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Asian Multilateralism in Uncertain Times

Defence Diplomacy in ASEAN: Running in Circles?

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SYNOPSIS

Defence multilateralism through the ADMM and ADMM-Plus remains focused on diplomatic processes, rather than shaping strategic outcomes. Is it time for regional policymakers to review this?

COMMENTARY

HOW SUCCESSFUL has ASEAN defence diplomacy been over the past two decades? To what extent have the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) achieved their objectives to promote mutual trust and confidence, as well as to facilitate practical cooperation and capacity building? How strategically relevant is ASEAN defence multilateralism in the era of rising geopolitical tensions and regional divisions?

To address these questions, we should not assess the ADMM and ADMM-Plus in a vacuum. Instead, they should be understood as a case of both “defence diplomacy” and “strategic engagement” as well as an extension of ASEAN institutions. Consequently, the ADMM and ADMM-Plus carry the promises and pitfalls of ASEAN’s defence diplomatic engagements that has evolved over the past two decades.

ASEAN Defence Diplomacy: Promises and Pitfalls

In general, the ADMM and ADMM-Plus have focused too heavily on designing, establishing, and sustaining diplomatic processes rather than achieving strategic outcomes. These defence diplomatic engagements should instead be ideally geared

towards operational readiness and capacity building as shaped by particular, agreed-upon outcomes (e.g., reduction in maritime crises).

But to do so, regional policymakers need to address the challenge of integrating defence and foreign policy instruments—bureaucratically represented by defence ministry and foreign ministry officials.

Since the 1990s, diplomacy in Southeast Asia has been driven by multilateralism and ASEAN-centric instruments. Consequently, ASEAN defence diplomacy carries the original pitfalls and promises of ASEAN institutions.

For one thing, ASEAN-related formal institutions and documents have historically focused less on practical policies; there has been less than a dozen “plan of actions” over four decades, for example. Consequently, while there are well-developed “habits of dialogue”, they have become a form of “cheap talk” over time.

By which I mean regional policymakers in recent years are less compelled to invest significant resources, nor do they incur high political costs, from engaging in ASEAN related meetings or activities. In other words, ASEAN diplomacy has become an easy, short-cut foreign policy positions to take or promote for regional countries.

Non-Traditional or Traditional Security?

For another, ASEAN’s predominant non-traditional security focus allows policymakers to “plug in” their preferred issue of choice, no matter how vague, under-developed, or too complex to tackle they are. Consequently, non-traditional security issues have become buzzwords that policymakers invoke when they want to give the impression they are “working on security challenges”.

In other words, non-traditional security becomes the stage for the “performance” of regional security management without investing in significant shared resources or strategy. After all, the more policymakers talk about non-traditional security, the less they need to talk about (the domestically costly) traditional security issues.

Finally, ASEAN security institutions have thus far focused on institution-building (i.e., diplomatic processes to create or sustain institutions). This has led to the ballooning of ASEAN-related meetings. By some account, ASEAN has to organise and complete over a thousand meetings a year for dozens of institutions across different issue areas.

On the one hand, the deepening web of meetings could increase habits of dialogue. But on the other hand, too frequent and too many meetings could lead to too little impact. Bloated meetings also lead to bloated bureaucratic layers. Over time, regional policymakers tend to focus on getting sentences into the joint statements or summaries of ASEAN meetings, rather than solving problems on the ground.

ADMM & ADMM-Plus: Maximising Potential

These “built-in” pitfalls and promises of ASEAN institutions provide the larger context in which we should assess ADMM and ADMM-Plus over the past decade. In general,

both processes and activities have focused on institution building and confidence building measures.

Practical cooperation that genuinely boosts capacity building and operational readiness has been few and far between—and has focused on a limited set of security issues.

Overall, ADMM-Plus appears to be less institutionalised than ADMM. But the general pattern of both institutions reflect and extend the ones we observe from ASEAN-related institutions discussed above. In short, both ADMM and ADMM-Plus remain focused on building and sustaining processes, rather than achieving strategic outcomes.

The central organising framework to address this shortcoming should be, not to abandon ADMM and ADMM-Plus, but to find ways to maximise their strategic potential. Two sets of policy suggestions are worth debating.

Policy Options

First, within the broader ASEAN remit, we might consider: reviewing the ASEAN Charter, deepening the practical engagement within ADMM first before ADMM-Plus, and formulating plans to review the security issue overlaps between ADMM-Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and other ASEAN-related institutions.

The review of the ASEAN Charter is necessary to address many of ASEAN's cumbersome institutional designs—from resources, funding, to decision-making—of ASEAN that has drained resources towards bureaucratic processes rather than strategic outcomes. The review process is also necessary to figure out which issues should the ADMM or ADMM-Plus further develop and push for, rather than “repeating” the same sets of discussions already taking place in ARF or other ASEAN-related institutions.

Second, beyond ASEAN, regional countries should consider boosting 2+2 meetings (defence and foreign ministers), improve the operational readiness of intra-ASEAN defence engagements, expand deepen extra-regional capacity building programmes, and find ways to develop institutional “link-ups” among the military-related events and activities, from the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Meeting to minilateral security cooperation.

Indeed, one of the perennial challenges of defence diplomacy is how to integrate the different military and diplomatic instruments and how defence and foreign ministry officials could sit together on a daily basis, rather than just before and during international events.

But if the ADMM and ADMM-Plus were to move from diplomatic goals like confidence building to defence goals like operational readiness, the integration and institutionalisation of defence and diplomatic instruments are necessary. Taken together, that Southeast Asian defence diplomacy inherits the challenges carried over by ASEAN institutions should not lead us to abandon ADMM and ADMM-Plus.

The strategic potential of Southeast Asian defence diplomacy could be further realised by seriously considering the integration of defence and diplomatic instruments as well as building the momentum to reform ASEAN institutions in general.

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