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Moving ASEAN-US Security Relations to a New Level?

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Mary Fides Quintos and **Joycee Teodoro**, both Foreign Affairs Research Specialists at the Philippines Foreign Service Institute, explain that “The message is that the United States views ASEAN as a central and strategic player, not only in the US rebalance to Asia but more importantly in the building of a strong and credible regional security architecture for the Asia-Pacific.”

The United States has just completed hosting a three-day forum with the ten ASEAN Defense Ministers in Hawai'i, fulfilling US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's invitation to his ASEAN counterparts during last year's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. The agenda of the US-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Forum included a roundtable discussion on humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR), site visits to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Pacific Tsunami Warning Center and the *USS Anchorage*—an amphibious transport dock ship designed to respond to crises worldwide—and discussions on various pertinent security issues in the region.

The US-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Forum marked the beginning of Secretary Hagel's ten-day trip to Asia which included visits to Japan, China, and Mongolia and is his fourth official visit to the region in less than a year, all part of the ongoing US rebalance policy to Asia. This event was the first meeting that the US hosted, as previous gatherings were conducted on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Retreat and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) Summit.

The US-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Forum was conducted under the ambit of the ADMM-Plus which was established in 2007 to serve as a venue for ASEAN to engage with eight dialogue partners—Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the United States—in promoting peace and security in the region. To date, ADMM-Plus has established five working groups for practical cooperation covering maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster management, peacekeeping operations, and military medicine.

This most recent meeting was held amid another wave of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in the South China Sea. For ASEAN, a recent water cannon incident near Scarborough Shoal involving Filipino fishing vessels and Chinese Coastguard ships, the standoff at Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal again between the Philippines and China, and China's naval exercises at James Shoal which is claimed by Malaysia are all issues of concern. Indonesia's strengthening of its military presence in the Natuna Islands which China included in its nine-dash line is another indication of the increasing insecurity and instability in the region. The meeting provided a good opportunity for informal dialogue on the overall security environment in Asia and the possible implications of developments in Ukraine for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity within the international order. It also served as an opportunity for the United States to reemphasize that it can be relied upon by ASEAN members in supporting the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law and in upholding the freedom of navigation and overflight in the region.

With regard to humanitarian assistance and disaster response, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines last year and the ongoing search for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 has

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demonstrated the lack of capacity of individual ASEAN countries or ASEAN as a bloc to immediately respond to a crisis. Not disregarding the efforts made by the governments of the Philippines and Malaysia, these incidents highlighted the need for the participation of other states particularly in terms of sharing of expertise, technology, and information. The US-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Forum explored areas where cooperation in these areas can be further strengthened. It was a reiteration of the need for multilateral cooperation in non-traditional security challenges that do not respect territorial boundaries.

The increased frequency of high-level visits by US officials to Asia, the provision of resources to its allies in the region, the reallocation of military hardware, along with ongoing military activities demonstrate that the US intent is to have a closer engagement with the region over the long term. These actions are also manifestations of the US commitment to Asia despite fiscal restraints and the looming crises in other regions where the US is also expected to be involved. Moreover, they send a strong signal that the United States remains the region's security guarantor regardless of doubts on its capacity to perform that role. However, the US-led hub-and-spokes alliance security model can be perceived as an act of containment against a particular country, hence the importance that bilateral alliances are supplemented by a multilateral institution that is open and inclusive such as ASEAN in shaping the regional security architecture.

The conclusion of the first US-initiated US-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Forum highlights the growing importance of ASEAN to the United States, especially if the event becomes more institutionalized. The message is that the United States views ASEAN as a central and strategic player, not only in the US rebalance to Asia but more importantly in the building of a strong and credible regional security architecture for the Asia-Pacific. The move by the United States to actively engage ASEAN in its rebalance also shows the maturation of ties between them. By acknowledging ASEAN as an important regional actor, the relationship between the two has clearly been elevated. This also raises a key point with regard to respecting ASEAN's centrality in the region. Economic power and military size notwithstanding, major powers need to recognize that any credible regional security architecture must include ASEAN. These deliberate and sustained efforts involving ASEAN in devising the region's security architecture are clear manifestations that the United States is actively engaging more actors in the region for maintaining peace and stability. More importantly, by involving ASEAN, there is the added assurance that the region's security environment will work under a framework that is not dominated by a single power.

ASEAN, for its part, should see changes in the regional security environment as both opportunities and challenges. While ASEAN has been successful in engaging the major powers in the region, its centrality must continuously be earned. First, it needs to maintain unity amid differences; it should not be influenced by any external actor that seeks to advance its national interests at the expense of regional interests. ASEAN members must learn how to pursue their respective interests not only through national strategies but also through regional unity. As a community, ASEAN is expected to act as a bloc championing the group's interests and not only those of the individual member-states. Second, there should be greater commitment to cooperation not only in HA/DR but also in other non-traditional areas of security. Non-traditional security challenges are often transnational in scope and include multiple stakeholders. ASEAN must continuously enhance regional cooperation and coordination in times of crisis, although individual countries must also develop domestic capacity to respond to security challenges. ASEAN should start addressing this deficit now otherwise institutional mechanisms will remain only on paper. These challenges will force ASEAN to build and improve on its usual practices and move beyond its comfort zone, in the long run benefitting the bloc as it matures institutionally.

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