

Opportunities

Creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum provides Asia Pacific countries with an opportunity to establish a distinctive security agenda that responds to the real concerns of regional states and reinforces the UN's work in building global peace and stability. The relationship between regional activity and that of the UN might be strengthened by inviting a UN representative to be an ARF observer.

While it is important not to overburden the ARF, there are many conflict prevention, peacekeeping and non-proliferation issues in Asia Pacific that could benefit from discussion at the ARF or in related working groups. The extent to which the ARF will help prevent and address conflict in the region remains to be seen. The potential is there. Its realization depends on the willingness of all Asia Pacific countries, including the major players, to make an intellectual contribution and political commitment to build cooperative security and reduce threats rather than simply meet them. ■

Canada Aids Conflict Prevention in the South China Sea

A notable example of preventive diplomacy in the Asia Pacific region is the South China Sea Initiative, co-sponsored by the Canadian and Indonesian governments and coordinated by the University of British Columbia's Centre for Asian Legal Studies. This "track two" (see below) initiative focuses on the Spratly Islands, which are variously claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, and the Paracel Islands, claimed by China and Vietnam. The surrounding waters are believed to hide rich oil and gas reserves. The Spratlys were the scene of military clashes between China and Vietnam as recently as 1988 and are still widely regarded as a potential flash-point in the region.

Experts from claimant countries as well as non-claimant "interested states" participate in a series of meetings on the history, legal and technical maritime issues surrounding the disputes. They also address the possible cooperative exploitation of resources in the South China Sea. Claimants have agreed not to enforce their claims militarily but to proceed through peaceful means.

The initiative is, in essence, a cooperative security dialogue — addressing a security issue at its roots, which in this case are found in questions of economics and resource management in addition to strict territorial questions. The experience reveals that it may be possible to deal with difficult, sensitive issues by focusing on modest efforts which, in themselves, provide opportunities to build confidence and enhance transparency, thus facilitating political settlement. The project has led to four workshops and two technical meetings. Two more technical meetings are scheduled for early this year, followed by a workshop in the summer. ■

Asia Pacific's "Track Two" Nourishes Official Dialogues

Although the ASEAN Regional Forum is Asia Pacific's first region-wide forum for governmental discussion of security issues, regional and sub-regional security dialogues have burgeoned over the past three years in non-governmental or "track two" fora. Track two activities, such as workshops and conferences, involve academics, researchers and journalists as well as officials acting in their private capacities.

The value of track two is multifold. It serves as a sounding board for new ideas. It encourages interaction between representatives of countries that have poor — or non-existent — diplomatic relations with one another. It moves thinking ahead when official dialogues are absent and contributes to a "habit of dialogue" that may later manifest itself at the official (or "track one") level. The fact that ASEAN has invited other countries to join it in a security forum is due in large part to ideas and momentum generated in track two.

Track two is not unique to Asia Pacific, but its breadth and depth in the region exceed that of anything similar elsewhere around the globe. Canada played a prominent role in encouraging Asia Pacific's second track with its North Pacific Cooperative Security Dialogue. NPCSD involved both official diplomatic contacts and non-official conferences, workshops and publications, with participation from around the region. The second track — coordinated by York University's Centre for International and Strategic Studies and the University of Toronto-York University Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies — developed multilateral dialogues on a range of proposals for enhancing security in the North Pacific and elicited regional reactions to those proposals.

Other ongoing track two dialogues include an annual ASEAN Institute of Strategic and International Studies roundtable on Asia Pacific security (in Kuala Lumpur), an annual UN Meeting on peace and disarmament in the Asia Pacific region (in Katmandu), and an annual international defence conference in Seoul, sponsored by the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington. Countless other seminars and conferences are sponsored by think tanks and universities around the region.

The intensity and policy significance of track two is likely to grow as governments continue to seek support for progress at the official level. However, the proliferation of track two activities is already stretching the financial and human resources available in individual countries. This has led — internationally — to efforts to streamline track two, and — nationally — to efforts to improve Canadian participation.

Canadian Consortium on Asia Pacific Security

The Canadian Consortium on Asia Pacific Security (CANCAPS) is an initiative by scholars interested in maintaining and enhancing the Canadian interest in and profile on Asia Pacific security issues. It will pick up where NPCSD left off. The objective of CANCAPS is to promote research, publication, public awareness and exchange activities on Asia Pacific security issues and Canadian involvement in them. Participation is open to Canadians based in academic institutions, research institutes and the private and public sectors who have expertise, experience and an active engagement in questions related to the changing security