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The 3rd ADMM-Plus: Did the Media Get it Right?

By Tan See Seng

Synopsis

The decision by the recent ADMM-Plus meeting in Kuala Lumpur to scrap a planned joint declaration has been depicted in the media as another failure by the regional grouping to end on a positive note due to the South China Sea issue. This is not necessarily an accurate portrayal.

Commentary

THE DECISION by ASEAN not to issue a joint declaration at the 3rd ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 4 November 2015 triggered a barrage of reactions from the international media, some of it misguided.

That the South China Sea dominated discussions at this year's ADMM-Plus—whose members include the ten ASEAN states and the “Plus” countries Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and the United States—is not in question here. Nor, for that matter, that a proposed joint declaration was scrapped owing to disagreements among some Plus countries—exchanges between the Chinese and Japanese delegations at the meeting were reportedly heated—over the South China Sea. What is problematic, however, was the inaccurate insinuation in some media accounts that China was the country solely responsible for the 3rd ADMM-Plus' non-issuance of a joint declaration. Equally troubling too was the implication that the incident was reminiscent of the failure of the ASEAN foreign ministers, at their meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, to issue a joint statement—the first time that had ever happened in ASEAN's history.

China solely to blame? Not quite

Given China's firm stance on the South China Sea and its behaviour at past international and regional meetings, it is understandable why observers were inclined to finger China as the ostensible culprit behind the imbroglio in Kuala Lumpur. However, accounts furnished by others present at that meeting depict a different story. Faced with the prospect of a joint declaration that would not include any mention of the South China Sea, the US delegation registered its displeasure and refused to support the draft version of the declaration. With the exception of China and Russia, the other Plus countries followed suit. The resulting impasse led ASEAN to decide against issuing a joint declaration.

But that was not all. Evidently, at the ASEAN Defence Senior Officials Meeting-Plus (ADSOM-Plus)—the gathering of senior officials that supports the ADMM-Plus—held in Kuala Lumpur in February this year, 16 of the ADMM-Plus members, including all ten ASEAN countries, had supposedly given their preliminary support for the inclusion of the South China Sea in the joint declaration planned for the ADMM-Plus meeting in November. Hence, from the perspective of the US and other Plus countries, the apparent change of heart among the ASEAN 10 was likely a surprise development which hinted, fairly or otherwise, at the possibility of Chinese “interference” behind the scenes.

What explains the apparent backpedalling on the joint declaration by the ASEAN countries? A likely answer is to be found in their choice of instrument for conveying their views on and aspirations for the South China Sea. Significantly, the Chairman's statement of the 3rd ADMM-Plus—issued by Malaysia in its capacity as the Chair of ASEAN for 2015—referenced the South China Sea. The statement urged the “effective implementation” of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the “early conclusion” of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC).

What is noteworthy about ASEAN's actions is that, unlike joint declarations, chairmen's statements are not consensus documents and hence do not require the agreement of all ADMM-Plus members for them to be issued. A joint declaration by the 3rd ADMM-Plus would have required the signatures of all 18 defence ministers—a challenging prospect given the contrasting opinions among them regarding the South China Sea. Furthermore, joint declarations are not mandatory for the ADMM-Plus. Faced with the prospect of a protracted fight between Plus countries for inclusion of the South China Sea in the joint declaration and those against it, the ten ASEAN countries took the bold decision not to issue a declaration that avoids mention of the South China Sea. At the same time, they released a Chairman's Statement that does.

Phnom Penh 2012 Again? Definitely Not

Noting that having no joint declaration by the 3rd ADMM-Plus was not necessarily a bad thing, Singapore's Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen argued, as reported by Channel News Asia: “It would be far less credible for us to say, well, there are issues that we don't agree on, but let's sign on something which we can all agree on. I think that sometimes not being able to agree, or agreeing that we disagree, and being able to reflect on the different perspectives is in a sense a progress in maturity.”

Seen from this vantage, the ASEAN countries' collective stance on the joint declaration issue, in the words of an ASEAN defence official, was an effort to "wrestle back control" of a meeting threatened by irreconcilable differences between the major powers.

The 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Phnom Penh on 13 July 2012 will forever be remembered as ASEAN's darkest moment for its failure to issue a concluding joint statement for the first time in its history. Memorably, that failure resulted thanks to a disunited ASEAN. However, here is where media attempts to portray the 3rd ADMM-Plus' problems as a repeat of that Phnom Penh meeting in 2012 are flat wrong because the ASEAN 10 did not break ranks in Kuala Lumpur but stayed firmly united. If anything, the ASEAN defence ministers were very conscious about avoiding undue comparisons with the fiasco in Phnom Penh.

That said, the ADMM-Plus gathering highlighted the rising prospect of ASEAN-led regional arrangements being hijacked by great power disagreements, even when unity among the ten ASEAN countries is assiduously maintained. Whether and how ASEAN can ensure that the Plus countries abide by ASEAN's norms of regional cooperation and mutual confidence will be key to ASEAN maintaining its centrality in the broader regional architecture.

Tan See Seng is Professor of International Relations at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An earlier version appeared in The Straits Times.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg