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Good start on Asean defence cooperation

By Ian Storey, For The Straits Times
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THE inaugural Asean Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Hanoi earlier this week represents an important milestone in efforts by Asean and its dialogue partners to enhance peace and stability in a region grown anxious by fractious maritime disputes.

The meeting - attended by defence ministers from the 10 Asean member states and their counterparts from Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and the United States - facilitated fence mending in bilateral relations and established potentially useful cooperative mechanisms to address a range of security issues. Yet while improved atmospherics and pledges of cooperation were important outcomes, the tough issues remained untouched.

ADMM-Plus was significant for two main reasons:

First, it reaffirmed Asean's central role in bringing all major players in the Asia-Pacific together to craft a strong regional security architecture to address common challenges, build trust and maintain the balance of power. In a speech prior to the meeting, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates captured well the central goals of the new forum, describing it as an 'historic and very welcome move to a higher level of regional security dialogue', and an 'important manifestation of the commitment of all our governments to a secure and peaceful future for Asia'. ADMM-Plus was the first time defence ministers from the 18 countries had sat at the same table.

Second, ministers met on the sidelines of the summit to ameliorate recent tensions. Most importantly, Mr Gates' meeting with his Chinese counterpart General Liang Guanglie marked a resumption of military ties between the two countries suspended by Beijing in January, following Washington's decision to supply Taiwan with US\$6.4 billion (\$8.3 billion) worth of arms. Although China's Ministry of Defence cited US arms sales to Taiwan as a persistent obstacle to closer relations, it described the meeting as 'very candid and constructive'. And Mr Gates accepted Gen Liang's invitation to visit Beijing early next year.

Another positive outcome was Gen Liang's meeting with Japanese Defence Minister Toshimi Kitazawa, their first since bilateral exchanges were suspended following the

collision between a Chinese trawler and Japanese coast guard vessels last month. Gen Liang and Mr Toshimi resolved to avert future such standoffs by improving bilateral communication links.

Similarly, China and Vietnam sought to calm troubled waters roiled by competing sovereignty claims in the Paracel and Spratly island chains. Defence chiefs of the two countries pledged to settle their disputes peacefully. In a gesture of goodwill, China released nine Vietnamese fishermen held near the Paracels last month.

On the South China Sea dispute as a whole, however, the ADMM-Plus failed to achieve meaningful progress. There was no movement on implementing the 2002 Asean-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and the US and China simply restated their existing positions.

Mr Gates said that while the United States did not take sides on competing territorial claims, it has a 'longstanding national interest in freedom of navigation and open access to Asia's maritime commons'. He called for a peaceful resolution of the dispute in accordance with international law and, in an oblique reference to Beijing's preference to resolve the problem on a bilateral basis, argued that a multilateral approach was needed to 'confront the most important security challenges in this region'.

As for America's allies and partners in the region, Mr Gates reassured them that the US would maintain a robust military presence in Asia to keep critical sea lanes open, safe and secure.

Gen Liang repeated China's opposition to the 'internationalisation' of the South China Sea dispute and said multilateral forums such as the ADMM-Plus were not appropriate venues to discuss the issue. Still, he tried to assuage regional concerns over China's rising military power by stating that the country's defence policy was defensive and not aimed at challenging or threatening other states.

The South China Sea dispute was not a formal agenda item at the ADMM-Plus - so as to avoid a 'war of words', according to Vietnam's Vice-Defence Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh. But in a sign of continued anxiety over recent Chinese assertiveness, many countries raised the dispute in general terms. However, unlike at the Asean Regional Forum in July, China's reaction this time was relatively muted.

At the meeting's conclusion, the defence ministers decided to meet once every three years, disappointing those who had called for annual or biennial meetings. The main work will be undertaken by expert working groups in five priority areas: maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism, military medicine as well as peacekeeping.

Overall, the tone of the ADMM-Plus was constructive and ministers avoided acrimony. Ultimately, however, it remains to be seen whether the 18 countries can address common threats and meet the challenges thrown up by territorial disputes and growing interstate rivalries.

The writer is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.