

Strengthening ASEAN Unity And Centrality

Presented by NADI Brunei Darussalam

Introduction

Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has managed to place itself in the center of regional dynamics.

In ensuring ASEAN's centrality and role as the driving force in the evolving regional architecture, ASEAN member states felt an urgent need for a stronger and integrated ASEAN, and to establish the ASEAN Community sooner. It was for this reason that ASEAN leaders agreed in 2007 to move the date of the establishment of the ASEAN Community from 2020 to 2015.

ASEAN had since placed more emphasis on community building and integration through strengthening its three pillars – the ASEAN Political Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

The ADMM, as everyone is aware, is one of the six sectorals under the APSC, together with ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), ASEAN Law Ministers' Meeting (ALAWMM), and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC).

The ADMM is a very young ministerial mechanism, only established relatively recently, nearly 40 years after ASEAN's establishment. Previous discussions between ASEAN defence officials were only confined to the ARF Defence officials Dialogue, a mechanism with a much bigger membership and a number of institutional limitations.

Within the ARF DoD, ASEAN centrality seem to be lacking and participants to the dialogue meet as equal partners. Even in considering the future activities and future directions of the ARF, an ASEAN position to guide the meeting had been absent. Perhaps due to the limitations of the ARF, ASEAN defence officials have placed lesser attention or resources in this mechanism than to meetings related to the ADMM. The agenda is also determined by the co-chairing country hosting the particular meeting at the time; and it does not necessarily build on previous meetings.

It was only in 2005, when the ADMM was established, did defence cooperation progress at a much quicker pace. This was a reflection on the need to move regional defence cooperation to the next level. At the Inaugural ADMM held in Kuala Lumpur, defence ministers noted the prevailing peace and stability in the region, but also agreed that security challenges remained that required continued efforts to address them. Consideration of defence matters was then promoted to the level of defence ministers, enhancing the regional approach to common challenges and addressing them through dialogue and cooperation.

As early as the ADMM's first meeting, defence ministers felt the need to engage other stakeholders in the region. While the ADMM provided the platform for ASEAN defence ministers for dialogue and cooperation, the absence of a mechanism that brought together defence ministers of major regional powers was still absent. Kevin Rudd's proposal in 2008 for an 'Asia Pacific Community' by 2020 was just one example of a regional architecture model where ASEAN may not be able to exert its influence effectively. There was thus an urgent need for an ASEAN driven mechanism for regional *defence* dialogue and cooperation.

To ensure ASEAN's centrality in the evolving regional security architecture, ASEAN Defence Ministers established the ADMM-PLUS in 2010 – a year earlier than originally planned. This was a very big step for ASEAN Defence Ministers, many of whom had been stressing the need to move at a pace comfortable to all (which was basically a diplomatic way of telling others not to move too fast). While it took ASEAN decades to engage dialogue partners, it took the ADMM only four years.

Another important reason for the establishment of the ADMM-PLUS is obviously the expertise and knowledge that dialogue partners can bring to the membership through practical cooperation. Through the ADMM-PLUS, ASEAN members have been able to further pursue its priorities. The Expert Working Groups (EWGs) have made substantial progress on HADR, maritime security, peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, military medicine and (to some extent) humanitarian mine action – much more than the ten ASEAN members could have managed by themselves.

A United ASEAN?

ASEAN Member States have always regarded the issue of its unity and centrality in regional affairs, with utmost importance.

When reference is made on ASEAN unity and centrality, it is usually in the context of its relations with its dialogue partners, which include major as well as emerging powers.

Through the various ASEAN documents at the Summit and Ministerial levels, it is clear that the ten member states had been able to agree on many issues.

However, differences were perhaps most visible in 2012 when ASEAN Foreign Ministers failed to agree on the final communiqué for the first time in its 45 years of existence. The failure was blamed on disagreements on how to address the South China Sea; and though ASEAN cannot be expected to agree on every single issue it faces, concluding a ministerial meeting without a document was unprecedented. ASEAN suffered a blow to its credibility with its inability to deal with an issue in its own backyard *and* be united, at least in approaching a matter of common interest.

2012 was a wake up call for ASEAN and showed that the grouping's unity cannot be taken for granted.

In the ADMM the following year, much of the effort was focused in strengthening unity and the region's own capacity to respond to challenges.

Three initiatives were pushed forward:

- ASEAN Logistics Support Framework, intended to support coordination mechanisms in mobilizing military assets and capacities for a more effective and cohesive response to challenges
- ASEAN Direct Communications Link, to be established between ASEAN defence operations centers, will be a practical confidence and security-building measure that aims to promote quick response in emergency situations, in particular relating to maritime security.
- ASEAN Defence Interaction Programme, to promote and enhance people-to-people contacts

within ASEAN defence and military establishments.

There has also been wide agreement that community-building efforts should continue after 2015, in order to strengthen the ASEAN Community.

In 2013, ASEAN Leaders instructed its Ministers to expedite their work on developing the ASEAN Community's post-2015 vision.

In fact, two years before that, ASEAN Leaders at their 19th ASEAN Summit in Bali in November 2011 committed to creating by the year 2022 an "ASEAN common platform" on global issues with four characteristics as spelled out in the Bali Declaration on ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations ("Bali Concord III"):

- A more coordinated, cohesive, and coherent ASEAN position on global issues of common interest and concern, based on a shared ASEAN global view, which would further enhance ASEAN's common voice in relevant multilateral fora;
- An enhanced ASEAN capacity to contribute and respond to key global issues of common interest and concern which would benefit all ASEAN Member States and its peoples;
- A strengthened ASEAN Community centered on ASEAN as a rules-based organization, with the ASEAN Charter as the foundation, while upholding the fundamental principles, values and norms of ASEAN; and
- A strengthened capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat which is able to support the vision and development of the ASEAN Community in a global community of nations."

Designed to strengthen unity and promote ASEAN's centrality in regional affairs, the establishment of the platform presents another important test on ASEAN unity. ASEAN Member States would have to strike a balance between sovereignty, non-interference, and national identity on the one hand; and shared commitment, collective responsibility, and the common interests of ASEAN on the other hand.

Recommendations

So what can ASEAN, and specifically the ADMM do next?

1. The ADMM must continue building on established cooperation initiatives – although they are *established*, more progress is still needed in building individual national capacities. These initiatives are mainly in the non-traditional security areas, and while much of the traditional security challenges may not be addressed adequately by the ADMM and the ADMM-Plus, these traditional security challenges are often sources of division.

The ADMM must also continue its efforts in managing possible tensions. The ongoing ADMM-led exercises can contribute to this by encouraging interaction between personnel at the front lines at the personal level. Other examples include those related to safety of navigation and communication at sea such as direct communication links, and cooperation in search and rescue. Other non-defence examples could already be found in the DOC on the South China Sea, including cooperation in marine scientific research, environmental protection, combating transnational crime, and these can be taken up by other agencies as appropriate.

2. Strengthening the ASEAN Defence Interaction Program.

As a region with rich histories, many of us represented here would also have disputes that continue to this day. Dispute resolution always calls for political will, but many times it may also require the wisdom of future generations.

There have been many forums at the senior officials, ministerial and leaders' level, but interaction at the junior officials has been limited. The first interaction program for junior defence officials was held last year in Brunei and while it was perhaps necessary that the first few programs be more social and interpersonal in nature, and involve a more general personal interaction, perhaps it would be useful to organize track 1.5 conferences for mainly junior and mid level officers to enhance mutual respect and understanding at that level.

Nurturing investments in regional relations *earlier* through junior officers can help promote regional unity and regional identity while being mindful of the diversity in historical and

cultural heritage. A track 1.5 conference could provide a platform to inspire the youth and imbue future generations with a stronger sense of collective responsibility for the region's future.

3. Stronger support by NADI to Track 1.

Being previously in Track 1, I know how busy the ADMM agenda is, busier at the ADSOM level and even more so at the working group level, with hardly enough space for discussion on priorities outside the formal agenda. The ASEAN Common Platform that is due in 2022 could prove to be a bigger challenge for its members. I think the informal dialogue with the track 1 through the ADSOM WG chairman has been useful in trying to gauge areas where Track 1 requires strong input. NADI has the capacity and is well placed to provide this strong input.

With seven years to go, NADI's contributions may be crucial in establishing a common platform in the defence sectoral.

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