

Track 2 Diplomacy Revisited

Carolina G. HERNANDEZ

ISDS Philippines

Prof. Carolina G. Hernandez is Founding President and CEO of the Institute for Strategic and Development Studies (ISDS Philippines).

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The ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN ISIS) is among East Asia's leading track 2 institutions. Established informally some 25 years ago in Bali, Indonesia, ASEAN ISIS was institutionalized on 29 June 1988, the date when its charter was signed in Singapore. Today, ASEAN ISIS remains the only track 2 group recognized in the ASEAN Charter's list of "Entities Associated with ASEAN" mandated in Chapter V, Article 16, Annex 2.

Track 2 diplomacy, when it began, refers to dialogues among various stakeholders on any given issue including those from government, knowledge groups (such as think tanks, academe, media), as well as civil society groups in their private capacities. These dialogues were organized by think tanks, individually or jointly. Over time track 2 became known as constituting of think tanks and epistemic communities whose inputs to policy making are purely recommendatory and not binding. It is now understood as distinct from track 1 the official track that makes binding decisions and also distinguishable from track 3 constituting of civil society/grassroots and non-governmental organizations (CSOs/NGOs), with occasional and symbolic participation from track 2. Further distinction is now known as track 1.5 which is organized by government, but includes persons from track 2 principally, such as meetings of the ASEAN Regional Forum's Expert and Eminent Persons Group (ARF-EEPG).

A principal track 2 institution that benefited from the links established by ASEAN ISIS with think tanks in the Asia-Pacific region is the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). It was launched, after a series of track 2 meetings in numerous places including Bali, Tokyo, Honolulu,

Lombok, Seoul, and Kuala Lumpur in June 1993, in anticipation of the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), CSCAP's primary target track 1 partner-institution. Consequently, CSCAP expanded beyond its original founders to include 21 member committees including one from the European (EU). Like ASEAN ISIS which produced a series of memorandums for ASEAN, CSCAP has also produced over 25 such documents covering a gamut of issues preoccupying the ARF but also pro-actively studying issues ahead of the ARF agenda. The latest CSCAP Memo is on Regional Security Architecture (RSA). It also produces an annual CSCAP Regional Security Outlook (CRSO) that addresses current security policy issues confronting the region.

It is not an overstatement to say that these two track 2 groups have contributed towards the promotion of regional peace and security through their activities, not only in the establishment of processes and mechanisms that contributes to more effective regional management of security issues, but also to build confidence and trust among the region's multifarious stakeholders outside government, and across the states in the Asia Pacific. For instance, the adoption of the special Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) constituted of ASEAN's Foreign and Defense Ministers, the decision by ASEAN to move beyond economic cooperation to economic integration through the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the establishment of the ARF could be traced to the ASEAN ISIS Memo on "A Time for Initiative" sent to the governments of ASEAN member states in 1992. ASEAN ISIS also constructively engaged the unlike-minded from countries like China and Myanmar. And, due to the fact that many CSCAP member committees include in whole or in part retired foreign, defense/military who remain influential in their respective governments, CSCAP's discussions, debates, and thinking on security issues are brought to the attention of track 1 actors. Moreover, the exposure of an increasing number of stakeholders from the various tracks in track 2 discussions is an important process to build knowledge, forge collegiality and even friendships, and address the enormous trust deficit that exists among the states in the region. They include both the major and middle powers such as China, the United States, Russia, India, Japan, Australia, Canada, South Korea, and Indonesia.

However, track 2 diplomacy is not without its challenges. Members of ASEAN ISIS and CSCAP as well as others have documented these challenges at various times. The character of the members of track 2 groups is a challenge. For instance, ASEAN ISIS is a mixture of institutes independent of government and academia, university-affiliated ones, professional organizations, and government-related or government-owned/controlled agencies. This mixed character of its membership has contributed immensely to its inability to make proposals that are intended to empower ASEAN but perceived as challenging state sovereignty. In a bid to improve its performance, senior members of ASEAN ISIS embarked on security policy cooperation with like-minded think tanks within ASEAN ISIS and beyond. This is an attempt to move faster than the slowest member, a practice

already found in some of ASEAN's official networks.

Another challenge is financial sustainability. To remain viable, track 2 needs sustained funding, which being close to government can help realize. Yet in so doing, the trade off could be track 2's independence, a feature that is important in innovation and creativity, so crucial in reforming governance institutions.

Generational change is also a challenge, as the rationale for the establishment of these institutions may not be shared by the younger generation. Moreover, with secure careers, the founders of the region's track 2 processes and groups enjoyed the luxury of spending huge amounts of time on their track 2 involvement without sacrificing their career advancement. The younger generation can ill afford that luxury, as they are still busy building their careers. Hence, it can be tempting to use track 2 membership to advance their careers.

Given this background of track 2 experiences and challenges of ASEAN ISIS and CSCAP, the issue of whether these experiences could be transferred to other regions arises. In the past, indeed, track 2 has the potential to address security issues in other regions. In the past, there was a serious attempt to expose think tanks in South Asia to track 2 diplomacy as it developed in Southeast Asia. This hugely innovative idea died with the end of its funding. Northeast Asia can pick up this idea and with determination, wisdom, and serendipity, it can succeed there as well.

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