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Asian Multilateralism in Uncertain Times

The Indo-Pacific Debate: Moving Forward Together?

By Liu Lin

SYNOPSIS

The Indo-Pacific debate is taking place amid great power competition and the severe impact of COVID-19 on geopolitics. How should ASEAN push forward on regional defence diplomacy?

COMMENTARY

IN THE past several years, the Australia, France, Germany, India, Japan and the United States all put forward their visions or strategies for the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific debate, as it is referred to, has been taking place amid competition among major powers, in particular between the US and China.

One of the main pillars of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy is the Australia-Japan-India-US quadrilateral cooperation framework (Quad), which is reinvigorating rapidly, and become more institutionalised and substantiated. The Quad is also considering expanding to other countries, such as South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam, to create the so-called Quad+. This trend will have much impact on the existing regional security cooperation framework, which emphasises inclusiveness and openness. It is also a challenge to the centrality of ASEAN in regional architecture.

ASEAN's Response

In response, ASEAN formally joined the Indo-Pacific debate by publishing ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in June 2019. ASEAN reemphasised the long-held

principles of, among other things, openness, inclusiveness, mutual trust, ASEAN centrality and cooperation.

While the AOIP may not be enough to change the geostrategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region, it will at least try to influence the debate and remind the major powers that in any discussion of the future regional order, ASEAN should not be neglected.

Another important purpose of the ASEAN Outlook is to maintain the group's centrality in regional cooperation framework. In this aspect, what is clear is that the AOIP is not aimed at creating new mechanisms or replacing existing ones; rather, ASEAN would prefer for AOIP to co-exist within the current ASEAN-led normative and political order.

In other words, the AOIP intends to influence the proposed Indo-Pacific order through making full use of and improving the existing ASEAN-led mechanisms.

ADMM, ADMM+ and the Indo-Pacific Debate

It should be in this context that we evaluate the role of ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM plus its dialogue partners (ADMM+) in the shaping of the Indo-Pacific defence and security order.

ADMM and ADMM+, which are at the defence ministerial level, are the two most important regional mechanisms of the existing ASEAN-led military and defence cooperation architecture. If ASEAN wants to grasp the initiative in navigating regional defence cooperation, ADMM and ADMM+ should continue to play an active role.

In fact, ADMM and ADMM+ still have much relevance in the increasingly complex security and geostrategic environment. Unlike Quad, ADMM+ has a more representative membership, which includes almost all the major countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Amidst the uncertainty of rising major power competition, this ASEAN-led mechanism, provides an important and necessary platform for the big powers to engage each other.

Besides, there is currently no alternative to ASEAN's convening power in Asia. Although ASEAN's capability may be limited, however, in terms of acceptance, ASEAN is still the best choice.

ASEAN-led Pragmatic Defence Cooperation

ADMM and ADMM+, since their establishment, have played an important role in pushing forward regional pragmatic defence cooperation, especially in dealing with non-traditional security issues.

For example, in 2020, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN defence ministers quickly issued a joint statement on cooperation to fight the COVID-19 in February at the ADMM retreat. ASEAN militaries also held virtual ADMM COVID-19 tabletop exercises, and reached consensus on the coordination mechanism for COVID-19 prevention and control.

More than that, under the ADMM framework, ASEAN militaries have made much

progress in various cooperation fields in the past decade, such as the establishment of the ASEAN military medical centre and peacekeeping centres network, the passing of Guideline of Air military Encounters and the Guidelines for Maritime Interaction.

As to ADMM+, ASEAN and its dialogue partners have pushed forward cooperation in seven priority areas and held HADR and military medicine exercises for several times since 2013.

Of course, challenges remain. Externally, the key challenge arises from changing great power dynamics. The rising competition among major powers decreased their mutual trust, therefore may influence the cooperation under ADMM+. The emergence of trilateral and minilateral defence cooperation advocated by major powers also poses a challenge to ASEAN-led mechanisms. Internally, there is the problem of ASEAN unity, and the gap between ASEAN's expanded vision and its capacities.

Impact of COVID-19 on Regional Defence Diplomacy

Beyond that, the impact of COVID-19 will be another challenge. The pandemic affects the ways and means of conducting defence diplomacy. A lot of conferences have to be held online, and a large amount of functional cooperation events has to be delayed or cancelled.

And because of the severe blow of COVID-19 to the economy, many countries have to cut defence budgets, which may influence their willingness and capability to invest in defence diplomacy, at least in short term.

Besides, fighting COVID-19 is part of military medical cooperation. Although this kind of cooperation is considered of low-sensitivity, there are still some sophisticated factors involved, such as the competition in vaccine development and distribution. In addition, the pandemic has aroused attention to biological technology and biological weapons, which are important areas in national security and can be highly sensitive.

Possible Way Forward

More broadly, in the new multiplex Indo-Pacific strategic environment, the future of ASEAN-led multilateralism will be more complex and uncertain. How can ADMM and ADMM+ move forward in the next phase of development?

First, ASEAN should stick to the fundamental objectives for establishing the two mechanisms. That is, to enhance regional defence cooperation; increase mutual trust; enhance capacity building; promote the defence relationship between ASEAN and external partners. Despite great changes in the strategic context, these objectives are still relevant and need to be cherished.

Second, ADMM and ADMM+ should expand and deepen the existing cooperation in the priority areas, such as maritime security, counter terrorism and peacekeeping. At the same time, they need to put forward creative new initiatives so as to give more momentum to regional defence diplomacy, especially facing the new geostrategic situations. For example, the initiatives to fight COVID-19 have pushed the military medical cooperation to a new level.

Third, ADMM and ADMM+ should have more coordination with other ASEAN-led defence and security mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Informal Meeting, ASEAN Navy Chiefs' Meeting, etc., to obtain the resources and develop capacity to shape future regional defence cooperation.

ASEAN may also need to embrace a more selective and strategic approach to multilateralism. This would mean developing new informal coalitions among its members or the 'ASEAN Minus X' approach on specific issues, within the larger ASEAN-centric multilateralism.

Creating More Strategic Space

Finally, at the 14th ADMM which concluded in Hanoi last December, ASEAN defence ministers agreed to continue promoting ASEAN's proactiveness and cohesion in adapting to geopolitical and geostrategic changes by strengthening defence connections between ASEAN members as well as between the bloc and partner countries.

But given the increasing great power rivalry, ASEAN needs to reconsider its role in the Indo-Pacific, particularly its engagement with the great powers. For example, how to maintain the active participation of dialogue partners in ASEAN-led mechanisms with trilateral or minilateral cooperation arrangements emerging? How to manage the relationship between ADMM+ and ASEAN-plus-one cooperation?

In fact, ASEAN thinks that it does not only have the binary choice between US and China. ASEAN has already begun to forge closer ties with Australia, India, Japan and the European Union, to create strategic space amid increasing competition between Beijing and Washington.

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