

## ADMM-dialogue partners informal meetings as a source of regional stability by Sarah Teo

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Defense diplomacy efforts led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have advanced significantly since the inaugural ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in 2006. A development that has recently gained prominence is the ADMM's engagement with individual dialogue partners. These informal meetings have occurred since 2011 – five times with China, four times with the United States, and once with Japan.

The forums are usually held on the side-lines of the ADMM or the ADMM Retreats, although the US and China have each organized one meeting respectively in Honolulu in 2014 and Beijing in 2015. The Honolulu and Beijing meetings were not tagged on to the ADMM meetings and marked the first time that ASEAN defense ministers were hosted in each extra-regional country – but these are unlikely to occur again. Given growing engagement with dialogue partners, the 9th ADMM in 2015 adopted [guidelines](#) for the conduct of such activities, recommending that the informal meetings be convened only on the sidelines of ADMM events.

Despite concern that these “ADMM+1” meetings could complicate the ASEAN-led defense networks, such a development could also benefit ASEAN and be a source of stability in the region. With the 10th anniversary of the ADMM coming up this May, assessing the value of these informal meetings would be useful as we consider the ADMM's next phase of development.

### Cause for concern?

Two issues associated with the ADMM+1 are potential causes for concern. The first is bandwidth. On a yearly basis, defense personnel and resources of ASEAN member states are utilized for the ADMM, ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meeting (ADSOM), ADSOM-Plus, ADSOM Working Group, ADSOM-Plus Working Group, various workshops, as well as activities carried out by the six ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups. Every other year, the ADMM-Plus is also held.

The addition of informal meetings with individual dialogue partners is arguably a burden on ASEAN's limited resources. Fortunately, this problem has been partly addressed by the guidelines adopted at the 9th ADMM, which states that meetings can only be convened up to two times annually and only in a year that the ADMM-Plus does not meet.

A second issue that could arise from these informal engagements relates to the [“open, transparent and inclusive” security architecture](#) that ASEAN has always championed. As highlighted in a [concept paper](#) adopted by the 8th ADMM in 2014, “multiple ADMM+1s could lead to a proliferation of meetings with separate agenda.” This could diminish the relevance of the ADMM-Plus, particularly if dialogue partners come to view the ADMM+1s as more useful for directly engaging ASEAN.

Moreover, the decision about which dialogue partner's request for a meeting to accept is to be made through consensus and on a case-by-case basis. This could be problematic if the ADMM prioritizes certain countries and accedes more frequently to their requests, while neglecting others. Mutual trust among ASEAN and the other countries could be undermined, and as a consequence affect ASEAN's honest broker role in the region.

### Source of stability

Nevertheless, should the ADMM effectively pre-empt these pitfalls, the ADMM+1s could be a source of stability in the region. Three positive implications of these informal engagements come to mind.

First, the meetings are another platform for dialogue among regional countries. This is encouraging given the region's security challenges, such as the South China Sea disputes. More dialogue venues, particularly with relevant stakeholders, would open more channels of communication and could help to defuse tensions.

Second, meeting separately with each dialogue partner allows the ADMM to address specific issues of concern to both sides. For example, [meetings with US defense secretaries](#) have thus far focused on reassuring ASEAN members of the US security commitment to the Asia Pacific and enhancing cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Meanwhile, similar [dialogues with Chinese defense ministers](#) have covered regional security community building and the South China Sea.

Such meetings would be of value to the dialogue partners since, in contrast to the 18-member ADMM-Plus, the ADMM+1s provide more room to explore respective issues of interest with the ADMM. Consequently, it is important for the ADMM to ensure that the dialogue partners' experiences in engaging the ADMM enhances the credibility of all ASEAN-led initiatives, and not, as mentioned, lessen the importance of the ADMM-Plus.

This leads to the third and final point: these meetings could reinforce ASEAN centrality in regional architecture. By engaging as a group with individual dialogue partners and setting out guidelines for such activities, the ADMM has shown that it is at the center of regional defense diplomacy.

Comprising fewer major powers than the ADMM+8 setting, an ADMM+1 arrangement would allow ASEAN to have even more control over the agenda than it displays in the ADMM-Plus.

The ADMM+1 process also reflects the dialogue partners' acknowledgement of ASEAN centrality. For example, when asked during a [press conference](#) at the 2015 ADMM-U.S. meeting in Honolulu if the United States planned to make the forum an annual event, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel replied that the decision lay in the hands of the ADMM. In this respect, the ADMM has reinforced – at the very least in appearance – its standing among regional major powers.

### **Informal meetings in ADMM's next decade**

As the ADMM embarks on its second decade, the ADMM's informal meetings with individual dialogue partners are likely to become an increasingly important part of regional defense cooperation. These forums reflect progress in ASEAN's defense diplomacy efforts – from an aversion to multilateral defense cooperation, to the inauguration of the ADMM in 2006 and then the ADMM-Plus in 2010, and now the informal ADMM+1s. It is possible that the ADMM might be inundated with requests from dialogue partners for these meetings. In these engagements, the ADMM should bear in mind both the contributions and challenges of the ADMM+1s to the regional security architecture.

To use the ADMM+1s to strengthen the ASEAN-led architecture's open and inclusive nature, ASEAN defense ministers could consider sharing the conclusions of the respective meetings with all eight dialogue partners in the ADMM-Plus. The ADMM should also be particularly mindful of the frequency of such meetings with each dialogue partner. Managed well, informal meetings with dialogue partners could boost ASEAN's prestige among regional countries and bolster ASEAN centrality.

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