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The First ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting: An Early Test for the ASEAN Security Community?

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THE 9th of May 2006 is a new landmark in ASEAN's security cooperation as the group's defence ministers held their first-ever meeting in Kuala Lumpur chaired by Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. Convening regular ASEAN defence ministers meetings has become an important element in realising the ASEAN Security Community, specifically its Plan of Action for conflict prevention. This meeting, which will henceforth take place annually, is a new step signifying ASEAN's shift in focus to embark upon closer military ties. However, ASEAN leaders have underlined from the very beginning that agreement on an ASEAN Security Community will not result in the establishment of an ASEAN defence pact in the future. The slow progress towards regular meetings of ASEAN defence ministers contrasts with the informal meetings of Asia-Pacific defence ministers held during the annual Shangri-La Dialogue. Still, it is a significant starting point for ASEAN's security cooperation and is an important test for ASEAN in its drive to create an ASEAN Security Community in 2020.

Introducing a New Lexicon: ASEAN's Defence Diplomacy

Just as significantly, this first meeting has introduced a new concept and terminology in ASEAN cooperation, namely "defence diplomacy". As ASEAN secretariat spokesman M.C.Abad pointed out, "defence diplomacy will consolidate the prevailing peace and stability relations in Southeast Asia by promoting greater convergence between national security and regional security". (The Jakarta Post, 8 May 2006). Furthermore, this meeting is also a strategic shift for ASEAN based on an argument that defence is no longer a sensitive issue to be discussed in ASEAN.

In the inaugural meeting in Kuala Lumpur, ASEAN defence ministers agreed on four main points: to promote regional peace and stability through dialogue and cooperation in defence and security; to give guidance to existing senior defence and military officials' dialogue and cooperation in the field of defence and security within ASEAN and with dialogue partners; to promote mutual trust and confidence through greater understanding of defence policies and threat perceptions, security challenges as well as enhancement of transparency and openness; and to contribute to the establishment of the ASEAN Security Community as stipulated in the Bali Concord II and promote the implementation of the Vientiane Action Programme. The meeting itself was mainly focused on the issues of human security as well as transnational crimes such as terrorism, piracy, trafficking, smuggling and cooperation for disaster relief as ASEAN's immediate security challenges.

In a joint statement, the defence ministers also agreed that “security challenges remained in the region and that continued efforts should be undertaken to address them”. However, this meeting itself did not identify the challenges. As Mr Najib argued, ASEAN’s defence meetings will not be held based on any threat perceptions, but rather as a mechanism to increase the level of interaction and mutual confidence in the region and beyond. From this point of view, as an initial step, this first meeting was practically aimed at promoting confidence-building measures around security and defence issues within the Association. In addition, this meeting was also aimed at strengthening ASEAN’s voice in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ARF’s next meeting itself is expected to be held also in Kuala Lumpur in July 2006.

However, it seems that ASEAN countries still have not agreed on the idea of establishing an ASEAN peacekeeping force -- a key element that Indonesia has proposed to support ASEAN’s agenda of conflict resolution. The idea itself has triggered some objections from other ASEAN members such as Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, for different reasons (for details see IDSS Commentaries 21/2004 by Adrian Kuah).

The Absence of Myanmar

The absence of Myanmar at the inaugural meeting has also put an immediate test to the notion of an ASEAN Security Community. According to Deputy Prime Minister Najib, Myanmar sent a written notice that there were “pressing domestic concerns and domestic engagements” that prevented its officials from attending the meeting, without specifying the details.

It is still unclear whether Myanmar's absence is related to the country’s discontent towards recent pressure from ASEAN to speed up democratic reforms and release opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. There was a fear that the issue was likely to come up again when ASEAN defence ministers meet in Malaysia. The regional grouping has a policy of non-interference, but the Myanmar issue has dominated most multilateral meetings at ministerial level in the past few years. However, it was stated beforehand that the Myanmar issue would not be at the table at the inaugural meeting in Kuala Lumpur. As Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar pointed out, ASEAN will not act to pressure Myanmar, despite his own failed visit to Yangon in March 2006 to underscore ASEAN’s concern over the political situation in its member state.

The Message from the KL Meeting

There is an important message that has emanated from ASEAN’s first defence ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur. Even though ASEAN members have moved forward in terms of security and defence cooperation, it is still clear that the issues discussed during the meeting were still limited to those within the comfort level of its member states. Some important issues such as the establishing of an ASEAN peacekeeping force or the arrangement of ASEAN extradition treaties will not be included in the agenda until the member states are ready to embark upon these ideas. ASEAN’s attempt to bring defence into the mainstream of ASEAN’s cooperative framework will face more significant challenges in the near future as there are many important, but sensitive, issues that are still left in the Association’s backburner.

The absence of Myanmar has shown that it is still difficult for ASEAN to foster unity under

the framework of the ASEAN Security Community project. A member state's unwillingness to involve itself in a discussion on certain issues will also hinder the unity of ASEAN, particularly in the field of security and defence cooperation. Even though it is still too early to measure the effectiveness of this meeting, it can be said that the KL gathering of defence ministers itself represents an example of how the ASEAN countries are trying to keep to their commitment to the five strategic thrusts embodied in the ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action. However, it is still a long way to go before the vision of an ASEAN Security Community can be realized by 2020.

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