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Creating Synergies between the ADMM and Sub-regional Arrangements

By Sarah Teo and Tan Wei

Over the past 15 years, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) has actively promoted dialogue and practical cooperation in the defence sector. Its three-yearly work programmes cover a range of shared challenges faced by ASEAN member states, and seek to improve communication and strengthen collaboration towards addressing issues of common regional concern, such as piracy.

Amid these ASEAN-level efforts, the fact remains that the security challenges that each ASEAN member state faces could be vastly different from one another's. Piracy, specifically, involves littoral countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, much more than landlocked Laos.

Consequently, even as the ADMM has been useful for broad dialogue and confidence building involving the 10 ASEAN member states, sub-regional arrangements such as the Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP) — involving Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand — and the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) — involving Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines — have arguably been where most of the ground-level action happens when it comes to tackling piracy.

While acknowledging that these sub-regional arrangements and the ADMM serve different functions, there may also be value in looking at the potential synergies between the two types of mechanisms. The ADMM itself has alluded to the need for increased coordination among relevant initiatives. Stronger linkages between sub-regional arrangements and the ADMM would be useful in bolstering ASEAN-level responses towards regional security threats.

There are several ways that the ADMM could work together with sub-regional arrangements such as the MSP and TCA.



ASEAN members of an ADMM-Plus EWG review disaster scenarios and relief efforts at Kuala Lumpur in 2019.
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Enhancing ADMM's Role vis-à-vis Sub-regional Arrangements

One option would be for the ADMM to coordinate and facilitate the exchange of best practices and lessons learnt from the various sub-regional mechanisms. Information-sharing networks certainly do already exist, such as in the form of the ASEAN Maritime Security Community Information-Sharing Portal (AMSCIP) and the Information Fusion Centre hosted by the Republic of Singapore Navy. Moreover, similar exchanges are facilitated by the Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) of the ADMM-Plus, a platform for the ADMM to engage defence ministers from ASEAN's eight Dialogue Partners (i.e., Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States). However, the lack of publicly available EWG documents makes it difficult to ascertain the extent of such sharing.

Nevertheless, the ADMM could step up to be the central knowledge-sharing platform for regional defence-related arrangements. In working towards this objective, it would be useful for the ADMM to go beyond boosting its own links with individual sub-regional arrangements and consider how it could serve to foster exchanges between these various arrangements.

Facilitating exchanges between the MSP and TCA via the ADMM, for instance, would not only help to anchor ASEAN's central role in tackling a key security concern of the region; it would also supplement ASEAN's capacity-building efforts in counter-piracy, as the related mechanisms would operate less in silos and may benefit from greater coordination.

Another way to increase linkages between the ADMM and sub-regional mechanisms would be through encouraging other ASEAN member states to take up observership opportunities. This is indeed already occurring. Prior to its induction as an MSP participant in 2008, Thailand had held observer status for three years. Myanmar and

Vietnam also [have](#) been MSP observers. Meanwhile, Thailand, Brunei and Singapore have been [suggested](#) as possible participants or observers in the TCA, with the latter two countries observing the launch of the Trilateral Maritime Patrols in 2017.

It bears emphasising that this is not an argument for the expansion of MSP or TCA membership. Rather, it is about leveraging the flexibility that observership offers. Extending observership to all ASEAN member states — perhaps on a rotational basis — would support the ADMM's attempts to build confidence and shape mutual understanding of security outlooks.

Such operationally focused minilaterals, moreover, offer the advantage of cultivating more substantial rapport among participating states. These arrangements would therefore benefit from being reframed more prominently as an additional key tool for confidence building, complementing the plethora of measures that already exist under the ADMM framework.

Last but not least, the ADMM could consider incorporating specific mentions of sub-regional arrangements into its three-year work programmes. The 2017–2019 work programme, for instance, [called](#) for the promotion of “maritime security cooperation among ADMM Member States and Plus countries and with other related regional maritime fora”, but did not specifically list the MSP and TCA.

Formally including these sub-regional arrangements into the ADMM work programme might be a tentative first step towards creating greater synergies between the two types of mechanisms.

Conclusion

The *raison d'être* of most sub-regional arrangements has been the management of specific threats, with membership logically being exclusive to states sharing similar security concerns. In contrast, the ADMM has pursued a broader and more inclusive form of defence cooperation and dialogue among the 10 ASEAN member states.

Precisely because of their different forms and functions, synergies between the ADMM and sub-regional mechanisms should be explored. A more concerted effort towards tackling challenges such as piracy would add value to the work conducted by individual sub-regional arrangements, as well as the ADMM's efforts in that area and ASEAN's role in regional security as a whole.

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