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ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus: Divisions amid Functional Cooperation?

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SYNOPSIS

Even as Indonesia successfully capped off its ASEAN chairmanship with the 17th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and 10th ADMM-Plus, major power rivalry and the intra-ASEAN problem of Myanmar have caused divisions in the Experts' Working Group (EWG) on Counter-Terrorism. Could this happen in other EWGs, and what can the ADMM do about it?

COMMENTARY

The recently concluded [17th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting](#) (ADMM) and [10th ADMM-Plus](#) saw numerous achievements, capping off a successful Indonesian ASEAN chairmanship. Some key achievements include the adoption of guidelines allowing Timor-Leste to participate in both forums as an observer, as well as the [Concept Paper](#) on the Implementation of ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) from A Defence Perspective, codifying the types of activities the ADMM can undertake under the auspices of the AOIP. The ADMM-Plus issued a Joint Statement on how it could support the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

While the ADMM, ADMM-Plus, and the Indonesian ASEAN chair have much to be proud of in 2023, outstanding geopolitical issues have not been fully addressed. The ADMM's [Jakarta Joint Declaration](#) made the usual reference to the code of conduct (COC) in the South China Sea and the Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar, but it was evident that there had been little substantive progress on these challenges. These could affect military cooperation at the ADMM-Plus, particularly in the Experts'

Working Groups (EWGs), whose purpose is to facilitate cooperation among the militaries of ADMM-Plus members in specific functional areas.

EWGs: Building Confidence or Sowing Division?

The ADMM-Plus has attempted to stay above the fray of major power politics to maintain cohesion and centrality. Nonetheless, in 2015 – a mere five years after the forum was established – the ADMM-Plus faced a challenge when there was no joint declaration issued that year due to disagreements among ASEAN member states over whether to include the South China Sea disputes. Malaysia, the ASEAN chair at the time, instead relied on the [sole issuance of a Chairman's Statement](#) – a document that does not require the consensus of all parties – which did highlight the issue, temporarily staving off fears that the ADMM-Plus was fragmenting.

Since then, however, there have been divisions in the ADMM-Plus EWG on Counter-Terrorism. In 2020, Myanmar and Russia began co-chairing the EWG, which started unremarkably. With Myanmar's coup in early 2021, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine starting in February 2022, cracks among the Plus countries began to emerge.



The 10th ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus in Jakarta, Indonesia, 16 November 2023. While the ADMM-Plus has attempted to avoid major power politics to maintain cohesion and centrality, disagreements and divisions have emerged among the Plus countries over the South China Sea disputes and more recently over the Experts' Working Group (EWG) on Counter-Terrorism. *Image by Wikimedia Commons.*

In mid-2022, [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), and [the United States](#) withdrew from an EWG meeting held in Moscow. The same countries, as well as Japan and South Korea, did not attend another [EWG meeting in December](#) that same year. With Myanmar's junta constantly [labelling its opponents](#) as “terrorists” and linking its suppression efforts with the EWG's activities, the no-shows by the five Plus countries [continued](#).

One must be cautious about assuming that non-attendance at an EWG is equivalent to a boycott. There could be other reasons, such as more pressing matters back home necessitating an ADMM-Plus team to skip an EWG meeting. For example, [the Philippines](#) was not present at the 12th ADMM-Plus EWG on Maritime Security in

2017. This was not regarded as a boycott, nor did it portend a split within the ADMM-Plus at the time.

However, in the case of the EWG on Counter-Terrorism, one can conclude that such no-shows were meant to send a political message. Indeed, [New Zealand](#) and [the United States](#) had made clear that their non-attendance in mid-2022 were meant to signal their displeasure towards the co-chairs.

Even so, the junta's representatives continue to participate in other EWGs. Notably, they participated in meetings and tabletop exercises hosted by the 2020-2023 co-chairs of the [EWG on Maritime Security](#) – Thailand and the United States.

A Fresh Start with Caveats

With [India](#) and [Malaysia](#) confirmed as the new co-chairs of the EWG on Counter-Terrorism for 2024-2027, the EWG is likely to get back on track. The issue seems to have resolved itself with the changing of co-chairs, yet other EWGs remain vulnerable to such divisions.

One such EWG would be that on Maritime Security, which will be co-chaired by the [Philippines and Japan](#). How the co-chairs manage meetings and exercises will be of interest, given that both countries have territorial disputes with China. Manila's [spats](#) with Beijing show only [heightened tensions](#) in the near future, and those between Tokyo and Beijing often [simmer beneath the surface](#) despite a recent meeting between leaders of both countries. The possibility of China withdrawing its participation from the EWG cannot be ruled out if it is rattled by the linking of territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas with the EWG's activities.

There is also the prospect of similar developments taking place at the EWG on Humanitarian Mine Action, which will be co-chaired by [Laos and Russia](#). Given Moscow's war against Kyiv, which has included extensive [Russian deployment of mines](#) in [Ukraine](#), Russia's co-chairmanship will likely be a highly contentious one.

Way Forward

As long as the Myanmar crisis and major power tensions persist, one can only expect divisions seeping further into the ADMM-Plus and its EWGs. But what can the ADMM and ADMM-Plus do about it?

First, the ADMM could internally discuss and agree on how to mitigate the risks of such divisions. This is the first thing the defence establishments of ASEAN countries should do to maintain ASEAN Centrality over the ADMM-Plus.

Second, EWGs are not the only platforms that host defence meetings as well as joint and combined exercises. In recent times, ASEAN has conducted numerous exercises with major powers, especially in an ASEAN+1 format with countries like [China](#), [India](#), [Russia](#), and the [United States](#). Particularly in EWGs where cracks have appeared, the ASEAN chair could push for separate meetings or military exercises with specific Plus countries in the EWG's respective functional areas to ensure cooperation remains inclusive. For example, Laos, as co-chair of the EWG on Humanitarian Mine Action,

could use its upcoming ASEAN chairmanship to host separate mine-clearing exercises with selected Plus members if the Russian co-chair proves too controversial for those countries.

Finally, it will also be up to the co-chairs of each EWG to determine how best to avoid no-shows. While it is ultimately at the discretion of the co-chairs to lead EWG meetings and exercises, they should be mindful of political ramifications in the way the meetings and exercises are planned. This applies, for example, to the aforementioned EWG on Maritime Security, where the co-chairs can avoid linking their territorial disputes to the EWG's activities. Moreover, in the event of absences in any EWG, the co-chairs will need to manage the optics with the remaining participants and ensure the utility of the EWG is still well-regarded.

Conclusion

Divisions within the ADMM-Plus may become more common in the future due to ASEAN's internal problems and broader geopolitical tensions. As such, the ADMM should determine how to deal with such matters in the spirit of maintaining ASEAN Centrality and not be caught flat-footed when they occur. The ADMM-Plus should exercise flexibility in its efforts to promote defence cooperation and host meetings and exercises outside of the EWGs, should such divisions manifest. This task will become ever more urgent as major power rivalry is likely to continue, and with Myanmar's crisis showing no sign of abating.

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