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ASEAN Plus Eight Defence Cooperation: Rise of a New Player

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

The ground-breaking ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus Eight convened for the first time last week. The emergence of the ADMM Plus will have implications for ASEAN and the evolving regional security architecture.

Commentary

UNTIL 2006, when there was an agreement to hold annual meetings of ASEAN ministers of defence, defence cooperation took place on a bilateral basis within ASEAN. A significant defence-related development in the Asia-Pacific is the agreement on an ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus Eight (ADMM Plus Eight) process as an integral part of the ADMM. The defence ministers of the ten ASEAN states together with their counterparts from China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India, Russia and the United States, met for the first time as a group in Hanoi on 12 October 2010.

ASEAN Security Community

The establishment of the ADMM took ASEAN a step closer to the realisation of the ASEAN Security Community. It is envisaged that ASEAN will be at the centre of the ADMM Plus Eight. The ADMM Plus Eight will be open and inclusive, and uphold the ASEAN principles of non-interference, consensus-based decision making, and respect for national sovereignty. It is conceptualised as a defence and security forum, not a military alliance. The ADMM Plus Eight provides a framework for confidence building and should facilitate the handling of emerging traditional and non-traditional security issues such as maritime security, terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. ASEAN regards the ADMM Plus Eight as a means of engaging the major powers and facilitating constructive and co-operative norms of behaviour.

It is unlikely that the ADMM Plus Eight process will move beyond the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in addressing traditional threats such as major power rivalries, bilateral conflicts and regional tensions such as India/China border issues, Kashmir, conflicting maritime claims in the South China Sea, the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute and the risks of nuclear proliferation arising from North Korea's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability. While the annual meetings will provide an opportunity to discuss these issues informally and enable bilateral exchanges such as the meeting of the Chinese and Japanese defence ministers, it is unlikely that there will be significant breakthroughs on the resolution of these disputes at this new forum.

Nevertheless, on defence-related matters, the ADMM Plus Eight will increasingly overshadow the ARF which is

seen as a foreign ministry-dominated institution -- too broad in its membership and overtaken by the rapid progress of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) institutions. The establishment of the ADMM Plus Eight structure is likely to reduce pressures for US and Russian membership of the EAS. This would ease concerns within ASEAN that such an expansion of the EAS (ASEAN+6) could lead to a Chinese focus on the APT (ASEAN+3). Another concern to be assuaged is the emergence of the APT as the primary framework for regional cooperation in East Asia that excludes the US. The worry is that the APT could be the basis of a Chinese-dominated security framework in East Asia if there were no other overlapping institutions.

Will the ADMM Plus be Different?

My assessment is that the ADMM Plus Eight would form part of a lattice framework of complex interdependence involving participating states engaged in cooperative security. While critics will fault the addition of one more structure into the alphabet soup of regional institutions in the Asia-Pacific region, the ADMM Plus Eight could quickly distinguish itself by agreeing on concrete areas of cooperation. It could be developed as the key institution in the Asia-Pacific promoting practical cooperation among the militaries of the participating states including exchanges of personnel, meetings of chiefs of defence forces, intelligence chiefs and heads of military academies, besides the annual meeting of defence ministers.

The ministers could agree on participation in multilateral search and rescue exercises; training in counter-terrorism operations, maritime security and anti-piracy; courses in best practices in peace keeping as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, before proceeding at a later stage to joint land, sea and air exercises, partnerships in peace operations and post-conflict peace building.

The most significant role of such an inclusive institution, which brings together the major powers as well as the smaller states of the ASEAN region, is that it will help to shape a cooperative regional order. Competition in the region can be expected and there will be limits to multilateral engagement, especially in the initial years of the ADMM Plus Eight process. However, interactions through this process will result in more candid exchanges over time, increased familiarity with different political styles and cultural norms and beliefs and enhanced opportunities for informal contacts and concrete, practical defence cooperation.

From an ASEAN perspective, instead of regional security institutions being shaped only by the perspective of the US, the ADMM Plus Eight will have a central role for ASEAN -- a grouping of small and medium powers -- while providing an opportunity for the engagement of the US and China, the two states at greatest risk of being engaged in a competitive relationship in East Asia, as well as major regional powers such as Japan, India and Russia.

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