

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S *INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES* SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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ASEAN Defence Diplomacy and the ADMM-Plus

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ASEAN defence ministers are on the verge of making a crucial policy decision on whether to start regular ADMM+1 meetings with the eight dialogue partners in the ADMM-Plus process. How they will respond to Chinese and U.S. courtship for increased engagement will have significant implications.
 - There is concern about whether the ADMM+1 dialogue will complicate ASEAN's policy towards each of the dialogue partners. The ADMM-Plus is already seen as competing with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which is run by the foreign affairs ministries of the respective member states. ASEAN's credibility, centrality and ability to speak with one voice in external relations may be eroded should the ADMM+1 dialogue materialise.
 - One proposed solution is for the ADMM to push for new areas of practical cooperation in the ADMM-Plus instead of venturing into the ADMM+1 process.
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INTRODUCTION

For the 46-year-old Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), defence diplomacy—involving defence ministers and senior defence officials of the 10 member states in regular meetings and cooperation activities—is a relatively new development. As a new term in ASEAN cooperation, ‘defence diplomacy’ is an important tool in the states’ foreign and security policy. It is a result of increasing reliance and appreciation among member states of the multilateral avenues to discuss security issues at the regional and international levels.

The establishment of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM)¹ is one such multilateral initiative. The first ADMM was convened in Kuala Lumpur on 9 May 2006, and the most recent 7th ADMM was held in Bandar Seri Begawan on 7 May 2013. It provides a platform for the discussion and aims to promote mutual trust and confidence through greater understanding of defence and security challenges as well as enhancement of transparency and openness in the region.

The ADMM attracted further international attention when it launched the ADMM-Plus process as a tool to engage ASEAN dialogue partners on defence and security matters. The first ADMM-Plus meeting was convened in Hanoi on 12 October 2010, during which the 10 ASEAN defence ministers met with their counterparts from Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the U.S. The ministers agreed, among other things, to start practical cooperation in five areas: humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime security, counter-terrorism, peace-keeping operations, and military medicine.

China and the U.S. were quick to recognise the potential of the ADMM and have sought to develop closer ties through the initiative. Chinese Defence Minister General Liang Guanglie met with ASEAN defence ministers for an informal dialogue prior to the 5th ADMM in Jakarta in May 2011, and the 6th ADMM in Phnom Penh in May 2012. His successor, General Chang Wanquan, upped the ante by calling for a regular ADMM+China annual formal meeting when he was in Bandar Seri Begawan in May 2013. It is worth noting that the Chinese side had been the initiator in these engagements.

Perhaps in a display of one-upmanship, the U.S. Secretary of Defence has had similar informal meetings with ASEAN defence ministers. U.S. Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta met with them prior to the ADMM retreat in Bali in November 2011, and in Siem Reap in November 2012; and U.S. Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel is scheduled to meet with the same group of leaders in Bandar Seri Begawan prior to the ADMM retreat on 28 August 2013.

1 Three other relatively new ministerial meetings are: ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (first meeting in Singapore on 23 March 2006); ASEAN Sports Ministers Meeting (first meeting in Yogyakarta, Indonesia) on 13 December 2011); and ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (first meeting in Vientiane on 19 October 2012).

At the very least, these informal meetings with the Chinese defence minister and separately with the U.S. Defence Secretary help ASEAN maintain some semblance of strategic equidistance with the two countries. The fact that the U.S. and China agreed to dispatch Gates and Liang (and Chang) to the meeting despite troubled bilateral relations demonstrates the importance that both countries confer to it. But lately, the U.S. has shown that it wants to intensify the engagement. During the 12th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2013, Secretary Hagel proposed an U.S.-ASEAN Defence Ministers meeting in Hawaii in 2014.

If ASEAN defence ministers decide to hold regular meetings with the Chinese Defence Minister and the U.S. Secretary of Defence, the regional grouping will come under heavy pressure from the other six dialogue partners in the ADMM-Plus to also have ASEAN+1 meetings with each of them too. Japan may be offended if there are no regular ASEAN+Japan meetings on defence matters. Japan has shown signs of believing that ASEAN is leaning towards China and downplaying its 40-year-long partnership with Japan.²

ASEAN defence ministers will soon make a crucial decision on how to further engage their counterparts from the eight dialogue partner countries within the ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting) process. The decision will have far-reaching consequences.

CHALLENGES AT THE ADMM RETREAT

Starting any regular ADMM+1 meeting with some or all of the eight dialogue partners under the ADMM-Plus rubric will bring ASEAN defence ministers into the uncharted realm of defence diplomacy where any misstep may have serious implications on the ADMM process. In addition, it may also compromise the credibility and centrality of ASEAN in managing its external relations. This is expected to be one of the key issues for ASEAN defence ministers to discuss in their upcoming retreat³ in Bandar Seri Begawan on 28 August 2013.

Starting any ADMM+1 dialogue will require new institutional support and resources. Sustaining and making it productive will not be easy in the long term. However, a more serious concern is whether such ADMM+1 dialogues will complicate ASEAN's policy towards each of the dialogue partners.

² This may not be true. After all, ASEAN Leaders are going to Tokyo in December this year for the Second ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit to celebrate the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan partnership.

³ The retreat will involve only the 10 defence ministers and the Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN on Political and Security Community. Instead of the Sultan of Brunei Darussalam who is also the Defence Minister, the Energy Minister of Brunei Darussalam, Dr. Awang Haji Mohammad Yasmin Haji Umar, will chair the retreat. He also chaired the 7th ADMM last May. In ASEAN practice, Leaders, Ministers, or senior officials sometimes meet privately in a retreat to have a free-flowing discussion on any issue of common interest without any specific agenda except a list of indicative discussion topics that some of the participants intend to bring up.

The ADMM-Plus is already seen to be competing with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)⁴ which is run by the foreign affairs ministry of the respective member states. Four of the six areas of practical cooperation in the ADMM-Plus (excepting military medicine, and humanitarian mine action) are also being pursued in the ARF. Questions remain on how far the defence establishments in ASEAN should push defence diplomacy in engaging the eight dialogue partners on international security issues.

According to the ASEAN Charter, Article 41, paragraph 5, “The strategic policy directions of ASEAN’s external relations shall be set by the ASEAN Summit upon the recommendation of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting.” Furthermore, paragraph 6 of Article 41 states that “The ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting shall ensure consistency and coherence in the conduct of ASEAN’s external relations.” In other words, the external relations of ASEAN shall be handled essentially by ASEAN foreign ministers, who are assisted by their senior officials and permanent representatives to ASEAN on the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) in Jakarta. One implicit belief in ASEAN is that civilian diplomats from the ministries of foreign affairs in member states should be the primary driving force of ASEAN’s external relations.

Should ASEAN defence ministers venture into starting ADMM+1 dialogues, they will run the risk of complicating ASEAN’s relations with each dialogue partner. They may articulate views about a particular security issue that differ from those of ASEAN foreign ministers. Sensitive issues such as the South China Sea, ASEAN’s views about the U.S. “rebalancing” posture in Asia-Pacific, and Japan’s quest for a new regional security role are full of diplomatic nuances that are better left to ASEAN foreign ministers and their professional civilian diplomats. Otherwise, the dialogue partners may hear different and confusing views from ASEAN defence ministers and their senior defence officials. As a consequence of that, ASEAN’s credibility, centrality and ability to speak with one voice in external relations may be eroded.⁵

Instead of venturing into any new ADMM+1 dialogues, the ADMM may wish to consider ways and means of strengthening its own ADMM process and improve its synergy through meetings of ASEAN militaries, including the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Informal Meeting (ACDFIM). Commanders of Army, Navy, Air Force, and heads of military intelligence also have their ASEAN meetings, although these are seldom advertised. The ADMM itself has a very important role to play in the building of the ASEAN Community, particularly its political-security pillar. Again, little is

4 Participating in the ARF are 10 ASEAN Member States, 10 dialogue partners countries (the eight in the ADMM-Plus and Canada, and the E.U.) and seven others: Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Mongolia, the DPRK, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

5 ASEAN Leaders have already agreed to create an “ASEAN Common Platform” by the year 2022 for ASEAN to coordinate common positions and articulate common views about important global issues. The commitment appeared in the Bali Concord III Declaration of the 19th ASEAN Summit in Bali, 17 November 2011. A Plan of Action to implement the Bali Concord III from 2012 - 2022 has subsequently been adopted. But it is not known how much has been done to help bring the ASEAN establishments on the same page with their colleagues from the ministries of foreign affairs on issues of common interest.

heard about the ADMM and its contributions. Instead, more reporting is focused on the ADMM-Plus.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADMM-PLUS

The ADMM-Plus is clearly gaining momentum compared to the ADMM. The new sixth area of cooperation on Humanitarian Mine Action is expected to be approved at the Second ADMM-Plus in Bandar Seri Begawan on 29 August 2013. Vietnam and India have volunteered to co-chair its Experts Working Group (EWG) on this particular initiative.

The Second ADMM-Plus is also expected to approve the new co-chairs of the other five EWGs: Laos and Japan to co-chair the EWG on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (replacing Vietnam and China); Brunei Darussalam and New Zealand to co-chair the EWG on Maritime Security (replacing Malaysia and Australia); Singapore and Australia to co-chair the EWG on Counter-Terrorism (replacing Indonesia and the U.S.); Cambodia and South Korea to co-chair the EWG on Peace-Keeping Operations (replacing the Philippines and New Zealand); and Thailand and Russia to co-chair the EWG on Military Medicine (replacing Singapore and Japan). Consequently, Myanmar (which will chair ASEAN and the ADMM in 2014), Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, China, and the U.S. will not have any co-chairmanship role in any of the EWGs.

In order to give every participating country in the ADMM-Plus a significant role in the EWG process, the ADMM may wish to consider establishing three new EWGs. Potential areas for these EWGs may include military industry, defence interaction, and defence logistics support. These are the same three areas that the ADMM has agreed to pursue active cooperation in. Expanding them to involve the eight dialogue partners can bring about more concrete results.

ASEAN will also propose increasing the frequency of the ADMM-Plus to once every two years, instead of three. If this is adopted at the Second ADMM-Plus, then the Third ADMM-Plus will be convened in Malaysia in 2015. On the other hand, the ADMM has decided against recommending the inclusion of Canada into the ADMM-Plus. For the time being, the ADMM wants to concentrate on strengthening the ADMM-Plus process rather than expanding its membership.

The E.U. and France have shown some interest in joining the ADMM-Plus, but neither of them has submitted any formal request. The E.U. is a dialogue partner of ASEAN; thus it has the first of three qualifications of the ADMM-Plus membership⁶. However, it is debatable whether the E.U.—being an economic union—has the other

⁶ See details in the *Concept Paper on ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus): Principles for Membership*, adopted at the Third ADMM in Pattaya, 25-27 February 2009, available at the ADMM website at: <https://admm.asean.org>

two qualifications, namely: “The ADMM-Plus country shall have significant interactions and relations with ASEAN defence establishments”; and “is able to work with the ADMM to build capacity so as to enhance regional security in a substantive manner”. France may be able to meet these latter qualifications, but it is not a dialogue partner of ASEAN.

When ASEAN defence ministers converge in Bandar Seri Begawan later this month, the attention of the international media will most likely be on their informal meeting with Secretary Hagel, and how they respond to his proposal for an U.S.-ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting in Hawaii in 2014. The outcome of this meeting will determine the role and strategic direction of the ADMM in the years to come.

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