



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 75 | October 18, 2010

ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus: The “ASEAN Way”

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The Asia Pacific region remains vulnerable to possible conflicts deriving mainly from historical antagonism, extremism, and unresolved sovereignty issues, although regional economic interdependence does help reduce the likelihood of open hostilities. However, as security issues get more transnational, complicated, and unpredictable, miscalculation regarding the Korean Peninsula, the East and South China Seas, and the unresolved border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand remain ever present. As such, the region needs an effective institution that can reduce the strategic mistrust and misunderstanding between and among states. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, has emerged as the central actor in creating a regional security architecture by implementing a sustainable web of ASEAN-centric multilayered security dialogues throughout the region. The “ASEAN Way” of consultation, quiet diplomacy, consensus-based decision making, along with non-interference in internal affairs has proven to be a formula that works.

ASEAN’s open regionalism to incorporate other dialogue partners has been carefully managed in order to maintain ASEAN’s centrality within this expanded regional architecture. Specifically, relating to regional security matters, ASEAN hosted the first ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) in May 2006. This meeting agreed on a concept paper outlining the roles, objectives, and scope of ADMM. At the fourth meeting of ADMM in May 2010, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) was officially endorsed as a dialogue forum to discuss regional security concerns. In addition to the ten ASEAN countries, ADMM-Plus includes Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. ADMM-Plus is intended to complement the other key existing regional security institutions: the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asian Summit.

The ADMM-Plus has five main objectives: to build ASEAN capacity to deal with shared security challenges; promote mutual trust and confidence; enhance regional peace and stability through cooperation; contribute to the realization of an ASEAN Security Community; and to facilitate the implementation of the Vientiane Action Program calling for ASEAN to build a peaceful, secure and prosperous ASEAN Community with an outward-looking regional perspective.

ADMM-Plus was inaugurated in Hanoi on October 12, 2010—the first time that defense ministers from these eighteen countries in the Asia Pacific region have gathered to discuss regional security issues. The second meeting of ADMM-Plus will be hosted by Brunei in 2013. The Hanoi ADMM-Plus was the first multilateral meeting that included US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and the Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie at the same venue. Initial outcomes indicate that some regional security tensions were addressed. China and the United States held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines and both parties agreed to resume top-level military contacts. Furthermore, early next year, Secretary Gates will visit China after accepting an invitation from his

Vannarith Chheang, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, explains that the inaugural ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus focused primarily on non-traditional security concerns and remained within the format of “The ‘ASEAN Way’ of consultation, quiet diplomacy, consensus-based decision making, along with non-interference in internal affairs...”



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Chinese counterpart, Minister Liang, thus resuming US-China military-to-military dialogue. In the post-summit joint declaration ADMM-Plus was endorsed by the eighteen defense leaders, as “a useful and effective platform for cooperation on defense and security issues that is able to make useful contributions to regional peace and security.”

Secretary Gates said that the United States regards ADMM-Plus as a “most useful innovation” that can strengthen participants’ capacity to cope with regional security challenges. China considers ADMM-Plus as an important official platform to jointly deal with non-traditional security challenges, and strengthen mutual trust and cooperation. China’s Defense Minister Liang stated at the meeting that “Non-traditional security threats are transnational and unpredictable, and require joint response[s]. We support ADMM-Plus in focusing on non-traditional cooperation.” Both the United States and China wish to see more practical cooperation and capacity building with ASEAN in addressing common regional security concerns. This commitment from dialogue partners, particularly the United States and China, resonates well with the needs of ASEAN members, especially in terms of capacity building relating to natural disaster management, humanitarian relief, peacekeeping operations, counter-terrorism, maritime security, and military medicine. The ADMM-Plus encourages ASEAN defense officials to cooperate with and support their eight dialogue counterparts in cooperatively addressing security issues of common concern, along with developing the capacity of each ASEAN defense ministry to design and implement its own national defense policy within a multilateral regional context.

Taking Cambodia as an example, security institutionalization will encourage the Ministry of National Defense to play an increasing role in international affairs. It is a significant challenge for Cambodian defense officials to think more strategically, especially pertaining to non-traditional security issues. The Cambodian Royal Armed Forces will have to learn how to multilaterally address common regional security concerns. Recently, Cambodia has begun to receive military support from both China and the United States. Cambodia, through the ADMM-Plus framework, expects to see more commitment and support from dialogue partners in providing capacity building and expertise sharing through information and educational exchanges, joint military exercises, and other training opportunities.

Different from other regional security mechanisms, the ADMM-Plus is supported by Expert Working Groups (EWGs) authorized by the ASEAN Defense Senior Official Meeting Plus (ADSOM-Plus). Each EWG is co-chaired by an ASEAN member state and a non-ASEAN country. EWGs will be in charge of discussing specific security issues and reporting their findings to the ADSOM-Plus. Both China and Vietnam, the two main conflicting claimants in the South China Sea, are interested in co-chairing a working group on humanitarian aid and disaster relief. ADSOM-Plus is also responsible for implementing the agreements and decisions of the ADMM-Plus. Being part of ADMM, the ADMM-Plus is also supported by the Network of ASEAN Defense and Security Institutions and the Meeting of ASEAN Chiefs of Security Agencies.

Thus, ADMM-Plus can be regarded as remaining within the realm of the “ASEAN Way.” Defense leaders tried to avoid touching on some of the most sensitive issues such as the unresolved sovereignty issues in the East and South China Seas. Since it is a consensus-based dialogue, it is easy to talk about non-traditional security issues. The ADMM-Plus joint declaration is a general statement expressing the commitment of member states to support each other to maintain peace and stability, and solve disputes in a peaceful manner. The most important part of the joint declaration is the endorsement of specific functions provided to the ADMM-Plus. Non-traditional security issues are prioritized and functional cooperation is emphasized. The ADMM-Plus, a milestone within the evolution of ASEAN defense regional architecture, will perform as a functional security mechanism within the context of extended security regionalism for non-traditional security issues.