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Asian Multilateralism in Uncertain Times

ADMM-Plus: Japan in ASEAN Defence Diplomacy

By Shoji Tomotaka

SYNOPSIS

Japan has been actively supporting the ADMM-Plus since its founding, motivated by three key objectives. Will Japan's vibrant approach toward ASEAN's defence diplomacy change under PM Suga?

COMMENTARY

THE SUGA administration is treating ASEAN with increasing importance for Japan's maritime security, given Beijing's growing assertiveness and intensifying tensions in the East and South China Seas. This has prompted Tokyo to cooperate with regional partners, including ASEAN, through the crucial platform of the ADMM-Plus.

This is, in fact, the first of two incentives for Japan to strengthen its security ties with ASEAN. The second is that Tokyo is pursuing a more "comprehensive" partnership with ASEAN by jointly addressing regional security issues, in addition to long-standing economic and political cooperation. Japan wants to remain "relevant" to ASEAN against the backdrop of competition with other external powers, especially China.

ADMM-Plus & Big Power Competition

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus or ADMM-Plus, is a regional defence and security platform comprising ten ASEAN countries and their eight dialogue partners including Japan. ADMM-Plus has been promoting practical security cooperation since its establishment in 2010.

The ADMM-Plus consists not only of a ministerial meeting, but also of various sub-group meetings including experts' working groups (EWGs). The EWGs facilitate the conduct of cooperative activities by ADMM-Plus participants in non-traditional security.

Currently, there are seven EWGs on specific fields including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, and peace-keeping operations (PKO). Through practical cooperation, the ADMM-Plus has benefited member countries in enhancing their capacity to effectively address non-traditional security threats.

The ADMM-Plus, however, is not only a platform for cooperation; it is also an arena for competition and conflict. Major powers, including the United States and China, are competing for political influence in the region, garnering support from ASEAN in particular. This competitive aspect prevents the ADMM-Plus from developing confidence-building measures.

ADMM Plus One?

However, competition among external players reinforces the significance and centrality of ASEAN. Major powers such as the US, China, and Japan are keen to hold a so-called "ADMM Plus One" meeting on a regular basis to forge bilateral ties between the countries and ASEAN. Thus, ASEAN can take advantage of its central position in influencing the major powers' regional strategies.

Japan has been a strong supporter of the ADMM-Plus since its founding because it is the only official forum for defence ministers in the Indo-Pacific region to meet. It is also an effective mechanism to promote substantial security cooperation among regional countries.

Japan has been proactively supporting the ADMM-Plus by its co-chairmanship of three EWGs: on military medicine with Singapore in 2011; on HADR with Laos in 2014; and on PKO with Vietnam this year, in 2021–2023. In addition, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Self-Defence Forces (SDF) of Japan have actively participated in meetings and joint exercises related to other EWGs.

Japan's Three Strategic Objectives

Tokyo has sought to achieve three strategic objectives by participating in the ADMM-Plus. *First*, Tokyo is attempting to contribute to institutionalising security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

The strategic environment in the region is facing serious security challenges such as great-power rivalry, arms race, and attempts to change the status quo by coercion. In particular, territorial disputes in the South China Sea raise concerns regarding the rule of law and freedom of navigation.

Therefore, the Japanese government intends to strategically promote multilateral security cooperation for building mutual trust among participating countries to address regional security issues. In other words, Tokyo hopes for a "spill-over" effect by transforming deepening cooperation in non-traditional security into a cooperative atmosphere to alleviate tensions in traditional security.

Second, Japan sees the ADMM-Plus as a convenient venue to convey its stance on defence and security. In April 2007, the MOD issued an official document entitled “Basic Policy for Defence Exchanges”.

The paper stipulated that defence exchanges should be conducted to promote an understanding of Japan's defence policy, as well as to convey the country's concerns about other countries' defence policies or military activities to encourage them to revise their approaches.

Third, Tokyo is trying to promote security cooperation with ASEAN and to support ASEAN's centrality in a multilateral security framework, motivated by the two incentives to strengthen its security ties with ASEAN mentioned earlier.

Japan's “ADMM Plus One”: Vientiane Vision

In addition to the multilateral cooperation provided by the ADMM-Plus, Japan attached great store to an “ADMM Plus Japan” framework. Since 2014, Tokyo has held a defence ministers' informal meeting with ASEAN, almost annually.

At the second ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting in Vientiane in 2016, Defence Minister Tomomi Inada announced a “Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defence Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN”, which outlined Japan's basic approach toward defence cooperation with ASEAN.

The Vientiane Vision was the first document that clearly presented an overall picture of the areas of priority in defence cooperation between Japan and ASEAN. This vision document stipulated that, in addition to implementing bilateral defence cooperation with ASEAN countries, Japan would promote multilateral defence cooperation with the entire ASEAN, aiming to support the association's capacity building.

In providing capacity-building support, Japan focuses on: (i) consolidating the regional/maritime order based on the principles of international law; (ii) promoting maritime security cooperation; and (iii) effectively addressing increasingly diverse and complex security issues.

At the sixth defence minister-level meeting between ASEAN and Japan in 2019, Defence Minister Taro Kono announced an updated version of the Vientiane Vision (“Vientiane Vision 2.0”), which emphasised Tokyo's willingness to promote “heart-to-heart”, “tailored and long-lasting”, and “equal and open” security cooperation with ASEAN.

Japanese Defence Diplomacy under PM Suga

The new Suga administration which took power in September 2020 clearly continues to pursue his predecessor Shinzo Abe's vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)”, as demonstrated in Yoshihide Suga's speech during his first overseas trip as prime minister to Vietnam and Indonesia in October.

In his vision on the Indo-Pacific, Suga prioritised cooperation with ASEAN by synergising Japan's FOIP with ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). He also

mentioned the importance of supporting ASEAN centrality not only for reinforcing ties with ASEAN but also for stabilising the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific amidst the intensifying US-China strategic competition.

In this regard, under Suga, Japan certainly continues to participate actively in ASEAN's security architecture including the ADMM-Plus. In fact, at the 10th ADMM-Plus held virtually in December 2020, Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi expressed Japan's full support for AOIP, which shares fundamental principles with Japan's FOIP. Under the new government, the updated Vientiane Vision is closely associated with FOIP.

In sum, Japan under the Suga administration continues to reinforce its security cooperation with ASEAN. Nevertheless, challenges still lie ahead for Japan. These include effective policy coordination with the new Biden administration and managing relations with China.

Shoji Tomotaka is the Head of Asia and Africa Division, Regional Studies Department, National Institute for Defence Studies (NIDS), Japan. Views expressed in this commentary do not represent NIDS' official views. He contributed this as part of an RSIS Series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg