

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 017/2025 dated 25 February 2025

ADMM-Plus Observership: Managing Inclusivity and Openness Amid Geopolitical Rivalry

Henrick Tsjeng

SYNOPSIS

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus continues to draw attention from Western countries seeking to participate in the forum. However, with major power rivalry already causing rifts within the forum, ASEAN countries have attempted to address this by implementing an observership programme. This enables non-Plus countries to participate in limited capacity as observers without admitting them as members, which would otherwise cause further divisions within the platform.

COMMENTARY

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), Southeast Asia's ministerial platform for deliberation and cooperation on defence-related issues, concluded its [18th meeting](#) under the chairmanship of Laos in November last year, and handed over the chairmanship of the ADMM to Malaysia. A key outcome of this meeting was the adoption of the protocol for the observership programme at the Experts' Working Groups (EWG) of the ADMM-Plus.

This development is noteworthy as it reflects the geopolitical realities of managing an inclusive and outward-looking forum such as the ADMM-Plus. The platform — which includes eight ASEAN dialogue partners — has [attracted the attention of external countries](#) (non-Plus countries), who have been seeking to participate in the defence forum or even join as members.

The ADMM has made clear that the ADMM-Plus should "[consolidate and build on its initial success](#)" before undertaking any expansion of its membership. To maintain the inclusivity of the platform, it has moved cautiously in formulating and implementing an observership programme for non-Plus countries.

Such prudence is warranted, as a geopolitical fault line now runs through the ADMM-Plus, and the addition of new members to the platform could further compound the problem. Observership can be seen as a way to allow inclusive participation of non-Plus countries without admitting them as ADMM-Plus members.



Through the observership programme, the ADMM-Plus has sought to maintain a balance between inclusivity and ensuring that the forum does not become more vulnerable to geopolitical rifts.

Image source: ASEAN Secretariat.

The Geopolitical Fault Line Running Through the ADMM-Plus

The fault line has split the ADMM-Plus, even if many ADMM-Plus members — especially ASEAN member states — remain relatively neutral. On one side, there are the United States and its allies, including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, and South Korea; Thailand is also a US treaty ally but appears to be [tilting closer to China](#). On the other side, there are China and Russia, along with their close partners Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar.

The ADMM-Plus has already seen manifestations of this division. First signs of trouble emerged during the 3rd ADMM-Plus in 2015, when the meeting failed to issue a joint declaration over disagreements regarding the South China Sea. Malaysia, then the Chair, decided to release a chairman's statement instead, which [did not require consensus](#). Since then, the ADMM-Plus has issued [joint declarations on specific and less contentious issues](#), with the latest one on [climate change](#), and no chairman's statement has been issued since 2020.

More signs of divisions became apparent during the 2021–2024 cycle of the ADMM-Plus EWG. The EWGs were established to facilitate functional cooperation in seven key areas, and are supposed to be bereft of geopolitical wrangling. However, in the EWG on Counter-Terrorism, then co-chaired by Myanmar and Russia, five Plus countries — the United States and its allies — stopped attending the meetings at various points in 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine that year. These no-shows were widely viewed as [boycotts](#), coupled with unhappiness towards Myanmar's brutal civil war since its military's coup in 2021.

In the current cycle (2024–2027), Myanmar is no longer a co-chair in any EWG, yet its presence as a dividing factor can still be felt. During the 18th ADMM, Myanmar

reportedly objected to several issues, causing the deliberations to stall. This prompted Singapore's defence minister to [caution](#) that Myanmar's actions could undermine ASEAN Centrality and the ADMM's credibility.

The risk of such divisions becoming manifest continues even in the new cycle. The Philippines and Japan's [co-chairmanship](#) of the EWG on Maritime Security may cause Chinese displeasure if the co-chairs decide to focus on maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Brunei Darussalam and China are co-chairing the EWG on [Peacekeeping Operations](#) in the new cycle. Given China's deepening rivalry with Washington and its allies, the risk of similar tensions emerging cannot be ruled out.

Moreover, with a more unpredictable United States under the second presidency of Donald Trump, how the United States will approach the ADMM-Plus, as well as its [co-chairmanship with Indonesia](#) of the EWG on Military Medicine, remains uncertain. Additional global geopolitical fault lines are now appearing, particularly with Washington's relations with [Canada](#) and [European countries](#) rapidly fraying, which could cause further complications if the latter countries are to be admitted as full members to the ADMM-Plus.

Allowing Non-Plus Participation Via Observership

The ADMM-Plus observership programme was created to mitigate the risk of further and deeper divisions that membership expansion would bring. Even so, the fault line has made itself felt in the programme. The [observership programme](#) was formulated in 2018, but it was only in 2023 that the programme began with Canada, France, and the United Kingdom [chosen to be observers](#) in select EWGs.

Delays in the implementation of the observership programme were purportedly due to [opposition](#) from certain Plus members, particularly Russia and China. Over the years, the ADMM and ADMM-Plus appeared to have considered these geopolitical dynamics when developing the programme.

Almost all documents highlighting the observership programme reiterated that observership would in no way be a precursor or guarantee to full membership. The level of participation of observers has also been kept [minimal](#), as they are not allowed in decision-making processes. They are only allowed to observe seminars, workshops, and exercises, but not the main EWG meetings. Observers are also not allowed to contribute to organising EWG activities.

Nonetheless, the ADMM and ADMM-Plus have not rested on their laurels, and have sought to further enhance the observership programme to keep it relevant and useful for both the ADMM-Plus and the observers. The 18th ADMM saw the adoption of a [protocol](#) for the observership programme, which outlined further refinements, including a provision for observers to briefly share subject matter expertise pertaining to the EWG if invited by the co-chairs.

The (Rocky) Way Forward

The ADMM-Plus, at least for now, has addressed the desire of Western countries to participate in the ADMM-Plus, but without formally admitting them as full members. In

doing so, the ADMM and ADMM-Plus have sought to maintain balance between inclusivity and ensuring the ADMM-Plus does not become more vulnerable to geopolitical rifts. This approach helps maintain the relevance and effectiveness of the platform despite the increasingly adverse international environment.

However, the existing divisions within the ADMM-Plus will remain as long as major power rivalry continues. The ADMM and ADMM-Plus have already attempted to manage this to some degree with its observership programme, but they should not stop there. Further proactive and adroit management of the geopolitical rifts within the ADMM-Plus — as well as internally divisive issues like the Myanmar crisis — will be needed by the current and upcoming ASEAN Chairs.

Henrick Tsjeng is Associate Research Fellow with the Regional Security Architecture Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

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