

Two Salient Developments at the 17th ARF

By ISHIGAKI Yasuji

The 17th Meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was convened in Hanoi on 23 July 2010 with participation of the representatives from 26 countries and EU on ministerial level, including ASEAN+3 countries, the United States, Russia, North Korea, all with keen and vested interests in political and security matters in East Asia. At that meeting, several significant moves and developments were observed with regard to the current situation and future prospect of security in the region. Pak Ui-Chun, Foreign Minister of North Korea, who attended the Meeting for the first time in two years, had arrived many days earlier in Hanoi, and worked hard so that the discussions over the issue of the sinking of a South Korean warship would be conducted to the best advantage of North Korea, and also to make the Six-Party Talks restarted with lifting of the sanctions against North Korea. As it turned out, the Chairman's Statement adopted at the end of the Meeting mentioned no direct involvement of North Korea, just as she so desired.

In my view, the above ARF Meeting was in particular worthy of noting on the following two points. First, it was declared in the final Chairman's Statement that the participating Ministers adopted the Ha Noi Plan of Action to implement the ARF Vision Statement, which contained policy guidance for the ARF to develop and implement concrete and practical actions toward the year 2020. The previous ARF meetings had focused on dialogues and cooperation concerning important issues of political and security nature in East Asia. However, the above Chairman's Statement clarified that the ARF remains the primary forum to discuss political and security issues in the region and supported ASEAN's role as the driving force in the ARF process, and stated that the Ministers reiterated support for ASEAN's central role in the existing regional mechanisms as well as in evolving regional architectures. Besides, it defined clearly the relationship between a new forum of ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and ARF by stating that the envisaged ADMM Plus will complement the work of the ARF. ADDM-PLUS is to be inaugurated in coming October this year with the participation of ASEAN + 8 countries including Japan, China, Korea, United States, and Russia.

Secondly, it was apparent that a heated discussion took place at the meeting among such countries as Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei on one hand and China on the other,

over recent increased China's naval activities and resource exploration in the South China Sea. The above-mentioned ASEAN countries, which have individually territorial claims over the islands in the South China Sea, and hold growing concerns over recent Chinese activities in the area, seized the ARF Meeting as a good opportunity to bring the matter to attention of other countries so as to "multilateralize" the issue. In response to such a move, China reacted strongly, arguing that those matters were bilateral issues to be settled directly with the concerned countries.

After all, Vietnam, the host country, managed well to have the final text of Chairman's Statement negotiated and adopted at very late hours of the closing session of the Meeting, stating that the participating Ministers reaffirmed the continuing importance of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) of 2002, embodying their collective commitment to the promotion of confidence-building measures in this area, and encouraging further efforts towards the eventual conclusion of a Regional Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC). This added phrase might be regarded as strengthening the assertion of the ASEAN countries concerned.

Furthermore, it was noteworthy that under those circumstances, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is said to have indicated at a press conference in Ha Noi that, while the United States does not take any position in favor of particular country over the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, the U.S. shares interest with ASEAN member states, stressing that the freedom of the seas, guaranteed by United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, must not be restricted in any case.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. ISHIGAKI Yasuji, Delegate for Japan to AALCO and former Professor of Tokai University, as his personal view which originally appeared on the BBS "Hyakka-Somei" of CEAC on August 1, 2010.)