

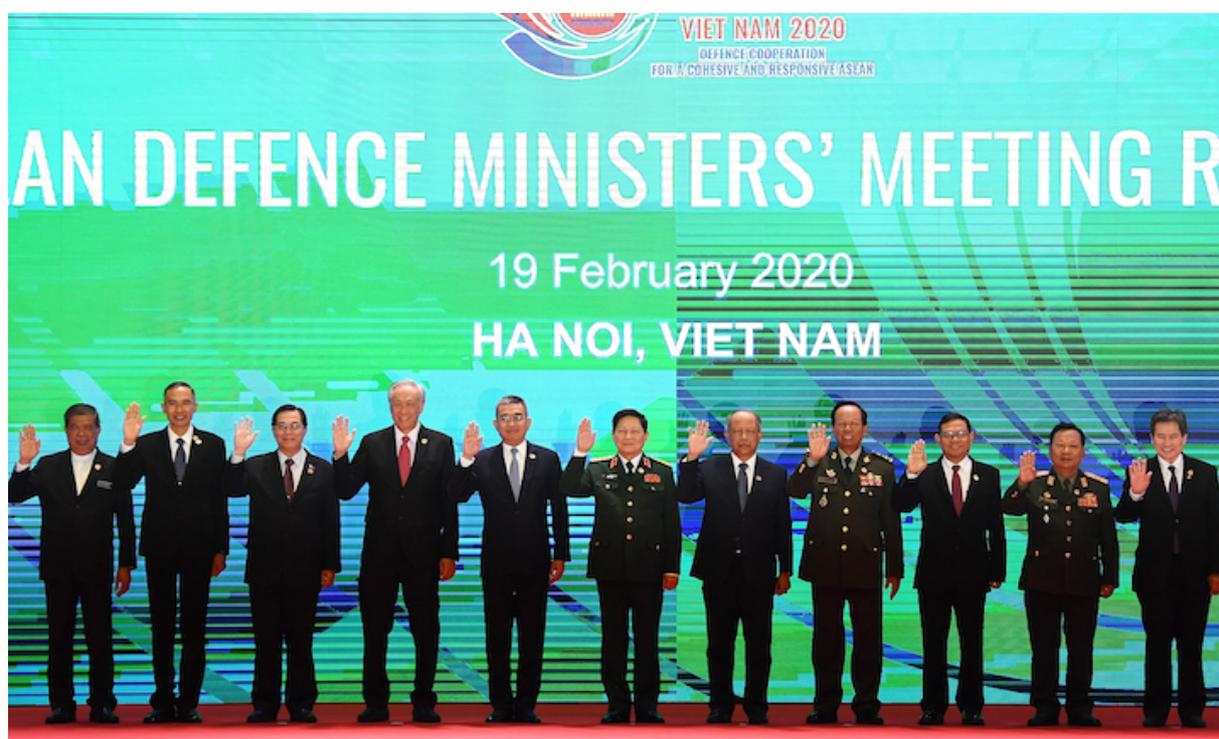
PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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Repositioning the ADMM-Plus in a Contested Region

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(L-R) Malaysia's Defence Minister Mohamad Sabu, Myanmar's Defence Minister Sein Win, Philippines Deputy Defence Minister Cardozo Luna, Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, Thailand's Deputy Defence Minister Chaichan Changmongkol, Vietnam's Defence Minister Ngo Xuan Lich, Brunei's Second Defence Minister Halbi bin Mohd Yussof, Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Tea Banh, General Secretary of Defense of Indonesia Agus Setiadji, Laos' Defence Minister Chansomone Chanyalath, and ASEAN Secretary-General Lim Jock Hoi pose for a group photograph during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) in Hanoi on February 19, 2020. Photo: Nhac Nguyen, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Major power competition, especially between the US and China, has negatively affected the ADMM-Plus' decision-making process and institutional outcomes.
- The ADMM-Plus' confidence-building measures aimed at incident prevention and crisis management tend to focus more on instituting processes than delivering results. Their practical value remains elusive as they have never been tested in a crisis situation.
- Emerging minilateral security arrangements among the US and other major powers in the Indo-Pacific are unlikely to replace the ADMM-Plus. However, they do threaten to eclipse it in terms of speed and efficiency in responding to geostrategic shifts and crises in the region.
- The ADMM-Plus must be more strategic and less bureaucratic in the design of its agenda and activities. It needs to focus more on risk control at the policy dialogue and operational levels.

INTRODUCTION

Established in 2010, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) occupies pride of place in the ASEAN-led regional architecture, being recognised by its 18 members as “the highest ministerial defence and security consultative and cooperation mechanism for regional security issues”¹ and “de facto multilateral security mechanism in the Asia-Pacific”.² Its steady development has contributed significantly to robust multilateral defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia and the broader region over the past decade.

At the policy dialogue level, the frequency of ADMM-Plus ministerial engagements increased from triennial (2010) to biennial (2014) and annual (2018). Informal ‘plus one’ meetings between ASEAN defence ministers and their American, Chinese, Japanese and most recently Australian counterparts have been introduced and gradually regularised in parallel. At the operational level, practical cooperation under the purview of respective Experts’ Working Groups (EWGs) has expanded from five to seven areas, and now cover maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), peacekeeping operations, military medicine, humanitarian mine action and cyber security.

Alongside the steady progression and expansion of the ADMM-Plus over the past decade, the regional geostrategic landscape has changed dramatically, underlined by three major trends. First, there is the rise of China and Beijing’s activism in rewriting the rules and reasserting its role and influence in the regional and global order.³ Second, there is the shift in US-China relations from engagement to strategic competition.⁴ Third, there is the emergence of the Indo-Pacific construct⁵ and minilateral security arrangements by and among the US and other major powers⁶ in response to China’s rise. Shivshankar Menon describes this uncertain and fluid landscape as one that is “between orders”,⁷ characterised by increasing fragmentation and polarisation from both within and without. The pursuit of cooperative security championed by ASEAN-led institutions has become more fraught in this increasingly contested region. This *Perspective* examines whether the ADMM-Plus in its current institutional set-up is adequately equipped to cope with these challenges, especially in the maritime domain.

THE ADMM-PLUS AND MAJOR POWER COMPETITION

ASEAN is no stranger to managing the competing interests of major powers in its mechanisms. Institutional balancing – defined by Kai He as “countering pressures or threats through initiating, utilising, and dominating multilateral institutions”⁸ – is inherent within and across ASEAN-led mechanisms that include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS) and ADMM-Plus. While the outcomes are in the form of cooperative security, the process always entails the whole spectrum of “institutional struggle, confrontation, bargaining, negotiation, compromise and balance among states within institutions”.⁹ Navigating between competition and cooperation is part and parcel of ASEAN processes, as it is in this in-between-ness that regional states exercise their agency and advance their interests.

Yet, the current abyss in US-China relations, and other sub-sets of major power contestation that are independent from but not unrelated to US-China rivalry, have exerted unprecedented pressure on ASEAN-led mechanisms to the point of polarising their decision-making processes and complicating their institutional outcomes.¹⁰ The ADMM-Plus is not insulated from this fraught situation. For example, the granting of Observership to ADMM-Plus EWGs’ activities

to the UK, France, Canada and the EU has been in abeyance since 2017 due to opposition from Plus members, especially Russia and China. Disagreements between the US and China over the wording on the South China Sea (SCS) resulted in the ADMM-Plus failing to issue a joint declaration (JD) for the first time in 2015.¹¹ ASEAN has since skipped this strenuous exercise of negotiating the JD, and decided to issue ADMM-Plus joint statements on specific topics and JDs only on special occasions. This bureaucratic tweak has helped avert a recurring impasse but has had no bearing on the deepening security dilemma in the region. Differences over the SCS issue continued to haunt the forum, and almost derail the issuance of the Joint Declaration on Strategic Security Vision of the ADMM-Plus at its 10th anniversary in 2020.¹²

As noted by Tan See Seng in 2016, “it is unlikely that the ADMM-Plus will transform the increasingly toxic state of the security environment of the region and overturn its massive trust deficit.”¹³ The negotiating process leading to the ADMM-Plus Joint Declaration on Strategic Security Vision last year unveiled anything but a common strategic vision among its members. Rather, it demonstrated the widening strategic chasm between China and Russia on one side and the US and its allies and partners on the other. Even how this broader region is to be called – i.e. Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific – is intensely contested since these terms signify contrasting visions among the Plus countries for the future regional order.

Thus, the question facing the ADMM-Plus at this juncture is whether it can withstand, and to some extent mediate, these competitive forces through strategic dialogue and practical cooperation. The ADMM-Plus is not the prominent forum for strategic dialogue on traditional security concerns. Its focus has always been on practical cooperation which in turn places the emphasis on non-traditional security issues. This is a design feature, since one of the ADMM-Plus’ key aims is to “strengthen regional defence and security cooperation through conduct of concrete and practical cooperation”.¹⁴ According to Nick Bisley, “defence diplomacy is popular in Asia because it is focused on concrete concerns and values the practical and the technical over the abstract and political.”¹⁵

Yet, as Bisley also points out, while defence diplomacy “may be technical in means, it is inherently political in its ends. It is about using defence personnel and assets to communicate, negotiate and more generally manage relations between states.”¹⁶ As the political-technical nexus is never far from the surface, the defence ministers and ADSOM-Plus leaders at the policy dialogue level must be more upfront in expressing their concerns over major power rivalries and recognising the need to institute risk control measures that include developing norms of engagement and convening ADMM-Plus emergency meetings, among others. The objective should focus more on recognising the differences and managing them than putting up an appearance of solidarity.

MEASURING PROGRESS THROUGH PROCESS?

The ADMM-Plus has made its mark in building mutual confidence and promoting norms of engagement among the participating militaries through practical cooperation at the operational level. This has enabled security cooperation to go “beyond diplomatic dialogue and towards more practical, task-oriented frameworks, agendas, and exercises.”¹⁷ In fact, it is the operational aspect involving military personnel and assets in joint activities and exercises that make the ADMM-Plus stand out in the ASEAN-led architecture, especially vis-à-vis the foreign affairs-led ARF. There have been 20 large-scale combined military exercises thus far that cut across the ADMM-Plus’ seven priority areas.¹⁸

Some of these practical CBMs were designed with the objective of crisis management and incident prevention in mind. For example, the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) was practised during the ADMM-Plus maritime security field training exercise (FTX) in May 2019.¹⁹ The ADMM-Plus in 2018 expressed in-principle support for the ADMM's Guidelines for Air Military Encounters and the intention to "explore the application of these guidelines by the ADMM-Plus".²⁰ Similarly, the ASEAN defence ministers in 2019 agreed to extend the ASEAN Direct Communications Infrastructure (ADI) to the eight Plus countries.²¹

While these guidelines, protocols and norms of engagement are regarded as important deliverables of the ADMM-Plus, their practical value in crisis situations remains untested. On closer examination, these protocols fall into the trap of instituting processes instead of delivering results. As an example, there are simply too many bureaucratic procedures and contextual requirements built into the ADI to make it an effective hotline for rapid response in times of emergency and crisis.

This procedure-bound mindset also led ASEAN to sleepwalk into the current impasse regarding the admission of observers to the EWGs' activities. The concept paper on observership highlights the principle of ASEAN centrality, with the ADMM having "the prerogative to determine the criteria to select the non-Plus countries as observers".²² Yet, observership applications must be approved by the ADSOM-Plus by consensus, giving the Plus countries veto power, which is exactly what China and Russia are currently exercising. This was a lapse in strategic judgement as ASEAN was too engrossed in bureaucratic procedures in managing the ADMM-Plus portfolio.

Last but not least, practical confidence-building measures under the ADMM-Plus run the risk of lagging behind new security dynamics and developments in the region, especially the use of grey-zone tactics by maritime law enforcement agencies and maritime militias. Both China and Vietnam operate maritime militia forces and the Philippines is considering establishing one.²³ China recently upped the ante with its new Coast Guard Law that allows its coast guard to use weapons against foreign ships,²⁴ while Indonesia recently armed its maritime enforcement vessels with machine guns.²⁵ The CUES and other ADMM guidelines of maritime interaction and air encounters are not quite relevant and effective in this grey zone warfare. Besides, these guidelines' geographic scope only applies to the high seas whereas maritime incidents in the region mainly take place in disputed exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and territorial waters as a result of overlapping sovereignty and jurisdiction claims.

BUY-IN FROM THE PLUS COUNTRIES

Non-ASEAN countries, especially the US and its allies such as Australia and Japan, maintain a longstanding ambivalence towards ASEAN as the architect and driver of the region's institution-building. On the one hand, the ADMM-Plus and other ASEAN-led mechanisms provide useful platforms for them to exert their influence in shaping the regional security environment. On the other hand, the embedded ASEAN-centric incremental and consensual approach is considered a permanent drag on its efficacy and the delivery of concrete results. Therefore, ASEAN-led institutions are among "many policy options and alternative frameworks" for these states and "the increased capacity and initiative displayed by China on both economic and maritime fronts with the turn of the 21st century only adds to the incentives to push alternative proposals that are both more exclusive in their participation and more major power-centric in their preoccupations."²⁶

In recent years, exclusive minilateral alignments among like-minded security partners have increased in both variety and intensity. According to Sarah Teo, “minilateralism could prove more effective than multilateralism in responding to specific issues and move regional cooperation beyond the proverbial low-hanging fruits.”²⁷ In 2020, the ADMM-Plus was dormant in terms of its operational activities, which is technically attributed to the fact that most of these activities had been undertaken in previous years according to the timelines specified in the respective EWG 2017-2020 work plans. Even then, there is no denial of the fact that ADMM-Plus, with its broad and diverse membership, almost always moves at a slow pace. For example, before a field exercise can take place, the conceptualisation and planning stages for it may take a couple of years and involve initial, mid-term and final planning conferences and a preceding table-top exercise (TTX).

In contrast, major power-centric exercises remained very active throughout 2020, especially among the US-Japan-India-Australia Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad) members in different configurations that include plurilateral, trilateral and bilateral (Table 1). Their narrow membership with high levels of strategic convergence and interoperability allows for swift deployments and nimble responses despite all the disruptions caused by COVID-19. The Quad’s scope of work remains under-defined and under-institutionalised – perhaps intentionally so to allow for flexibility²⁸ – but it clearly signals its members’ return to or re-focus on balance of power to countervail a risen China. The Quad serves an entirely different purpose from the ADMM-Plus; nor does it seek to replace or compete with the ADMM-Plus institutionally. Instead, it raises questions and concerns over the relevance of the ADMM-Plus in an increasingly contested region.

Table 1: Major power-centric naval exercises in the Indo-Pacific in 2020²⁹

January	US-Japan Iron Fist 2020 exercise
February	US-Japan advanced warfighting training (BAWT) US-Japan Resilient Shield 2020 exercise
April	US-Australia combined operations in the South China Sea US-Japan joint operations while sailing through the Andaman Sea
June	India-Japan passing exercise (PASSEX) in the Malacca Strait
July	US-Japan Mine Warfare Exercise (MIWEX) 2JA 2020 off Japan’s coast US-India joint military exercise in the Indian Ocean
August	Exercise Rim of the Pacific (US-led, China excluded) US-Japan joint exercises in the waters and airspace near Japan
September	Pacific Vanguard Exercise (US, Japan, Australia, ROK)
October	US-Japan-Australia naval exercise in the South China Sea US-Japan Keen Sword 21 exercise
November	Malabar Naval Exercise (US, India, Australia, Japan)
December	Russia-China joint aerial patrol over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea US-France-Japan integrated exercises in the Philippine Sea

As and when these major powers shift their focus back to ASEAN, their respective proposals to strengthen defence cooperation under the informal ‘ADMM plus one’ configuration also presents a conundrum for ASEAN. China especially has pushed for a more exclusive form of ASEAN-China defence cooperation to reinforce the narrative and visibility of China as the first among equals among all ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners. The first ASEAN-China maritime

exercise was conducted with much publicity in 2018.³⁰ ASEAN balanced this out with a maritime exercise with the US in 2019³¹ and another with Russia³² in the near future. The same dynamic has been observed in the separate informal engagements that have taken place between ASEAN defence ministers and their counterparts from China and the US (since 2011), Japan (since 2016) and Australia (2020).

On the one hand, these engagements may bring “expertise, perspectives and resources from extra-regional countries” that “benefit ASEAN member countries in building capacity to address shared security challenges” – a very important objective of ASEAN’s defence diplomacy.³³ On the other hand, they may put the ADMM-Plus at the risk of bifurcation and/or multifurcation along US-China rivalry faultlines. ASEAN’s innate institutional balancing has thus far managed this competitive dynamic well and turned it to cooperative outcomes. But it must watch out for the potentiality of these exclusive ‘Plus One’ engagements gradually sucking the oxygen out from the ADMM-Plus’ collective undertaking.

CONCLUSION

While “resolution of major power conflicts is beyond the capacity of ASEAN frameworks”,³⁴ the ADMM-Plus still holds the significance of mediating and alleviating their competitive dynamic through normative rhetoric, policy dialogue and practical cooperation. To this end, the ADMM-Plus will need to be more strategic and less bureaucratic in the design of its agenda and activities. It must take a hard look at the unfolding rivalries in the region, and place greater emphasis and urgency on risk control at both the policy dialogue and operational levels. The ADMM-Plus’ impressive track record in a short span of ten years is cause for celebration, but it should not be reason for complacency. If the ADMM-Plus contents itself with the comfort zone of confidence building and the process-bound mindset, the ARF, with a protracted history of confidence building and fading relevance in today’s region, provides a cautionary tale.

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