

A Farewell to Grandiosity? Practical Cooperation and the ADMM-Plus by See Seng Tan

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The ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), which includes the ten ASEAN countries along with Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the United States, will meet this year in Bandar Seri Begawan on August 29. Formed in 2010, the gathering in the Bruneian capital will only be the second time the ADMM-Plus ministers have convened, although the grouping has agreed from henceforth to meet on a biennial rather than triennial basis.

While the establishment of the ADMM-Plus has generally been welcomed, the attitude of observers toward it has at best been one of cautious, even weary, optimism. And for good reason: as past contributions to *PacNet* have shown, opinion remains divided over whether the ADMM-Plus or the Shangri-La Dialogue (the Singapore-based nonofficial defense forum regularly attended by defense ministers and armed forces chiefs) has greater relevance for Asia's security.

Furthermore, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia's region-wide security institution, has historically underperformed, failing to meet its own aim of implementing preventive diplomacy much less the more demanding goal of conflict resolution. While the decision by the ARF to undertake practical cooperation in a number of "soft" security issues makes good sense in the light of Asia's growing host of challenges, it arguably serves as a tacit admission that meaningful cooperation by ARF states over "hard" security concerns – such as vexing problems on the Korean peninsula and, more recently, in the East and South China Seas – is likely beyond the ability of the ARF.

ADMM-Plus' *raison d'être*: functional not strategic?

Against such constraints, what can the ADMM-Plus realistically hope to accomplish? Not much, if by that we mean the grand vision for security cooperation with which the ARF started its institutional life and has hitherto failed to realize. The highly circumscribed remit of the ADMM-Plus is essentially two-fold, namely, confidence building and capacity building. The first concern offers no surprises as the challenge to create and sustain confidence and trust among regional countries – and, in this specific instance, also their militaries – remains foremost on the "to do" list of all Asian institutions, bar none.

The second concern is more intriguing, however. The joint declaration issued by the ADMM-Plus at its inaugural in

May 2010 defined its role as that of "[enabling] the ADMM to cooperate with the non-ASEAN countries to build capacity and better prepare ASEAN to address the complex security challenges." Simply, the goal of the ADMM-Plus is to help ASEAN help itself – presumably with assistance from the eight "Plus" countries and their defense establishments. The grouping has identified five areas in which member countries' defense capacities could be developed and enhanced: counterterrorism, HADR (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief), maritime security, military medicine, and peacekeeping.

Against the concern over whether the mandate of the ADMM-Plus competes with rather than complements that of the ARF – the two arrangements overlap significantly in terms of their interests – the ARF Defence Officials Dialogue (DOD) emphasized during its May 2012 meeting that, "ADMM-Plus should continue to focus on practical cooperation while the ARF-DOD could continue to provide comprehensive and strategic direction, hence the need for information sharing and coordination between the two platforms."

The unintended consequences of ad hoc institution building are obvious enough where those two "platforms" are concerned. While the ARF-DOD might well have supplied the definitive conclusion on the respective roles of those regional arrangements – strategic-level consultations for the ARF and functional cooperation for the ADMM-Plus – it would seem odd if the ADMM-Plus, as a ministers-led forum, were to stick purely to humdrum concerns and avoid discussing matters of strategic import altogether. Be that as it may, the specific capacity building purpose of the ADMM-Plus implies that the proposed division of labor between it and the ARF could well emerge despite the penchant for role confusion and overlapping agendas among Asia's institutions.

Beyond grand but unfulfilled visions

Recently, I proposed elsewhere that the ADMM-Plus' focus on practical cooperation arguably represents a commitment by the region's defense establishments to "talk their walk" rather than walk their talk. Over two decades of regionalism efforts have likely taught Asian leaders that grand regional visions and lofty institutional aims alone do not ensure progress, not least when their relations with one another continue to be marked by mutual strategic mistrust and a paucity in will and resources to make good on regional goals. By adopting a low key approach and keeping their specific aims relatively mundane but doable, Asia's defense leaders presumably wish to avoid targeting bridges too far. Possibly heeding the lessons of past regional efforts, they are stepping back from grand promises that are easily uttered but difficult to achieve. They are taking small "actionable" steps

that do not make the news headlines but which build and enhance defense cooperation step by incremental step.

Likely, the prosaic pragmatism of the ADMM-Plus does not represent a farewell to grandiosity as such, not least where regionalism in Asia more broadly is concerned. Perhaps it intimates disconcertedness among the region's defense practitioners over the prospect of their own arrangement emulating its counterparts by ending up as a "talk shop" that accomplishes precious little by way of meaningful cooperation.

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