Houston Area Model United Nations
Specialized Committee

ARF



Chair | Timothy Zhang
Topic A: Combating Trafficking and Scam Compounds in the Mekong Region
Houston Area Model United Nations 52
February 4 & 5, 2027

Atilgan Ozdil/Anadolu Ag

Chair Letter

Delegates,

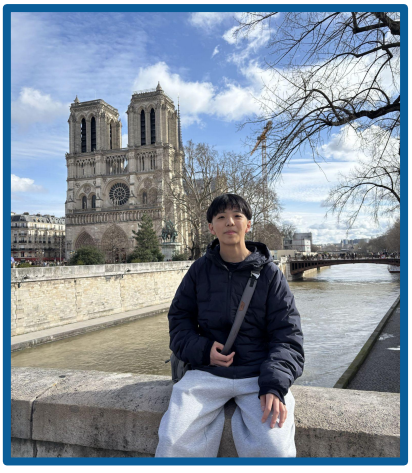
Welcome to HAMUN 52! My name is Timothy Zhang, and I will be your chair for this year's ASEAN Regional Forum!

I'm a 2nd-year student at the University of Texas at Austin double majoring in philosophy and humanities, with a minor in government. I competed in Speech and Debate throughout high school (LD was my main event!) and quickly joined MUN after learning of their similarities. Since then, I've participated in numerous conferences and staffed as vice-chair of UNSC at HAMUN 51.

I chose to chair ARF because of the regional focus it holds, allowing for more concentrated dialogue on political and security issues of concern. The Asia-Pacific region offers a breadth of topics, and as delegates, I hope you all explore its range.

Regardless of whether you're a veteran or if this will be your first time competing, above all, HAMUN is a place to learn and grow. Every member state offers a unique position to represent, and I believe the debate will reflect this. I hope the conference will bring memorable experiences, opportunities to meet new friends, and a passion for the event. If there are any questions y'all might have, please reach out!

Timothy Zhang
Chair of ARF
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Background Information

What is ARF?

Established in 1994, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF) serves as a platform for open dialogue discussions on political and security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. It consists of 27 members: ASEAN member states, ASEAN dialogue partners, as well as Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, Bangladesh, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Talk processes are guided by the ARF Senior Officials Meeting (ARFSOM), which proposes activities and meetings alongside institutional matters. ARF promotes cooperation, confidence-building, and transparency among member states to work towards regional peace. Recent discussions include issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and counter-terrorism along the Korean Peninsula and South China Sea. However, since its establishment, the ARF has prohibited topics regarding the Taiwan Strait and does not include Taiwan in the forum.

A Brief History

International order remained tense in the years following the Cold War; the ARF was formed to fill these power vacuums in the Asia-Pacific. A key detail is that the ARF operates through preventive diplomacy and deinstitutionalization, rather through direct methods of deterrence. Notably, the ARF has been criticized for being a “talk shop,” that its format often leads to a lack of enforcement mechanisms. Many critics view that, without genuine reform, the value of the ARF may be overrun by the rapid pace of current events.

TOPIC ABSTRACT

Since 2010, organized crime groups in East and Southeast Asia have expanded rapidly, forming a vast network of transnational operations. Along borders and areas with weak governance, an estimated 300,000 individuals from around 66 countries are trafficked into scam compounds in the Mekong region. These centers coerce persons to commit cybercrime, including investment fraud, money laundering, identity theft, phishing, and kidnapping. A wide range of corruption sustains this system: government administrators, economic elites, and local police. ASEAN has prioritized suppressing scam operations as a primary geopolitical concern, given their implications for Indo-Pacific economic and political security. Moreover, the global expansion and reach of these compounds have prompted involvement from other international organizations, with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the European Union cooperating towards awareness and enforcement action.

Scam centers represent a systemic challenge for Southeast Asia; they exacerbate the criminal ecosystem and fuel entrenched corruption. Economies across the region have been reshaped by scam centers; in the case of Cambodia, it is estimated to be 60 percent of its GDP. This presents a difficult policy dilemma of potential economic shocks and social unrest. The threat of trafficking persists across borders and has become deeply rooted within regions. Without vigilant coordination from member states, regional stability is doomed to deteriorate further. As chair, I encourage delegates to consider possible platforms and initiatives that can create practical methods of confronting organized crime while prioritizing the safety of victims. Dismantling the system requires a direct solution to its source and efficient ways of navigating the complex relationships of border regions.

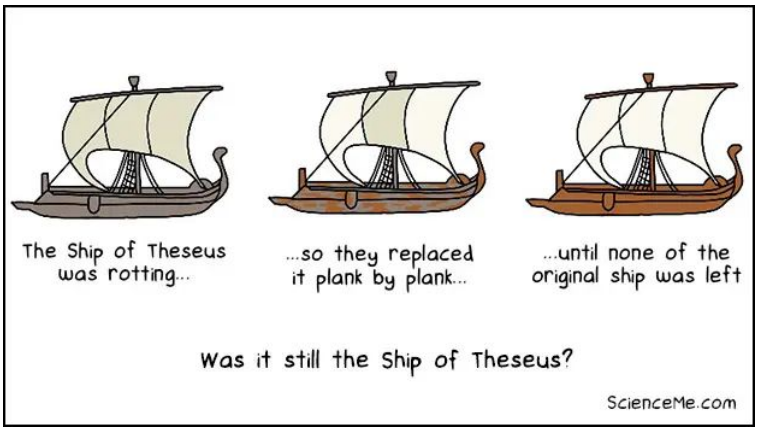
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"Southeast Asia strengthens regional cooperation to combat trafficking for forced criminality", UNODC, 1 July 2025, https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/2025/07/southeast-asia-combat-trafficking/story.html

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One might imagine scam operations as a ship. Each time authorities raid a compound they remove a plank. However, the center operators simply replace it, and in doing so, they rebuild the ship in another location. If every plank, crew member, and even the harbor changes, is it still the same scam compound? When understanding the "scam center model," analysis must consider the subject enforcement targets. Crackdowns focuses on instances—places and people—but not the pattern—an enterprise's identity and network, so success can easily be confused by measuring in the wrong unit.



Cartoon depicting the thought experiment "The Ship of Theseus,"

THE SCAM CENTER MODEL

Cyber scam operations first emerged when telecom fraud networks from mainland China crossed into Kokang, in northern Myanmar. Following this, they've evolved into a form of transnational organized crime that, as Benedikt Hofmann, Acting Regional Representative for UNODC in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, describes as "part of a wider regional challenge that is impacting communities, economies, and institutions across Southeast Asia." Scam centers have adopted sophisticated structures and function similarly to large industrial corporations, "with hierarchical management, specialized teams, and clear divisions of labor" (Menet 26). The complex geography of border regions combined with weak governance and corruption enables the existence of scam compounds. Officials within many host countries have been reported to protect this system, such as U.S.-sanctioned Senator Ly Yong Phat and Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and former National Police Chief, Neth Savoeun. Moreover, the reach of scam compounds have extended across the globe, with INTERPOL recording victims from nearly 80 countries in almost all continents.

However, a majority of scam compound victims still come from Southeast Asian countries, where scam compounds are the most concentrated. Organized criminal networks easily proliferated these areas, inflicting an extreme crisis in large areas of Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.

COMPOUND CONDITIONS

Survivors have described working in conditions that amount to modern day slavery, where they are frequently exposed to violence and torture. An account from a survivor from Bangladesh depicts how working in scam compounds are a matter of survival:

"I saw people being beaten, electric shocks were used. I realised I needed to learn to scam in order to survive."

A testimony from a survivor from Thailand described how scam compounds coerced individuals into engaging in fraudulent crimes:

"The bosses told us that we had to make 300,000 Thai baht [$9,500USD] every day...in order to avoid punishment or being sold to another company."

The OHCHR defines the international legal definition of a trafficked persons as:

"Individuals who have been deceived, coerced, or threatened into forced criminality," further confirming that the circumstances in the Mekong Region are grave human rights violations.

DRIVERS OF REGIONAL INSTABILITY

A significant issue of scam compounds are its economic impacts. Some estimates report that cyber-fraud operations in Cambodia make roughly US$12.5bn and US$19bn per year, which translates to about 60% of the country's GDP. As these revenues become more intertwined with legal and illegal economies, it becomes difficult to implement policies without risking economic shocks and social unrest.

The closure of the compound "Prek Khsach" in Cambodia's Koh Kong province is an example of how local livelihoods become so dependent on scam centers for employment.

After the area was shut down, protests followed. An account from a street vendor, Kunthea, captures the general resentment from works:

"The issue with workers not getting paid is everywhere, and it's not only here…Our economy is in sharp decline after the announcement of the scam boss's arrest."

Scam compounds will continue to distort a country's economy and fuel entrenched corruption; solutions require an approach that satisfactorily replace them to meet economic interests.

Another concern is of China's growing security presence in the region. Analysts argue that Beijing is framing the cyber-scam crisis as a response to transnational crime that affects its citizens to warrant further involvement and a larger presence in the region.

In January 2025, the trafficking of Chinese actor Wang Xing to a scam compound on the Myanmar-Thailand border drew significant public attention. In response, Liu, Zhongyi, the PRC's Assistant Minister of Public Security, traveled to Thailand to coordinate Wang's rescue. Chinese pressure prompted Thai authorities to act; however, this raised concerns that China was encroaching on Thai sovereignty.



"Sparks of unrest at construction sites as Cambodian scam raids continue" Mekong Independent, 16 Feb 2026

Despite this trend, Mekong countries remain mostly selective on allowing Chinese interference. The PRC prioritizes the repatriation of Chinese nationals over joint goals of dismantling the scam ecosystem holistically.

Western powers have also steadily become more involved. The U.S. launched a Scam Strike Force in 2025 in addition to imposing sanctions on several cyber-crime related entities, notably the criminal organization Prince Group in Cambodia.

TOPIC A: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How can states balance the need for effective transnational law enforcement with equal respect for national sovereignty?

2. What role should multilateral bodies play in ensuring that enforcement efforts remain accountable?

3. What responsibilities should private technology providers, such as satellite internet and generative AI developers, bear when their tools are misused by scam networks?

4. How effective are targeted sanctions against politically connected figures?

5. How can external actors, such as the EU, offer alternatives to existing security partnerships?

6. With victims from nearly 80 countries, how can states with limited reach support rescue and reintegration?

7. What would an effective cross-border information sharing system between ASEAN and partners look like?

8. How can rehabilitation services be coordinated across borders for survivors?

9. To what extent should the long-term health consequences of forced criminality shape victim-identification standards and legal protections?

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