

Regional Security: New Emerging Trends and Challenges

Achievements of ASEAN

It is now almost 50 years since ASEAN was established and it has made significant accomplishments. It began embarking upon community-building efforts since 2007 and in April 2015, the 26th ASEAN Summit announced that 90.5 percent out of the 506 measures in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Scorecard has been implemented. Today, ASEAN is the seventh largest economy in the world, and as it continues to pursue its integration process, it is projected to become the fourth largest economy by 2050.

ASEAN is also central to the peace and stability in the region. While the ASEAN Political-Security (APSC) and Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) pillars are not as measurable as the AEC, and are often more complicated, ASEAN has always sought to develop its capacity so that it would be able to continue maintain regional peace and stability. It was in 2006 when ASEAN decided to elevate defence cooperation to ministerial level. Three years later, it expanded this cooperation to dialogue partners. By involving its extra-regional partners, ASEAN is not only able to intensify its dialogue, it is also able to engage in a significant level of practical cooperation.

The six Expert Working Groups (EWGs) under the ADMM (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting) Plus so far conduct annual multilateral exercises, established an ASEAN Centre for Military Medicine and an ASEAN Centre for Peacekeeping Network, and is currently working towards a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). While these efforts reflect ASEAN's determination to strengthen its capacity to address and respond to security challenges, it also places a premium on fostering camaraderie among military personnel and defence officials. Indeed, many of the 3,000 personnel who were involved during the inaugural ADMM-Plus HADR/MM exercise in 2013 have not worked together before, and they managed to put aside their differences in order to work towards common goals. In addition to nurturing trust and confidence, ASEAN took a step further to introduce mechanisms to prevent the escalation of tension and conflict such as through the Direct Communications Link (DCL).

Reflecting upon ASEAN's overall achievements so far, it has created a strong foundation that does not only allow it to further its cooperation, but also to manage destabilising situations. Yet, recent developments have indicated that ASEAN needs to continue to be vigilant. The economic and geopolitical landscape remains dynamic and adds to the complexity of the security challenges faced by the region today.

Emerging Trends and Challenges

At the outset, the current **economic situation** has varying implications to individual ASEAN member states where some economic growth prospects are better than others. The projected aggregate growth of ASEAN as a whole is stable, from around 4.3 percent in 2015 to 4.9 percent by 2017. As ASEAN forge closer links with three of its top trading partners - China, Japan and the US, it is vulnerable to the slow economic growth in the two heavy economic weights in particular, China and Japan. China's slowing growth since 2011 to below 7 percent has been referred to as the new normal, as the country rebalances its economy from investment driven to domestic consumption and services. Consequently, there is a fall in demand of commodities and decline of commodity prices, in particular oil and gas. Since ASEAN consists of economies that depend on global export and import of commodities, a slow in demand for commodities would mean weaker economic prospects for those economies.

Oil prices are influenced both by economic growth and geopolitical situation. Currently, the market does not only have an abundant supply of oil, there is also an increase in players in the oil market, from Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and non-OPEC countries to US shale producers and Iran. As such, it would be difficult to cut the supply of oil and rebalance prices back to peak levels in the past. In the long run, the rebalance of oil prices will take time.

Notwithstanding these, the US Federal Bank's decision to hike interest rates late last year also has implications to the region. It is the first interest hike since 2006, signalling a shift to tighter monetary policy. The potential drain of capital flow will likely exacerbate the slow economic growth for emerging markets. Lack of confidence from investors could increase the cost of borrowing. High interest rates increase the value of US dollar, making debts more expensive. For countries that are already facing economic and political turmoil, they will face more difficulty as they try to stimulate their economies.

Against this backdrop, **ongoing strategic shifts** also have implications onto the region. In recent years, the US, Japan and China have strengthened their respective strategic policy, including in defence and security. Major and emerging powers seek to continue to rebalance their role and assert influence in the region. Differing perceptions of the security environment fuel security dilemma as well as nationalistic sentiments and strategic distrust. Ultimately, any form of conflict among major and emerging powers is not good for the region. The concern is when ASEAN member states get caught in the middle of the competition for influence.

In this regard, ASEAN centrality is important because it allows ASEAN to have its say in shaping the region. However, this prospect is determined by its success in achieving the visions of the ASEAN Community, together with the support of its dialogue partners and

friends. So far, even with their respective rebalancing, ASEAN's partners and friends have been supportive of its vision and have contributed to enhancing its capacities.

At the same time, **security threats** today continues to **evolve** and sometimes unconventional in nature, requiring ASEAN to adapt. Quite recently, humanitarian security has been brought to the forefront. The multifaceted character of the **refugee crisis** demonstrates the nature of today's security challenges. The people stranded in the Andaman Sea do not only comprise refugees who are fleeing discrimination and prosecution by a State, but also Bangladeshi migrants who are fleeing poverty in their country. Then, apart from the grievances of the people, authorities are also required to look at the role of human smuggling, people trafficking and corruption in exacerbating the problem. The humanitarian assistance required by the crisis is not what ASEAN is used to and currently, it is exploring mechanisms and framework to allow it to address the issue.

Meanwhile, the rise of **ISIS** marked the first time the international community has to face the threat of a non-state actor of this scale. The threat of ISIS to Southeast Asia takes three forms: i. the possibility of ISIS operating in Southeast Asia, ii. radicalisation of the population, and iii. return of fighters to their home countries after training with ISIS in Syria and/or Iraq. Several countries in the region such as Malaysia and Singapore have managed to apprehend individuals using their ports as transit points. However, putting a halt to ISIS' ambitions and influence in this region requires ASEAN to move beyond merely adopting reactionary measures; ASEAN needs to make sure that it takes measures that are several steps ahead of ISIS. It is bewildering that developments in a region as far as the Middle East have real impact onto Southeast Asia, prompting ASEAN of the need to be aware of developments beyond its immediate surroundings.

Some security issues are outside the jurisdiction of the APSC, but the ADMM still needs to be aware of them because they indicate that the regional environment is becoming more and more unpredictable. One example is the **unpredictable weather** that the region has been experiencing. In 2015, the peatland fires in parts of Indonesia were exacerbated by the El Nino. In January 2016, at least 12 people died as a result of an "unusually cold weather" in Thailand, where temperature dropped to below 5 degrees Celsius in some areas. In March 2016, several schools are closed in some Malaysian states because of a heat wave.

As ASEAN embark on a journey to further improve the quality of life of its people, the region will be more vulnerable to forces of globalisation. In an era where time and space have shrunk, population becomes more educated and well-informed. In turn, this makes societies have **higher expectations** from their government. The widespread use of social media subjects national and foreign policies to public debate. Ensuring internal stability becomes an utmost concern for many countries in this region. Sometimes, governments are faced with the difficulty of needing to balance between fulfilling a regional or international obligation and pacifying public demands.

ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together

The ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together roadmap seeks to build upon its past achievements and deepen the integration process. It presents promising opportunities to address the security concerns mentioned above. However, in a security environment that continues to evolve and becoming more unpredictable, ASEAN also needs to evolve.

It was in 1967 when the foreign ministers of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore came together and articulated the political, economic and social hardship at that time. The result of the deliberation was the conception of ASEAN. As it was then, today's challenges also require articulation, even more so with the evolving nature of security threats. There is a need to emulate the courage that ASEAN's founding fathers had so that it is ASEAN that conceptualises the developments in this region, and not a foreign element with its own vested interest.

Hence, the new roadmap's emphasis on enhancing strategic dialogue is a much welcomed development. A strategic dialogue within the ADMM could help encourage an ASEAN voice that is clear and resolute.

Where NADI Comes In

NADI is the only Track II network recognised by the ADMM to provide inputs for the ADMM's use. NADI should make full use of this opportunity, as well as the opportunity to play a more active role with the new APSC blueprint's emphasis on enhancing strategic dialogue. NADI could have an open discussion on the strategic environment and implications for the APSC in the future. While in NADI meetings and workshops each member presents from the view of their respective country, there needs to be as much or more reflection on ASEAN's views in both security and strategic challenges.