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Future of ADMM-Plus: Asia's Growing Defence Engagements

By See Seng Tan

Synopsis

Defence engagements are slowly reshaping the Asian region. Asia's security architecture is changing incrementally in three ways: from the U.S.-centred "wheels" to "webs"; from being multilaterally foreign policy-focused to an expansion of the role of defence institutions; and potentially from "talk-shops" to "workshops."

Commentary

DEFENCE DIPLOMACY - or the efforts by national defence establishments to engage one another by peaceful and presumably cooperative means - is, as regional analysts have noted, a relatively late development in Asia.

To be sure, the types of activities typically identified as within the rubric of defence diplomacy are not particularly new to the region. These include contacts between senior military and civilian defence officials; defence cooperation agreements and training arrangements; sharing know-how on the professionalisation of the armed forces, defence management, military technical areas and other forms of military assistance; exchanges between military personnel and units; port calls; coordinated or joint military exercises, and the like. These are much the sorts of intramural activities Asian members of military alliances have long been conducting within their collective defence arrangements since the Cold War.

Better late than never

What may be new, however, is the late emergence, at the initiative of ASEAN, of an official gathering of defence ministers from a select number of Asia Pacific countries. In 2006, member states of ASEAN inaugurated the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), an annual forum aimed at furthering dialogue and cooperation among ASEAN defence establishments at the most senior level. In 2010, a "Plus" appendage was added to the ADMM—typical of ASEAN's engagement with the wider Asian region—with eight external partners (Australia, China, Japan, India, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States), thereby making it the ADMM-Plus.

Sharing the same membership as the East Asia Summit but for all intents and purposes a separate arrangement, the ADMM-Plus' mandate is primarily in confidence-building and capacity-building. Concerning the latter, the ADMM-Plus issued a joint declaration on 11 May 2010 that specified the contribution ASEAN would like its external partners to make, namely, to "enable the ADMM to cooperate with the non-ASEAN countries to build capacity and better prepare ASEAN to address the complex security challenges."

Nevertheless Asia's security order and its supporting architecture are far from the finished article. But the inclusion of the defence ministerial to Asia's evolving and burgeoning defence engagements is like an incomplete jigsaw puzzle that has just benefited from the addition of a key piece. In a sense, the landscape of Asian military security is quite remarkable in the light of the numerous military-to-military exercises, many of them increasingly multilateral—such as RIMPAC, the world's largest maritime exercise and Cobra Gold, originally a Thai-US bilateral exercise that has now expanded to include other Asian states.

The region's militaries have also participated in coordinated or joint operations in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), as happened after the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004; in anti-piracy patrols in the Malacca Straits; and in counter-terrorism. Beyond the tactical and operational dimensions, Asian defence establishments have also been engaging one another at the strategic dimension with senior officials, civilian and uniformed, regularly participating in multilateral meetings such as defence officials dialogues (DOD), senior officials meetings (SOM), gatherings of service chiefs and the heads of defence institutions, and the non-official forum held annually in Singapore, the Shangri-La Dialogue.

Significant as the inclusion of the ADMM and its Plus appendage is to Asian defence cooperation, serious concerns remain. These include the high level of strategic mistrust among regional countries; tensions arising from territorial disputes; the persistent lack of political will to advance collaboration beyond relatively "non-sensitive" issues that pose fewer challenges to states' sovereignty; and the paucity of assets and capabilities necessary to ensure the security of the region and its residents.

Three transitions

That said, there is no question that defence engagements in Asia as a whole are redrawing the security map of the Asian region. To that end, the transition has at least three noteworthy facets:

First, the former chief of US Pacific Command, Admiral Dennis Blair, hypothesised in a 2001 article in *The Washington Quarterly* about refashioning security arrangements in Asia from "wheels"—referring to the San Francisco "hub-and-spokes" alliance system—to "webs." Fast forward to the present, the idea of defence webs has become the accepted nomenclature used by analysts and pundits to refer to the proliferation of bilateral and multilateral defence ties in the region.

Second, the late formation of the ADMM-Plus renders high-level defence engagement as the "Johnny-come-lately" of Asia-wide multilateral diplomacy. Indeed, even the Shangri-La Dialogue is a mere pup in years compared with older and more established multilateral enterprises in the region. Not surprisingly, it is Asia's foreign policy establishments that have taken the lead in multilateral diplomacy.

At the same time, it is under the rubric of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)—a gathering of foreign ministers—that the defence establishments of ARF member states began engaging in multilateral dialogue in the mid-1990s through the Department of Defence (DOD) and ARF Defence SOM processes as well as the ARF Security Policy Conferences.

Far from emerging *ex nihilo*, the ADMM-Plus has presumably benefited from that history of lower-level engagements. But with their own ministerial conferences, the so-called "defence track" of Asia has, for all intents and purposes, graduated from the minor leagues of multilateral diplomacy, as it were, to the majors.

Third, the functionalism which the region's defence engagements bring to bear on regional security cooperation has highlighted the potential Asian multilateral diplomacy has for moving beyond mere dialogue to practical collaboration in non-traditional security issues. A number of things has been identified—counter-terrorism, HADR, maritime security, military medicine, peacekeeping—as areas in which ADMM-Plus members are to cooperate.

Defence diplomacy reshaping the region

Granted, working to develop and enhance the region's capacities in disaster management or military medicine is miles away from the ambitious aims and grandiloquent vision that the advocates of the ARF held in the halcyon days of that institution's formative period. But it offers the best chance for Asia's multilateral consultative mechanisms to move from "talk-shops" to "workshops".

Nonetheless, all this should not be taken to mean that Asian security has been fundamentally transformed as a consequence of warrior diplomats exchanging their battlefield fatigues for business suits and their jungle boots for leather brogues. Defence engagements are slowly reshaping the region, but in incremental ways.

Political tensions and strategic mistrust continue to animate regional relations in Asia. Against that backdrop,

the prospect of growing ties and practical cooperation among Asia's defence establishments is something to be welcomed.

See Seng Tan is Associate Professor and Deputy Director, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) and Head, Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU). This commentary is part of a policy report, "Strategic Engagement in the Asia Pacific: The Future of the ADMM-Plus," available at http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/policy_report/Strategic-Engagement-in-the-Asia-Pacific.pdf.