



An Era of the ADMM-Plus? Unique Achievements and Challenges by Michito Tsuruoka

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Having held the second ministerial meeting in Brunei at the end of August, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) has now entered a second cycle of activities. Launched in October 2010 as the first official framework to bring together defense ministers from 18 countries – 10 ASEAN countries and eight “Plus” countries of Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States – the new body is emerging as a pillar of defense diplomacy and cooperation in the region. The fact that ministerial meetings will now be held biennially rather than once in three years is a good sign.

Skeptical as well as positive views have been expressed about the ADMM-Plus. While it is too early to give a definitive verdict, it is a good time to look back at what it has achieved and examine challenges to be addressed.

Unique Characteristics and Achievements

The ADMM-Plus' achievements have predominantly stemmed from its character as a framework for practical cooperation among defense authorities in the region. First and foremost, in this regard, the ADMM-Plus can be said to have been quite successful, arguably more than expected. Contrary to what its name suggests, the bulk of the ADMM-Plus does not occur in the ministerial meeting itself. What is remarkable is a series of continuous activities under five Experts' Working Groups (EWGs): humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, military medicine, counter-terrorism, and peacekeeping operations. While not often publicized, a number of meetings, workshops, and, most importantly, exercises have taken place since spring 2011.

The biggest and most high-profile event so far is the HADR/Military Medicine joint exercise, held in Brunei in June 2013, in which more than 3,000 troops participated. It provided a rare occasion for troops from the US, China, Japan, India, Vietnam, and Indonesia to work side by side. Japan and China were both part of the steering committee as co-chairs of Military Medicine and HADR EWGs, respectively. The two countries managed to cooperate well, despite the political and

other tensions between them. In less than three years, the ADMM-Plus has demonstrated that it is capable of organizing such a large-scale exercise, which represented a “major accomplishment” according to Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel. Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism EWGs are planning exercises for later this year.

Second, the novelty of the ADMM-Plus lies with the fact that it is a framework and a process driven by Defense Ministries as opposed to Foreign Ministries, as in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). While no security problem today can be solved by military means alone, there are still many things left to be tackled by defense authorities, starting from more mutual understanding to interoperability, given that the region long lacked substantial multilateral defense cooperation. The ADMM-Plus process provides regular occasions to interact at an unprecedented level of frequency and intensity. In addition, Defense Ministries in many ASEAN countries appear to be shifting attention and resources from other frameworks like the ARF to the ASEAN-only ADMM and the ADMM-Plus. This trend is unlikely to change. Strategic discussions among defense ministers and senior defense officials have a distinct value, different from dialogue among foreign ministers and diplomats. Furthermore, in some ADMM-Plus countries, including many ASEAN countries, the armed forces and Defense Ministries have stronger domestic influence (than Foreign Ministries) and are often closer to head of state and government.

Third, the ADMM-Plus has facilitated bilateral cooperation on top of cooperation involving all the countries. The system of forming EWG co-chair pairs between an ASEAN country and a “Plus” country, like Indonesia and the US for the Counter-Terrorism EWG, has worked well. It has required each co-chair pair to work together extensively. In the next round of EGWs, Japan is to co-chair the HADR EWG with Lao PDR, with which Tokyo has had no substantial defense relations. New bilateral partnerships are emerging out of the ADMM-Plus process.

Challenges Ahead

Despite these substantial achievements, the ADMM-Plus faces many challenges that will determine its long-term value.

First, participating countries need to make clear to what extent they expect the ADMM-Plus to be a venue for strategic discussions on issues of real mutual concern like maritime security, the South China Sea, and North Korea. In reality, serious and candid discussions are taking place on those issues at ministerial and senior officials meetings, called the ADSOM-Plus (ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meeting-Plus). But it may be necessary to give an enhanced and clearer mandate to the ADMM-Plus in pursuing strategic discussions. For this purpose, organizing an informal “retreat” for ministerial and senior officials is worth considering. (The

ADMM has annual “retreat” ministerial and senior officials meetings in addition to annual formal meetings.)

Second, the ADMM-Plus needs to move beyond its primary focus on nontraditional security issues. No country expects the ADMM-Plus to solve territorial disputes in the region (the most obvious example of traditional, as opposed to nontraditional, security concerns). However, there are a number of important areas, especially in the maritime domain, where the ADMM-Plus has a potential to contribute, including in the area of communication mechanisms and norm- and rule-making. It is understandable to start with easier items, but the scope of cooperation should not be understood to be limited only to nontraditional security issues. At the very least, a focus on nontraditional issues should not be used as an excuse to not address traditional ones. The fact that the declaration from the August 2013 ministerial meeting mentioned the need to “establish practical measures that reduce vulnerability to miscalculations, and avoid misunderstanding and undesirable incidents at sea” is an encouraging sign.

Third, while acknowledging the value of being a defense-driven framework, the ADMM-Plus needs to coordinate its activities with other bodies, most obviously the ARF, which are working on a similar set of issues. Given differences in membership and in terms of who leads the process, the relationship is not as smooth as it should be. For example, the idea of “cross-reporting” and “cross-participation” between the ADMM-Plus EWGs and ARF Intersessional Support Groups (ISGs) remains sensitive for some countries. Also, as the East Asia Summit (EAS) increases its involvement in security and defense matters, a question of how to connect – or not – the ADMM-Plus to the EAS will loom large in years to come.

Fourth, with the establishment of a new EWG on demining (Humanitarian Mine Action), there will be six EWGs in the next cycle, which highlights the need to ensure synergies among EWGs. This need may be of higher priority than ensuring external synergies with the ARF. This need is felt most regarding exercises. Since resources are limited in all countries, the number of exercises may have to be limited by combining two or more EWGs activities as in the case of the HADR/Military Medicine exercise this year. Various combination ideas are already floating.

Fifth, while fully respecting the principle of “ASEAN centrality,” there might be a long-term need to think about how to share a sense of ownership of the ADMM-Plus with the “Plus” countries. To be sure, the ADMM-Plus is designed to be “an integral part” of the ADMM and it is meant to contribute to the realization of the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). All major decisions regarding modalities, configuration, and composition are therefore for the ADMM to make. However, as the ADMM-Plus develops, it might have to revisit what the ADMM-Plus itself can decide among all participating countries – for example, what sort of initiatives “Plus” countries can take – and what needs to remain in the sole hands of the ADMM.

Sixth, there is a challenge of how to make the ADMM-Plus more visible. The fact that the ADMM-Plus is still new and the ministerial meetings, which naturally attract press

attention, have only taken place twice contribute to the low level of public awareness. In addition, not much information is available on the ADMM-Plus. People, including experts, tend to have negative or skeptical views on what they do not know well. As the ADMM-Plus involves no classified activities, much more information should be made available to the public, such as on the EWGs’ activities. It will help raise the ADMM-Plus’ profile and visibility.

The ADMM-Plus has entered the second cycle of its activities. In the first cycle, because everything was new and it started from scratch, it has been relatively easy to make progress. The real value of the ADMM-Plus will be tested in the years to come.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are welcomed.