

Don't underestimate the ADMM+ by Brian Harding

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In *PacNet* #65, “A Farewell to Grandiosity? Practical Cooperation and the ADMM-Plus,” See Seng Tan paints a skeptical picture of the importance of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and relegates its activities to “prosaic pragmatism.” However, his assessment fails to acknowledge the forum's remarkable progress since its inception and overlooks the substantial amount of strategic, policy-level dialogue now taking place among senior defense officials in a multilateral setting due to the existence of the ADMM-Plus.

Although the Aug. 29 meeting in Bandar Sri Begawan, Brunei will be the first ministerial-level meeting since the October 2010 Ministerial in Hanoi, the ADMM+ has been very active over the past 34 months, with annual meetings of senior officials (vice ministers, permanent secretaries, US assistant secretaries, and their equivalents) and mid-ranking officials (policy directors and equivalents). At each of these meetings, there have been sessions at which strategic issues have been discussed, in addition to overseeing the practical work of the ADMM+. Given that there exists no other venue for these officials to have these sorts of strategic discussions aside from established bilateral and trilateral dialogues (the Shangri-La Dialogue is a venue for speeches and bilateral meetings and the ARF has questionable relevance for the Department of Defense), these ADMM+ meetings have filled a void in the regional security architecture and have become important opportunities for officials to regularly discuss significant issues in a multilateral setting.

The senior and mid-level officials who have met annually have also overseen the development of a productive – and remarkably coherent – organizational structure. Five “experts working groups” were established in 2011 (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, Military Medicine, Counterterrorism, Peacekeeping, and Maritime Security), which meet twice annually and report on their activities to the senior officials. While the subject matter of the groups is generally “soft,” their work has not been trivial. For example, the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Experts Working Group, co-chaired by China and Vietnam, and the Military Medicine Experts Working Group, co-chaired by Japan and Singapore, combined efforts to organize an 18-country military exercise in Brunei in June 2013. The United States and Indonesia, co-chairs of the Counterterrorism Experts Working Group, are in charge of planning for an 18-country exercise in Indonesia in September. Malaysia and Australia will co-organize a maritime security exercise in

September as well. At each experts working group meeting, time has been allotted for discussion of policy issues, in addition to making plans for practical cooperation. The United States and China working together in a multilateral setting, India and Japan playing significant roles, and Myanmar having a seat at the table – these are non-headline-grabbing, but notable, developments. In ASEAN terms, these developments have been at the speed of light, largely due to the commitment of successive ASEAN chairs – Vietnam, Indonesia, and Brunei – to the success of the ADMM+.

When the 18 ministers meet in Bandar Sri Begawan, they will review progress to date and set a course for the two years until they meet again in Malaysia in 2015. They will also have a broad strategic discussion and put down markers on the biggest issues of the day. Regardless of what a mission statement for an organization might say – and whatever the bland communicate reports may say – a meeting of 18 defense chiefs will produce a strategic conversation. Furthermore, what they say will not merely be the personal thoughts of the ministers – their statements will almost universally be based on national positions, carefully developed by the foreign and defense policy apparatus of each country. US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel will come prepared to lay markers on key issues that will be fully coordinated at the highest levels in the White House and State Department. Indeed, it is inconceivable that the secretary of defense would travel to Brunei to simply applaud practical cooperation among regional militaries and not touch on important, strategic level issues – and his regional counterparts will not sit silently when he does.

Rationalizing the activities of the ARF and ADMM+ will be a challenge for some time. Furthermore, the agenda-setting role of the East Asia Summit and its linkages to the ARF and ADMM+ are important elements that will take time to develop. In the meantime, we should recognize the positive role the ADMM+ is playing and be optimistic about its future, especially in light of its strong track record to date.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.