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ADMM-Plus: Can It Do “CUES” in the South China Sea?

By Tan See Seng

Synopsis

The ADMM-Plus should jointly undertake a multilateral exercise that would test and illustrate the application of the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in the South China Sea.

Commentary

SAVE FOR a few bright shining moments, the history of multilateral security in the Asia-Pacific has mostly been a frustrated enterprise. However the surprise package has been multilateral defence cooperation, which has burgeoned since the formation of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010.

Through the ADMM-Plus, whose membership includes Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, the United States and the 10 ASEAN countries, multilateral security cooperation has gone farther and deeper than anything the region hitherto has experienced.

ADMM-Plus and CUES

Given this laudable accomplishment, there is no reason why the ADMM-Plus cannot serve as a regional framework through which member countries could jointly undertake a multilateral maritime exercise that would test and illustrate the application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in the South China Sea.

As it is, many if not most of the ADMM-Plus members are signatories to the CUES arrangement established at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium held in Qingdao in

2014. Separately, China and the ASEAN states formulated their own CUES for the South China Sea in September 2016. By leveraging on their good record in military-to-military cooperation, the ADMM-Plus can effectively “operationalise” CUES through conducting a maritime security exercise that incorporates a CUES element in its activities.

According to Mr Ong Ye Kung, who spoke at the Xiangshan Forum in Beijing in October 2016 in his previous capacity as Singapore’s Senior Minister of State for Defence, CUES should be expanded to cover all ADMM-Plus members. Going further, Dr Ng Eng Hen, Singapore’s Minister for Defence, has proposed the expansion of CUES to include “white” shipping – the current CUES arrangement covers only naval vessels or “grey hulls” – and for the ADMM-Plus to adopt a similar protocol for the region’s airspaces.

Should the ADMM-Plus formally adopt CUES – and it should – then the next logical step could be to implement the code in the context of a maritime exercise. Such a proposal is not at all farfetched.

Strengths and Limitations of ADMM-Plus

Through their activities, ADMM-Plus countries and their respective defence establishments have developed mutual confidence if not trust, whilst at the same time establishing a reasonably high level of military-to-military interoperability. Arguably, with the high frequency and tempo of multilateral maritime exercises taking place under the ADMM-Plus aegis, participating countries have already been engaging mutually in CUES-like activities.

Therefore, it should not require a lot of work to transform multilateral maritime exercises already planned for by the ADMM-Plus into formal CUES-based exercises in the South China Sea.

However, should this recommendation become reality, we need to be clear-eyed about what the ADMM-Plus can and cannot achieve. Indeed, it is not impossible, should interstate tensions over the South China Sea continue to persist or worsen, that the claimant countries, all of which (with the sole exception of Taiwan) are ADMM-Plus members, might reconsider their respective investments in the ADMM-Plus.

After all, the ADMM-Plus has not been completely exempt from the troubles that have afflicted the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), not least of which the penchant of the great powers to import their strategic rivalries into ASEAN’s multilateral dialogue forums. For instance, at its ministerial meeting in November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, as a result of intractable differences among its member states, the ADMM-Plus was forced to scrap a planned joint statement – non-mandatory, in any event – on the South China Sea.

ADMM-Plus’ Evolving Mandate

Moreover, it is possible that member countries could be using their participation in ADMM-Plus exercises for the purpose of deterrence, which they seek to achieve through “showcasing” their defence assets and lift capabilities. For example, when

Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 went missing in March 2014, China deployed a flotilla of 18 warships and Coast Guard vessels along with long-range military transport aircraft to assist in the search. CUES or not, such motives and dynamics could end up destabilising the region rather than the other way round.

Fundamentally, getting the ADMM-Plus to do CUES in the South China Sea poses the interesting question of the evolving mandate and mission of the ADMM-Plus, namely, from a mechanism meant for non-traditional security to potentially one that handles traditional or conventional security challenges.

One of the unfortunate outcomes of the ARF has been its volitional “recusal” from conventional security management – whether in Taiwan cross-straits relations, the Korean Peninsula or the South China Sea. Whether the ADMM-Plus would be subjected to a similar fate remains to be seen. But a first step towards avoiding such an outcome could be to establish the ADMM-Plus as the relevant platform for a multilateral CUES exercise in the South China Sea.

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