

Two Cheers for ADMM+

by David Capie and Brendan Taylor

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Much optimism surrounds the establishment of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), which held its inaugural meeting in Hanoi Oct. 12. With a membership matching the expanded East Asia Summit (EAS), much of this optimism stems from a judgment that an optimal architectural formula for Asian security politics has finally been found. Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defense Teo Chee Hean describes ADMM+ as a "significant milestone." Longtime follower of Asian defense diplomacy, Ron Huisken, calls it "an acronym to watch" and a process that "is likely to take shape as one of the more substantial pieces of Asia's multilateral security architecture." Ernest Bower of CSIS goes further, calling the inaugural ADMM+ gathering "a historic meeting that will establish the basic modalities for a new regional security architecture designed to build confidence, practical cooperation among defense leaders and militaries, and promote peace and prosperity in the dynamic Asia-Pacific region."

Bringing Asia's defense ministers together in a single forum is no small feat. Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the United States each proposed a similar gathering during the 1990s, but these efforts failed to gain traction. A Japanese proposal for an "Asia-Pacific Defense Ministerial Meeting" at the inaugural Shangri-La Dialogue in 2002 also came to nothing. For all its critics, ASEAN has proved once again that it continues to be a critical fulcrum for wider regional cooperation.

Beyond the achievement of getting representatives from 18 countries around the table, the key outputs from the inaugural ADMM+ were the Hanoi Joint Declaration and a brief Chairman's Statement. Apart from generous portions of the usual pleasantries about friendship and mutual trust, these focus primarily on how the ADMM+ process will work, with the creation of a Senior Officials Meeting (ADSOM-Plus) tasked to establish five Working Groups on defense and security issues and to "[implement] agreements and decisions" of the ADMM+.

The Hanoi meeting also provided a welcome opportunity for a bilateral on the sidelines between Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and his Chinese counterpart, Liang Guanglie. This was the first high-level contact between China and the US since Beijing's suspension of military ties in response to Washington's decision in January to sell arms to Taiwan. A bilateral meeting between Liang and Japanese Defense

Minister Kitazawa Toshimi, was also held at an equally testy time in relations between Beijing and Tokyo sparked by renewed tensions in the East China Sea.

These achievements notwithstanding, it is important to recognize that the ADMM+ faces constraints that will likely hamper its capacity to make the contribution some scholars and practitioners anticipate.

First and foremost, the forum's biggest limitation is that defense ministers are only scheduled to meet once every three years in this wider ASEAN+8 format. Although the 10 ASEAN defense ministers will continue to meet annually in the smaller ADMM, and while a supporting structure of senior officials meetings will remain in place, the ability of the ADMM+ to maintain institutional momentum is going to be severely hampered by the lag between meetings. The next ADMM+, scheduled to take place in Brunei in 2013, seems a long way off.

Second, ASEAN's centrality in this new process – which was reaffirmed by the Joint Declaration – and the adoption of ASEAN modalities, is likely to appeal to some members more than others. China's defense minister, for example, was quick to emphasize in his comments the importance of "gradualism and taking into account the comfort levels of all participants." While this was music to ASEAN ears, for others such as the US and Australia who have a tendency to assess the utility of multilateral processes on the basis of the tangible outcomes they deliver, the novelty of ADMM+ may wear off quickly. Secretary Gates' call for the establishment of "shared rules of the road" – arguably something not easily reconciled with ASEAN's preference for informality and a non-legalistic diplomatic approach – was an early indication of this tension.

Third, the ADMM+ work program is modest and many of the issues identified are being addressed elsewhere. To be fair, this was the group's first meeting and cooperation has to start somewhere. But its focus on predominantly nontraditional security challenges (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), military medicine, counter-terrorism, maritime cooperation and peacekeeping) will gradually become a source of frustration for some participants. China and most ASEAN participants will be comfortable with this approach given that nontraditional security challenges typically do not raise the same level of sensitivity that more traditional security issues are apt to generate. Consistent with this, Beijing and Hanoi have already agreed to co-Chair an ADMM+ "Expert Working Group" on enhancing the region's capacity to provide humanitarian assistance and respond to natural disasters. However, there is a glut of regional organizations already focusing on such matters and a dearth of processes tackling arguably more pressing traditional security concerns, such as Asia's burgeoning military modernization or addressing the growing risks of incidents at sea. It is not yet clear what

ADMM+ will bring to discussions of nontraditional security issues that will be different from the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or EAS.

These challenges notwithstanding, ADMM+ is now firmly part of Asia's regional security architecture. Its creation has prompted speculation that its success may come at the expense of the Shangri-La Dialogue. Run by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and quietly resented in some ASEAN circles, this glitzy annual gathering in Singapore had become a de facto meeting of Asian defense ministers (although notably China had resisted sending ministerial level representatives). The advent of a separate inter-governmental defense ministers process calls into question the Shangri-La Dialogue's raison d'être. It will be interesting to see how the IISS responds to a more crowded marketplace in multilateral defense diplomacy, and how many ministers turn up to celebrate the Shangri-La Dialogue's 10th anniversary in 2011.

ADMM+ is a welcome and positive development. It would be churlish to ignore ASEAN's achievement in bringing defense ministers into the regional security dialogue process. But only time will tell if ADMM+ is able to carve out a distinctive role and sustain a substantive and practical set of activities and succeed where other regional institutions have fallen short.