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Asian Multilateralism in Uncertain Times

ADMM-Plus' Next Phase: Whither Defence Diplomacy?

By Lindsey W. Ford

SYNOPSIS

Asia's regional defence institutions are straining under the weight of accelerating traditional and non-traditional security challenges. A renewed focus on action-oriented cooperation and collective security mechanisms will be necessary to respond to these threats.

COMMENTARY

THE ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) has been an unlikely success story for Asian multilateralism. As the organisation celebrates its 10th anniversary, the deteriorating Asian security environment raises questions about whether regional security institutions remain fit for purpose.

Looking ahead to its next phase, the ADMM-Plus should consider three sets of issues that regional security institutions must be better poised to address: the continued inability of Asian institutions to drive coordinated responses to transnational security crises; a resurgence of strategic competition; and the need for Asian defence establishments to build collective capacity.

Impact of 2020: Three Challenges for Asian Defence Institutions

The COVID-19 epidemic has reaffirmed the interconnected nature of the Indo-Pacific region, but it has also provided a reminder that despite a proliferation of regional agreements, institutions, and exercises focused on transnational security threats,

regional defence establishments still lack much needed capacity to prepare for and respond to these problems in a collective manner.

This assessment is, of course, not new. Limitations in the regional response to the 2014 MH-370 disaster, difficulties in mustering an integrated response to the resurgence of violent extremism, as well as ongoing challenges in dealing collectively with transnational crime and illegal fishing, are all well known.

Even as the COVID-19 crisis has affirmed the value of regional connectivity, growing strategic competition is creating fissures within regional institutions. Regional defence diplomacy is shifting away from ASEAN's preferred model of broad, inclusive institutions and toward a greater emphasis on smaller, mini-lateral forums.

The reestablishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the United States ("Quad") has dominated headlines, but mechanisms such as the ASEAN Our Eyes Initiative (AEOI) and new trilateral dialogues between countries including Indonesia, India, and Australia all point to a growing trend toward a narrower form of multilateralism.

Finally, on the fiscal front, COVID-19 is placing renewed stress on regional defence budgets, creating starker choices for national defence establishments over which missions, investments, and platforms matter most. This problem is likely to accelerate in the coming years, both as the long-term economic impact of the epidemic is more clearly felt, and as the US military feels pressure to prioritise higher-end investments over lower-end presence and capacity-building activities.

Faced with newly constrained budgets, some countries may choose to cut back on needed investments and prioritise personnel costs, a trend that would exacerbate existing capacity problems, increasing the risk that emerging threats and crises may escalate.

Defence Diplomacy Priorities for the Future

There are no easy solutions to these problems, but they point to the need for regional defence institutions to put a new emphasis on building collective capacity. To maintain credibility, institutions such as the ADMM and the ADMM-Plus must be able to demonstrate that they can deliver not just dialogue, but also problem-solving capabilities. The ADMM is the forum of ASEAN defence ministers while ADMM-Plus is the forum's dialogue process with its security partners.

To begin addressing this task, regional defence diplomacy should focus on three priorities:

- *Information Sharing and Transparency.* The ASEAN Outlook highlights the value of transparency, but national defence establishments have all too often shied away from the types of information-sharing that will be necessary to better prevent and respond to emerging security threats.

As we have seen during the current COVID-19 epidemic, the absence of strong regional information sharing mechanisms can perpetuate and deepen existing mistrust

between countries in the region, a problem that will only be exacerbated by a more competitive Indo-Pacific security environment.

On issues such as pandemic prevention and management, counter-terrorism, environmental monitoring, and maritime domain awareness, countries could build on existing cooperation to develop the real-time information sharing capabilities that will be needed to more effectively address future crises.

- *Rapid Response Mechanisms*: In addition to enhanced information sharing, regional defence institutions should accelerate efforts to build collective crisis response capabilities. ASEAN's work establishing the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), building regional stockpiles and emergency response warehouses, as well as recent efforts to operationalise an ASEAN Militaries Ready Group (AMRG) are valuable steps in the right direction.

But these efforts will need to be strengthened and expanded. Operationalisation of the AMRG could provide a needed proof of concept to help build momentum for ADMM discussions on additional types of standing capabilities and response mechanisms to address transnational threats in the region.

- *New Coalition Models and Partnerships*: An additional priority for regional defence diplomacy should be to help provide a more coherent agenda for the expanding array of militaries with a presence and interest in the Indo-Pacific region. In the past several months, several European partners have begun developing plans to enhance their military activities in the Indo-Pacific theatre.

Indian Ocean littoral states have also become more engaged in discussions about Indo-Pacific security. This wider constellation of players is not currently reflected in the regional defence architecture, however, which remains geographically oriented around the Asia-Pacific region.

From a practical and operational perspective, there would be significant tradeoffs associated with expanding the formal membership of institutions such as the ADMM-Plus. However, it may arguably become problematic for regional defence institutions to remain disconnected from emerging regional security dialogues and cooperation mechanisms increasingly oriented around an "Indo-Pacific" perspective.

Going forward, regional militaries should explore new mechanisms and activities that will better link Indian Ocean and European partners to Asia-Pacific defence institutions.

Filling the Void

Over the past decade, the ADMM-Plus has filled an important void in regional defence cooperation, creating a venue in which participating defence establishments can begin to develop practical cooperation mechanisms. But the Asia-Pacific region has evolved significantly over the past decade and its defence institutions will need to evolve as well.

Put simply, unless existing institutions can begin to lead in building effective problem-

solving mechanisms, they risk finding themselves sidelined by new alternatives. To do so, regional institutions will need to strengthen nascent cooperation mechanisms with new financial and operational resources.

They also need to more effectively link their efforts to a broader constellation of interested partners who have additional capacity they can bring to bear.

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