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ADMM Plus: New Twists to Old Security Issues

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The inaugural ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) is the latest move by ASEAN to influence and shape the regional security architecture in a changing global order. Significantly, it is kicking off by tackling non-traditional security challenges.

Commentary

SOON AFTER its inauguration in Hanoi on 12 Oct 2010, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) billed itself as a “milestone in ASEAN history”. Indeed, its significance is not just for ASEAN but also the wider Asia Pacific region. There have been countless regional meetings of ministers. But never before have defence ministers sat down together in a large group, and in a formal setting -- with a structured agenda to discuss peace, stability and development in the region. That's a breakthrough.

Also, this first-ever summit of defence ministers in the Asia Pacific region included some of the world's military powers. The eight invited countries were the United States, Russia, China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. Defence ministers of major military powers coming together for a common purpose is rare, in fact unprecedented. So the emergence of this new platform to promote understanding and cooperation amongst them is a feat. There is now a common desire to meet and talk, though where this will lead to remains an open question.

Still, with the creation of the ADMM Plus, the ASEAN-driven regional architecture that addresses political and security challenges in the Asia Pacific region is now more complete. Indeed, the ADMM Plus met against the backdrop of new perspectives on security -- as well as new twists to old security issues.

Changing Security Perspectives

Though the participants were defence ministers, their immediate agenda was security of a new kind -- not of guns and bombs, but security of the non-traditional variant. They focused on five core issues for immediate cooperation -- disaster relief, peacekeeping, military medicine, maritime security and counter-terrorism. In fact, since the ADMM forum proper was initiated by ASEAN in 2006, the key areas for collaboration included humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and even working with civil society organisations on “non-traditional security” issues.

These are non-sensitive issues and therefore easy to attract consensus and agreement. This non-controversial approach eases everyone into the cooperative mood, which will enable the ADMM Plus to tackle the tougher issues later. But there is also a new logic to this emphasis: security today has been redefined. While traditional security refers to states having to prepare for war to defend their sovereignty, non-traditional security today means protecting the well being of the citizen from non-military threats. Because the threats and challenges are also increasingly transnational – meaning they cut across borders -- countries have to cooperate more closely to deal with non-traditional security issues.

As the Chairman's Statement noted, complex and transnational security challenges "are beyond the scope of any country to handle alone". The region is also prone to natural disasters. Failure of states to deal with calamities can also lead to instability and cross-border problems such as forced migration. In such emergency situations, it is more often than not the militaries that are most ready, most equipped and most organised to extend humanitarian assistance.

The militaries are increasingly finding themselves confronted not by the prospects of war and conflict but by the prospects of human disasters, which, if not handled well, can also lead to conflict, insecurity and instability. All this is a recipe for a more explosive region down the road. The best way to deal with such a future is to prepare for it through cooperation.

Significantly, the immediate challenges identified by the ADMM Plus were climate change, natural disasters, transnational crimes, infectious diseases as well as maritime security and terrorism. Indeed, the ADMM Plus agreed to deepen cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

Old Issues, New Twists

At the same time, long-standing security issues are not going away. The ADMM Plus met against the backdrop of new tensions in the region sparked by old bugbears. Two of these stemmed from current flashpoints in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

Beijing has caused some restiveness in the region with its new assertiveness over its claims to these waters. In the case of the East China Sea, this had led to an unprecedented war of words with Japan. To the south, reports of Beijing upgrading its South China Sea claim as a "core interest" have generated tension with the US and some nervousness within ASEAN. The broader regional concern is its impact on maritime access to vital sealanes that are the lifeline of world trade and commerce.

Significantly, several of the protagonists in these disputes were present at the Hanoi meeting, namely the defence ministers of China, Japan and the US – three of the key players whose postures and policies are critical to peace and stability in the Asia Pacific. Surprisingly, the rising tensions over these issues seemed to have toned down in the run-up to the ADMM Plus summit. Was the emergence of the ADMM Plus a factor for the lowering of temperature?

ADMM Plus and East Asia Summit

The ADMM Plus is the new kid on the block in the evolving regional security architecture. It will further entrench ASEAN's position as a major player in the world of security diplomacy. By starting off with a focus on non-traditional security issues -- such as climate change, natural disasters, infectious diseases, transnational crimes and terrorism -- the ADMM Plus is plugging a major gap in tackling these new dimensions in security.

Equally important, the ground-breaking ADMM Plus was established just before this year's East Asia Summit (EAS) to be held in a week's time – with the likely participation of the foreign ministers of two world powers who attended the ADMM Plus, the US and Russia. This can only mean that this increasingly important dimension -- non-traditional security -- will get growing attention in a changing regional order.

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