asia-Pacific context, the US also faced a rising potential power challenger in the form of China. Washington's approach to the ARF has been instrumental and related to its bilateral relationship with China. In confronting the post-Cold War strategic situation, the US has continued to focus on the containment element of its East Asia policy, centred upon its regional bilateral alliances. Washington has treated multilateral institutions like the ARF as supplementary measures. Participation in the ARF initially helped to assure the region about continued US involvement and commitments. The Clinton administration also saw the ARF as a means to test Beijing's willingness to conform to international norms and to be a responsible regional power, but it did not quite expect the multilateral security forum in and of itself to alter fundamentally Chinese intentions and behaviour. This paper concludes that the main motivations for American membership in the ARF also explain the limitations of its participation in the regional multilateral security forum thus far. But it suggests that one important effect of US participation in the ARF is its crucial function in helping to legitimize American security interests in the region, and to entrench the Asia-Pacific identity of the US. This, in turn, is critical to safeguarding US preponderance in the region.

Hegemony and multilateralism

Why would a great power and a hegemon such as the US, after the Cold War, choose to participate in multilateral institutions which might constrain its autonomy and power?

Rational-choice approaches offer some insights into the benefits and costs of multilateral security institutions from a great power's point of view. Key benefits include: lower transaction costs, especially in instances of

standardization; the deflection of challenges to the institution from weaker members by ceding some degree of decision-making and thus the lowering of policing and enforcement costs; and increased stability in the event of changes in relative power, a particularly attractive aim to a far-sighted hegemon (Martin 1993). On the other hand, great powers may also find multilateral approaches to security constraining in that they may substantially increase the costs of decision-making and the price of maintaining the collective institution. In particular, as multilateralism tends to make security a non-excludable good, it minimizes a great power's coercive power and its ability to extract payment for protection. Furthermore, it makes the sanctioning of free-riders difficult (Weber 1993).

On the positive side of the ledger though, hegemonic stability theory further posits that a hegemonic power may create or support multilateral institutions so as to boost its primacy by offering a collective good, such as free trade or security, to others. In the discipline of International Relations, hegemonic stability theory has been the dominant explanation for US sponsorship of global economic institutions and regional security groupings such as NATO after the Second World War (Keohane 1984; Gilpin 1987; Walter 1993). This reading suggests that the costs of hegemony can also be reduced if the hegemon supplements and sustains its material dominance by constructing a social framework, which legitimizes its power and leadership. Multilateral institutions are a key form of such frameworks through which a hegemonic power agrees to bind itself to specified voluntary strategic restraints in dealing with their weaker partners, in return for the latter's long-term, institutionalized cooperation. John Ikenberry (2001) has argued that international orders that entailed such 'institutional-binding' have been more long-lived and stable than those based on unilateral or bilateral relationships between the hegemon and weaker states.

While there are advantages to a hegemon in supporting multilateral institutions, under what conditions is this more likely to happen? Realists would stress the importance of relative power: the greater the disparity between the great power and weaker powers, the lower the incentives for the former to engage in multilateralism because the prospects of mutual benefits are thinner (e.g. Modelski 1962). Institutionalist would add the consideration of the perceived policy importance to the hegemon of the weaker states and their perceived ability to be bound by the bargain. For example, Ikenberry argues that, during the Cold War, Washington did not support a multilateral security institution in East Asia because the US was 'both more dominant in Asia and wanted less out of Asia'. Not only did America's 'extreme hegemony' mean that the costs of constrained autonomy would be higher than the benefits to it, but the US also did not have ambitious goals in the region, which was seen as less threatened and less important than Europe (Ikenberry 2002: 126–7, 130). In addition, constructivists suggest that the lack of strong US identification with Asia played a limiting role, as multilateralism requires a strong sense of collective

identity in addition to shared interests. Hence, explaining the absence of a NATO equivalent in Asia, Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002: 588) note that having been 'constructed as a region composed of alien, and in many ways, inferior actors, bilateralism followed closely'.

The changing context for US East Asia policy

The creation of the ARF, and the US response to this multilateral security institution, were tightly bound up with the changing strategic context presaged by the end of the Cold War. The implosion of the Soviet Union engendered a systemic shift towards US unipolarity and compelled Washington to adapt its Cold War strategy of containing a hegemonic rival. Within the East Asian context, the end of the Cold War saw the lifting of Soviet involvement in the region. Moscow's aid for Vietnam was ended, and the Russian focus turned westward, with a diminishing role for its Far Eastern naval fleet, for instance. On the other hand, with the removal of the Soviet superpower rival came an increasing American preoccupation with China's perceived rise and potential threat. Against the context of the power vacuum created by the demise of the Soviet Union, the Chinese government's brutal domestic policies, highlighted by the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, and China's rapid economic growth throughout the 1980s combined to pose an apparent challenge to US interests in the region.

Given these systemic and perceptual changes, the calculus regarding the relative costs and benefits of a multilateral approach for the US in East Asia changed along three main axes. First, with the lifting of the Cold War superpower rivalry overlay, the US was forced to adopt a more regional focus to its East Asia strategy. Given its regional preponderance, Washington now had to move away from balancing Soviet power towards a more managerial approach to maintaining regional security. It also had to grapple with conflicting goals, such as how to restrain potential Japanese militarism while promoting a more active responsible role for Japan in the region; and how to deal with growing Chinese power while attempting a post-Cold War draw-down of US commitments to the region. A more regional focus also revealed a plethora of regional problems such as weapons proliferation, economic integration and environmental security that were essentially transnational and required regional cooperation. In such situations of varied and competing goals, promoting multilateral strategies can help a hegemon to reduce costs of leadership (see Press-Barnathan 2000/1).

Second, the power disparity between the US and regional states in the 1990s was smaller than that at the beginning of the Cold War. The economic capacity and military forces of US allies and partners in the region had grown significantly, and not only was East Asia of international importance economically, but regional states now had more potential contributions to make to the US goal of preserving regional stability. This was reflected in the third change, in terms of partner preferences. In the 1950s, SEATO had

failed in part because of the inability of regional states to work together due to domestic and intra-regional conflicts. In the 1990s, significant players like Japan and ASEAN were genuinely interested in, and initiated, regional security cooperation (Press-Barnathan 2000/1). How these factors facilitated a reconsideration of the US approach to the ARF is discussed in the next section.

The evolution of the US approach to the ARF in the context of East Asia policy

The George H. Bush administration, 1989–93

Initially, the Bush administration was cold to suggestions by the Australians, Canadians and Japanese for a regional dialogue on security issues in Asia in 1990 and 1991 (Clark 1990; Evans 1990; Nakayama 1991). This reluctant and suspicious attitude towards a multilateral security forum was derived from the Bush administration's struggle to understand and shape the post-Cold War security structure in the Asia-Pacific.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Bush administration was forced to reformulate American strategy in the Asia-Pacific from one of containing Soviet/Chinese/communist power to one of maintaining the status quo balance of power or, more accurately, the preponderance of US power. In 1990 and 1992, two key Defense Department strategy documents, known as the East Asia Strategy Initiative (EASI) I and II, portrayed the US as a 'regional balancer', an 'honest broker' playing a 'critical stabilizing role'.¹ Washington aimed to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon and to protect US economic interests – in 1990, the value of US trade with the region was over \$300 billion, as opposed to half that value for US–Europe trade – in the region. However, in line with the Bush administration's overall strategy for reducing and reconfiguring global US military deployments, Washington would now retain its presence in East Asia based on reduced troop strength and greater allied contributions. EASI projections were for US force levels in the region to be reduced from 135,000 to 100,000 by 1995, a target that was largely met (US Department of Defense 1990, 1992; US Secretary of Defense 1993; Morrison 1994). Yet, America's bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia would remain the keystones of its regional strategy.

Given the imperative to find new justification for retaining the US forward presence in the region in spite of the end of the Cold War, the Bush administration viewed regional multilateral security fora or institutions as an anathema, as they threatened to undermine the bilateral alliances that remained at the core of its East Asian strategy (Solomon 1990, 1991). The administration had to contend with less enthusiastic domestic support for large defence expenditures with the end of the Cold War; and the State Department in particular worried that the creation of a regional multilateral

security institution would provide Congress with an excuse to press for a further draw-down of US forces in the region (Capie 2001).

Finally, in the post-Cold War transition phase, threat perceptions were being revised in Washington. There was uncertainty about the role of Russia in East Asia; relations with Japan soured with the rising trade deficit and accusations of Japanese security free-riding; and China's status in American eyes after the Cold War, while anomalous, tended towards that of a new threat, especially in light of the Tiananmen massacre. Interestingly, the Bush administration's opposition to early suggestions of a regional security institution also stemmed from suspicions that the Russians would be able to use multilateral institutions to expand their influence in the region and to try to contain the US, for example, by bringing up the difficult issue of naval arms control (Capie 2001; Mack 2003).

By late 1991, though, the Bush administration had moderated its attitude towards a regional multilateral security forum. In a speech in Tokyo in November, Secretary of State James Baker, while reaffirming the centrality of US alliances in the region, acknowledged that 'multilateral actions may ... supplement these bilateral ties'. In a subsequent article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Baker pointed to multilateral action in the Cambodian peace process, the South China Sea disputes, and on the Korean Peninsular, and stated that 'we should be attentive to the possibilities for such multilateral action without locking ourselves into an overly structural approach' (Baker 1991/92: 5–6).

This change in attitude appears to have come about as a result of gathering regional doubts about the continued commitment of the US to East Asia in the wake of the Cold War. EASI I and II had led to cuts in defence spending and troop reductions, which implied a significant retraction of the US military's forward presence in the region; and the Bush administration's presentation of its new strategy had failed to reassure its allies in the region that Washington was not planning to withdraw into an 'offshore balancing' strategy.² Furthermore, the US withdrawal from Subic Naval Base and Clark Airfield in the Philippines caused great concern about the reliability of the American commitment to Southeast Asia. These worries were deepened by an increasing regional recognition of the potential threat a growing China might pose to the stability of the Asia-Pacific strategic landscape, a concern which many in Washington shared.

As a result of regional disquiet, the Bush administration, while retaining its key focus on bilateral alliances, began to appreciate the utility of a regional multilateral security dialogue in helping to reassure friends and allies in the region about its continued commitment. There was a need to demonstrate, that, as Baker told ASEAN leaders, '[t]he form of our presence may have changed, but the substance of our commitment is firm' (Baker 1992). As realists would argue, the Bush administration's lukewarm support for a multilateral security forum represented an increasing recognition that this was one avenue along which to extend the power

preponderance strategy by political means. The foundational hub-and-spokes alliance structure could, in these belt-tightening times, be supplemented by participation in an embryonic multilateral security discourse.³

The Clinton administration, 1993–2000

The momentum for the ASEAN Regional Forum gathered from 1992 onwards, and by the time of the first ARF meeting in Bangkok in July 1994, Washington had declared its full backing for the forum.⁴ This change of heart had become much more pronounced from 1993 onwards with the new Clinton administration, which was guided by liberals such as Joseph Nye and Anthony Lake. While the Bush administration's main motivation had been to reassure its friends and alliance about Washington's continuing commitment to East Asia, the Clinton administration's approach to the ARF seemed to reflect its more general inclination towards value-driven strategy, liberal institutionalism and multilateralism.

During his March 1993 confirmation statement before Congress, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (A/S EAP) Winston Lord identified as one of the major goals for US policy in the region 'developing multilateral forums for security consultations', and specifically stated that the US would 'fully participate' in security dialogue within the framework of the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference. During a tour of Northeast Asia in the same year, President Clinton called for 'new regional dialogues on the full range of our common security challenges', and identified the need 'to develop multiple new arrangements to meet multiple threats and opportunities' which would function as 'overlapping plates of armor'.

The Clinton administration's endorsement of a regional multilateral security dialogue was, however, accompanied by a strong reaffirmation of Washington's traditional emphasis on bilateral alliances. The 'bedrock' of US East Asia policy remained its treaty alliances, its military arrangements, and the maintenance of a substantial military presence in the region. As a 'Pacific nation', the US intended to 'remain actively engaged' in the region; and America's allies could be reassured that Clinton saw emerging multilateral security dialogues as 'a way to *supplement* our alliances and forward military presence, not to supplant them' (Clinton 1993). Thus, Clinton, like Bush, was working on the basic aim of reassuring the region of enduring American involvement. Washington's participation in regional security dialogues would help to boost US identity as an integral Asia-Pacific power, and help regional states to appreciate its role as a regional stabilizer.⁵ At the same time, in the context of domestic political debates about security free-riding, such regional fora would encourage allies like Japan to take more notice and responsibility for their own regional security issues.

Washington's support for the ARF might be construed as a low-cost, low-stakes policy during a time of transition. As some Bush administration

officials have argued, by 1992, even the Republicans saw that, given the change of opinion within the region, there was 'no reason to lie down across the railroad tracks and say do or die, we will oppose this'.⁶ This suggests that, in some ways, American acquiescence to the ARF was reactive – there was no benefit in opposing, little cost and some gain in supporting the initiative. The costs were low because only the Secretary of State would be involved, and not the Defense Secretary or intelligence chiefs; there would be no treaties to sign and be ratified by a sceptical Senate; and no dues to be paid to a secretariat. At the same time, Washington wanted to strengthen ties with ASEAN, which was becoming more important economically. Finally, it would also

put to the test the issue of whether there [was] a 'China threat' to the region because ARF participants could have the opportunity to observe 'up close' whether China would 'play by the rules' in a multi-lateral security forum dealing with sensitive security issues.

(Pillsbury 1999: 139)

As with most issues in East Asia, the American approach and attitude towards the ARF was intimately related to its policy towards China. However, it would seem that American thinking about China was one step behind that of China's neighbours. By 1993, the ASEAN states were already less interested in assurances about continued US interest in the region, than about the need to engage China, in their considerations about the ARF (Emmers 2001). On the US side, in contrast, it was only after the collapse of the Clinton administration's attempts to link trade relations with China to improvements in its human rights record, that Washington leaned towards an engagement strategy. The key tenet of engagement was the assumption that, by persuading the Chinese to participate in various international fora, it would be possible to condition and socialize Beijing into accepting international norms of acceptable behaviour (see Shinn 1996).

However, the ARF's initial significance to the Clinton administration might have lain more in its potential as a political tool in the argument about whether to contain or engage China. Active support for the ARF helped the administration to advance the engagement discourse because it addressed the problem of how to engage China politically, on security issues, as opposed to the main focus of the engagement lobby at the time, which was on economic issues. Generally, in the context of a heated domestic debate about China policy centred on MFN status, China's human rights record and China's actions during the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the ARF and other regional multilateral frameworks proved to be useful to the Clinton administration in 'selling' its engagement strategy towards China. Thus, A/S EAP Stanley Roth declared in 1997 that 'facilitating the integration of the People's Republic of China into regional institutions like the ARF and APEC ... can only encourage moderation in Chinese behaviour', helping

to bring about 'a China that plays by the rules, rather than a China that seeks to make and enforce the rules'. More recently, Roth (1998) went further to suggest that the fact that 'the Chinese are now on board and actively engaged in the ARF is compelling evidence that multilateralism in Asia is coming of age'. Even the Commander in Chief of the US Pacific Command acknowledged the importance of 'regional dialogues where we engage China, together with others, to fathom their intentions and to ease our misperception' (Macke 1995).

And yet it would seem that, fundamentally, Clinton's East Asia policy did not evolve very much away from its basis of containing potential threats to regional stability and American hegemony by means of maintaining a ring of alliances and a posture of forward deployment in the region. The definitive report on defence strategy, the Defense Department's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), issued in 1997 by the second Clinton administration, reinforced this stance. First, it reaffirmed that existing US bilateral alliances would remain the key components of its deterrence posture in the Asia-Pacific. Second, it identified China as critical to regional peace and stability and that it would continue to be engaged as a responsible player and closely monitored. Third, 'security pluralism' would constitute part of overall US strategy in the region, and would include cooperative and complementary frameworks within which states can address their security concerns through bilateral and multilateral relationships and dialogues (see Tow 2001: 193).

On balance, though, while there is evidence aplenty of a remarkably sympathetic approach to multilateralism by the Clinton administration in terms of rhetorical support and participation, its East Asia policy suffered from an unreconciled duality. As William Tow observes, the Clinton administration failed to specify how bilateralism and multilateralism related to each other, and left unexplained 'how a preference for maintaining power-balancing alliances could be reconciled with an inclination to seek instruments for threat reduction and region-wide security collaboration' (Tow 2001: 189). A recent study of the turn to multilateralism under the Bush and Clinton administrations concludes that there were significant limits to the discourse on 'cooperative security' and 'security pluralism' which was propagated by the latter. There was not a wide following for the liberal notion of security pluralism within the administration; and in spite of its rhetoric, the Clinton administration did also strengthen significantly its alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia (Capie 2001).

In conceptual terms, these trends are not necessarily contradictory. As noted above, a power preponderance strategy may be pursued through multiple means, including military containment and political engagement at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. And containment may be conceived of in terms of both military deterrence and encirclement, as well as institutional 'enmeshment' and social binding. What is interesting here, though, is how and to what extent these different elements were employed.

And, in spite of its rhetoric, the Clinton administration's combination of these approaches left the multilateral and institutional aspects of its East Asian strategy relatively underdeveloped.

Within the framework of the broader US policy towards East Asia, the evidence shows that both the Bush and Clinton administrations regarded bilateral alliances as their mainstay, supporting a strategy of containment and deterrence in order to retain the American preponderance of power in the region. *Vis-à-vis* China, Washington adopted a hedging while containing strategy. Containment through the maintenance of US alliances and defence relationships in East Asia provided the fundamental basis of this policy, while the hedge was engagement.⁷ Engagement with China was largely conceived of and carried out within a bilateral context, in the form of summits, official and military exchanges, trade and other Sino-American contacts (Cossa 2000). A parallel element was the engagement of China in international society through China's participation in international and regional multilateral institutions. The ARF was one of these regional institutions, but, as the next section shows, it was not the central institution of choice; rather, the key institutions through which the US tried to engage and socialize China were the economic institutions of the WTO and APEC. In any case, such multilateral 'shaping' strategies *vis-à-vis* China were supplementary. As Secretary of State Warren Christopher told the ARF in 1995, the reason for which Washington was working with the region to build a regional cooperation architecture, was in order 'to reinforce our treaty alliances and our policy of engagement'.

The George W. Bush administration, 2001–2

While the Clinton administration's pursuit of a continuing strategy of preponderance in East Asia was tempered by its positive attitude to multilateral institutions as an important supplementary policy, the George W. Bush administration has, in contrast, clearly reinforced the absolute priority of maintaining US hegemony, and containing any potential threat to it. Bush and his main advisers are largely conservatives and neo-conservatives who have been openly sceptical about multilateral enterprises, and who seem to prefer drawing clear-cut distinctions between policies towards friends and foes.

Thus, at the outset, the Bush administration conveyed its more sceptical view of China by labelling it a 'strategic competitor', to whom Washington was less keen to extend peer status, and towards whom it would be more watchful and demanding (Shambaugh 2000). Furthermore, the Bush administration's 2001 QDR adopted an explicit agenda of boosting US primacy in the Asia-Pacific region.⁸ The review worked from the bases that the 'possibility exists that a military competitor with a formidable resources base will emerge in the region', and that East Asia is an area of 'enduring' national interest to the US that no other state can be allowed to dominate.

China was thus indirectly but clearly identified as a potential threat to US interests in the region. The document went on to delimit a subregion, 'East Asia Littoral', spanning the south of Japan through to the Bay of Bengal, within which US forward-deployed forces would be more widely dispersed to cope with contingencies (US Department of Defense 2001).⁹ Implications of this include the expansion of US forces in Guam, future deployments of additional aircraft carriers in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans, the development of more long-distance bombers, and other projects such as the Theatre Missile Defense system. In view of the identification of China as the potential power challenger (in contrast to North Korea, which is regarded as a major source of regional instability), this may be seen as a strategy to encircle and contain China before it becomes too strong. This strategy rests upon a renewed emphasis on American bilateral alliances and military relationships in the region. The Bush administration reiterated the centrality of the US–Japan alliance, and has also continued and strengthened its military sales and ties with Taiwan (Dittmer 2002). Thus, the QDR indicates both a new overt emphasis on maintaining US preponderance in East Asia, and the application of a containment strategy to China.

In some ways, the terrorist attacks of 11 September helped to dampen the hostile attitude of the Bush administration towards China. China's support for the Bush administration's 'war on terror' and its toleration of the heightened US military presence in Central Asia brought a rhetorical shift in Washington. The administration now calls China a 'partner' on some issues, and Bush has expressed the desire for a 'constructive relationship' with China (Yu 2002). As part of cooperative counter-terrorism efforts, the FBI has opened a liaison office in Beijing, and Washington has also ceased to criticize Beijing's moves to suppress separatist movements in its far western provinces, instead designating the East Turkestan Islamic Movement a terrorist organization. On the other hand, many points of contention between China and America remain, particularly over Taiwan, which continues to occupy centre stage in bilateral relations, as Beijing contends – with some justification – that the US has moved some distance from its previous policy stance of 'strategic ambiguity' (*Reuters* 2002; *Washington Post* 2002; *Straits Times* 2003a). To realists who focus on how the war on terror has reinforced US power and US relations with China's neighbours, these trends will only serve to deepen existing conflicts between the two countries beyond the short term (see Friedberg 2002).

At the same time, the events of 11 September and the ensuing war against terrorism have also exacerbated certain trends. First, there has been increased emphasis and strengthening of some bilateral US alliances, such as those with Japan and the Philippines. However, the Bush administration's inclination towards unilateralism has also been reinforced in the war against terror and the imminent campaign in Iraq (Ramakrishna 2002; Goh 2003). Its ambivalence towards multilateralism notwithstanding, the Bush administration has brought its intense focus on counter-terrorism to multilateral

institutions such as the ARF and APEC, which have in the last year adopted anti-terrorism as their main focus. Given the scepticism and the instrumental and functionalist view of the Bush administration towards multilateralism and international coalitions, it is not clear how much expectation Washington has invested in turning these declaratory efforts into concrete counter-terrorism cooperation measures. Moreover, while counter-terrorism may serve as a significant new focal point for cooperation, an overarching emphasis on terrorism at the expense of other regional security issues and the deep-seated institutional problems within the ARF may in fact work to the detriment of the forum as an effective security institution.

An assessment of the US in the ARF

Even if Washington views the ARF as a supplementary tool in its China and East Asia policies, the US has supported and participated in the regional security forum. If one of ASEAN's main concerns in setting up the ARF was to keep the US engaged, how successful has it been in this goal? What is the nature of American participation in the ARF; has the ARF helped to entrench US engagement in the region; and if so, how?

American officials have declared their hopes that the ARF would play 'a useful role in conveying intentions, promoting constructive dialogue, and restraining potential arms races'; as well as in easing tensions, promoting transparency, developing confidence, and cultivating habits of consultation and cooperation on security issues (Lord 1995; Kelly 2002). In terms of concrete issues, there have been three staple items on the US agenda in the ARF since 1994.

The South China Sea disputes featured strongly between 1995 and 1997, with the US Secretary of State asserting the US position, stated initially in May 1995, that while it takes no view on individual claims, it will not accept any claims which infringe on the freedom of navigation as provided for by the Law of the Sea. US officials used the ARF to oppose the use of force by rival claimants, and to urge the reduction of tensions.¹⁰

As the major East Asian hotspot for much of the 1990s, the subject of the Korean Peninsular has been brought up by the US at every ARF meeting. However, because North Korea did not attend the meetings until 2000, Washington used the ARF to urge the region to support (diplomatically and financially) American initiatives in the Korean Peninsular, such as the Four-Party Talks and KEDO (Albright 1997a, 1997b; *Straits Times* 2003c).

Washington has consistently pushed its international non-proliferation and arms control agenda in the ARF, exhorting them to ratify, observe and support the entry into force of international conventions like the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Missile Technology Control Regime, and the Chemical Weapons Convention (1997). At the same time that the US has pushed for greater transparency of conventional arms transfers in the region, it has urged members to sign

up to the UN Register of Conventional Arms Transfers and to develop a regional arms register.¹¹

In this regard, it would seem that the US tends to utilize the ARF as supporting forum for declaratory statements and garnering support for the perpetration of international norms deemed important by the US, rather than as a potential regional norms generator. This tendency has also been manifested in the two other key issues the US has pursued within the ARF: human rights and anti-terrorism. Madeleine Albright, in particular, used the ARF to state strongly US reservations and disagreements with ASEAN about policy towards Myanmar's military regime, and to express the US government's concerns about its human rights record (Albright 1997a, 1998). During the run-up to the most recent ARF ministerial meeting in June 2003, it appeared that ASEAN leaders yielded to US and European pressures in the unprecedented move of urging Myanmar to accept United Nations mediation in seeking a compromise between the military regime and the pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and to release the latter, who had again been detained (ASEAN Secretariat 2003; *Straits Times* 2003b). At the ARF meeting, however, Secretary of State Colin Powell was unable to persuade ASEAN leaders to adopt sanctions against Yangon (*Straits Times* 2003d).

In the wake of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, Powell (2002) now reads the campaign against terrorism as the prime issue of common interest for states in the ARF, which 'has perhaps given a focus to the ASEAN meetings and ARF that might not have existed before'. However, the US is forging various counter-terrorism agreements with ASEAN rather than the ARF. The latter provides a venue, rather than an institution, for such cooperation.¹²

Another major problem is that in spite of the plethora of – increasingly 'non-traditional', 'new' – security issues discussed at the forum, the ARF has little real contribution to make in regional security issues which are critical from the American point of view. The Taiwan issue, peaceful reunification of the two Koreas, and the India–Pakistan nuclear contest rank top on US priorities, and a regional institution which cannot help to address these issues, represents low stakes for the superpower. Thus we see that at times, when multilateralism is mentioned in conjunction with the Asia-Pacific in official US documents or speeches, it is APEC, with its economic liberalization focus and summit-level meetings, and not the ARF, which is highlighted.¹³

Some observers have painted a two-way split within the ARF in recent years, between ASEAN and China, who prefer to concentrate on general dialogue to avoid disagreements; and the US, Australia, Canada and Japan, who seek practical confidence-building measures that can be implemented, and to move on to develop the ARF's potential in preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution (Simon 2002). It is useful to note that this apparent distinction between two camps in the ARF might be somewhat simplistic,

given that there exist some fundamental differences and suspicions between ASEAN states and China. For instance, ASEAN states have been suspicious that Beijing's 'new security concept', which apparently embraces regional multilateralism, is in fact a new guise under which to better effect China's power-balancing strategy against the US (Thayer 2003).¹⁴ Be that as it may, Washington has indeed been urging the ARF to move forward towards preventive diplomacy since 1998: 'While the confidence building foundations must be solid, the ARF must move forward if it is to remain vital and relevant' because the 'traditional security challenges the ARF was created to address must still be met' (Albright 1998). At the same time, at the Track II level, the US CSCAP has played a leading role in developing the concept and principles of preventive diplomacy (Pacific Forum CSIS 2002; Simon 2002). In 2000, Washington also suggested the need for greater institutionalization of the ARF, that 'in time, it seems likely that some form of structural support for the Forum will become necessary, and we may want to begin thinking about how we could provide that in a way that meets the interests of all ARF members' (Talbot 2000).

There is recognition in Washington, as there is elsewhere, that some of the problem stems from ASEAN's setbacks after the 1997 financial crisis. Stanley Roth identified that key ASEAN states are turning inwards with grave domestic problems so that 'while the intellectual commitment to multilateralism is there ... the political will to implement it is weak'. His expectation in 2001 was that 'ASEAN will remain challenged for some time to come'. The new A/S EAP James Kelly (2001) called the ARF a 'limited forum', and pointed out that 'progress in both deepening the debate on security issues and in sharpening its focus has been slow'. There are some recent indications of Washington's impatience with the ARF's slow progress in addressing effectively key security issues, most notably reports after the July 2001 ARF meeting that the Bush administration had endorsed suggestions of Australia–Japan–US security talks and a Northeast Asia security forum (*The Australian* 2001; *Business Times* 2001).

On the positive side, from the American point of view, the ARF has contributed to regional security in two ways. First, and probably most important, the ARF has, since 2000, provided opportunities for official US–North Korea contacts. Albright's meeting with North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam Sun at the ARF meeting in Bangkok in 2000 led to the visit of a North Korean envoy to the US, and Albright's trip to North Korea in October that year. The 2002 ARF meeting in Brunei also provided an occasion for Paek to meet with the new US Secretary of State Colin Powell (*The Nation* 2002). Note, however, that on this issue, the ARF is not useful in and of itself, but rather as a facilitating meeting place.

Second, ARF meetings have provided a useful forum at which the US could reassure the region during periods of tension or crisis, such as during the Korean Peninsular nuclear crisis in 1993/94; Washington's reassurance after the revision of the US–Japan treaty guidelines in 1999 that it was not

directed at any particular country; in the aftermath of the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999; and after the EP3 incident in 2001. ARF meetings have also been used by other participants to clarify or criticize US security policies; for instance, China and North Korea expressed their concerns and suspicions about Washington's Missile Defense plans at the 2001 ARF meeting (*Financial Times* 2001). At the 2001 ARF meeting in Hanoi, ASEAN also formally requested that China and the US ease bilateral tensions, but the main mediation efforts of Japan, South Korea and ASEAN over the EP3 incident were conducted outside of the forum (Christoffersen 2001). This set of limited benefits derived from the ARF supports the case of those who argue that it is fundamentally a 'talk shop', which serves an important, but essentially low profile, function.

The quality of American participation derives from the fact that it is a global superpower taking a back seat in a regional security enterprise in its relatively dangerous backyard. This disjuncture breeds ambivalence, both within Washington and amongst its dialogue partners. The US has so far chosen to accord the ARF a subsidiary role in its East Asian strategy because of its limited efficacy and because the constraints on American influence through this channel renders it a low stakes arena. On the other hand, there are those who insist that ASEAN must eventually make way for the US and other great powers in the driver's seat if ARF is to count (Huiskens 2002).

Explaining the limits of US participation

The foregoing analysis has discussed the potential advantages which the ARF offers to the US in relation to its East Asia strategy. American participation in the ARF initially helped to improve Washington's position *vis-à-vis* its allies and other smaller regional players in terms of the assurance of continued US involvement in the region. ARF membership has also served to signify Washington's commitment to a policy of engagement with China, and allowed some exploration of strategic restraint and other means of stabilizing the strategic situation through dialogue.

However, Washington's relative reticence regarding the ARF may also be explained by clear cost-benefit calculations. While the costs of joining the ARF to the US have been low so far, the benefits have also been limited since key security issues cannot be addressed via the ARF. This precisely renders the ARF a low-stakes institution in Washington's eyes. Also, the potential price of a greater US commitment to the ARF may be high. Because of its explicit aim of perpetuating US hegemony in the region, Washington is particularly concerned about possible constraints on its naval deployments and supremacy posed by military transparency and confidence-building measures. Other considerations include the loss of relative bargaining power *vis-à-vis* China and the smaller regional powers, as well

as free-riding or selective norm-abidance. In this sense, few of the opportunities offered by the altered strategic landscape since 1991 have been converted by Washington into a stronger multilateral approach in the region.

Here, beyond institutionalist rational-choice calculations, Washington's approach to the ARF might be better understood with an eye to the role of ideas and identity in explaining the re-definitions of its interests since 1991. The three administrations examined here have faced difficulties related to ideational transitions and identity dilemmas in the wake of the Cold War and after 11 September. These two sets of variables in turn affected American perspectives on the ARF through Washington's attitude towards multilateralism in general, and the bilateral relationship with China in particular.

Strategic thinking in Washington has been and remains confused in the post-Cold War period. During times of conceptual uncertainty, there is a tendency to rely on 'the devil we know', even more so if the devil in this case is a tried, tested and triumphant one. Thus, Washington clings to the validity of its Cold War grand strategy and the bilateral alliances which formed the core of its East Asia policy. Yet, at the same time, the various post-Cold War administrations have recognized the need or exigency to try to think outside of the Cold War box. Thus we have seen the coexistence of bilateral security arrangements with Clinton's push for multilateral security dialogue, and more recently, Bush's penchant for more unilateralist security policies. Overall, multilateral approaches have consistently ranked lower than bilateralism.

Accompanying the incomplete post-Cold War ideational transition has been strategic indecision regarding China. The debate about the China 'threat' is a manifestation of a plethora of interrelated issues, including trade, human rights, nuclear proliferation and strategic competition. Sino-American relations have been characterized by summitry and personal diplomacy, as well as a series of bilateral crises, throughout the 1990s, trends which have not helped to clarify China policy. Although there is recognition in the 'engagement' camp that Chinese attitudes to the world must change, this tends to be presented as vague hopes that Chinese perceptions and priorities will be altered by development and liberalization. The idea of 'socialization' through multilateral fora is under-conceptualized, and so the *de facto* official approach is a minimalist one of 'join us, and we will sit back and wait for you to show us that you are not disruptive', rather than a proactive one that seeks out ways to draw out Beijing and Washington.¹⁵

In terms of identity, Washington has become used to its position and status as the paramount power in the region, the Asia-Pacific hegemon. This relates especially to its being the strategic 'hub' from which regional bilateral alliance 'spokes' emanate. Multilateralism ARF-style involves ceding this primacy in manner, if not in substance. The modality of interaction is different, and it runs counter to habit for the US. Thus there is a

tension between Washington refraining from hegemonic domination of a small/middle power-led institution, and a reactive 'back-seat' posture which in fact contributes to the lack of progress.¹⁶

Another element of the US exercising its due influence and implementing policy in a manner commensurate with its status and position lies in the way in which it prefers bilateral diplomacy with China. While China is regarded as not quite a peer to the superpower, it is still a great power several levels above the rest of the states in the region. At the same time, in this difficult relationship, Washington prefers not to have the issues mediated through the eyes and interests of smaller regional powers, nor to have its bargaining power diluted by dialogue partners in a multilateral setting.

Having said this, may we then conclude that these limiting factors therefore condemn the ARF to assured obscurity within the realm of US East Asia policy? The ARF has apparently offered Washington relatively low costs, but insufficient benefits that would justify a more active and positive US approach. However, one potential and important function of such a multilateral security institution has been underplayed in the discourse on the US and the ARF. This is the possibility that in helping to create and maintain such an institution, Washington has and can continue to make significant gains in terms of legitimizing its position in the Asia-Pacific.

From this point of view, the ARF provides two potential sets of goods for Washington. First, it is a site of international society at the regional level. In spite of its inclusion of the European Union, the ARF is centred upon the 'Asia-Pacific', drawing together East Asia, Australia and New Zealand, and the Americas. It reinforces the identity of the Asia-Pacific as a region, and allows the US and China to interact and engage with each other within the context of a shared neighbourhood and its concerns. In the larger regional context, Washington can find support for its mixed strategy of engagement with and containment of China. For most East Asian states, which do not wish to be confronted with open great power rivalry between the US and China, it is important to try to enmesh China in multilateral institutions, to give it a chance to learn to conform to international norms and to contribute to regional stability. As the only regional-level forum for security issues, the ARF is a proving ground for Chinese sociability in the security realm.

On the other hand, the region is also concerned about preventing China from flexing its growing muscles in a more direct and credible way. Integral to this aim is the continued security commitment of the US to the region. Thus, growing an 'Asia-Pacific' notion also helps to affirm the US's identity as an integral regional player with legitimate interests in East Asia. This helps to justify US forward deployments and security postures in the region, something which has become a source of greater concern to certain East Asian states than to Washington itself. For instance, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong observed in 2001 that through the ARF, ASEAN had 'changed the political context of US engagement in Southeast Asia'

because Southeast Asian countries had 'exercised their sovereign prerogative to invite the US to join them in discussing the affairs of Southeast Asia'. As a result, 'no one can argue that the US presence in Southeast Asia is illegitimate or an intrusion into the region'.

Strengthening Washington's legitimacy in these two areas would, of course, contribute to the basic US strategy of maintaining its preponderance in the Asia-Pacific.

Conclusion

There are three points to note about the American approach to the ARF. First, analyses of the US in the ARF tend to be relatively realist in orientation, as opposed, for instance, to the literature on ASEAN views. This is in part because of the material evidence itself. Second, there is a multiplicity of US views on the ARF: realists versus idealists; hardliners versus liberal institutionalists within the administration and Congress; CSCAP and other Track II stakeholders in the ARF process versus the administration. This paper has concentrated on administration views and discourse as well as concrete policy indications. Third, Washington has tried to tread a balance in its participation in the ARF by refraining from exercising its hegemonic influence in the ASEAN-led forum. Conversely, however, this has also resulted in an assessment of the ARF as a low stakes enterprise not entirely worthy of a great investment by Washington.

As with East Asia policy as a whole, Washington views the ARF through a strong China lens, but American perceptions of the ARF are also shaped by the strategic outlook of each administration. One constant in this outlook has been the belief in retaining bilateral security alliances – and, by extension, containment – as the bedrock of its East Asia policy. Engagement with China was elevated as a secondary prong of this policy during the Clinton administration, but this was envisaged more at a bilateral level of summits, high officials and military exchanges. Alongside these two prongs, the ARF as a multilateral security forum plays only a subsidiary role in 'shaping' the security environment and possibly China's intentions, but one in which Washington does not invest much expectation.

However, in spite of the instrumental approach to the ARF of the three US administrations since 1991, and despite the forum's relatively limited efficacy in terms of addressing key security issues, the ARF may play an important role in helping to legitimize and bolster US interests in the region, not least in the area of China policy.

Notes

- 1 The idea of the US as a 'regional balancer' was somewhat misleading. Balancing presupposed that there was some other credible power for the US to balance against, when in reality, the regional power equilibrium was one of US

- unipolarity. Instead, Washington was rather the regional security guarantor, which would be in position to deter any future challenger, such as China. For an application of balance-of-power theory to ASEAN's attempts to forestall regional hegemony, see Emmers (2003).
- 2 On offshore balancing, see Layne (1997). It is essentially a strategy to draw back US power projection overseas by rationalizing alliance commitments, and to give up the aim of perpetuating US hegemony, but rather to seek a multipolar order by which other rising powers are accommodated and balanced.
 - 3 Leifer (1999: 63) suggests that by this change of heart, Washington 'embarked on a course of action which [made] a virtue of necessity and [covered] up military inadequacies by indulging in new rhetoric'.
 - 4 Winston Lord, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, pointed out the critical preventive diplomacy and trust-building role of the ARF, declaring that the US wanted to discuss the Cambodian situation, the Spratlys dispute, and the Korean problem at the forum, as well as develop greater transparency in regional defence establishments (*Straits Times* 1994).
 - 5 This point was recognized by ASEAN states, which, at an ASEAN-PMC Senior Officials Meeting in Singapore in May 1993, issued a Chairman's statement which affirmed that 'the continuing presence of the United States, as well as stable relationships among the United States, Japan, and China, and other states of the region would contribute to regional stability'.
 - 6 Richard Solomon interview in Capie (2001: 193).
 - 7 This is as opposed to the ASEAN case, where engagement is the key aim, and deterrence is the hedge, or 'fall-back' option. See Storey (1999/2000) and Khong (1999). For an argument that the US ought to adopt a similar strategy to that of ASEAN, see Weitz (2001).
 - 8 This has been reinforced at the global level by the National Security Strategy, which states the aim to keep forces 'strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States' (White House 2002: 21–2).
 - 9 A more hopeful analysis based on a similar division of East Asia into a US-dominated maritime region as opposed to a China-dominated continental region was presented in Ross (1999).
 - 10 China and the ASEAN states signed a 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea' on 4 November 2002 at the ASEAN summit in Phnom Penh. Assessments of the significance of this agreement have been mixed. See Anthony (2002) and Emmers (2002).
 - 11 The latter has so far been resisted by East Asian states. For a discussion, see Garofano (2002: 515–16).
 - 12 The US chose the ARF meeting in 2002 as the occasion at which to sign an anti-terrorism agreement with ASEAN, and ASEAN announced at the 2003 meeting that the two sides would soon endorse a counter-terrorism plan which could involve US assistance in safeguarding shipping in the Malacca Straits. This was apparently viewed with some anxiety by Beijing – see *Agence France-Presse* (2002).
 - 13 A notable recent example is the Bush administration's new *National Security Strategy* (White House 2002: 19).
 - 14 To some extent, both these great powers have been somewhat transparent in their adjustments to multilateral policies in order to supplement their basic power political strategies.
 - 15 For more sophisticated theorization about processes and tests for socialization within multilateral institutions, see Checkel (2001) and Johnston (2001).
 - 16 This parallels what Dobb (2000: 15) has observed to be a larger problem in US East Asian policy. In order to gain the willing participation of other states in its

concept of international order, the US has to conduct 'strategic restraint' to convey its willingness to limit its use of military power and to stay within international norms. As a result, it has to 'walk a tightrope between too little and too much use of force and between too much and too little involvement with its allies'.

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