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ADMM + 8: Adding Flesh to a New Regional Architecture

By Tan Seng Chye

Synopsis

The ADMM Plus is a milestone in ASEAN history. It is also an important step forward in ASEAN defence cooperation and its engagement with its dialogue partners to enhance peace and security in the region.

Commentary

THE INAUGURAL ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) held in Hanoi on 12 October 2010 was a milestone in ASEAN's history. For the first time, the defence ministers of the ten ASEAN countries that form the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) gathered together with their counterparts from the eight Dialogue Partners, namely Australia, China, India, Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK), New Zealand, the Russian Federation, and the United States. It is a new and important step forward in ASEAN's defence cooperation to enhance peace, stability and development in Southeast Asia.

ADMM Plus will help promote defence dialogue and security cooperation between ASEAN and its key trading partners and pave the way for them to cooperate to deal with traditional and non-traditional security challenges. The theme of the ADMM Plus meeting was "Strategic Cooperation for Peace, Stability and Development in the Region". The meeting discussed cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, military medicine, maritime security, counter terrorism and peacekeeping operations. It was a significant meeting as it provided an opportunity for the major powers like China, Japan and the US, to meet on the sidelines of the ADMM Plus to discuss their bilateral relations.

Joint Declaration

In its Joint Declaration, the ADMM Plus acknowledged that the security challenges in the region and the world are now more complex and transnational in nature which would require the regional countries to cooperate to deal with them. The ADMM Plus is a key component of a robust, open and inclusive regional security architecture that enables the ASEAN defence ministers to cooperate with their counterparts from the eight "Plus" countries to address common security challenges.

The ADMM Plus reaffirmed ASEAN's centrality. It also underscored its integral link to the ADMM proper while contributing to ASEAN's efforts to realise the ASEAN Political Security Community by 2015. The ADMM Plus also reaffirmed its commitment to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) and its fundamental principles of sovereignty, equality, non-interference, consensus and unity in diversity.

The ADMM Plus is the highest ministerial defence and security consultative and cooperative mechanism for regional security issues amongst the ASEAN members and the eight Plus countries. To help with the groundwork, they agreed to establish an ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meeting Plus (ADSOM Plus). This grouping of senior defence officials will implement the understandings and decisions of the ADMM Plus. Expert Working Groups on defence and security issues of mutual interest will also be established. The Second ADMM Plus Meeting will be held in Brunei Darussalam in 2013.

South China Sea

Although the South China Sea was not mentioned, media reports suggest that the US and China did voice differing views on the territorial claims and disputes in the region and their approaches to resolve them. While US Defence Secretary Robert Gates wanted an international approach to resolving maritime disagreements, China opposed this as well as any outside intervention, preferring bilateral negotiations with the ASEAN claimants. Gates said that the disagreements over territorial claims and maritime domain appeared to be a growing challenge to regional stability.

Gates insisted that the US Navy would not back away from sailing into Pacific waters. He was referring to China's recent assertive stance over the South China Sea and the projection of its naval reach. China had complained about US warships sailing in the South China Sea and conducting exercises with Korean naval forces in the Yellow Sea. While Gates apparently did not criticise China directly, his remarks reflected the growing rivalry as a result of China's increasing economic and military influence in the region which has long been dominated by the US. The rivalry between the US and China for influence in the region could increase in the future as the Chinese economy and military power grow stronger. The jostling could raise tension.

The ADMM Plus will be an important platform for the major powers in the Asia Pacific to deal with the many non-traditional issues that are of concern to all the ADMM Plus countries. ASEAN, with its role as driver, will play a central part to move ADMM Plus forward to enhance peace and stability in the region.

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