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Asian Multilateralism in Uncertain Times

ADMM-Plus: More European Engagement?

By Nicolas Regaud

SYNOPSIS

There is growing interest among European states for collaboration with ASEAN on security and defence matters through the ADMM-Plus. Although European applications for observer status at ADMM-Plus have so far been stymied, there should be room for greater engagement between ASEAN and Europeans in the field of defence and security cooperation.

COMMENTARY

EUROPEAN STATES and ASEAN are increasingly finding it critical to strengthen their security and defence cooperation. This is coming at a time of growing tensions between great powers, the weakening of multilateralism, an undermining of international law and the growing consequences of global risks and threats on international security -- in particular climate change, pandemics, terrorism, confrontation in cyberspace and at sea.

Participation in ADMM-Plus' activities would be a powerful symbol of closer collaboration between the two groupings in this regard, especially given that ADMM-Plus is a platform that brings together the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting and its security dialogue partners (hence the "Plus").

A Thwarted Rapprochement

As early as 2013, France expressed its wish to be able to participate in the activities of ADMM-Plus. This interest was received with caution, as the regional cooperation

platform created in 2010, it was argued, needed to be consolidated before being possibly enlarged.

To maintain the dialogue aimed at bringing Europeans and ASEAN countries closer together, the question of participation by non-Plus countries, as observers, was discussed. The proposed platform was in the Experts' Working Groups (EWGs), with rules of accession established.

France was the first to embark on this path, followed by the United Kingdom and the European Union. Each highlighted its strengths and in particular the added value of its participation in the activities of the seven EWGs under the ADMM-Plus and its expertise in the fields covered.

ASEAN members' cautious reception towards opening the platform to non-Plus countries is evident in the two documents produced in 2017 and 2018 to oversee the process of participation in EWGs activities. Three conditions were specified for accession to observer status.

Conditions for EWG Observer Status & Opposition

Firstly, observer status "is not a guarantee or a basis for eventual membership in the ADMM-Plus", an option only available for ASEAN dialogue partners, and a status that neither France nor the United Kingdom has;

Secondly, observer status excludes access to EWG meetings and is limited to activities like conferences, workshops and exercise, with a maximum of two EWGs; this is also valid for a three-year cycle of activities and there can only be one non-Plus country per activity;

Finally, for the sake of inclusiveness and respect for consensus, the ASEAN countries would submit the applications for agreement of all ADMM-Plus member countries.

The question is raised whether such precautions and limitations were essential to allow the participation of three candidates. Canada had also applied, while that of the EU was not considered admissible, as the rules of the ADMM-Plus precludes the candidacy of a regional organisation.

Unfortunately, two Plus-countries -- Russia and China -- opposed the three applications for observership, hindering the proposed expansion of the dialogue process with the Europeans.

Way Forward?

Against this backdrop, how can we strengthen Euro-ASEAN relations in the field of defence and security and unleash the potential for multilateral cooperation? There is no doubt that efforts must come from both sides, both at the political and practical levels.

ASEAN, under the chairmanship of Vietnam in 2020, paved the way by inviting the European Union, France and United Kingdom, as well as Canada and Germany, which

recently expressed its desire to apply for observership, to speak at the ADMM-Plus Defence Ministers' Meeting in December 2020.

It is significant that ASEAN and the EU decided to enhance their relationship by establishing a strategic partnership, as this was one way to stress the importance of openness, inclusivity and ASEAN centrality.

In 2020, a year after France developed its strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, Germany and the Netherlands adopted their own policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. This has created a positive momentum within the EU which is expected to soon engage in the development of an Indo-Pacific strategy.

Think-tanks: New Space for Dialogue

France and Great Britain have long been active in the region in the area of defence and security, having established close cooperative relations with most of the ASEAN countries. Moreover, the EU and its major member states, Germany in particular, should develop their regional security engagement.

They should also promote their already significant contribution to regional peace and security as well as their relevant expertise in the fields covered by the EWGs, which are the two main criteria for participating in ADMM-Plus activities.

For their part, the ASEAN countries could possibly reconsider the rules they have drawn up regarding cooperation with non-Plus countries in order to reaffirm the principle of ASEAN centrality.

As consensus in this regard may take time, a parallel path could possibly be explored by creating space for dialogue between ASEAN strategic research institutions - which exchange on a regular basis through the Network of ASEAN Defence and Security Institutions, NADI - and equivalent institutions from the EU and European ADMM-Plus applicant countries.

The work carried out within the framework of NADI contributes to the development of ADMM/ADMM-Plus by promoting a shared vision of strategic issues and new avenues of cooperation, such as the security impacts of climate change. This Track 2 mechanism is a welcome source of ideas and proposals for the benefit of ADMM.

Establishing regular exchanges with European strategic research institutions would promote convergences in terms of strategic analysis, a better understanding of regional expectations and the added value of Europeans, furthering the dynamic of dialogue even beyond the prospect of European participation in ADMM-Plus.

Game-changer?

Of course, European participation in ADMM-Plus activities would not be a game changer. Despite the success and importance of this regional platform for defence cooperation, the volume of its activities is still limited and they focus on non-traditional security areas.

But the question of European participation in ADMM-Plus -- even modest -- has acquired over time a high symbolic weight, and its realisation would illustrate a shared desire to face together global challenges of increasing importance, independent of the tensions between great powers.

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