Chapter VII

Conclusion

As discussed in the preceding chapters, by promoting bilateral cooperation and playing down conflicts, ASEAN made a vital contribution to the national economic development and domestic stability of its member states. The habit of cooperation cultivated during the process of constructing and maintaining collective political defence against common threats, provided the appropriate psychological environment for enhancing both the scope and the quality of bilateral cooperation among the member states. ASEAN had succeeded in drawing all parties to a common front as regards the role of existing forms of security cooperation within the grouping in promoting confidence building. Bilateral military exercises among ASEAN states also helped to build links with neighbours, and thus overcome suspicion and promote cooperation.

Initially, for the countries of the region, bilateral cooperation was the main focus, so far as internal security was concerned. For external security these countries depended on the various security pacts which they had with external powers, and most importantly, on the US security umbrella. Subsequently, multilateral security cooperation, as a result of the emergence and consolidation of multilateral institutions like the ARF, assumed an important role.

The ARF was set up in order to remove mistrust and misconceptions and to give a boost to "confidence building" and preventive diplomacy. The ARF, together with the expansion of ASEAN membership and the Declaration on the South China Sea, constituted another significant step in the process of transforming the association's role as
a diplomatic community, from being the organiser of collective political defence in one particular area, to being the manager of a region-wide order in Southeast Asia.

In addition, by limiting interference in each other's affairs and thereby enhancing the legitimacy of regional governments and regime consolidation, ASEAN promoted stability and at the same time brought in the flow of foreign investment into the region which in turn was the key to fostering rapid growth in the region. The long period of peace and stability enjoyed by ASEAN states before the crisis was to a great extent through the efforts of ASEAN which was conducive to economic growth.

Cooperation through ASEAN enhanced the security and stability of states in the region. Many of the member states which were conflict and tension-ridden in the mid-60s considerably strengthened their regimes as well as achieved a high degree of social cohesion and at the same time improved their bilateral relations, mainly due to ASEAN initiative. ASEAN helped to boost the domestic legitimacy of incumbent regimes, as it did during the third summit in Manila where the heads of government met.

The association played a significant role in preventing the kind of fratricidal wars that characterized the Indochina sub-region and promoting peace and stability in the region. At the same time, by containing the ambitions of the larger states within the framework and principles of the association, it guaranteed the security of small states like Brunei and Singapore. It prevented interference in the domestic affairs of other states which was of paramount importance in a region where nearly all states were experiencing domestic conflicts, many of which are of a cross-border nature.

Member states which were conflict-ridden in the mid-1960s strengthened their bilateral relations considerably subsequently. It promoted the security of small states like Brunei
and Singapore mainly by curbing the ambitions of the larger states within the framework and principles of the association. It played an important role in preventing undue interference in internal affairs of other states which is of paramount importance in a region where nearly all states are experiencing domestic conflicts, many of which transcend national barriers.

The preceding analysis demonstrates the fact that the bilateral and multilateral cooperation efforts of ASEAN went a long way in binding the states in a common strategic perspective and at the same time preventing potential flashpoints from erupting into open hostilities.

In spite of the fact that political suspicions, lack of trust in defence and security matters between regional states and competitive industrial strategies prevented substantial collaboration in arms acquisitions, one positive occurrence as we have seen was that the ASEAN states embraced transparency in military acquisitions and endorsed the United Nations Register on Conventional Arms requiring countries to report on major conventional arms transfers. The countries showed a clear lack of interest in weapons standardisation and cost saving joint purchase of weapons, differences in defence doctrines, absence of interoperability (despite the wide ranging bilateral exercises) as well as differing concepts of defence self-reliance within the region. Despite repeated references to military acquisitions by ASEAN states as the prelude to armed conflict, there were neither arms races nor outbreak of hostilities in the region despite the existence of numerous potential flashpoints in the region.

After the end of the Cold War, the ASEAN countries had realised the futility of depending on one power or a single defence arrangement. During the period, although the
engine of cooperation was intra-regional, ASEAN leaders regarded the US as an important pillar for their internationalist strategy, in both economy and security. On the one hand, there was a growing dependence on the US on the part of the ASEAN states, while on the other, they nurture suspicions about US intentions in the region mainly because of the US attempts to push through the human rights agenda in the region.

A great deal of uncertainty marks the security environment of the region today. There is a sense of pessimism in the region mainly because the recent developments in the region have ushered in a period of dramatic and profound changes in the security predicament of the region. Despite the talk of "collective strength" individual countries do not constitute a collective whole. The future of ZOPFAN is uncertain mainly due to the different attitudes of the countries in the region.

The emergence of new security dimensions in the region cannot be ignored. The political turmoil and social unrest in these countries are reaching a saturation point. There are demands for greater openness from different sections of the populations. The authoritarian political structures are finding it difficult to cope with such problems. The economic crisis has brought in its wake attendant problems of regime legitimacy. This might lead to political violence resulting from the demands for greater political participation, autonomy and leadership.

Many in the ASEAN intelligence community feel that the need of the hour is not suspicions and mistrust; what is important is to replace security arrangements based on a military balance with mutual security based on economic cooperation — on mutually beneficial trade and commerce. The ASEAN states need to transcend ethnic, religious and historical animosities and sensitive bilateral issues and to concentrate on the
overriding common objective of remaining independent of Super Power domination. Political will is required on all sides to transcend ethnic, religious and historical animosities and sensitive bilateral issues such as the Pedra Branca territorial dispute, to emphasise the overriding common objective of remaining independent of great power domination. These are the realities which should provide the basis for a real political and defence alliance as opposed to the current suspicion-laden cooperation.

The alternative would be an environment full of suspicion and mistrust — which would be detrimental to a stable political climate for economic prosperity. History abounds with examples that prove this to be a dangerous and disturbing trend which can only lead to a recurring arms race which the states involved will regret in the future.

Bilateral cooperation is on the decline mainly because of the changing security concerns today. In the days of the Cold War aligning with one or more block was looked upon with suspicion. But in the post Cold War period multilateralism has come to stay, since it does not involve dependence upon any one single power. ASEAN did not want to give the impression of a defence community earlier although ASEAN was basically a defence community. ASEAN as discussed earlier never had any intentions of developing into a formal military pact mainly due to the fact that its members failed to arrive at a common perception of threat. Another reason was it would result in ASEAN's image as an aggressive organisation. Hence, ASEAN never developed into a common military pact to enable the states in the region to operate more flexibly. But this did not prevent ASEAN from taking care of the security needs of the Southeast Asian nations, as well as to reconcile the differences between its five original members. The main function of ASEAN was resolving intra-ASEAN disputes and the earlier success of the association
was mainly because it had limited aspirations, namely, to ensure that bilateral tensions and disputes were not allowed to go out of control. But after the economic crisis the scenario has changed. In the absence of either common political aims or defence objectives, the old intra-ASEAN rivalries are beginning to resurface. The optimism which was generated in the Eighties and Nineties is gradually declining. There are too many strategic uncertainties and potential flashpoints for the ASEAN leaders not to feel troubled at the moment. Economic prosperity achieved by these countries in the Eighties and early Nineties succeeded in defusing many of the inter-state tensions in the region. Now with the economic gain, wiped out in many cases, old antagonisms took an upper hand over the earlier willingness to forget many of their differences.

The present Secretary General Severino is stressing more on economic regeneration than security concerns. Moreover countries in the region feel that it is better not to talk about security concerns at the moment. Chinese competitiveness in the manufacturing sector is another contributing factor for the push towards greater economic cooperation and regionalism among the ASEAN states. This truth is for all the ASEAN members to see, to realize that they should develop their military modernisation programmes to complement rather than compete with each other in order to promote a stable political climate for economic development. More so, because of the current turmoil — political, social and economic — so as to rescue a declining economy and rebuilding the social institutions which in turn will work towards weeding out the rampant corruption and at the same time provide the basis for stable democratic government institutions. This would require interoperability to some extent and a need to cooperate as alliance partners in all spheres, including security.
The ASEAN-led ARF has definitely made some progresses in that it has promoted dialogue on the Spratlys Islands dispute and Korean denuclearisation and has advanced CBMs, including the publication of "White Papers" on defence policy and the promotion of high-level contacts and exchanges between military establishments.

The ARF has "matured enough" to move on from the CBM stage to the domain of Preventive Diplomacy as announced at the 1999 annual ARF meeting in Singapore. A grouping such as the ARF could do a lot to reassure the ASEAN states (especially at this juncture) about their strategic environment which in turn would instill confidence in the minds of prospective investors about the strategic stability of the region. The situation demands assessment of the ground realities in the Southeast Asian countries. They need to address key regional problems especially in view of the recent economic crisis. They need to concentrate on gathering resources to counter the crisis.

It is important to ensure that the arms build up process which has slackened does not revive again — the situation does not evolve into an arms race. Under such circumstances it is imperative to push hankering potential threats to the background and concentrate on rebuilding their economies. In spite of uncertainties, security concerns, unresolved issues and lack of trust, the success of ARF, though limited, is definitely a stepping stone. Confidence building, as mentioned earlier, is what the countries of the region need today, a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This will eventually create an atmosphere conducive to industrial growth and economic prosperity and help counter crises like the one in 1997.

Given the past experiences of ASEAN, the association has not done so badly after all. The success rate is higher as compared to its setbacks. There is no denying the fact that
ASEAN through its efforts at cooperation and diplomacy promoted peace and prosperity in the region, in spite of the existence of numerous potential conflicts. This enabled the ASEAN countries to enjoy a long era of economic boom. Hence, one can be optimistic that, as in the past, ASEAN will enable the countries in the region to overcome the present predicament.