

# THE FUTURE OF ADMM-PLUS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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*Since its establishment in 2010, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) has facilitated dialogue and advanced practical cooperation in the Indo-Pacific's defense sector. As geopolitical circumstances evolve, the future relevance of the ADMM-Plus in the regional security architecture would depend on three interrelated factors. These are: (i) ASEAN's intramural dynamics and ADMM leadership; (ii) the trajectory of major power relations and the existence of alternative options for multilateral security cooperation in the region; and, (iii) the attitudes towards practical cooperation under the ADMM-Plus rubric. This issue brief examines these factors and argues that whether the ADMM-Plus thrives or stagnates depends on the trajectories of these three factors.*

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## Introduction

With the inauguration of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in 2006, the region for the first time had a defense minister-led, ASEAN-led platform for defense-oriented multilateral consultations and cooperation. From its beginnings, the ADMM sought not only to bolster defense ties among the 10 ASEAN member-states, but also to “actively engag[e] ASEAN's friends and Dialogue Partners”.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, the ADMM-Plus was launched in 2010. Comprising the 10 ASEAN member-states as well as eight ASEAN dialogue partners—Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the

United States—the ADMM-Plus works to facilitate dialogue at various levels in the defense sector of the Indo-Pacific and advance practical cooperation among regional defense forces. As an ASEAN-led forum, the ADMM-Plus' agenda and processes are driven by the ADMM, with the rotation of its chairmanship following that of ASEAN's.

In the current geopolitical climate, amid worsening China-U.S. competition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and ASEAN's intramural challenges, the ADMM-Plus stands at a crossroads. The relatively favorable regional circumstances that framed the emergence of the ADMM-Plus, as well as much of

its progress, have evolved. This issue brief examines three interrelated factors that are likely to shape the relevance of the ADMM-Plus to Indo-Pacific security in the near to medium term. These are: (i) intra-ASEAN dynamics and the ADMM's leadership; (ii) major power rivalry and the existence of competing options for multilateralism; and, (iii) the attitudes towards practical cooperation under the ADMM-Plus framework. Whether the ADMM-Plus thrives or stagnates depends on the trajectories of these three factors.

The issue brief is organized as follows. The next section outlines the development of the ADMM-Plus to date. This is followed by the third section which lays out the three factors that are expected to shape the relevance of the ADMM-Plus going forward, before a brief conclusion.

### Evolution of ADMM-Plus

The achievements of the ADMM-Plus thus far are evident. The ministerial-level meetings started as a triennial event, but by the second meeting in 2013, the decision was taken to increase their frequency to once every two years. This was followed by the annualization of the ADMM-Plus from 2017. The acceleration of the ADMM-

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Plus process illustrates the forum's importance and relevance to its participants. After all, it was—and remains—the only defense ministerial forum with a fixed membership of 18 of the Indo-Pacific's key countries. Considering its composition, ADMM-Plus initiatives such as the adoption of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and the extension of a joint hotline among ASEAN defense ministers to the Plus countries are constructive for regional stability. The actual effectiveness of these initiatives is admittedly debatable, but one could make a strong case that the existence of such options, in themselves, helps to establish a more conducive context for the management of regional challenges.

From the start, the ADMM-Plus created Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) to promote consultations and practical cooperation among the militaries of the participating countries, on specific issues of shared concern. This would be in line with broader ADMM-Plus objectives of building capacity for ASEAN and its member-states, promoting mutual trust and confidence including with ASEAN's dialogue partners, as well as addressing transnational security challenges facing the region.<sup>2</sup> Five EWGs were initially established, focusing respectively on counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, military medicine and peacekeeping operations. Later, EWGs on humanitarian mine action and cybersecurity were added in 2013 and 2016, respectively. The expansion of the number of EWGs underline the concrete contributions that the ADMM-Plus has made to regional security.

The EWGs are co-chaired by an ASEAN member-state and a Plus country on a three-year cycle. Within each cycle, the co-chairs organize and host various meetings, workshops and exercises to strengthen the regional response to the respective transnational security challenge. One of the most visible manifestations of ADMM-Plus practical cooperation to date is its field training exercises. The inaugural exercise, held in June 2013, was co-organized by the EWGs on HADR and military

medicine. Described by the ADMM-Plus defense ministers as a “landmark of cooperation”, it was the first time that the 18 countries had come together in a joint drill.<sup>3</sup> Seven ships, 15 helicopters as well as 3,200 personnel participated in this exercise that was based on scenarios involving collapsed buildings, landslides, and flash floods.<sup>4</sup> Since then, more than 10 field training exercises have been convened by the various EWGs.

The accomplishments of the ADMM-Plus have, quite naturally, generated interest from non-member countries to engage with the grouping. The European Union, Canada, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—ASEAN’s newest dialogue partner—have all sought to join ADMM-Plus activities.<sup>5</sup> As early as 2014, the ADMM had issued guidelines facilitating the participation of non-ADMM-Plus members in the activities of the EWGs. It took another four years, however, before an observership program was formulated and it was only in 2023 that the program commenced with Canada, France, and the United Kingdom as the first cohort of observers in selected EWGs. The delay in getting the program off the ground was reportedly due to opposition from some Plus countries, such as China and Russia.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps in response to their concerns about the observership program, it has also been made clear that observership “is not a guarantee or basis for eventual membership in the ADMM-Plus”.<sup>7</sup> For non-ASEAN states, ADMM-Plus membership remains based on three criteria, where the applicant country should: (i) be a full dialogue partner of ASEAN; (ii) have significant interactions and relations with ASEAN defense establishments; and, (iii) be able to work with the ADMM in capacity building for regional security.<sup>8</sup> The decision to offer membership ultimately rests with the ADMM.

Since its establishment, the ADMM-Plus has evolved into a valuable component of the regional security architecture. It facilitates not only dialogue among the region’s defense ministers and officials, but also practical initiatives involving the regional

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militaries to address transnational security concerns. It bears noting that the ADMM-Plus emerged and progressed during a time when circumstances were more conducive for multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>9</sup> These circumstances are now changing, with expected implications for regional multilateralism including the ASEAN-led groupings. Looking ahead, whether the ADMM-Plus would continue to retain its relevance in the regional security architecture would arguably depend on the development of three overlapping factors: (i) intra-ASEAN dynamics and the ADMM’s leadership; (ii) major power rivalry and the existence of competing options for multilateralism; and, (iii) the attitudes towards practical cooperation under the ADMM-Plus framework.

## **Factors Shaping the ADMM-Plus’ Future**

### ***Intra-ASEAN dynamics and ADMM’s leadership***

Considering the central role that the ADMM occupies in driving ADMM-Plus cooperation, ASEAN’s internal dynamics would play an important part in shaping the effectiveness and relevance of the ADMM-Plus. Without a cohesive ASEAN, it would be tough for the ADMM to exercise its agenda-setting influence in the ADMM-

Plus. One example of the ADMM's decisiveness was during the 3rd ADMM-Plus, chaired by Malaysia in 2015. Given the differing views of all 18 members regarding the South China Sea disputes—which some ADMM-Plus countries had sought to include in the joint declaration—ASEAN decided to circumvent a potential deadlock by not releasing an ADMM-Plus joint declaration, which was, in any case, not a required document. Instead, the South China Sea was mentioned in the accompanying Chairman's Statement, which was not a consensus document.<sup>10</sup> This incident reflected a skillful move by the ADMM to prevent ADMM-Plus dialogue from reaching a stalemate. In recent times, however, questions raised about the overall level of ASEAN cohesion point to more challenges for the grouping to effectively steer the ADMM-Plus process.<sup>11</sup>

The ongoing political and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, and consequently how to deal with the junta, is among ASEAN's most pressing challenges in the near term. In the context of ASEAN-led multilateralism, the impact is arguably greater for the ADMM and ADMM-Plus as the platforms directly involve the defense sectoral and military officials.

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ASEAN has barred high-level representation from the Myanmar junta at its summits and ministerial meetings, but some engagement continues at the technical level in the ADMM-Plus EWGs. This has caused some complications for several of the Plus countries. In July 2022, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States withdrew from an ADMM-Plus EWG meeting on counter-terrorism co-chaired by Myanmar and Russia.<sup>12</sup> Questions have also been posed to Canberra and Washington for co-hosting EWG meetings that involve the junta.<sup>13</sup> Given that attendance at these meetings are determined by ASEAN rather than the dialogue partners—even if they are co-chairs—the ADMM would need to find a way to ensure that its position regarding Myanmar remains cohesive. In some instances, the seemingly divergent strategies taken by different ASEAN member-states towards the junta suggest that the association may encounter difficulties in sustaining a collective approach.<sup>14</sup>

Timor-Leste's forthcoming admission into ASEAN may also result in shifting dynamics within the organization. Although it is too early to predict how things may change—or whether the changes will be significant—ASEAN will have to take into account Dili's interest and capacity to participate in ADMM and ADMM-Plus activities. The entry of one more country into the 10-member ADMM and 18-member ADMM-Plus may seem relatively minor, but it is nevertheless an additional set of interests and concerns that would have an impact on the consensus-based decision-making process.

Much would also depend on the leadership of the ASEAN and ADMM chairs in the next few years. Among other initiatives, Indonesia—as the ASEAN chair in 2023—would likely be working to obtain consensus in the ADMM on its proposal for a defense perspective of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).<sup>15</sup> Issued in June 2019 amid the promotion of the Indo-Pacific narrative by some non-ASEAN countries, the AOIP was framed as a regional vision that would be acceptable to the competing powers and it emphasized the

importance of existing ASEAN-led platforms. Indonesia's proposal for a defense perspective of the AOIP adopts a similar approach, underlining the central role of ASEAN and the ADMM in regional defense cooperation.<sup>16</sup> This would presumably also be tabled at the ADMM-Plus at a later stage, to acquire the support of the dialogue partners.

The subsequent ASEAN chairs are Lao PDR in 2024 and Malaysia in 2025. Taking reference from their past chairmanships, Vientiane is expected to adopt a low-profile approach while Putrajaya is likely to pursue higher profile initiatives for ASEAN. Myanmar is presently scheduled to take over the chairmanship in 2026; whether and how this will occur, however, is uncertain. Regardless, a cohesive ASEAN would be essential in bolstering the ADMM's leadership in driving ADMM-Plus cooperation.

### *Major power rivalry and competing options for multilateralism*

Of the recognized major players in today's geopolitics, China, Russia, and the United States are all members of the ADMM-Plus. The evolution of the China-U.S. strategic rivalry and the geopolitical consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been examined at length elsewhere, and do not need to be repeated here. Their implications for ADMM-Plus cooperation, however, bear some consideration. Perhaps the broader issue here is the extent to which major powers and their allies or partners would continue to find value in ASEAN-led multilateralism. For the past three decades, the ASEAN brand of multilateralism has been characterized by inclusivity, where the grouping pursues engagement with all the key regional countries. This means bringing both likeminded and non-likeminded actors to the same table, and facilitating consultations and cooperation among a varied group of states.<sup>17</sup>

Two main factors have driven ASEAN's pursuit of inclusivity. First, by encouraging major and regional powers to invest in security and economic growth

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in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, the hope is that they would think twice about starting or worsening a conflict situation which would risk their own commitments and interests in the region. Second, the presence of a range of powers in the region would prevent the smaller Southeast Asian states from being subjected to the unilateral whims and pressures of a hostile regional hegemon. This takes reference from former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa's concept of "dynamic equilibrium", which rejects the existence of a preponderant power and "seeks to place in the wider context—'dilute' even—the rising power of any given state".<sup>18</sup> These two factors account for the fairly inclusive and diverse membership composition of ASEAN-led forums such as the ADMM-Plus, East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

For the most part of the post-Cold War period, China, Russia, and the United States have generally been open to engaging with each other via the ASEAN-led forums, and in the context of the ADMM-Plus have also participated in joint exercises involving one another. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, it seems unlikely that Russia and/or the United States would want to be part of a military exercise that involves the other, even if the focus is on supposedly non-controversial transnational

security challenges such as HADR. Washington's allies, such as Canberra and Tokyo, may also hesitate to participate in such a joint exercise. Given this, whether the ADMM-Plus could sustain its relatively inclusive format of cooperation is unclear.

Alongside the China-U.S. rivalry and the perceived ineffectiveness of ASEAN-led multilateralism in responding to pertinent regional challenges, the two major powers as well as some of their regional allies and partners have also turned towards non-ASEAN multilateral and minilateral networks. These include the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Australia-United Kingdom-US (AUKUS) arrangement, and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism. Several observers have written about the potential implications of these non-ASEAN groupings for ASEAN-led multilateralism. Chief among the points raised are whether these new platforms—perceived to be led or dominated by competing powers—

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would increase regional tensions, as well as whether they would eventually sideline ASEAN's central role in regional affairs.<sup>19</sup>

Another angle to this debate would be the feasibility of ASEAN-led platforms working together with the non-ASEAN-led arrangements. For the ADMM-Plus specifically, the possibility for collaboration with the newer multilateral and minilateral arrangements appears dim. With the current state of geopolitical dynamics and in light of the ADMM-Plus' diverse membership, any suggestion to work with groupings regarded as dominated by the respective competing powers would come up against some opposition. In this sense, the ADMM-Plus would not have many options to work with the non-ASEAN platforms. Consequently, amid the emergence of forums that have similar agendas and overlapping membership with the ADMM-Plus, it is all the more important for the latter to offer a comparative advantage in order to maintain its relevance in Indo-Pacific security.

### *Attitudes towards practical cooperation under the ADMM-Plus framework*

The ADMM-Plus prides itself on practical cooperation, with its terms of reference pointing out that “the ADMM shall determine the areas and levels of interaction with defence establishments of extra-regional countries, with a particular focus on practical cooperation”.<sup>20</sup> The ADMM-Plus is certainly particularly suited for such a purpose, given the “mission-mindedness and the military assets and resources at [the] disposal” of its members, which are national defense establishments.<sup>21</sup> As earlier mentioned, the ADMM-Plus has implemented concrete initiatives, such as the adoption of CUES and a defense hotline, as well as conducted regular multinational exercises to enhance regional cooperation on transnational security challenges.

The extent to which these practical initiatives may continue to be effective or sustained, however, is debatable. The improbability of Russia, the United

States and its allies participating in an ADMM-Plus joint military exercise at present has been highlighted above. Should China-U.S. tensions worsen, it is not unlikely that a similar dilemma may materialize regarding the participation of Beijing and Washington in ADMM-Plus exercises. Assuming that the declining interest towards larger-scale multilateral practical cooperation persists, the ADMM-Plus may find its original value diminished. Instead, there may be more engagement via a “ADMM+1” format, as reflected by the growing interest in “ASEAN+1” exercises and the “ASEAN+1” defense ministers’ informal meetings.<sup>22</sup>

Another related issue would be the evolution of the EWGs. Participation in the seven EWGs demands time and resources. In addition to the workshops and meetings, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, each of the EWGs would typically mark the end of the three-year co-chairmanship cycle with a military exercise. These would be on top of the individual countries’ other commitments outside of the ADMM-Plus. This has, perhaps unsurprisingly, led to suggestions for a stock-take of the EWGs and a more effective allocation of resources across the different platforms dealing with similar regional security challenges. Following the 9th ADMM’s acknowledgement of the “limited financial and human resources available” and the need to consolidate processes “for more economical and efficient outcomes”, the ADMM-Plus in 2017 expressed its goal to streamline the EWGs.<sup>23</sup> This would include a review of each EWG to determine if they have achieved their objectives, following which a decision would be made on whether the EWG should be retained, dissolved or merged with another EWG.

While there have not been indications of any changes to the existing EWGs thus far, the consolidation of the EWGs is an important task. For one, it would help to pre-empt questions about the sustainability of the EWG framework. Without a process to disband EWGs that have fulfilled their purpose and as new EWGs continue to emerge to

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deal with new challenges, the fight for limited time and resources would become a bigger problem. To be fair, assessing whether a EWG has attained its final objectives regarding cooperation and capacity building is a tough—and delicate—undertaking. For various reasons, individual countries may also have an interest in continuing the operations of certain EWGs. The overall risk, however, is that as the costs of participation grow to exceed the benefits, this may then diminish the general value for participants to engage with the ADMM-Plus framework. This would be particularly applicable to countries that have typically emphasized pragmatic engagement with the ADMM-Plus, such as Australia and the United States. For the EWGs and the ADMM-Plus to remain effective and relevant in regional security, the efficiency of the processes would be a significant determinant.

## **Conclusion**

The ADMM-Plus has come a rather long way since its inauguration in 2010. It has not only facilitated dialogue and interactions among defense ministers

and officials in the Indo-Pacific, but also advanced concrete cooperation among regional militaries. As geopolitical circumstances evolve, the future of the ADMM-Plus in the regional security architecture would depend on ASEAN's intramural dynamics and ADMM leadership, the trajectory of major power relations and the existence of alternative options for multilateral security cooperation in the region, as well as the attitudes towards practical cooperation under the ADMM-Plus rubric. Current trends and expected developments in all three areas foreshadow the challenges facing the ADMM-Plus in the foreseeable future. For the ADMM-Plus to uphold its usefulness and relevance in Indo-Pacific security, members would thus have to consider the fundamental contributions of the forum to the region and work towards strengthening those attributes. Ultimately, the ADMM-Plus would only be as durable as its members want it to be.

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