

## **Can the ADMM-Plus Do “CUES” in the South China Sea?** by See Seng Tan

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Save for a few bright shining moments, the history of multilateral security in the Asia-Pacific has mostly been a frustrated enterprise. Against this rather insipid backdrop, the surprise package has been multilateral defense cooperation, which has burgeoned since the formation of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) in 2010. Through the ADMM+, whose membership includes Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, the United States, and the 10 ASEAN countries, multilateral security cooperation has gone farther and deeper than anything the region has ever envisioned let alone experienced.

Given this laudable accomplishment, there is no reason why the ADMM+ cannot serve as a regional framework through which its member countries could jointly undertake a multilateral maritime exercise that would test and illustrate the application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in the South China Sea. As it is, most of the ADMM+ members are signatories to the CUES arrangement established at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium held in Qingdao in 2014. Separately, China and the ASEAN states formulated their own CUES for the South China Sea in September 2016. By leveraging its good record in military-to-military cooperation, the ADMM+ can effectively “operationalize” CUES by conducting a maritime security exercise that incorporates a CUES element in its activities.

According to Ong Ye Kung, who spoke at the Xiangshan Forum in Beijing in October 2016 in his previous capacity as Singapore’s senior minister of state for defense, CUES should be expanded to cover all ADMM+ members. Going further, Ng Eng Hen, Singapore’s minister for defense, has proposed the expansion of CUES to include “white” shipping – the current CUES arrangement covers only naval vessels or “grey hulls” – and for the ADMM+ to adopt a similar protocol for the region’s airspaces. Should the ADMM+ formally adopt CUES – and it should – the next logical step could be to implement the code in the context of a maritime exercise.

Such a proposal is not that farfetched. Through their activities, ADMM+ countries and their respective defense establishments have developed mutual confidence if not trust, while at the same time establishing a reasonably high level of military-to-military interoperability. Arguably, with the high frequency and tempo of multilateral maritime exercises taking

place under the ADMM+ aegis, participating countries have in fact, if only tacitly, already been engaging mutually in CUES-like activities. As such, it should not require a lot of work to transform multilateral maritime exercises already planned for by the ADMM+ into formal CUES-based exercises in the South China Sea.

However, should this recommendation become reality, we need to be clear-eyed about what the ADMM+ can and cannot achieve. Indeed, it is not impossible, should interstate tensions over the South China Sea continue to persist and even worsen, that the claimants, all of which (with the sole exception of Taiwan) are ADMM+ members, might reconsider their respective investments in the ADMM+. After all, the ADMM+ has not been exempt from the troubles that have afflicted the ASEAN Regional Forum, not least of which the penchant of the great powers to import their strategic rivalries into ASEAN’s multilateral dialogue forums. For instance, at its ministerial meeting in November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, as a result of intractable differences among its member states, the ADMM+ was forced to scrap a planned joint statement – non-mandatory, in any event – on the South China Sea. Moreover, it is possible that member countries could be using their participation in ADMM+ exercises as a form of deterrence, which they seek to achieve by “showcasing” their defense assets and lift capabilities. For example, when Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 went missing in March 2014, China deployed a flotilla of 18 warships and Coast Guard vessels along with long-range military transport aircraft to assist in the search. CUES or not, such motives and dynamics could end up destabilizing the region rather than the other way round.

Fundamentally, getting the ADMM+ to do CUES in the South China Sea poses the interesting question of the evolving mandate and mission of the ADMM+, namely, from a mechanism meant for nontraditional security to potentially one that handles traditional or conventional security challenges. One of the unfortunate outcomes of the ASEAN Regional Forum has been its volitional “recusal” from conventional security management – whether in cross-Taiwan Strait relations, the Korean Peninsula, or the South China Sea. Whether the ADMM+ would be subjected to a similar fate remains to be seen. But a first step toward avoiding such an outcome could be to establish the ADMM+ as the relevant platform for a multilateral CUES exercise in the South China Sea.

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