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**BANGLADESH'S PARTICIPATION IN ASEAN
REGIONAL FORUM (ARF): AN ASSESSMENT**

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Abstract

Bangladesh's accession to ARF, a multilateral security forum of the Asia-Pacific region, would enable the country to involve in dialogues and consultations on issues of non-traditional security. Additionally, by engaging in this forum, the country would possibly gain some economic dividends. Also, this association might enhance the country's reputation and prestige as ARF includes all the powerful nations of the world. The main purpose of this article is to find out the likely benefits that Bangladesh might achieve following its joining this security forum. It will also identify some motivational factors which could have influenced the country to become a part of ARF.

I. Introduction

Multilateralism provides the smaller nations an appropriate platform to voice their opinion and concerns, collectively and individually, giving an opportunity to deal with the most powerful counterparts. Thus, it can be regarded as a source of strength for small countries. Since 1972, Bangladesh has been devoting its diplomatic efforts¹ to become members of multilateral organizations.² Recently, it

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¹ Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan's speech at Bangladesh Enterprise Institute on 23 August 2006 available at www.mofa.gov.bd/statements/fm72.html accessed on 24 October 2006.

has become the twenty-sixth partner of a multilateral security forum, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF). This participation of Bangladesh is significant in that ARF has been considered as Asia's top security forum. A forum of diverse nations, ARF's aim is to maintain peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region through the process of dialogues and consultations.³ Bangladesh was officially admitted to this forum at the inaugural session of the thirteenth Annual Ministerial Meeting of ARF partners, held in Kuala Lumpur on 28 July 2006.⁴ The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, M Morshed Khan, who participated in the meeting, underlined that Bangladesh's engagement in this forum would further foster peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. He also assured Bangladesh's active participation in the future ARF deliberations.⁵

This paper has tried to address a couple of key questions, keeping in mind Bangladesh's non-traditional security issues, economic opportunities, and its commitment to global peace and security. What were the factors that motivated Bangladesh to join ARF? What will be the likely dividends for Bangladesh as it has become a partner of this forum? The paper has further argued that Bangladesh would be benefited in a number of ways from its participation in ARF. Also, it has tried to find out whether ARF can provide an impetus to SAARC. Section II of this paper gives an overview of ARF, which includes the emergence, mechanism, objectives, achievements, and limitations of this regional security forum. Bangladesh's motivations to join ARF have been identified in section III. The possible benefits following its entry to this forum have been presented in section IV. Section V will provide a discussion on ARF's role in relation to SAARC and Bangladesh. The paper's concluding remarks along with few recommendations for the Bangladesh government have been provided in section VI.

²Bangladesh's multilateral journey commenced with its membership in Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Commonwealth, Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), and the United Nations (UN).

³The official slogan of ARF is "Promoting peace and security through dialogue and cooperation".

⁴*The Daily Star*, 29 July 2006.

⁵Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan's speech at the 13th ARF Ministerial Meeting, 28 July 2006 available at www.mofa.gov.bd/statements/fn75.html accessed on 28 August 2006.

II. An Overview of ARF

ARF was created in 1994 under the auspices of ASEAN. During the twenty-sixth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and the post ministerial conference held in Singapore on 23-25 July 1993, the ministers agreed to establish ARF.

Emergence of ARF

ARF is the culmination of a process that started in 1990.⁶ In fact, it is a product of post-Cold War era when there was no longer any direct ideological confrontation between the two superpowers, the USA and the former USSR. In that period, Canada and Australia later joined by the USA and Japan suggested that the states of Asia-Pacific region should create a multilateral security cooperation forum in order to address regional security issues. Initially, the ASEAN states were cold to this proposal as they felt that such a forum would not work in this region. However, they recognized that the unwillingness to establish such a security forum would have marginalized the ASEAN.⁷ In addition, in 1992 the USA closed its largest overseas base in the Philippines, which raised new concerns about the future of the US involvement in the region. At the same time, China, India, and Japan were becoming stronger and more assertive. As a result, strategic debates were dominated by fears of a possible power vacuum, and resulting competition and clashes among the regional powers. All these influenced the ASEAN states to recognize the need for a regional security forum.⁸ So, ASEAN shifted their stance and agreed to establish ARF. In July 1994, the first meeting of this forum was held.⁹

⁶Shaun Narine, "The Limits of the ASEAN Way", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 7, 1997, p. 963.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 962.

⁸G.V.C Naidu, "Multilateralism and Regional Security: Can the ASEAN Regional Forum Really make a Difference?", *East-West Centre*, No.45, 2000, pp. 3-7.

⁹It lasted only three hours and was attended by six ASEAN states and their dialogue partners. Also in attendance were China, Russia, Laos, Papua New Guinea, and Vietnam.

Members of ARF

The partners of ARF include all the ten ASEAN states, together with sixteen other nations that have a bearing on the security of Asia-Pacific region. In an age of unilateralism, it is a unique experiment in multilateralism and dialogue.¹⁰ ARF comprises great powers like the USA, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, India, Malaysia, and Australia as well as weak powers like East Timor and Vietnam.

Mechanism of ARF

ARF formally approved a concept paper in its 1995 ministerial meeting. This provided it a clear action line, outlining a three-stage strategy. The first stage included confidence-building measures (CBMs), the second stage included preventive diplomacy (PD), and the third stage involved the evolution of technique for conflict management.¹¹ Efforts to develop the tools of preventive diplomacy¹² and conflict management are still at an early stage while this forum continues to focus on confidence-building measures.¹³ The ARF's Annual Ministerial Meeting is the high point of the ARF activities and becomes an important gathering for consultation on regional security, political issues, and global matters that have regional impact. In fact, ARF's existing mechanism is revolving around this meeting. The main outcome of it is not action, but the chairperson's statement, adopted by

¹⁰ Maj Gen Jamshed Ayaz Khan, "Pakistan's Perspective on East Asian Security", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2005, p.22.

¹¹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia, Official website: www.dfat.gov.au accessed on 25 August 2006.

¹² Preventive diplomacy as a term was first used by the then UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld in 1960. It was meant to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to peace. The term had relevance to Cold War context. In the post Cold War scenario, the term means action to prevent disputes arising between the parties to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur.

¹³ Confidence-building measures include aim to improve transparency; through steps such as publication of defence white papers, information, exchange on military exercise and arms purchases. Most CBMs involve seminars and workshops on specific topics.

consensus.¹⁴ Besides, ARF organizes senior officials meeting (SOM) and inter-sessional group meeting (ISG). Interactions at the ministerial and SOM level are referred as Track-I activities that include intercessional CBMs, management disaster, maritime cooperation, and training for peacekeeping operations. Apart from these, the forum aims at building confidence at Track II levels where non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, members of civil society of the partner countries provide ideas and share experiences with the forum.

Objectives of ARF

ARF's objectives were outlined in the first Chair's statement in 1994.¹⁵ They are as follows:

- a) To organize constructive, relevant dialogue, and consultation on political and security issues of common interests and concerns;
- b) To make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building, and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.

Achievements of ARF

ARF remains a vibrant organization that has generally averted dealing with significant security issues.¹⁶ But so far, ARF has proven to be an effective forum for consultation on a wide range of non-traditional security issues such as terrorism, natural disaster, disease, epidemics, maritime security, proliferation, and illegal trafficking of small arms and light weapons, smuggling, and trafficking in person etc. The forum has also achieved considerable progress in increasing cooperation in the area of confidence-building measures. At the same time, it enables the weaker nations in this region to work with the major global powers. All these have led ARF to contribute to the maintenance of peace and security in the region, despite the great

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of New Zealand, Official Website: www.mfat.govt.nz accessed on 27 August 2006.

¹⁵ ASEAN Regional Forum, Official Website: www.aseanregionalforum.org accessed on 25 August 2006.

¹⁶ Satish Nambiar, "Developing a Cooperative Security Framework for South Asia", in Dipankar Banerjee and Gert W. Kueck, (eds.), *South Asia and the War on Terrorism: Analysing the Implications of 11 September*, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Indian Research Press, 2003, p.168.

diversity of its membership. The main achievements of the forum are cited below:

- a) As mentioned earlier, ARF provides a useful platform for multilateral and bilateral dialogues, and consultation on non-traditional security affairs, among the partner countries. This type of activities is gradually building mutual confidence;
- b) This forum, in addition, has been promoting transparency through exchanging information related to defence policy and publishing defence white papers. However, the record of practical achievement in this area is quite patchy. Many partners of this forum do not publish defence white papers and those who do reveal, little is unknown.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the partners of ARF have developed a good network among security, defence, and military officials;
- c) It has put emphasis on the importance of working together in emergency relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction as well as prevention and mitigation efforts in addressing natural disasters;
- d) ARF always raises its concerns about global terror, which has become the topmost security threat all over the world. Recently, the forum has contributed to the region's counter terrorism work. At an ARF meeting in 2003, the partners and participants arrived at a consensus to strengthen the cooperation among them by combating terrorism.¹⁸ In July 2004, the Australian government released white papers on terrorism which outlined Australian and regional efforts to fight terrorism. Also, the twelfth Annual ARF Ministerial Meeting extended its support for the activities of the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC), the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), and the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA). The discussions in the second meeting of the ARF ISG on CBM and PD were dominated by issue of countering terrorism;
- e) Asian Security Outlook (ASO), a regular publication of ARF, promotes understanding, confidence, and transparency among the

¹⁷ G.V.C Naidu, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ *East Asian Strategic Review*, The National Institute for Defence Studies, Japan, 2003, p. 223.

participants of this forum. It is the compilation of the voluntary reports, provided by the ARF partner countries on their security outlook;

- f) ARF is becoming a meeting point for bilateral issues and it provides an opportunity for countries on different sides of the fence to dialogue and negotiate in privacy. For example, at this forum the European Union (EU) can speak directly to Myanmar about democracy and human rights;
- g) This forum is one of the few diplomatic gatherings where North Korea attends. ARF provides the big powers of this forum an opportunity to meet North Korea for discussing the issue of Korean peninsula;
- h) ARF emphasised on dealing the issue of maritime security threat within a cooperative framework. A workshop, organized by ARF in 2004, on this security threat, reached at a common consensus to take collective efforts for addressing maritime security threats.

Based on these achievements, it can be said that ARF has progressed well towards CBMs but its movement towards preventive diplomacy is still modest. Only during its twelfth Annual Ministerial Meeting, the partners were stressing on the importance of adopting the concept and principles of preventive diplomacy in guiding ARF in its action.

Limitations of ARF

ASEAN was at the core of ARF during its formation in 1994. In fact, ASEAN could take credit for transforming a group of conflict prone states into a viable security community through a method¹⁹ of interaction among its member states.²⁰ Many of its political leaders and observers suggested that ARF should adopt the ASEAN experience as model for approaching security issues in this region. The proponents of this approach believed that, if the ASEAN process of dialogue and consultation could successfully alleviate intra-ASEAN conflicts, then it

¹⁹ This method is referred as the 'ASEAN Way' which involves the use of extensive consultations and consensus building to develop intramural solidarity.

²⁰ Shaun Narine, *op. cit.*, p. 962.

would be able to produce similar effects in the larger Asia-Pacific region. Nevertheless, the 'ASEAN Way' has some difficulties of being a good model for ARF, which includes²¹

- i. The political, economic, and strategic considerations that have made ASEAN a success within Southeast Asia, do not necessarily apply to the more powerful states of the Asia-Pacific region; and
- ii. Since the 'ASEAN Way' is not designed to resolve disputes and conflicting perceptions among the ASEAN states, it may not be applicable to ARF.²²

Moreover, ARF brings together twenty six states with very diverse political system, military strength, economic development, and strategic outlook.²³ It makes this forum difficult to form a possible defence alliance. Instead, ARF is working together within a framework of cooperative security through cooperation and peaceful coexistence not competition.²⁴

III. Bangladesh's Motivations to Join ARF

Bangladesh showed its interest for the first time to participate in ARF in 1998. The ASEAN states supported Bangladesh's interest to join the forum. But things could not move well for Bangladesh because of ARF's 'moratorium on new membership' and India's opposition to the admission of Pakistan in ARF. Eventually, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 2003 decided to lift the 'moratorium on new membership' and adopted a 'case by case' approach to consider the application of new participants of ARF. The same meeting arrived at a consensus to accept Pakistan as the new ARF partner. It was the twelfth meeting of the ARF, held in Vietnam in July 2005, which agreed to accept Bangladesh as its participant. The Foreign Ministers who participated

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 963.

²² ASEAN actually, is not capable of resolving contentious issues among the members, but it is capable of moving such issues aside so that they do not prevent progress in other areas.

²³ Simon S C Tay and Obood Talib, "The ASEAN Regional Forum: Preparing for Preventive Diplomacy", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1997, p. 252.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

in the meeting agreed to ASEAN's consensus on the admission of Bangladesh. The country's South Asian neighbours India and Pakistan became the permanent partners of ARF in 1996 and 2004 respectively. East Timor was the twenty-fifth partner of ARF. Sri Lanka will formally be accepted as its twenty-seventh participant when it would be presented at the next ARF Annual Ministerial Meeting scheduled to be held in Manila in 2007. Meanwhile, France, Britain, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan have also applied to join the security forum.

Why Bangladesh was keen to join this forum? Here the paper attempts to dig out a few factors, which might have motivated Bangladesh to become a part of ARF. The factors are as follows:

- Bangladesh's interest in ARF could be discerned from its commitment to global peace and security. The country always protests against any action that violates global peace and harmony and supports the major international instruments on disarmament. Bangladesh also, has extended its support to international efforts at curbing nuclear proliferation. This is evident from the nation's signing of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Also, it is the first South Asian signatory to UN Convention on Anti Personnel Landmine and Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). At the same time, Bangladesh recognizes the right of a nation to use nuclear power for peaceful purpose.
- An association with ARF is likely to help Bangladesh to implement the 'Look East Policy' which was introduced in its foreign policy agenda in 2002. By adopting this policy, it has made a constructive step in exploring its eastern horizon.²⁵ The 'Look East Policy' was aimed at the eastward trade expansion of Bangladesh. And this policy might have influenced Bangladesh to join ARF. So, the motivation of Bangladesh to engage in this forum could be traced in this policy.
- That Bangladesh has economic considerations cannot be ruled out. Traditionally, Bangladesh had very close commercial and other

²⁵ Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan's speech on "The Look East Policy of the Government of Bangladesh" at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore, 12 November 2003 available at www.mofa.gov.bd/statements/fm7.html accessed on 27 August 2006.

links with most of the ASEAN states.²⁶ These contacts have been reinforced through its participation in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), and Asia Cooperative Dialogue (ACD). This helps one to assume that Bangladesh might accrue some economic benefits from its attachment with ARF which comprises all the Southeast Asian nations.

- In an age of cooperative security²⁷, it is difficult to attain a sustained growth²⁸ unless regional security is ensured.²⁹ India and Pakistan were already the partners of ARF. Policymakers of Bangladesh might have thought that if Bangladesh becomes a partner of ARF, it will brighten the prospect for a cooperative security arrangement in the South Asian region. Additionally, this may help to reduce conflicts in the South Asian region. Such considerations might have motivated Bangladesh to join a multilateral security forum like ARF.
- Perhaps no other issue has been as intensely debated in the contemporary world as the issue of international terrorism. Bangladesh's concern and view about terrorism might be better understood at home and abroad through its association with ARF.
- Psychology of the government might be identified as another factor. ARF is one of the most prestigious forums as it clubbed

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Cooperative security is a methodology to create conditions between hostile states for a sustained process of economic, cultural, communication, and defence cooperation. See, Moonis Ahmar, "Developing a Cooperative Security Framework for South Asia", in Dipankar Banerjee and Gert W. Kueck (eds.), *South Asia and the War on Terrorism: Analysing the Implications of 11 September, op.cit.*, p. 178.

²⁸ South Asia needs to attain a 7% to 9% sustained growth in order to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). See, Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan's speech on "Thirteenth SAARC Summit and Future Outlook" at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies on 11 December 2005 available at www.mofa.gov.bd/statements/fm51.html accessed on 1 November 2006.

²⁹ Syeda Naushin Parnim, "New Dynamics of East Asia: Evolving Asia Plus Three and Challenges for Bangladesh", *SARID Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2005.

together almost all the regional heavyweights as well as global superpower (i.e., the USA). In addition, this forum fully endorses Australia and New Zealand - two economically developed countries. Therefore, policymakers of Bangladesh might have thought that it would be a matter of pride and prestige for the nation if it becomes an ARF partner. Moreover, two closest neighbours of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, as mentioned earlier, were already partners of ARF. Therefore, 'being left out' sort of perception could have influenced the mind of the government. Viewed thus, the government's psychology was to generate a 'sense of belongingness' to a region which offers a lot of economic promises to it. Furthermore, it will likely to offer Bangladesh an opportunity to initiate an inter-faith dialogue between the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and ASEAN to foster more regional cooperation.

- Bangladesh has some engagement in the security affairs of Southeast Asia. It is one of the nine countries that composed an Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) committee to monitor Moro issue of Philippines. Also, Bangladesh can help to augment the cooperation between Asia and the Middle East as the country is a member of the Asia-Middle East Dialogue (AMED).

IV. Possible Dividends that Bangladesh might Derive from ARF

Bangladesh has always tried to continue the momentum towards strengthening the process of peace and democracy. According to its fundamental objectives³⁰ of foreign policy, the country is inclined to settle the contentious bilateral issues through dialogues and positive engagements, which can reform international order. So, the participation in ARF reflects Bangladesh's intention to ensure security

³⁰ The fundamental objectives of Bangladesh's foreign policy are: the preservation of our independence and sovereignty, ensuring economic progress, consolidation of our existence as a politically stable moderate democratic and responsible contributing member of the international community and protecting this image outside. See, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, Official Website: www.mofa.gov.bd accessed on 29 August 2006.

in a peaceful way. At the same time, the nation is likely to derive some benefits in terms of dealing issues of non-traditional security threats and trade related aspects, following its admission to the forum.

Bangladesh considers ARF as the primary forum in enhancing political and security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.³¹ The participation in ARF is likely to help Bangladesh to intensify cooperation and coordination with the East Asian nations on various issues bearing on international security and peace; such as to intensify coordination in fighting terrorism, the scourge of narcotic, disease, smuggling, and illegal trafficking, particularly in contrabands, small arms and human beings-specially women and children. Thus, the association with ARF shows Bangladesh's desire to play its role in ensuring regional security. This would enhance the reputation of the country in the outside world. Apart from these, ARF would provide Bangladesh an opportunity to exchange views with some of the developed nations of the world. In an age of increasing globalization and interdependence, such an exchange will likely to help the state to explore avenues for cooperation. Further to this, Bangladesh endorses the objectives, goals, and principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia at the inaugural session of ARF's thirteenth Annual Meeting. In the Asia-Pacific region, TAC can be a very effective code of conduct in determining inter-state relations and propagating cooperation, amity, and friendship within the Asia-Pacific region, and between the ASEAN and other ARF participants. It was decided that Bangladesh would sign the treaty at an early date.³² If it signs this treaty then Bangladesh might be able to champion the cause of peace, harmony, and stability in the region.³³

South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) was put into effect on 1 July 2006 to increase the intra-regional trade in South Asia. Then, it was assumed that Bangladesh could gain something considerable from this trade agreement. But a recent survey conducted by the European Commission showed that the possibility of Bangladesh's

³¹ Foreign Minister's speech on 12 November 2003, *op. cit.*

³² Foreign Minister's speech on 28 July 2006, *op. cit.*

³³ According to Article 2 (Chapter I) of Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, no nation would interfere in the internal affairs of others, and disputes or differences among partner nations would be settled peacefully.

reaping much significant advantages from SAFTA was very slim.³⁴ Such fate of this regional free trade agreement might influence the government of Bangladesh to propose an FTA (Free Trade Area)³⁵ with the ASEAN states with which it has traditionally maintained a close commercial tie as mentioned in the preceding section. As a consequence, accession to ARF could be considered a gateway for Bangladesh into ASEAN and greater East Asia. Also, the country has been actively negotiating with Myanmar and Thailand for a direct road link to Thailand through Myanmar.³⁶ This link would help to increase the trade with Southeast Asian nations. So, a participation in ARF might provide Bangladesh a room to discuss this issue with the concerned nations in the coming days.

The rise of religious militancy and illicit trade of small arms and light weapons pose major security threats to South Asia and Southeast Asian countries. Recently, Bangladesh, itself has been suffering from the crimes committed by religious militants. Besides, illicit trade of small arms and light weapons has hampered the law and order situation of the nation. Now, being a partner of ARF, Bangladesh may involve in dialogues, seminars, workshops etc. on these affairs. This involvement might help Bangladesh to get some effective measures to prevent, combat, and eradicate the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons. Moreover, it would enable the nation to share the best practice and experiences in coping with religious militancy. Most importantly, ARF would be an ideal forum for Bangladesh to raise its concern about terrorism in all its forms, as it has profoundly affected the subcontinent after 9/11 and become the major threat to security around the world. As a committed supporter of global war on terror, Bangladesh should have a voice in shaping the evolving strategy of this war. Thus, an association with ARF may facilitate Bangladesh to arrange or participate in inter-faith dialogues, seminars etc. on issues of countering terrorism or menace of terrorism, and identification of

³⁴ Most of Bangladesh's 145 exportable items are in the list of sensitive items of SAFTA's member states. See, *The Daily Janakantha*, 29 October 2006.

³⁵ Japan, China and South Korea have signed FTA agreement with ASEAN. Also, India has finalized such an agreement with ASEAN, Thailand and Singapore.

³⁶ Foreign Minister's speech on 12 November 2003, *op. cit.*

possible root causes of terrorism etc. This might give the country a scope to contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability in the region. In addition to this, together with the ARF countries Bangladesh can share and exchange intelligence information and documents in enhancing cooperation to combat terrorism and other transnational crimes.

It is mentioned elsewhere in this paper that ARF mechanism encourages dialogues and negotiations at the Track-II level or non-government level. Bureaucratic dilly-dallying can hamper dialogues organized at the Track-I level or government level. Also, Track-II level of interactions are likely to strengthen mutual understanding and create trust among people in the region. Therefore, various think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of Bangladesh in collaboration with the ARF partners, can organize seminars, workshops, and conferences on relevant security affairs. Outcomes and suggestions from these seminars could be forwarded to the government.

Armed forces of Bangladesh have been playing a leading role in peacekeeping and peace building operations around the world.³⁷ It has maintained a robust presence in the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions. In fact, Bangladesh has developed its own capacity building facility as a contribution to the field of peacekeeping through founding the Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support, Operation and Training (BIPSOT), which trains the peacekeepers. This institute is also available for the ARF partners. As a result, Bangladesh might play a decisive role in the distant future, when ARF would eventually establish a peacekeeping centre following its commitment to the 1995 concept paper. Currently, Bangladesh would have the opportunity to engage in talks, workshops etc *vis-à-vis* experiences from the peacekeeping missions. Besides, at this confidence-building phase of ARF, the country, with its ARF partners can initiate meetings and high-level interactions among the military officials from the defence academies and colleges. This could build an element of transparency in the defence policies and would go a long way in building confidence and trust, and fostering mutual understanding between Bangladesh and

³⁷ Since 1988, Bangladesh has participated in 34 different peace keeping missions in 26 countries with a total of 51,501 troops. See, Foreign Minister's speech on 28 July 2006, *op. cit.*

other ARF nations. As a result, ARF is likely to provide the Bangladeshi defence personnel an opportunity to participate in continuous process of confidence-building within the region and beyond by exchanging of intelligence information, building capacity, arranging and attending training programme, and sharing experiences on the legal aspects of the role of the armed forces in dealing with non-traditional security threats. All these might assist Bangladesh to shape its security environment.

Bangladesh is a disaster-prone country. Nevertheless, it has made good progress in disaster management. The government has adopted '2005-2009 - A Framework for Action' which intends to shift emphasis on risk management framework from relief oriented activities. The UN International Disaster Reduction acknowledged this adopted framework as a best practice mode for other nations to follow.³⁸ It might enable Bangladesh to contribute to the regional mechanism on disaster reduction that the ARF partners have planned to establish. So, cooperation in the form of dissemination of knowledge³⁹ and the development of collaborative network for early warning system might help Bangladesh to further improve this adopted framework for action. At the same time, the attachment with this forum would certainly pave a way for Bangladesh to work with its ARF partners in emergency relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction as well as prevention and mitigation efforts in addressing natural disaster.

Maritime security is a major concern for Bangladesh. It has decided to join the ReCAAP (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia) agreement, which has been given importance in various ARF meetings. ReCAAP agreement would go a long way in enhancing maritime security for Bangladesh. Also, by taking part in the seminars and workshops on maritime security organized by ARF, Bangladesh might develop national and international standards on the safety of navigation and surveillance system for ensuring safe movement of people and goods through regional water. Furthermore, it would be able to

³⁸ Foreign Minister's speech on 28 July 2006, *op. cit.*

³⁹ In the twelfth meeting of ARF held on 29 July 2005 in Vietnam, the ministers had exchanged views on tsunami disaster and follow-up actions taken by the concerned nations.

cooperate with the ARF partners in operational solution to maritime safety and security, shipping and port security, and application of technology for maritime safety and security. Apart from these, Bangladesh can initiate joint maritime security exercise with ARF participants in the coming days.

As Bangladesh is moving into the age of information and communication technology, the risk of possible attacks by cyber terrorists could not be ignored. The thirteenth ARF Ministerial Meeting has decided to boost counter-cyber terrorism measures by announcing sweeping plans to prevent cyber attacks on critical infrastructure.⁴⁰ Thus, Bangladesh could develop an effective counter-cyber terrorism measure in the way of sharing intelligence, expertise, and skills on fighting cyber-crime.

V. ARF, SAARC, and Bangladesh

In spite of being an association of lots of promises, SAARC has not been able to grow, while other regional blocs are emerging as close-knit communities.⁴¹ Since its inception in the mid-eighties, SAARC has achieved very little in tangible terms. In fact, it is not yet a success so far, either in political or in economic terms.⁴² The inter-state rivalry between the two regional powers, India and Pakistan over Kashmir issue coupled with Indo-Bangladesh disputes, other bilateral disputes, terrorism, and mistrust amongst the members stand in the way of harmonising SAARC as an effective organization. It failed to deliver much to a region, which is still far away from making an economic breakthrough to achieve a sustainable cycle of rapid

⁴⁰ It is worth mentioning that cyber attacks are not very eminent in this region. The regional terrorist outfits are not yet capable of mounting a large cyber assault. But, it is alarming to find that the cyber terrorists are using internet to recruit members, raise funds, and coordinate attacks. See, ASEAN Regional Forum, Official website: www.aseanregionalforum.org/Default.aspx?tabid=50 accessed on 14 August 2006.

⁴¹ Atiur Rahman, "SAARC: Not Yet a Community", in Jim Rolfe (ed.), *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition*, Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies, 2004, p. 133.

⁴² Moudud Ahmed, *South Asia, Crisis of Development: The Case of Bangladesh*, The University Press Limited, 2002, p. 229.

growth.⁴³ As a result, South Asia remains a region of about 600 million people who earns less than one dollar a day.⁴⁴ While average per capita gross domestic product (PCGDP) for developing nations is US \$ 1280, the same is only US \$ 510 in South Asia. Only 1% of foreign direct investment (FDI) and 1% of global tourists come to this region.⁴⁵ Such socio-economic indicators leave South Asia as a region plagued by immense poverty, illiteracy, deprivation, and under-development. Bangladesh, being very much an integral part of South Asia, is feeling the heat as SAARC's passive role in an age of globalization frustrated to some extent the growth and development process of the nation. Moreover, in SAARC Bangladesh cannot discuss some outstanding conflicting issues like common resource management, border problems, terrorism with its closest and powerful neighbour, India. Now, Bangladesh's accession to ARF might stir up the mind of concerned ones with a few pertinent questions: Will Bangladesh able to discuss the contentious bilateral issues with India in ARF, when it has failed to do so in SAARC? Will this forum work as a substitute for SAARC?

It has been mentioned that due to India-Pakistan conflict and some other inter-state disputes, SAARC could not make much headway on functional front. So, it was perceived that on a forum like ARF in the presence of some big powers, both India and Pakistan could have made considerable progress towards confidence-building and ultimately adopted a mechanism to resolve conflict.⁴⁶ Actually, the ASEAN Head of external relations, Sundram Pushpanathan, expressed in an interview to AFP in 2004, that the inclusion of Pakistan in ARF would give this forum a chance to play its role in discussing a regional flash point, Kashmir.⁴⁷ But unfortunately, in near future it seems that ARF would not fully materialize this possibility because this forum itself needs to go a long way before adopting the technique for conflict management. Furthermore, before Pakistan's entrance to ARF, India was concerned

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴⁴ Atiur Rahman, *op. cit.*, p.133.

⁴⁵ Foreign Minister's Speech on 11 December 2005, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Shahid Ilyas, "ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF): Its Role in Confidence Building and Conflict Resolution", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2004-05, p.43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

about its bringing controversial issues in front of ARF partners. The Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda also assured the Indian foreign ministry that ARF would not discuss contentious bilateral issue like Kashmir, after the admission of Pakistan to this forum.⁴⁸ This might lead one to predict that just like SAARC⁴⁹, ARF would not be able to play any role in calming down the hostile situation between the two nations. In this backdrop, it may be assumed that in ARF, Bangladesh also would not be successful in consulting with India regarding the issues of conflicting affairs. What Bangladesh can do is it might moot the idea of forming a multilateral security forum like ARF in South Asia. An introduction of such a forum would possibly initiate people-to-people cooperation and dialogues amongst the SAARC nations on controversial bilateral issues⁵⁰ and promote congenial atmosphere to this region. In addition to this, under the umbrella of this forum the academics, journalists, businesspersons, senior ex-army officials, and other prominent personalities of Track II approach together with diplomats and officials of Track I levels might come closer to work for developing a cooperative security framework in South Asia. But, on the other hand, one can argue that the nations of South Asia do not have to approach beyond SAARC for adopting a collaborative security framework. To have such an arrangement in this region within the framework of SAARC, countries, such as Afghanistan, Iran, China, and Myanmar could be endorsed as its members. The inclusions of the new nations in SAARC might negate the overwhelming size and status of India⁵¹. But, in the coming days if a new security forum is to be created in the mould of ARF in South Asia, then the nations of this region need to arrive at a consensus to formulate security, political, and economic ties on the basis of equality, notwithstanding their conflicts. In fact, it is a requirement for successful application of cooperative security in South Asia.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ The constitution of SAARC does not allow its members to discuss bilateral issues in this association.

⁵⁰ Diplomacy at the Track-II level *vis-à-vis* conventional state-to-state interactions is said to have better chance in building confidence in South Asia. See, Atiur Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁵¹ Satish Nambiar, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁵² Moonis Ahmar, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

So, it is evident from the above discussion that at ARF, any possibility of Bangladesh's taking part in dialogues with India on disputed bilateral issue is very unlikely. This security forum would actually play no different role than SAARC *vis-à-vis* contentious bilateral affairs. All these have suggested that ARF right now, would not be able to complement SAARC. Neither could it be a substitute for SAARC. At best, Bangladesh might extract a lesson from ARF by taking initiative for creating a security forum in South Asia. But, an effective working of such forum is subject to the fulfilment of conditions as pointed out previously. Considered thus, Bangladesh needs to ensure that its association with ARF would not undermine the importance of its involvement in SAARC. Therefore, it should adopt a concerted effort for development through mutual co-operation within the framework of this South Asian regional body.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Currently, at the phase of confidence building ARF is only organizing seminars, workshops etc. The sixth volume of the ASO reflects this picture. This has led some critics of ARF to dub this forum as 'talk shop', which failed to deliver concrete output and where things moved very slowly.⁵³ To enhance credibility, ARF needs to utilize whatever opportunities available for cooperative actions.⁵⁴ However, in the East Timor crisis in 1999, ARF could not play any role. The forum viewed that crisis as an internal problem of a fellow partner. But ARF has to move, over a period of time, slowly and gradually from its current phase to the next phase i.e., preventive diplomacy, and ultimately it will adopt the mechanism for conflict resolution.⁵⁵

It is in this backdrop that Bangladesh is expected to remain engaged in dialogues and consultations by participating in seminars and workshops. Participation in ARF appears worthwhile since it gives Bangladesh an opportunity to raise its concerns about traditional and non-traditional security issues in presence of some powerful nations mentioned at the beginning. In addition, ARF would provide the country a scope to interact with the ARF partners. Furthermore, by

⁵³ Simon S C Tay and Obood Talib, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

⁵⁴ G.V.C Naidu, *op. cit.*, p.7.

⁵⁵ Shahid Ilyas, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

associating itself with this forum, Bangladesh would likely to accrue economic benefits in the form of strengthening commercial ties with the ASEAN states. Seen thus, Bangladesh's participation in ARF can be regarded as a significant achievement for the Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh. In fact, the involvement of Bangladesh in this forum is considered a milestone in its multilateral diplomacy.⁵⁶ However, to remain actively engaged in this forum, this paper recommends the following which the Bangladesh government may consider:

- To enhance cooperation among the ARF partners, the Bangladesh government can encourage dialogues at the Track-II level where the local think-tanks and NGOs will come up with ideas of organizing and participating in seminars, workshops etc. on issues of regional security;
- To make any decision in relation to security affairs, the government might consider relevant suggestions, output, and ideas generated from these Track-II levels of dialogue;
- To ensure the participation of the Bangladeshi delegations in the ARF deliberations in the coming days, the government should explore sources for funds.

⁵⁶ Foreign Minister's speech on 23 August, *op. cit.*