

The Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD): Formation and Development

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Abstract

This article aims to provide an overview of the development, progress, and problems of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD)—the only continent-wide forum in Asia—emphasizing the role of Thailand, the founding country. The ACD serves as the missing link in Asian cooperation, constituting an informal and a non-institutionalized forum for Asian Foreign Ministers. It is a useful diplomatic asset, which is not as recognized as ASEAN, APEC, or ASEM but can still provide a forum for Asian Foreign Ministers to informally exchange views on matters of common interest. A lack of leadership and political will is among the major factors that have considerably undermined the significance of the ACD.

Keywords: ACD, Asia Cooperation Dialogue, Asia, Kuwait, Thailand.

Introduction

“A new chapter of history begins today,” proclaimed Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Prime Minister of Thailand, in June 2002. In his speech delivered at the inaugural meeting of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) in Cha-Am, Thailand, he mentioned several bright promises of the new continent-wide forum. However, he might soon discover that the future does not hold a bed of roses for this newborn forum.

This article examines the progress of the ACD—its evolution from its founding in 2002 to the present—and the problems faced by it during its development since its inauguration. It thus provides readers with an overview of the ACD and also attempts an assessment of some of the major problems of the forum.

Methodology

Atheoretical Case Studies: This article uses the atheoretical case study method, as it aims to simply describe the data collected through primary and secondary sources.

Findings and Discussion

Establishment of the ACD: On June 18, 2002, at Thailand’s initiative, former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and former Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai, along with the Foreign Ministers of and special envoys from 17 other Asian nations, convened in Cha-Am to mark the inauguration of the ACD, supposedly Asia’s first continent-wide forum. Thaksin proclaimed the meeting as an “historic Asian event” that marked the “beginning of a new chapter of world cooperation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand—MFA 2003: 167).

The ACD idea was first introduced by Surakiart, on behalf of Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, at the First International Conference of Asian Political Parties, held in Manila in 2000, a year before Thaksin’s electoral win. After coming into office in 2001, Thaksin and Surakiart continued to put forward the idea of establishing an Asia-wide forum for consideration by Asian governments. The idea was formally proposed by Surakiart during the 34th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Hanoi in July 2001, and was further elaborated at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat in Phuket in February 2002 (Ahmad 2003). In June of the same year, after receiving broad support from Asian governments, Thaksin officially declared the launch of the First ACD Ministerial Meeting, putting the idea of Asia-wide cooperation into practice. The founding members of the ACD are Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, India,

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Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The aim of the ACD was to constitute the “missing link” in Asia by encompassing Asian nations into the newly formed ‘Asian Community’—a continent-wide forum, the first of its kind in the region—without duplicating other existing regional arrangements or creating a bloc against the others (ACD 2012a). The missing link concept, as stated in *The ACD E-News*, is as follows:

...implies something new. Before the ACD was formed in 2002, forums for cooperation in the Asian region were primarily sub-regional in character, e.g., GMS, ACMECS, BIMSTEC, ASEAN, ASEAN+3, SAARC, GCC, CICA. When the ACD came about, however, it was able to draw its membership from all of Asia's sub-regions, i.e., Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia, Western Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, becoming the first pan-Asian forum. What the ACD did, then, was to bring (or “link”) all sub-regions and sub-regional forums together under one roof (ACD 2007b: 3).

As an Asian community, the ACD would help to integrate and complement existing regional institutions. A key principle was to enhance Asia's strength and economic competitiveness by maximizing its diversity and rich resources as well as actualizing the continent's potential. The ACD would create the required synergy for Asia's enormous potential (ACD 2015). This materialized in Thaksin's opening statement at the inaugural meeting of the ACD in 2002:

At the present time, Asia has not been able to forge the basic understanding and the will to use our dynamism, our talents, our own markets and skills in order to create mutual benefit from our combined potential, either as individual nations or as a region on the world scene. Asia therefore needs to forge a common strategy to build from our vast resources...in order to overcome the challenges of the new century. We must learn to trust, confide, and work together for our mutual benefits, not viewing one another as competitors, but rather as partners and allies (MFA 2003: 169).

The core values of the ACD are as follows: positive thinking, informality, voluntarism, non-institutionalization, openness, respect for diversity, the comfort level of member countries, and the evolving nature of the ACD process (ACD 2012a). Thaksin pointed out this concept of the ACD in the speech he delivered at the East Asia Economic Summit in Kuala Lumpur in October 2002:

The ACD is not just a cooperation. The ACD is not just a dialogue. But, simply, the ACD is both a cooperation and a dialogue. It is a capacity building process based on trade, economic, social, and possibly political cooperation dialogues, relying upon the flexibility and a comfort level of all its participants. Driven by positive thinking, the ACD will be an evolving, informal, and non-institutionalized, open and inclusive process...In a nutshell, the ACD must be a forum for Asia to pool its inner strengths to create an environment of win-win state of affairs for a wealthier and more prosperous Asia and for the rest of the world (ASEAN Secretariat 2012).

The ACD currently has 34 members from all over Asia. In 2003, it welcomed four new members, namely Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Oman, and Sri Lanka, and four more in 2004, namely Bhutan, Iran, Mongolia, and the United Arab Emirates. Two regional major powers, Russia and Saudi Arabia, joined the forum in 2005. Two Central Asian nations, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, became members in 2006, followed by Kyrgyzstan a year later. Afghanistan joined the Dialogue in 2012, followed by Turkey the following year. In 2015, Nepal initiated a process for joining the ACD (Xinhua 2015), and it became the 34th member in 2016.

The main objectives of the ACD, as indicated on its website, are as follows:

1. To promote interdependence among Asian countries in all areas of cooperation by identifying Asia's common strengths and opportunities which will help reduce poverty and improve the quality of life for Asian people whilst developing a knowledge-based society within Asia and enhancing community and people empowerment;
2. To expand the trade and financial market within Asia and increase the bargaining power of Asian countries in lieu of competition and, in turn, enhance Asia's economic competitiveness in the global market;
3. To serve as the missing link in Asian cooperation by building upon Asia's potentials and strengths through supplementing and complementing existing cooperative frameworks;
4. To ultimately transform the Asian continent into an Asian Community, capable of interacting with the rest of the world on a more equal footing and contributing more positively towards mutual peace and prosperity.

(ACD 2015)

Operation of the ACD: The paramount issue at the First ACD Ministerial Meeting in Cha-am was how to move the forum forward, as can be seen through its theme suggested by Thailand, "Asia Cooperation Dialogue: How to Consolidate Our Strengths?" The participants in the inaugural meeting reached an agreement to create two important dimensions of mechanism based on ACD's core values, namely dialogue and projects.

The dialogue dimension, as stated in Surakiart's statement, was designed to promote the participation and consultation of ACD members on an inclusive basis, by proceeding incrementally and beginning with stress-free issues before dealing with more difficult ones (Sathirathai 2003: 193-194). Besides, Surakiart (2003: 194) claimed that the dialogue suggested "merit in maintaining the non-institutionalized and informal nature of ACD in order to retain maximum flexibility in rapidly changing times." At the conclusion of the meeting in Cha-Am, the 18 original ACD member states all agreed that the continuity of the dialogue is essential in sustaining relationships among the membership (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 99).

To put the dialogue dimension into effect, it is imperative to hold the meetings on a regular basis to fortify the sense of 'we-feeling' among the members of the ACD. For the first ten years, the forum had organized a series of meetings at two levels: the ministerial level and the senior officials' level. At the senior officials' level, apart from the easy-going meeting held in provision for the annual ministerial meeting, there have been at least two other regular sessions for senior officials so that they can meet periodically. The first one is the ACD Senior Officials' Trips to ACD Capitals. The second one is the ACD Ambassadorial Retreat, usually organized in Bangkok. The retreat has been regularly held since 2002 and is normally chaired by the Permanent Secretary or the Deputy Permanent Secretary for the Thai Foreign Ministry (ACD 2012a). It has been created to encourage talks among member states on various issues of common interest. The retreat is at the top of the dialogue dimension (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 100).

At the ministerial level, the ACD ministers have met annually since its inauguration in 2002. Until April 2016, 13 official ACD Ministerial Meetings took place. The ministerial meeting is conducted in an informal, retreat-style format, in accordance with the ACD's fundamental values, as can be exemplified through the special manner of the meetings. Sofa Meeting, for example, is "a meeting format uniquely employed in the ACD Ministerial Meetings...Ministers are seated on sofas instead of the meeting room and discuss issues of mutual interest without prepared notes or structured agenda in order to induce the exchange of views and idea freely. Only an indicative list of topics is provided to the Ministers to facilitate the flow of the Meeting" (ACD 2007a: 3). The ACD also annually arranges the Breakfast or High Tea Meetings in

September on the sideline of the UN General Assembly session, where the foreign ministers talk and exchange their opinions on the ACD ongoing projects and programs as well as on regional and international issues.

“Hosting the ACD meeting is a piece of cake. What we have to do is just preparing [sic] a speech for the Chair,” said a Thai senior diplomat, who has been involved in ACD affairs, in a closed-door meeting at the Foreign Ministry. As Pavin Chachavalpongpun, former Thai diplomat, describes, the ACD “is a process where there is no agenda, no assigned speakers, no specific topics...prepared for and agreed in advance by senior officials. The host only prepares and issues a Chairman’s Statement for reference” (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 99).

Despite its unique and informal format, the meetings would mean nothing to the members if they do not make the ACD relevant to the changing regional context. To preserve the *raison d’être* of the group, each annual ministerial meeting has always initiated new cooperative schemes in response to the changing situation of the region (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 100). The major outcomes of the ACD Ministerial Meetings can be summarized as follows:

1. The First ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Cha-Am, Thailand in June 2002. All the representatives present at this meeting endorsed and recognized the ACD initiative.
2. The Second ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand in June 2003. The Chiang Mai Declaration on Asian Bond Market was adopted at this meeting (ACD 2012b).
3. The Third ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Qingdao, China in June 2004. The Declaration on Asia Cooperation was adopted along with the Qingdao Initiative. The former is a proposal for future cooperation in various fields, while the latter focuses on energy security and cooperation (ACD 2012c, 2012d).
4. The Fourth ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Islamabad, Pakistan in April 2005. The Islamabad Declaration, which included the Guideline for Granting the Status of ACD Partner for Development, was adopted at this meeting. The guideline aims at opening a channel to cooperate with non-ACD members and other regional groups (ACD 2012e).
5. The Fifth ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Doha, Qatar in May 2006. The ACD Energy Forum was established because of the Doha Declaration, which was adopted at the meeting. In addition, the ACD Energy Action Plan was endorsed to promote energy security, research and assessment on energy, and energy infrastructure development, and to consider the possibility of reinvesting revenues that accumulate from the energy trade among the ACD members in order to ensure the overall sustainable development of the Asian continent (ACD 2012f).
6. The Sixth ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Seoul, South Korea in June 2007. The Seoul IT Declaration was adopted at this meeting. The objective of the declaration is to narrow the digital divide among the members of the ACD by fostering closer cooperation in IT-related project areas (ACD 2012g).
7. The Seventh ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Astana, Kazakhstan in October 2008. The meeting adopted the Seventh ACD Declaration that launched the initiative of Track II participation in the process of the ACD. India and Iran offered to host the ACD Think Tank Network meeting in 2008 and 2009 respectively (ACD 2012h).
8. The Eighth ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in October 2009. The meeting adopted the ACD Colombo Declaration, with emphasis on reaffirming the commitment to create strong, sustainable, and balanced regional growth as well as to reform global governance and financial architecture, and to shape regional arrangements to meet the challenges of the new century (ACD 2012i).
9. The Ninth ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Tehran, Iran in November 2010. The meeting discussed ways to converge and to promote cooperation in Asia, fortifying Asia’s

- competitiveness and maximizing Asia's diversity and rich resources, leading to economic development in important areas such as tourism, ICT, and energy cooperation (MOFA 2013).
10. The Tenth ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Kuwait City, Kuwait in October 2011. The meeting discussed various measures to further strengthen cooperation in the region, facilitating Asian regional integration (MOFA 2013).
 11. The Eleventh ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in March 2012. The Dushanbe Declaration was adopted at this meeting and it was agreed to set up the ACD Provisional Secretariat. Kuwait's proposal for mobilizing USD 2 billion for an Asian Development Fund was mentioned and its pledge of USD 300 million initial contribution was appreciated (Asia-Plus 2013).
 12. The Twelfth ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Manama, Bahrain in November 2013. The meeting adopted the Manama Declaration, promoting intra-Asian tourism, featuring orientations to enhance ACD cooperation in a more effective and practical manner, and supporting initiatives and proposal on Asian connectivity (BNA 2013).
 13. The Thirteenth ACD Ministerial Meeting originally scheduled to be held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in November 2014 was first postponed and later cancelled due to a low level of participation of member countries. This was because the Eighteenth Summit of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was held in Kathmandu, Nepal from November 26-27, while the ACD Ministerial Meeting was scheduled for November 25 (Rasooldeen 2014).
 14. The Fourteenth ACD Ministerial Meeting was held in Bangkok in March 2016. The meeting agreed to draft the ACD Vision for Asia Cooperation 2030 in order to set a clear direction for regional cooperation in line with the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (MFA 2016).

The First ACD Summit was called by Kuwait and was held for the first time in Kuwait City, from October 15-17, 2012. The ACD Summit has been scheduled to be held every three years. At the First Summit, Kuwait and Thailand put forward an initiative to make the ACD permanent with a Secretariat (AFP 2012). Nevertheless, at the initial stage, only the Provisional Secretariat was agreed to be set up. Bundit Limschoon, a seasoned Thai diplomat, or "Mr. ACD," a nickname given by his colleagues owing to his dedication to ACD affairs even during the times the forum was downplayed by anti-Thaksin governments, was appointed as the first Secretary General of the ACD overseeing the ACD Provisional Secretariat, based in Kuwait City. At the end of the historic Summit, the Communiqué of the First ACD Summit was also issued. The Second ACD Summit was rescheduled to be held in Thailand in late 2016. The Third ACD Summit will be hosted by Iran in 2018.

For the project dimension, ACD members were encouraged to volunteer to perform as prime movers or co-prime movers in various areas of cooperation, suitable to their expertise. The project dimension mechanism proceeds on a voluntary basis. It therefore does not require a consensus from ACD member countries (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 101). Details of areas of cooperation and prime and co-prime movers are shown in Table 1.

Areas of Cooperation	Prime Movers and Co-prime Movers
1. Energy	Bahrain, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Qatar, China, the Philippines, Lao PDR, and the United Arab Emirates
2. Poverty Alleviation	Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Vietnam
3. Agriculture	China, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan

4. Transport Linkages	India, Kazakhstan, and Myanmar
5. Biotechnology	India
6. E-Commerce	Malaysia and Bahrain
7. Infrastructure Fund	Malaysia
8. E-Education	Malaysia and Iran
9. Asia Institute of Standards	Pakistan
10. SMEs Cooperation	Singapore and Sri Lanka
11. IT Development	Republic of Korea and Russia
12. Science and Technology	The Philippines
13. Tourism	Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Bahrain
14. Financial Cooperation	Thailand and Kazakhstan
15. Human Resources Development	Vietnam and Thailand
16. Environmental Education	Japan, Qatar, and Bahrain
17. Strengthening Legal Infrastructure	Japan
18. Road Safety	Oman
19. Natural Disaster	Russia
20. Cultural Cooperation	Iran, India, and Bahrain

Table 1 List of ACD Areas of Cooperation and their Prime and Co-prime Movers

ACD members demonstrated their zeal for participation as either prime movers or co-prime movers in 20 areas of cooperation under the project dimension. Malaysia, for example, was a keen prime mover in E-Education, subsequently leading to the establishment of Asia e-University, a dual-mode, international university, with the support of ACD members as confirmed at the Fourth and the Fifth ACD Ministerial Meetings.

At the Fourteenth ACD Ministerial Meeting, the areas of cooperation were regrouped into six pillars: (1) Connectivity; (2) Science, Technology, and Innovation; (3) Education and Human Resource Development; (4) Interrelation of Food, Energy, and Water Security; (5) Tourism and Culture; and (6) Promoting Approaches to Inclusive and Sustainable Development (MFA 2016).

One of the most ambitious moves was the Asian Bond Market Development initiative proposed by Thailand, a prime mover in financial cooperation, at the Second ACD Ministerial Meeting. It aims at “promoting the development of efficient and sustainable Asian bond markets for the betterment of Asia and its financial system” (ACD 2003). According to Thailand’s Concept Paper on Asian (Regional) Bond Market

Development, the cooperation on Asian Bond Market Development in ACD is needed because of the following reasons:

1. A lack of sufficiently developed bond markets in the region has been constantly mentioned as one of the major causes leading to the outburst of the 1997 crisis. From past experiences in the region, immature debt and capital markets, to a certain extent, forced investors/borrowers to rely upon tapping funds from external sources, particularly short-term borrowing.
2. Short-term borrowing could be destabilizing since it could lead to capital account reversals that would leave fund receiving economies vulnerable thanks to heavily fluctuating capital flows. Therefore, developing efficient bond markets in the region is seen to be not only a necessary condition but also a sufficient one to promote a sound and stable macroeconomic environment.
3. In addition, Asian economies have accumulated substantial amount of wealth in terms of collective international reserves and a large portion of those reserves would normally be invested elsewhere outside the continent. Establishing sound and efficient Asian bond markets could provide alternatives for investment of Asian economies.
4. Therefore, the development of deep and liquid bond markets should be viewed as not only an enhancement to the financial development process within the continent but also a further step to promote more integrated financial cooperation among Asian economies.

(ACD n.d.)

Nevertheless, the Asian Bond Market Development initiative has become stagnant under the ACD framework. It being a forum mainly for Foreign Ministers explains why the ACD was inactive in pursuing the Asian Bond Market Development initiative. However, the more important reason is the fact that the political destiny of Thaksin's government, which was overthrown in 2006, prevented his government from keeping the project alive within the ACD. The 2006 coup in Thailand was the turning point that made the ACD lose its momentum.

The Lack of Leadership and Political Will: Thailand's domestic politics has a great impact on the momentum of the continent-wide forum. After the Thaksin government was toppled in 2006, the ACD has been losing its momentum, and its activities have been few (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 106-107). Critics view the ACD as a promotional product of Thaksin's international ambitions (Panaspornprasit 2004: 260-261; Theeravit n.d.). Subsequent governments, anti-Thaksin factions, have been unwilling to follow up on ACD affairs, and have downgraded this Asia-wide framework (Chachavalpongpun 2009). For them, continuing with ACD works and activities would legitimize Thaksin's legacy and the symbol of his foreign policy. As Chachavalpongpun (2010: 107) observes, "[t]his explains why the ACD is currently being left in a rather neglected state, especially as long as the Democrat Party [Thaksin's opposition] remains in power." His observation remains true for the current military regime led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, who ousted Yingluck Shinawatra from office in 2014. The Second ACD Summit (which will be hosted by Thailand) and the Fourteenth ACD Ministerial Meeting (which was hosted by Thailand) were postponed from 2015 to 2016.

As Thailand was forced to become less active since the 2006 coup (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 108), there was a leadership vacuum in the ACD. Kuwait saw the opportunity to fill this vacuum. MD Nalapat, an Indian analyst, observed the following:

Kuwait has reasserted its crucial role in the region once again by becoming a strong voice for Asia...It is heartening to note that Kuwait, after more than 20 years, is once again stepping forward to become an important diplomatic player in the region like Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Kuwait is the Singapore of the Middle East: small, prosperous, and forward-looking (Peter 2012).

Kuwait called for the transformation of the ACD into a formal organization. Kuwait's efforts were best exemplified through the establishment of the ACD Provisional Secretariat at Kuwait City, symbolizing Kuwait's leading position in the continent-wide forum and increasing its international status. Kuwait would host the Provisional Secretariat on its own expenses. However, without support from Thailand, Kuwaiti efforts would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. To accommodate Thailand whose diplomacy was under siege by its political crises (Chachavalpongpun 2009), the deal was to nominate a senior Thai diplomat to be the first ACD Secretary General. Kuwait's endeavors, especially about institutionalization, received a lukewarm response from other member countries.

Despite its hard efforts, Kuwait has been unable to gain leadership. This partly derives from the fact that Thailand still controls several ACD works and activities, and is trying to regain its leading role in the ACD. In addition, other players in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, have also joined this competition in the ACD. Riyadh hoped to increase its international status and prestige by hosting the Thirteenth ACD Ministerial Meeting; however, it failed to do so because of insufficient participation in the meeting (Rasooldeen 2014).

The lack of political will among ACD members is also a critical problem for the forum. ACD members claim to be in favor of rhetorical goals, but so far, most of them have only paid lip service to delivering the substantial cooperation goals. A former Thai diplomat observed the following:

The lack of interest in the ACD has not only been felt in Thailand. It is reported that the Thai Foreign Ministry has to work extremely hard in convincing and lobbying ACD members to send representatives to attend some of its many meetings. Some meetings had to be postponed or even cancelled because of insufficient participants (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 110).

Therefore, the ACD has been waning. To a certain extent, the lack of political will among regional powers and great powers has stemmed from the fact that the ACD has not been an organization in the strict sense of the term. For example, Russia, as Elena Suponina points out, "views that...[ACD] is unique but until now is careful and requires there to be further clarity on the organizational side and on its outcomes" (Al-Dulaimi 2012). Therefore, for ACD members like Russia, the ACD has failed to deliver rhetorical goals and actual achievements. Nevertheless, those who are at the region's periphery want to take advantage of the forum to appear on the same stage with the big powers in the international scene (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 109). Institutionalization of the ACD would be disadvantageous for them.

Conclusion

For a forum that began with high ambitions, the ACD has achieved surprisingly little. However, despite its inability to have an impact on both a continental and regional scale, and its steadily declining importance, the ACD provides a good example of the difficulties of institution building in Asia. The failure of the ACD has been a result of the forum's lack of leadership and political will and its inability to fulfill the expectations of its members.

In conclusion, we argue that despite having a 14-year-old history of making diligent attempts to take an important step toward becoming a relevant continental body, the ACD does not seem to have a bright future.

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