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No. 039/2024 dated 28 March 2024

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting: A Platform for Climate Security Cooperation

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SYNOPSIS

In the face of continued climate challenges in Southeast Asia, ASEAN must build institutional capacity in climate security through regional cooperation and collaboration. Considering the role of militaries as the first responders in the region, building capacity can be done by expanding present mechanisms such as the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Groups to include climate security as part of the region's defence cooperation mandate.

COMMENTARY

The recently published [State of Global Climate report](#) by the World Meteorological Organisation has sounded a climate "red alert" to the world. Confirming 2023 as the hottest year on record by a significant margin, the report further emphasises the current global state, highlighting records broken for extreme temperatures, ocean heat, and sea-level rise, along with the continuing intensification of extreme weather and disaster events around the world.

These developments are of particular interest to Asia, and indeed to Southeast Asia, which in 2023 alone [faced over a thousand disaster events](#), including several major disasters such as Tropical Cyclone Mocha and Typhoon Doksuri (Egay). While there were fewer disasters in 2023 than in 2022, these numbers reflect the disaster-prone nature of the region, a propensity which is only likely to intensify in the face of climate change.

For the militaries in the region – which are heavily involved as first responders in times of humanitarian emergencies – climate security has therefore become an area of focus. Considering the clear transboundary nature of climate change and the established preference for regional cooperation in disaster response, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and its related platforms are therefore an ideal forum for convening and promoting collaborative climate action between militaries.

The Current Climate Security Context in ASEAN

Broadly, climate security can be understood as the risks caused by climate change. Specifically, it refers to the effects of climate change on the wider geopolitical environment, including extreme weather events and rising sea levels. As critical actors in national security and contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, militaries around the world are becoming increasingly engaged in this space. The view that climate change affects global security was reflected in [recent remarks made by NATO's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg](#), in which he emphasised the need to fight global warming and, more pressingly, highlighted climate change as a “crisis multiplier” with implications for global security.

The recognition of climate change as a security issue requiring the development and adoption of strategies, operations, and tactics to tackle the issue as part of a wider national security strategy is also reflected in the [defence white papers and/or national policy papers](#) adopted by various ASEAN members such as Malaysia's [2020 Defence White Paper](#) and the [Philippines National Defence Strategy](#). Elsewhere in Asia, Japan has showed increasing attention to climate security, as seen in its [2021 Defence White Paper](#), where climate change was for the first time explicitly recognised as a national security issue.

On the other hand, considering Southeast Asia's exposure to disasters and the prevalence of militaries as first responders during disaster events, climate security needs to be given increased consideration, specifically in terms of regional defence cooperation through regional forums such as the ADMM.

ADMM as a Platform for Defence Cooperation

In fact, climate security had indeed been highlighted in the recent ADMM in November 2023. The [Jakarta Joint Declaration of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting for Peace, Prosperity and Security](#) that was issued as an outcome of the meeting recognised climate change as a complex security challenge for ASEAN.



Climate security had recently been highlighted in the 10th ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus in Jakarta, Indonesia, 16 November 2023, and was recognised as a complex security challenge for ASEAN.
Image from Wikimedia Commons.

That this declaration was made at the ADMM was not incidental. As ASEAN's "[highest defence consultative and cooperative mechanism](#)", the ADMM is a key regional platform for multilateral defence cooperation. Through this platform and the ADMM-Plus, which includes ASEAN's dialogue partners as well, ASEAN member states are able to cooperate in meeting defence and security challenges in the region and thereby promote peace and stability. Already in place as mechanisms for international cooperation, the ADMM and ADMM-Plus can therefore be used to address responses by the member countries' defence establishments to climate crises.

By broadening the mandate of the ADMM to include climate security, states can use this platform to coordinate responses by their militaries and expand their base of mutual knowledge on climate change and its security impacts on the region. This can be done through the creation of a new Experts' Working Group (EWG) focusing on climate security, or even by simply expanding the remit of the already existing EWG for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), which can serve as a vehicle for practical cooperation. The second option might be particularly apt for this region, considering the regional propensity to link HADR and climate change, due in part to the heavy involvement of militaries during disaster response operations, as reflected in the various ASEAN member states' [defence white policy papers and/or national policy papers](#).

The EWG can then be used by militaries in the region as a platform through which they can collaborate and jointly develop a regional framework for climate security. Such a framework could be based on the recently released [Concept Paper on the Implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific \(AOIP\) from a Defence Perspective](#), which is set to be adopted and implemented.

Defence forces need to have a deep understanding of how climate change is likely to affect not just the security environment in which they operate, but also how their strategies, personnel, bases, installations, and equipment could be affected. The

ADMM could fulfil this need for deeper understanding by developing a climate security perspective of the [ASEAN State of Climate Change Report](#). By examining and analysing the current climate security landscape in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, such a report could be used to assess regional military capabilities in light of future challenges and plan ahead, informing the overall climate security framework for ASEAN.

Beyond simply providing guidelines for responding to climate disasters, this framework should also include methods for militaries to mitigate their own contributions to climate change. Militaries of ASEAN should therefore also prioritise reducing greenhouse gas emissions arising from their military activities and installations, as well as incorporate climate change considerations into defence planning, capability development and civil preparedness and exercises.

These activities could take the form of potential collaboration between militaries through information-sharing as well as joint research and development. Such a climate framework can then be used to better organise bilateral and multilateral engagement between ASEAN militaries and their dialogue partners, which would in turn help strengthen the regional capacity of the ASEAN militaries in dealing with climate change.

Overall, climate change is the defining challenge for humanity in this era, and Southeast Asia is no exception. In fact, considering that Southeast Asia is one of the most climate vulnerable regions in the world, it is especially important for ASEAN to step up to this challenge. Doing so is especially important for militaries in the region, which are heavily involved as first responders in times of humanitarian emergencies. Only by engaging with other regional militaries through cooperative mechanisms such as the ADMM can ASEAN member states build the institutional capacities of their defence establishments and militaries.

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