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## The ADMM-Plus at 15

Sarah Teo

### SYNOPSIS

*The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus marks its 15th anniversary this year. The platform has been valuable for promoting practical defence cooperation in the wider region, although it has also had to manage the limitations of resources and the interest from external partners, alongside broader geopolitical challenges. Amid shifts in the regional security architecture, the ADMM-Plus will require careful attention and care from its participants to ensure its continued durability and progress.*

### COMMENTARY

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus marks its 15th anniversary this year. Its creation in 2010 was [lauded](#) as a milestone for the regional security architecture, as it represented the launch of an ASEAN-led, defence-minister-led process for countries in the wider Asia-Pacific. Four years earlier, in 2006, ASEAN had inaugurated the ADMM — the [first](#) time 10 defence ministers of the ASEAN member states convened formally. Soon after, the ADMM agreed to establish the Plus grouping as a way to engage ASEAN's partners and strengthen its capacity-building efforts.

While the ADMM-Plus began as a triennial arrangement, ASEAN defence ministers [agreed](#) in 2013 to shorten the frequency of ADMM-Plus meetings to once every two years. This interval was further [reduced](#) in 2017, hence making the ADMM-Plus an annual affair. The annualisation of the ADMM-Plus dialogue highlights the importance of the forum to its participants. The presence of the 18-member grouping — which counts China and the United States among its participants — has also helped to emphasise the open and inclusive nature of the regional security architecture.

However, the geopolitical context today has evolved significantly since the ADMM-Plus was formed 15 years ago. Great power rivalry has heightened, tensions over

security flashpoints have risen, and fractures in ASEAN-led multilateralism have become increasingly evident. The ADMM-Plus also faces hurdles that are more specific to its framework. Consequently, even as the ADMM-Plus has its distinctive characteristics that stand it in good stead to continue facilitating regional cooperation, the forum also has to deal with several issues that may impede its progress.

## **Advancing Practical Defence Cooperation**

A salient achievement of the ADMM-Plus has been the advancement of practical defence cooperation. Prior to the ADMM-Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ADMM had helped facilitate multilateral dialogue and confidence building among regional defence officials. There had also been some activities that went beyond dialogue, such as an ASEAN combined military exercise on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in 2011 and the ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (DiREx) that was held three times between 2011 and 2015.

The ADMM-Plus and its Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) — numbering seven as of 2016 — have accelerated the growth of such practical cooperation. In fact, when the ADMM-Plus first emerged in the early 2010s, the ARF had held [discussions](#) on avoiding duplication and improving synergies with the ADMM-Plus. Several [participants highlighted that](#) while the agendas of both forums overlap, the ARF's mandate should remain in broad strategic and policy dialogue while the ADMM-Plus should prioritise practical cooperation and action. After all, as See Seng Tan had [pointed](#) out, the national defence agencies that participate in the ADMM-Plus have more direct access to military resources that they can deploy towards these security and defence initiatives.

In this spirit, the inaugural ADMM-Plus exercise on HADR and military medicine was conducted in June 2013 in Brunei — it was the [first](#) time that the 18 ADMM-Plus countries came together in a field training exercise. These combined military exercises have become a regular feature of the ADMM-Plus' EWGs. Singapore's minister for defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen, [noted](#) in June 2024 that more than 20 “large-scale” ADMM-Plus exercises had been convened thus far.

## **Dealing with Challenges**

Based on a [survey](#) of the ADMM-Plus concept papers, two main challenges stand out. The first is that the increased number of ADMM-Plus initiatives are likely to have [strained](#) the “limited financial and human resources” of its participants. These have led to calls to streamline the activities of the EWGs, an idea which was formally introduced in 2017. An arguably bold recommendation was to consider the dissolution or merger of EWGs, although there does not appear to be any movement in this direction so far.

The second challenge for the ADMM-Plus is managing the interest of external partners to engage with the platform. As the grouping made strides on its agenda and grew to take on a constructive role in the regional security architecture, its appeal to other actors has increased. According to some accounts, countries such as Canada, France, and the United Kingdom had [expressed interest](#) to be observers of the ADMM-

Plus EWGs as early as 2017 — but this had initially been opposed by China and Russia. Only in 2023 the ADMM-Plus [welcomed](#) the three countries as observers to the EWGs.

While the ADMM has [emphasised](#) that observership is not a guaranteed path to ADMM-Plus membership, several observers have indicated [their interest](#) to join the forum. Considering the present geopolitical climate, it may be challenging for ASEAN member states to arrive at a consensus regarding ADMM-Plus membership applications. The conundrum here, then, is how the ADMM can retain the interest of the non-Plus observer states without granting them the status they seek. This is all the more important given the [possibility](#) and [emergence](#) of non-ASEAN options for regional defence multilateralism (or minilateralism).

In addition to the above issues which are more specific to the ADMM-Plus, the grouping also has to navigate the implications brought about by great power rivalry, security conflicts, and ASEAN's intramural dynamics. In light of all these challenges, it is uncertain if regional countries will continue to see relevance and value in ASEAN's inclusive and open model as encapsulated in frameworks such as the ADMM-Plus.



Having forged a strong foundation for regional defence cooperation over the past 15 years, the ADMM-Plus will need to consider how to advance its agenda amid present challenges.

*Image source: [Lance Cpl. Kasey Peacock](#) via [Flickr](#).*

## Looking Ahead

In marriage parlance, the 15th anniversary is also referred to as the crystal anniversary. This is perhaps an apt description for the ADMM-Plus which has forged a strong foundation for regional defence cooperation but is also prone to fragility. Consequently, the ADMM-Plus needs careful attention and care — just like the work involved in maintaining crystal — in order to ensure its continued durability and progress.

At the most fundamental level, this will require persistent commitment from the grouping's members, particularly in terms of not letting geopolitics or disagreements on other issues affect cooperation under the ADMM-Plus framework. It may also be useful to have a clear-eyed understanding of the ADMM-Plus' distinctiveness — its

strengths and weaknesses, so to speak — among the various options for regional security cooperation. Especially in view of the on-going geopolitical developments that are (re)shaping the networks and elements of the regional security architecture, this will help manage expectations of what the ADMM-Plus may or may not be able to achieve. Here's to the next 15 years.

**Sarah Teo** is an Assistant Professor in the Regional Security Architecture Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS); Deputy Head, Graduate Studies; and, Coordinator of PhD Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

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S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798