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Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Possible Implications for ADMM-Plus

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SYNOPSIS

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has shocked the world. While this might not have significant impact on defence cooperation at the ASEAN level, it will be keenly felt at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), the platform for defence establishments in the region to discuss security issues.

COMMENTARY

Although the Russia-Ukraine conflict takes place far from the Southeast Asian region, it will have implications for ASEAN and ASEAN-led multilateral platforms. This will be especially the case for those platforms involving regional defence cooperation.

Many of the [initial responses](#) by ASEAN member states, with Singapore and Indonesia being notable exceptions, have been cautious and restricted to expressions of concern regarding the humanitarian impact of the war without criticising Russia. However, at the recent United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) vote on 2 March, which called upon Russia to end its military operations in Ukraine, most of the ASEAN member states voted in support of the resolution except Laos and Vietnam, which abstained. Both those countries have longstanding relations with Moscow. Notably, Myanmar also voted to support the resolution, but the country's UN representative was [appointed](#) by the ousted civilian government. The vote that was cast therefore does not represent the position of the military government, which has [called](#) Russia's invasion "justified".

However, when it came to ASEAN's collective view, an ASEAN Foreign Ministers [Statement](#) was released on 3 March, which simply expressed concerns regarding the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and called for a ceasefire and "peaceful dialogue". There was neither any direct criticism of, nor support for, Russia.

The key is how Cambodia, as the current ASEAN chair, will steer ASEAN with regard to the Russia-Ukraine war. Cambodia voted in support of the UNGA resolution. However, as demonstrated by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement, it also appears to be unwilling to rock the boat at the ASEAN level. This suggests that Cambodia, as the ASEAN chair, will continue promoting a neutral position within ASEAN, continuing to steer ASEAN in expressing concerns over the humanitarian impact of the war and calling for its end, while avoiding any outright condemnation of Russia.

Challenges Facing the ADMM-Plus

Given that the crisis is one involving the use of force, there is the question of how regional defence cooperation in the Asia-Pacific will be affected. At the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), a platform consisting of the defence establishments of the 10 ASEAN member states, there is unlikely to be much change in spite of the differing views of the war among the bloc's members. However, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) is a different matter. Its membership consists of the 10 ASEAN member states, as well as eight of ASEAN's dialogue partners (including Russia), collectively referred to as the "Plus countries". It is the Russian defence establishment — responsible for directing the war against Ukraine — that is a member of the ADMM-Plus.

The Plus countries include those that have longstanding and warm ties with Russia such as China and India, both of which abstained in the UNGA resolution. The rest of the Plus countries — Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and the United States — have taken far more antagonistic stances against Russia, voting in support of the resolution, in addition to imposing sweeping sanctions against Moscow.

Given Russia's strident denunciations of negative reactions to the invasion, it can be expected to shut down any discussion regarding Ukraine at the ADMM-Plus. Russia could use ASEAN's principle of consensus to block any references to Ukraine, even if other countries attempt to approach the issue through non-traditional security lenses, such as humanitarian assistance in the context of addressing the refugee crisis caused by the war.

Therefore, the prospect of a split within the ADMM-Plus cannot be completely ruled out. However, Cambodia as the ASEAN chair could use its good offices to negotiate between the "rival factions" within the ADMM-Plus to forestall such situations. Given Cambodia's approach as chair thus far, it is likely to continue conducting a balancing act to ensure that the Russia-Ukraine war does not completely derail the ADMM-Plus.

Risks to Practical Cooperation

Another thorny issue is the fate of the practical cooperation efforts that the ADMM and ADMM-Plus have painstakingly fostered over the years. The invasion of Ukraine is

likely to affect trust among the ADMM-Plus members and impact the prospects of continued cooperation.

There is one particular ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group (EWG) that will be particularly vulnerable in this respect — the EWG on Counter-Terrorism (CT), which is co-chaired by both Russia and Myanmar until 2023. Myanmar's defence representative previously used the 12th ADMM-Plus EWG on CT to rail against its National Unity Government opponents as "[terrorists](#)". There were nonetheless no apparent boycotts in this EWG.

However, as a co-chair, Russia could in future put even more stress on the EWG. Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service has warned that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries were "[sending terrorist fighters](#)" to Ukraine. Years before the war, Moscow had accused Ukraine of "[plotting terrorist attacks](#)" in Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. Should Russia use its prerogative as co-chair to peddle such narratives at EWG meetings, other countries can be expected to push back. This also brings to question whether the defence establishments of some countries would still be willing to work alongside Russian troops in a joint military exercise, not only in the EWG on CT, but in other EWGs as well.

In this regard, the prospect of "split" exercises in the next few years, with Russia, China and their partners participating in one ADMM-Plus exercise, and the other countries in a separate one, cannot be ruled out entirely. These are thorny problems that Cambodia as the ASEAN chair will face. It will require skilful leadership to navigate these difficulties, which are likely to persist beyond Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has implications beyond Europe and NATO. While it may have less of an effect at the ASEAN and ADMM levels, its impact will be felt far more keenly at the ADMM-Plus. Divisions among ADMM-Plus members could possibly emerge in the coming months, which will in turn affect practical cooperation among member states. Owing to this latest crisis, Cambodia as this year's ASEAN chair will now face another major challenge in steering the ADMM-Plus through these challenging times.

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