A Diplomatic Decade: The ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting

By Sarah Teo & Henrick Z. Tsjeng

The ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting turns 10 in 2016. Since its inception it has been most successful in non-controversial areas such as confidence building, engagement with the ‘Plus’ countries and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Challenges are building, however, write Sarah Teo and Henrick Z. Tsjeng.1 In its next decade, it will need to preserve both its relevance and ASEAN centrality in the regional security architecture.

IN 2016, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) will mark its 10th anniversary. The ADMM is one of several platforms in the region that facilitate defense diplomacy, broadly defined as the utilization of military and defense agencies to achieve overall foreign and security policy aims, above and beyond their traditional function involving deterrence and armed conflicts. The ADMM stands out for being the top-level ministerial defense and security mechanism that is directly accountable to the ASEAN leaders.

The ADMM is a milestone in ASEAN’s history, given that it is the first — and to date, the only — formal platform to annually convene all 10 defense ministers of the association. Prior to its establishment, ASEAN defense co-operation was led by foreign policy agencies, or took place within the ambit of military-to-military interactions. The inclusion of the ADMM in the regional security architecture is a significant development because it formalized multilateral defense diplomacy and co-operation in the region.

In a joint press release issued at the inaugural meeting in Kuala Lumpur in May 2006, defense ministers agreed that the ADMM’s objectives were:

• To foster peace and stability in the region by means of dialogue and co-operation on defense and security issues;

• To advise senior defense and military officials on co-operation within ASEAN and with its Dialogue Partners;

• To build mutual trust and confidence in defense and security issues through the promotion of understanding and transparency; and,

• To further the establishment of the then-ASEAN Security Community, now known as the ASEAN Political-Security Community, one of the three pillars (the other two being the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community) of the broader ASEAN Community 2015 vision.

Defense co-operation within the ADMM framework generally takes two forms: first, regular dialogues among security and defense ministers and officials of ASEAN countries; second, functional and practical initiatives to manage shared security challenges including natural and humanitarian disasters, terrorism and maritime concerns.

TEN YEARS ON

This paper is the first piece to closely examine the progress that the ADMM has made in regional defense co-operation a decade since its founding, and also suggest directions for its future development. The next two sections discuss its achievements thus far, and the main challenges to regional defense diplomacy. We argue that ADMM co-operation has been most successful in relatively non-controversial areas such as confidence-building and engagement with the Plus countries in practical and functional cooperation, particularly in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). For now, the ADMM has also managed to avoid the politicization of regional defense co-operation.

Meanwhile, challenges to regional defense diplomacy continue to stem from different national priorities and levels of capacities, the lack of institutionalization in the ADMM’s engagements with individual Dialogue Partners, as well as overlapping agendas among the different forums dealing with defense. Following the assessment of the ADMM’s achievements and challenges, we offer several issues for the forum’s consideration to strengthen co-operation in its second decade.

ADMM ACHIEVEMENTS

The ADMM has come a long way since its inaugural meeting in 2006. Its major achievements include deepening networking and confidence building among the defense and military establishments of ASEAN countries, avoiding politicization of its co-operation and engaging the Plus countries in practical and functional co-operation, particularly in HADR.

First, networking and confidence-building deepened as the forum brought the 10 ASEAN defense ministers together annually to discuss defense and military issues, a departure from the bloc’s long-standing preference to maintain defense engagements bilaterally rather than at the multilateral level. Other than its annual meetings, the ADMM framework also includes the ASEAN Defence Senior Officials’ Meeting, which is the key co-ordinating instrument for interactions among member states’ defense and military agencies.

These networking and confidence-building measures are not limited to leaders and senior officials; with the launch of the ASEAN Defence Interaction Programmes in March 2014, there are now more opportunities for junior officials and officers to interact as well. Additionally, the discussion of various defense issues such as a direct communications link, and the implementation of initiatives such as the Logistics Support Framework contribute toward the shaping and sharing of behavioral norms among member states, thereby reducing the risk of conflict and miscalculation. These regular and frequent exchanges have likely enhanced mutual understandings of motivations and defense policies.

Second, the ADMM has thus far managed to avoid the politicization of regional defense co-operation. This is a significant achievement given that the ASEAN foreign ministers’ meeting and leaders’ summit in 2012 had been affected by tensions from the South China Sea disputes. At the
foreign ministers’ meeting, member claimant states had wanted ASEAN to acknowledge perceived Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea, but the then-ASEAN chair, Cambodia, disagreed. Subsequently, at an ASEAN summit in November 2012, Philippine President Benigno Aquino III said that the bloc was “not the only route” for the Philippines and disagreed with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen’s statement that all 10 member states had agreed not to “internationalize” the South China Sea disputes. This kind of open disagreement was extraordinary within ASEAN. Fortunately, such divergent perspectives on the South China Sea appear not to have affected defense co-operation in the ADMM. Bilateral political dynamics, such as the temporary deterioration in relations between Singapore and Indonesia following the latter’s naming of a naval warship after two marines who carried out a deadly bombing in Singapore in 1965, have also not seemed to influence ADMM co-operation. Despite this downturn in bilateral relations both sides continued to participate in ADMM-related meetings and exercises.1 In this regard, the forum has been successful in maintaining positive momentum for dialogue and co-operation. Third, the ADMM has done well in engaging the Dialogue Partners. In a 2014 seminar, Singapore Ministry of Defence Senior Advisor Chiang Chie Foo said that during the forum’s initial phase, some ASEAN member states did not immediately warm to the idea of engaging countries outside the bloc. Nonetheless, by the second ADMM in 2007, the concept paper on the ADMM-Plus was endorsed based on the need to ensure that external countries were involved and engaged in the region. Since the first ADMM-Plus in 2010, the ADMM has taken steps toward practical and functional co-operation with the Dialogue Partners. Given the recent high-profile natural disasters in the region, HADR co-operation has been particularly visible, and is the focus of one of the six ADMM-Plus Experts’ Working Groups co-chaired by an ASEAN country and a Dialogue Partner. In fact, many of the HADR activities that the ADMM countries have been involved in were conducted within the ADMM-Plus framework. In June 2013, the ADMM-Plus held a HADR/military medicine joint exercise in Brunei, the first time that the 18 countries participated in an exercise together. The ADMM countries recognize the need to involve the Plus countries in HADR, given the latter’s high capacities and ability to enhance the expertise and technology within ASEAN countries. Indeed, the Experts’ Working Groups co-chair system helps to facilitate the transfer of expertise from the Plus countries to the ASEAN countries. At the same time, such efforts further embed the Dialogue Partners in the ASEAN-led network in the region.

CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL DEFENSE DIPLOMACY

Although the ADMM has made progress, trying to get 10 countries — with ultimately different interests and goals — to reach consensus on security and defense issues in a region with a multitude of overlapping dialogue and co-operative platforms is not without its challenges. First, defense-related priorities among the ASEAN countries continue to diverge to some extent, even if at the ADMM level all 10 countries have pledged their commitment to enhance defense co-operation. For example, even though HADR has been a consistent priority in the ADMM work programs, initial responses from the ASEAN states to the Singapore-initiated Regional HADR Co-ordination Centre appeared lukewarm. As of July 2015, more than a year since the idea was first mooted, only three ASEAN countries — Brunei, the Philippines and Thailand — had appointed liaison officers to the center, while Laos had set up operational connections with it.

Another example is the proposal to create an ASEAN Peacekeeping Force — first suggested by Indonesia in 2003 to little regional fanfare and then brought back onto the agenda by Malaysia in 2015. It is unclear how much support this proposal would garner from all 10 member states given that some member states do not have experience in peacekeeping operations and, more importantly, as ASEAN scholar Tang Siew Mun noted in a commentary, member states generally maintain vague attitudes regarding the Responsibility to Protect doctrine as well as differing views on political and security interests. Such divergences in priorities are likely to become even starker with the limited defense resources of the respective member states, which forces them to focus on issues they deem important to their own national interests. Without membership support, no matter how farsighted or beneficial an idea or proposal may be, it will not progress at the regional level. Second, the lack of institutionalization in the ADMM’s growing engagements with individual Plus countries could potentially put at risk the open, transparent and inclusive regional architecture toward which ASEAN has always worked. In recent years, the ADMM has conducted informal meetings with individual Plus countries, including the United States, China and Japan. While most of the meetings have occurred on the sidelines of ADMM events held in ASEAN countries, ADMM ministers attended an informal meeting hosted by US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in Honolulu in April 2014. In October 2015, China hosted a similar meeting with the ASEAN defense ministers in Beijing. In light of such engagements, it was highlighted at the eighth ADMM in 2014 that these “Plus One” meetings should remain informal “as multiple ADMM-Plus could lead to a proliferation of meetings with separate agenda[s].” This could result in ADMM-Plus becoming irrelevant. Even
if these “separate agenda[s]” have not materialized, the perception that the ADMM countries are engaging certain Plus countries at a deeper level than others would not bode well for the principles that the ASEAN-led architecture has traditionally upheld. Furthermore, without a clear added value for these “Plus One” meetings beyond the ADMM-Plus, member states could easily find themselves overwhelmed by excessive dialogues, thereby diminishing the utility of each meeting.

Third, the scope of ADMM (and ADMM-Plus) co-operation currently overlaps with other forums, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit. For example, both the ADMM-Plus and the ARF conduct HADR joint exercises, with the former conducting a HADR/Military Medicine joint exercise and the latter conducting the biennial Disaster Relief Exercise. There is also potential overlap among the ADMM-Plus and the ARF Defence Officials’ Dialogue. This proliferation of engagements runs the risk of both confusion about the roles and scopes of various defense-related forums and inefficient allocation of resources by member states as all frameworks work toward their respective goals.

**WHAT’S NEXT FOR THE ADMM?**

By virtue of their capabilities and influence, the geopolitical dynamics between the United States and China are likely to be the most important development for the region going forward. The evolution of this major-power relationship will have implications for the smaller countries in the region, many of which maintain close trade and investment ties to China while depending on the US for their security needs. Keeping in mind the shifting geopolitical dynamics, we suggest several recommendations for the ADMM and its members as it continues to enhance regional defense diplomacy in its second decade of existence.

With the US (along with its treaty ally, Japan) and China competing for regional influence, one pressing issue for the ADMM would be to keep this competitive dynamic from negatively affecting ADMM-Plus co-operation. Important as it is to keep the US and China interested in the ASEAN-led security architecture, Sino-US competition could easily affect regional defense co-operation, as was visible in the third ADMM-Plus in November 2015, where the meeting failed to produce a joint declaration due to disagreements over the South China Sea issue. Over the long term, this could further divide the ADMM countries and subsequently result in major power dynamics overshadowing ADMM co-operation and jeopardizing ASEAN centrality. In order for the ADMM to preserve its relevance, ASEAN countries must ensure that the interests of the Dialogue Partners do not supersede those of the ADMM. In this regard, the ADMM countries should maintain the political will to speak with a collective voice and retain control of the ADMM-Plus process.

Another way to preserve ASEAN centrality would be for the ADMM to move beyond current co-operation on “softer” and less controversial issues. ASEAN countries need to adjust to the new and ever-changing environment, and to incorporate new areas of co-operation into the ADMM. With technological advances and the ASEAN Community vision for a more interconnected region, one emerging area is cyber-security. This is admittedly a sensitive issue, but it is precisely because of this sensitivity — and the potential for misunderstanding — that the ADMM should put this on the agenda so that member states have a platform to exchange views, explain their policy motivations and contribute toward establishing some sort of common behavior in cyberspace.

Additionally, ADMM countries need to deepen their investment in resources and capacity-building. The existing mismatch in capabilities among the various ASEAN countries gives rise to interoperability issues and makes co-ordination of multinational operations difficult. The ADMM has to take stock of the capabilities of its member states, make viable investments in capacity building and narrow the gaps between its members for seamless co-operation. In addition, extra-ASEAN states have far more extensive capacities than the member states. For the ADMM to be able to maintain its collective independence vis-à-vis the extra-ASEAN states, member countries need to develop the capacity to engage with the Plus countries on a more equal footing. The ADMM could additionally consider increasing the frequency of the ADMM-Plus meetings to once a year to hasten the capacity-building efforts of the ASEAN countries. Annual ADMM-Plus meetings could moreover eventually eliminate the need for the ADMM+1 meetings which, as discussed above, could risk the transparent and open nature of the ASEAN-led regional architecture. To prevent resources from being overstretched, ASEAN should also review the state of its multiple forums and perhaps dismantle those which no longer add value to regional co-operation.

Finally, the ADMM needs to discuss risk-mitigation measures to manage any accidents or miscalculations arising from thorny issues in the region. This requires an acknowledgement that, while hot button topics like territorial disputes are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, militaries and defense establishments should take steps to guard against any out-of-control escalation of tensions. Some of these measures include the adherence to existing agreements and mechanisms such as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea and direct communication links. Beyond policy-level discussions, the ADMM should also enhance co-operation and relations among militaries, which are likely to be the first ones on the ground responding to an interstate dispute. Related to this, the ADMM could in the longer term also consider discussing rules of engagement among ASEAN countries.

**AN OPTIMISTIC CONCLUSION**

With the ADMM approaching its 10th anniversary and the ADMM-Plus its sixth, there is much to be optimistic about. The ADMM has been relatively successful in deepening its network and building confidence in the region, as well as engaging with the Plus countries in practical and functional co-operation, particularly in HADR issues. It has also thus far avoided the politicization of regional co-operation which has affected other ASEAN-led forums. Nonetheless, ADMM co-operation and defense diplomacy continue to be challenged by different national priorities and capacity levels among member states, the lack of institutionalization in the ADMM’s engagements with the individual Dialogue Partners as well as overlapping agendas among the different forums dealing with defense. Looking ahead, the ADMM would need to address issues such as preserving its centrality in the ADMM-Plus, as well as enhancing the capacities of the ASEAN countries. The ADMM’s engagements with the Plus countries would also take on particular significance as the United States and China continue to compete for influence in the region. Additionally, the ADMM should consider expanding co-operation to manage emerging issues such as cyber-security, as well as discuss risk mitigation measures in response to regional tensions.

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