

# ASIA COOPERATION DIALOGUE (ACD): A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR ASIA

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On 18 June 2002, eighteen countries agreed to set up the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) at Cha-am, Phetchaburi Province, Thailand, at the initiative of the Kingdom of Thailand to become an Asia-wide forum, the aims of which are to close the missing link in Asia without duplicating other groupings or organizations, and to discuss issues of common concerns or challenges in Asia.<sup>1</sup> This platform for cooperation provides an interactive exchange of views and the consensus-building approach for alignment of policies to address such issues or challenges, which are non-political in nature.

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This paper offers the background of the ACD, including the mechanisms to deliver the ACD mission. The concept of cooperation in the context of the ACD is examined, while the process of securing consensus in order to ensure the level of comfort of all Member States will be illustrated. Prospects of this grouping will be offered as food for thought.

### Principles and Mechanisms

At the inaugural meeting on 19 June 2002, the Thai Prime Minister referred to the purposes of this platform



for cooperation to optimize the strength and potential of Asia for mutual benefit, and also to help alleviate poverty and suffering.<sup>2</sup> Thailand also referred to the view of the People's Republic of China that this framework would supplement and complement Boao Forum for Asia, which covered politics while the ACD would deal with non-political matters.<sup>3</sup> The ACD grouping was also meant to complement the basic concept of “acting together –advancing together” proposed by Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan<sup>4</sup>. This so-called ‘new cooperation,’ as it is the only Asia-wide grouping, would “fulfill our people with the sense of Asian belongings” with a view to achieving peace and prosperity for all Asian peoples and countries<sup>5</sup>.

On the surface, it could be viewed that the establishment of the ACD is based on political will, together with ideas and national agendas of the Asian leaders. Such ideas and policies were harnessed and harmonized to achieve an accord of the majority of opinions acceptable to all. Moreover, a level of comfort has always been provided to countries, which might, at times, need to reserve some

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space to maneuver their own policy optimization, on account of consensus-based decision-making.

In fact, this line of approach is nothing new since Article 1 of the Charter of the United Nations requires all Member States to “achieve international cooperation to solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character.” The concept of cooperation is purported to reduce conflicts of interest, and to create an atmosphere conducive to consensual interna-





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tional agreements among states, especially international regimes for public goods,<sup>6</sup> including global and regional governance.

It should be kept in mind that the idea of an Asia-wide community or integration of Asian countries in the context of ACD should be given due consideration in the long run. It could be made possible in any form of grouping satisfactory to all member states because economic and political integration is the “single most powerful strategy to reduce the risks of war and increase the prospects for economic development.”<sup>7</sup>

Over the past two decades, the ACD has proven to be a forum for discussions on issues among countries in Asia. Discussions are usually made in the form of dialogue, which is informal in nature but evolving in substance and flexible in formality.

Interdependence is another factor that drives states to conduct diplomatic intercourse. To put it in another way, a state of affairs is attributable to the realization that no state may continue its isolation from the international community. Thus, Thailand took the initiative of inviting eighteen countries in Asia to discuss how Asia may resolve issues among themselves, and perhaps in their own ways of approach. The ACD was then and is now a continent-wide forum and the first of its kind in Asia, aiming to

constitute the missing link in Asia by embracing all Asian countries to form an Asian Community, with no intention to become a bloc against others. The fact that the membership has increased from eighteen in 2002 to thirty-five at present is a manifestation that the ACD is relevant and has stood the test of time so far.

The Ankara Declaration adopted virtually in Ankara on 21 January 2021 reaffirms the principles of informal dialogue, inclusiveness, and complementarity, including shared interests with commitment to cooperate with one another, which constitute the basis of the spirit of ACD. The term ‘dialogue’ conveys its dimension of informal conversation or discussion in nature. It was observed that informality might serve the purpose of the negotiators since flexibility could be exercised in order to achieve mutual commitment or understanding<sup>8</sup>.

Since its inception in 2002, the ACD has operated in many areas of cooperation. At the Second Summit in 2016 in Thailand, the areas of cooperation were combined into six areas, called the “Six Pillars of Cooperation,” namely the Interrelation of Food, Water and Energy Security; Connectivity; Science, Technology and Innovation; Education and Human Resource Development; Cultural and Tourism; and Promoting Approaches to Inclusive and Sustainable Development. All the six Pillars of Cooperation will be put into operation by the Ministerial Meeting (MM) and the Summit, according to the Rules of Procedure of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue. It should be noted that senior officials’ meeting (SOM) is also acknowledged as an important mechanism to implement decisions and mandates of the Ministerial meeting, as well as to guide the Secretariat’s work for making recommendations to Ministers.<sup>9</sup>

At present, the ACD has been guided by ACD Vision 2030 and ACD Blueprint 2017-2021 where actions and measures for tangible outcome need to be implemented accordingly. Interestingly, consensus-based decision-making process is the method of reaching an agreement acceptable to all Member States insofar as no Member State makes an objection thereto. The process of securing consensus needs negotiating skills and strategy of those involved in the negotiation process with a view to arriving at a compromise satisfactory to all. In other words, it is supposed to be something that all stakeholders can live with. Therefore, consensus is the best way to ensure that every state’s voice will be heard and, in the end, each and every state will be able to safeguard its interests at all times. Consensus is then tantamount to the right to veto which every state may enjoy.

In the process of probing whether the issue under debate will be decided upon by consensus or voting, the



chairperson of the meeting needs to facilitate discussions so that the atmosphere of the meeting is conducive to a compromise acceptable to all, where every state involved has its comfort zone to live with. Consensus-based decision-making has served as a politically binding principle and value for the unification of member states to reach an agreement in a subtle way.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned observation corresponds to the SWOT analysis made by the ACD Secretariat on 6 July 2020 and revised on 25 February 2022,<sup>10</sup> which confirmed that the Spirit of ACD remained “the backdrop of this grouping’s mindset.”<sup>11</sup> On top of that, when any ACD member state could not make herself available to attend meetings, “no objection of the Member States will be secured through silence procedure.”<sup>12</sup> In practice, when a decision-making body is not in session, decision-making may be initiated by the ACD Chair or the Secretariat, upon instruction of the Chair, sending a note verbale to seek approval of all Member States within a time limit, beyond which the approval is tacitly made unless an objection is notified.

It should be mentioned that the 19<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting on June 24, 2024, at Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, under the Chairmanship of Iran, made another

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milestone of the ACD since there were at least four deliverables, namely:

- approval of the Guiding Principles for the Functioning of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue Secretariat;
- approval of the Rules of Procedure of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue;
- adoption of the Tehran Declaration;
- appointment of the next ACD Secretary General for the tenure of three years.



**The ACD framework has served as an avenue to supplement and complement the national policies of ACD member states when it comes to policy orientation towards Asia. For example, the “Asia Anew Initiative” of the Republic of Türkiye was launched in 2019, the same year as Türkiye assumed the chairmanship of the ACD.**

The adoption of the two basic documents, namely the “Guiding Principles for the Functioning of the ACD Secretariat” and the “Rules of Procedure of the ACD,” would pave the way for the ACD to become an inter-governmental organization in the future. The 19<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting acknowledged the need for the conclusion of the “Host Country Agreement” in order to strengthen the role of the Secretariat and confer to it legal personality, in accordance with the principle of functional necessity.

### **From Maturity to Complementarity**

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All states shall follow the provisions of Article 52 of the United Nations Charter which promotes the involvement of regional arrangements or agencies in the peaceful settlement of disputes. The ‘regional principle’ is acknowledged as “a useful ancillary to maintaining peace and security,”<sup>13</sup> while consensus, at the same time, has “replaced contention.”<sup>14</sup>

To elaborate further, the ACD framework has served as an avenue to supplement and complement the national policies of ACD member states when it comes to policy orientation towards Asia. For example, the “Asia Anew Initiative” of the Republic of Türkiye was launched in 2019, the same year as Türkiye assumed the chairmanship of the ACD. This policy expands cooperation with Asian countries as “potential partners”<sup>15</sup> because Türkiye and other Asian countries are connected with historical, economic, and strategic dimensions.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, India introduced its “Look East Policy” which was later aimed to include not only Southeast Asian countries, but also East Asia and Oceania, then renamed as “Act East” Policy in

2014. It is another reference<sup>17</sup> consonant with the object and purpose of the ACD. The positions of China and Japan were previously mentioned. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has intensified its cooperation in many dimensions under the policy of “Gulf direction eastward.”<sup>18</sup>

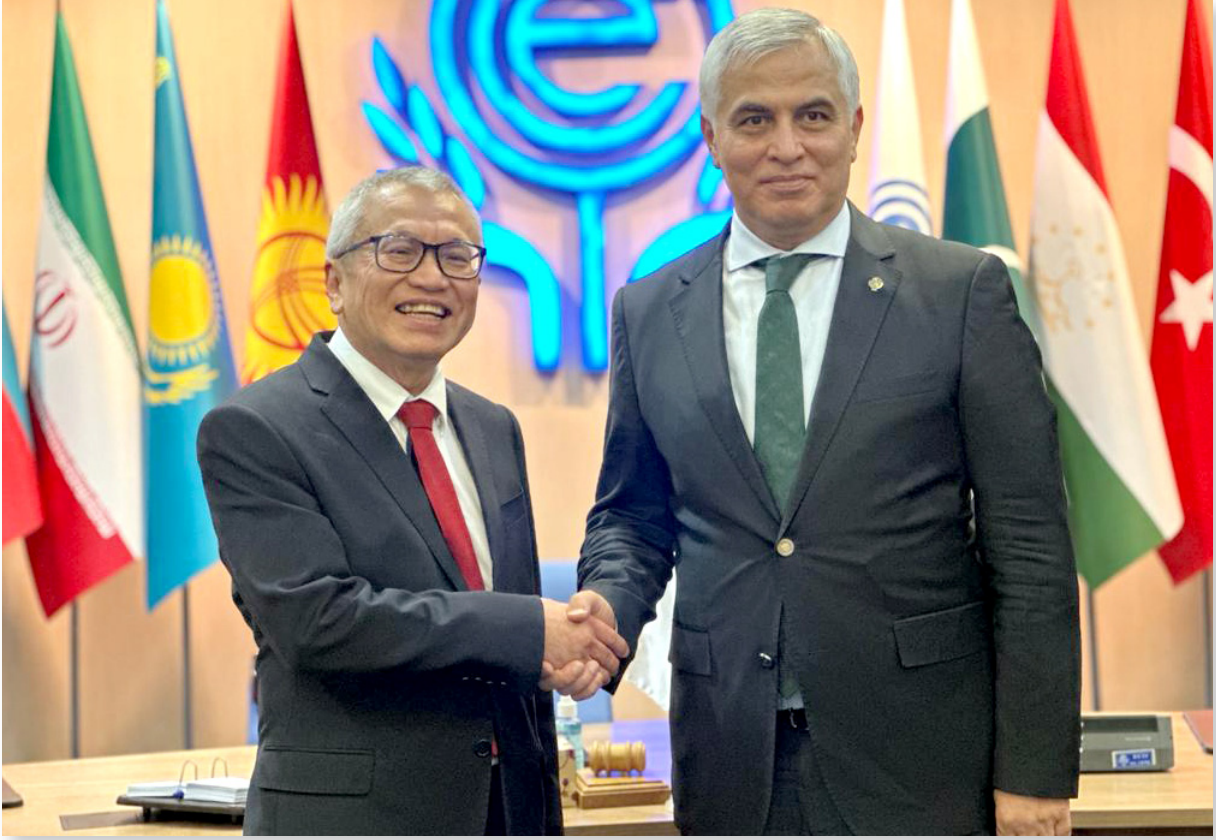
The above references to national policies of some Asian countries are a manifestation of how they view the relevance and benefits of joining the ACD in consonant with their national development agenda. Moreover, as reaffirmed in Tehran their commitment to the objectives, values, and principles of the ACD as a pan-Asian platform for cooperation<sup>19</sup>, member states in general have reacted together to resolve issues of common concerns through international institutions in order to achieve consensus<sup>20</sup>.

In the context of multilateralism, in which the ACD is included, the objective is to encourage a responsible world order that ‘give and take’ arrangements are not the only available option, but cooperative behavior is always preferred.<sup>21</sup> Another way to look at state behavior is to refer to the concept of regionalism where a group of countries in a region or sub-region tries to “manage relations between each other and with other regions.”<sup>22</sup> In the meantime, it was observed that in ‘Pacific Asia’ or from Japan to Myanmar, it would be difficult to expect integration in the short run since there were differences in terms of size of countries, levels of development and lack of a common desire for regional integration, as opposed to the regional integration of the European Union<sup>23</sup>. Still, it is evident that all states in this area had formed sub-regional organizations and groupings to enhance cooperation between and among states in the region<sup>24</sup>. It could be interpreted that such states had witnessed the need for more extensive multilateral cooperation in regional integration so that this region could follow what Europe had achieved<sup>25</sup>. As the ACD encompasses countries from all sub-regions in Asia, forward-looking towards an Asia-wide community is still plausible if only political will prevails.

### **Approaching the Next Chapter: Action-Oriented Agendas**

The adoption of the two basic documents, namely, the “Guiding Principles for the Functioning of the ACD Secretariat” and the “Rules of Procedure of the ACD,” has shown that the ACD is approaching the new chapter of implementation with specific timelines and procedures. As mentioned earlier, ACD member states agreed that the “Host Country Agreement” between the State of Kuwait, where the Secretariat is located, and the member states, represented by the Secretary General, would be con-





cluded.<sup>26</sup> The “Host Country Agreement” will be binding upon the parties concerned, subject to the legal maxim, “*pacta sunt servanda*” (agreements must be kept).<sup>27</sup> The issue of legal personality of the Secretariat should be addressed for functional necessity to serve the membership in an effective manner. This line of argument is somewhat business as usual in international relations and diplomatic intercourse. The precedent set forth in other organizations or entities could be further explored, for example, the agreement between the Government of Singapore and the Secretariat of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Organization Relating to the Privileges and Immunities of the APEC Secretariat of 1993.

One of the important components embodied in the “Guiding Principles” is the issue of budget. This basic document leaves room for member states to provide voluntary contributions to the budget of the Secretariat, apart from the financial commitment from the Host Country<sup>28</sup>. A sufficient budget based on an annual work program will enable the Secretariat to effectively provide support to member states and facilitate the implementation of all activities and projects, given the fact that the six working groups established under the “ACD Blueprint 2021-2030” have held their meetings virtually to “elaborate ways and means for implementation of actions/mea-

sures as envisaged in the Blueprint under corresponding pillar.”<sup>29</sup>

In principle, tangible outcomes of all the six working groups are the centerpiece of the Blueprint because the participation of Member States can address common challenges that any single state cannot.<sup>30</sup> The ACD as a whole, together with the Secretariat, could expand cooperation while participation would promote “a sense of ownership,”<sup>31</sup> which is one of the weaknesses of the ACD as identified in the SWOT analysis illustrated in the author’s article.<sup>32</sup>

### Prospects beyond 2030

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Summit is scheduled to be held on 3 October 2024 in Doha, State of Qatar. This Summit is supposed to chart a new course of action for the ACD towards the achievement of “ACD Vision 2030,” with the theme of “sports diplomacy.” This theme should inspire member states to make the best use of sports to contribute to the Sports Diplomacy Guidelines, particularly SDG 3 (health benefits of sport and physical activity). The United Nations recognizes that sport has a key role in development and contribution to peace while empowering women and

the youth. If sports could be promoted regardless of race, gender, religion, the sports industry would become a big and lucrative business with a huge potential for income generation, development of professional sports, and other economic dimensions for sustainable growth. One may recall that ping-pong diplomacy was used to improve the relationship between states and people-to-people connectivity. In 1971, the diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States were improved towards normalization due to the interaction between the table tennis (ping-pong) teams of the two countries.<sup>33</sup> Sports diplomacy could be instrumental in promoting friendly relations between states within and outside Asia. Serious consideration should be given to include sports in the national curricula of primary and secondary schools, as well as intra- and inter-murals, which would lead to a wide range of accreditation for professional sports and service providers in the sports industry. The ACD could use sports as a powerhouse for revenue generation and as a catalyst for inter- and intra-regional connectivity simultaneously.

Apart from the above, at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Summit, leaders of thirty-five Member States may have a good chance for stocktaking in order to make an assessment of what action will be necessary to achieve "ACD Vision 2030" and beyond. They may consider giving guidance on the future participation of the private sector and other sectoral government agencies in response to the changing geopolitics and new challenges in Asia and elsewhere. Member states may agree to double their efforts in achieving the SDGs. Definitely, due consideration should be given to embark on tangible projects based on the ACD Blueprint, especially in the area of culture and tourism because it is a win-win situation for all since culture is Asia's soft power. In this context, it is appropriate to consider how the designation of a city to become 'ACD Tourism Capital' should be promoted in a sustainable way.

**The ACD has been a non-state actor with its commitment to fostering cooperation and problem-solving among Asian countries for more than two decades. The increase in the number of members to thirty-five countries is a clear illustration of how member states perceive the benefit gained from this grouping. On top of that, interactions of member states in the mode of dialogue have contributed to confidence-building in the end.**

Nonetheless, more needs to be done individually and collectively to address climate change. In this connection, information on and best practices in disaster preparedness and relief management should be duly shared and exchanged since Asia is prone to natural disasters year-round. Asian talent and skills empowerment should be highlighted since human resource development is a long-term commitment for delivery by each member state. Food and energy security is another matter of common concern. Deliberation and contemplation could be made, perhaps in such a manner that Member States will assist one another, to the extent possible and in a manner not to be in breach of any obligations or commitment, in case of emergency.

In the meantime, the ACD may also share its best practices in certain areas, for example, poverty eradication, and quality health care because countries in Asia and the Pacific had pledged to "strongly recommit to achieve universal health coverage by 2030"<sup>34</sup> as a result of significant progress which had been made so far. These success stories should be publicized to showcase the achievements and dedication of commitment to the betterment of people.

The Summit should spare some of its time to discuss in which direction the ACD may engage with other regional and sub-regional organizations or groupings because there are many of them in Asia and outside Asia, some of which have their eyes on plausible cooperation and collaboration with the ACD. It is high time to hold a meeting with other organizations or groupings for that purpose so that their resources could be optimized while avoiding the duplication of work.

## Concluding Remarks

The ACD has been a non-state actor with its commitment to fostering cooperation and problem-solving among Asian countries for more than two decades. The increase in the number of members to thirty-five countries is a clear illustration of how member states perceive the benefit gained from this grouping. On top of that, interactions of member states in the mode of dialogue have contributed to confidence-building in the end.

Insofar as implementation is concerned, all working groups established under the Blueprint are responsible for implementing the six Pillars of Cooperation in a tangible manner. With the two basic documents adopted at the last Ministerial Meeting, including the need for strengthening the role of the Secretariat, the ACD has already proceeded into the next chapter of action-oriented agendas. In this light, priority should be given to some areas of co-

operation, which are non-controversial in nature, for example, disaster prevention and preparedness, together with relief management. The fact that Asia has suffered a lot of damage and death toll due to natural disasters and pandemics warrants a call for collective action in an urgent manner since they are transboundary and no single state can act alone.

In conclusion, the window of opportunity remains open to all member states to make the best use of this forum. As the only platform embracing regional and sub-regional organizations and groupings in Asia, the ACD can offer its potential benefit not only to Member States but also to other Asian countries. It is sub-

ject to the political will of member states to consider how its course should be charted as enshrined by “ACD Vision 2030” and beyond, in particular, what the ACD as a whole is willing to contribute to the international community and what the ACD expects from others for the betterment of member states and their peoples in the next decade. Even though one may cast doubt on whether the ACD will stand the test of time, it should bear in mind that the ACD has been in existence as a responsible non-state actor so far. The outcome of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Summit will be another proof of the success of the ACD, apart from whether or not the ACD is yet to become relevant and resilient in the years to come.

## Endnotes

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- 23 Ibid, p.336-337.
- 24 Ibid, p.339.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Guiding Principle for the Functioning of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue.
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- 29 The six Working Groups are : Working Group on Connectivity; Working Group on Science, Technology and Innovation; Working Group on Education and Human Resource Development; Working Group on Food, Energy and Water Security; Working Group on Culture and Tourism; and Working Group on Inclusive Sustainable Development.
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