

Challenges Facing ASEAN Defence Ministers

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ASEAN defence establishments have attained remarkable achievements during their first decade of regional cooperation, starting with the inaugural ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) in Kuala Lumpur on 9 May 2006. How successful they can continue to be over the next decade depends very much on whether they can cope with challenges amidst the growing international uncertainty as well as the intensifying complexity of the Sino-US rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the South China Sea.

ASEAN risks losing its centrality if cooperation in the ADMM is lagging behind while cooperation in the ADMM-Plus is growing in leaps and bounds and is sometimes driven by powerful Dialogue Partners. Excessive preoccupation with external engagements in the ADMM-Plus will distract ASEAN defence establishments from their own ADMM agenda. An ineffective ADMM will weaken the collective ASEAN leadership role in the ADMM-Plus and could embolden some Dialogue Partners to try to hijack the process to serve their own narrow strategic interests.

One proposed solution is for ASEAN defence establishments to redouble their concerted efforts in defending ASEAN centrality by first creating more substantive cooperation in the ADMM. A stronger ADMM can manage the ADMM-Plus more effectively. At the same time, productive ADMM cooperation will boost the development of the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), thereby contributing to the building of the ASEAN Community towards 2025.

Successful cooperation of ASEAN defence establishments can increase mutual trust and understanding. This can help overcome the “trust deficit” among some ASEAN governments, and reinforce the “we-feeling” or the “ASEAN Spirit” of belonging to the same integrated ASEAN Community. Mr. S. Rajaratnam, Singapore’s first minister for foreign affairs, and one of the five founding fathers of ASEAN, once

* This paper was submitted on 15 March 2017.

explained the “ASEAN Spirit”¹ as the habit of consultation and cooperation, which involved the sincere efforts of ASEAN members in trying to “forge” a consensus on important issues through frequent meetings, friendly exchange of views, and adjustment of one’s own national policy or attitude in order to see eye to eye with one another and address common concerns. Adjustments of national policies and attitudes were made because ASEAN members placed some value on reaching an ASEAN consensus.

CHALLENGES FACING THE ADMM

Defence-Military Synergy

ASEAN countries’ supreme commanders or heads of the militaries have had their informal meetings under the framework of the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Informal Meeting (ACDFIM) since 2001. At the 12th ACDFIM in Kuala Lumpur on 10 February 2015, the ASEAN military chiefs decided to “formalize” their meeting in order to further enhance practical cooperation among the ASEAN militaries.

Some military chiefs are also interested in expanding the scope of cooperation in the ACDFIM to include external engagements with key dialogue partners of ASEAN, just like in the ADMM-Plus, in which ASEAN defence ministers have had a regular meeting with their counterparts from eight dialogue partner countries: Australia, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea (RoK), New Zealand, Russia, and the US.

At the 13th ACDFIM in Vientiane on 14 March 2016, the ASEAN military chiefs adopted their 9th Two-Year Work Plan (2016-2018). Participation in activities in the Work Plan is voluntary. This means activities in the Work Plan can be undertaken even when some ASEAN militaries do not or cannot participate.

Prior to the 13th ACDFIM, there were two other military informal meetings in Vientiane on 13 March 2016: the Sixth ASEAN Military Operations Informal Meeting, and the 13th ASEAN Military Intelligence Informal Meeting.

In addition, the ASEAN militaries also have the following informal meetings: the ASEAN Navy Interaction, the ASEAN Air Force Chiefs Conference, the ASEAN Chiefs of Army Multilateral Meeting, and the ASEAN Armies Rifle Meet.

Not much is known about what is happening in the ACDFIM or other informal ASEAN military meetings. The ASEAN Secretariat has never been invited to attend

¹ Singapore’s first minister for foreign affairs, S. Rajaratnam, once described the “ASEAN Spirit” as the habit of consultation and cooperation, which involved the sincere efforts of ASEAN members in trying to “forge” a consensus on important issues through frequent meetings, friendly exchange of views, and adjustment of one’s own national policy or attitude in order to see eye to eye with one another and address common concerns. Adjustments of national policies and attitudes were made because ASEAN “members placed some value on reaching an ASEAN consensus.” Without ASEAN, Southeast Asian governments would be “more stubborn about modifying their views.” See S. Rajaratnam: *The Prophetic and the Political*, edited by Chan Heng See and Obaid Ul Haq, published by ISEAS in 2007, page 312.

them. On paper, the ACDFIM as well as all other informal ASEAN military meetings report to the ADMM.

ASEAN defence ministers, at their ninth annual meeting in Langkawi, Malaysia, on 16 March 2015, recognized and commended the discussion and the proposal in the ACDFIM to “formalize” the ACDFIM. However, it remains unclear how formalizing the ACDFIM will change its status and reporting line.

Administratively, the defence minister is the boss of all the generals in the armed forces, including the supreme commander. But in some ASEAN countries, the supreme commander may be more powerful than the defence minister. This is the case in Myanmar, where Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is known to hold the supreme military power. Myanmar’s Defence Minister Sein Win was a former chief-of-staff of the Bureau of Air Defence of the Myanmar Army with the rank of lieutenant general, which is two ranks lower than Supreme Commander Min Aung Hlaing’s.

Undoubtedly, military-to-military interactions and cooperation in the ACDFIM and other informal ASEAN military processes are useful in enhancing mutual trust and confidence. But the ADCFIM need not and should not go its own way. At the minimum, the ACDFIM should continue to report to the ADMM. The ASEAN Secretariat should be invited to attend the ACDFIM. The ASEAN Secretariat can, at least, help keep the ASEAN military chiefs well-informed of what is going on in ASEAN, not only in the ASEAN Political-Security Community (to which the ADMM belongs) but also in the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

Introducing external engagements to the ACDFIM needs further careful consideration to avoid adverse consequences that could affect the ADMM-Plus. ASEAN defence ministers as well as ASEAN foreign ministers should be consulted to examine all strategic implications.

ASEAN military chiefs should know that it is difficult to sustain the diverse interests of ASEAN’s external partners whenever ASEAN initiates a new engagement process. Some major powers have a tendency to bring up issues of their own strategic interest to discuss, even though these issues may not be of common concern in ASEAN. Some major powers are sometimes more interested in talking to other powers instead of discussing issues raised by ASEAN. This was one reason why ASEAN foreign ministers have given up on having the annual ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM) +10 Post Ministerial Conference.

Moreover, ASEAN needs to maintain unity and speak with one unified clear and consistent voice when engaging its external partners. Having too many external engagement processes risks exposing ASEAN to inconsistency, or worse, disunity.

AVOID OVERREACHING IN THE ADMM

After its first decade, the ADMM has put in place quite a number of cooperation activities and long-term projects. The emphasis now should be on delivering concrete benefits, rather than venturing into new initiatives.

One of the first and noteworthy achievements of the ADMM was the establishment of the framework of the ASEAN Defence Establishments and Civil Society Organizations Cooperation on Non-Traditional Security. Such engagement is especially useful in coping with major natural disasters as national and local civil society organizations in the affected country can be engaged to play a useful part in working with the ASEAN militaries.

Potent Capability in HADR

Within ASEAN, the ADMM has the most potent capability in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). The terms of reference for the ASEAN Militaries Ready Group (AMRG) on HADR were adopted at the 10th ADMM in Vientiane on 25 May 2016. The AMRG is now able to assist upon request any affected country in ASEAN, in coordination with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) in Jakarta. ASEAN military personnel taking part in AMRG's operations can have the ASEAN emblem on their national uniforms and display the ASEAN flag.

One crucial question is whether enough real resources will be made available when a major natural disaster strikes. This is why it is wise to have the understanding that operation of the AMRG shall not replace bilateral assistance. Neither will it supersede ASEAN cooperation with its partners under the ADMM-Plus for HADR operations.

ASEAN Standby Force?

Eight ASEAN countries (excluding Laos and Singapore) contributed altogether 4,750 peacekeepers to UN peacekeeping operations (UN PKO) as at the end of January 2017. This made ASEAN the sixth largest contributor, after Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. It makes sense for the ADMM to promote networking among the PKO training centres in ASEAN countries to share experiences and best practices. In the future, peacekeepers from ASEAN countries should have the ASEAN emblem on their national uniforms when taking part in the UN PKO.

So far ASEAN governments have shied away from the idea of establishing any ASEAN standby force for peacekeeping in the ASEAN region. The fear of high expenditure in funding any ASEAN standby force deployment is enough to deter further serious discussion on this extremely sensitive issue. Using such a standby force may not be possible in countries which are militarily powerful, such as Indonesia, Viet Nam,

and Thailand. Past experiences in the African Union showed that the deployment of the African Standby Force were successful only in small African countries with the support of major external powers, such as the EU, the US, or the UN. For the time being, it is prudent for ASEAN to depend on the UN PKO, instead of trying to set up a standby force of its own.

ASEAN Defence Industry Collaboration

Another idea in the ADMM which is still awaiting concrete realization is the ASEAN Defence Industry Collaboration (ADIC). Four workshops have already been convened to develop the framework for the implementation of the ADIC. Now, it is time for action.

In the past, ASEAN economic ministers did try to implement joint ASEAN industrial projects (AIPs) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Each of the five founding members of ASEAN was to host one project. Subsequently, only Indonesia and Malaysia succeeded in setting up one urea fertilizer plant each. The host government held 60% of equity while the other four member countries in ASEAN each contributed 10% of equity. Three other AIPs assigned to the Philippines (phosphate fertilizer), Singapore (small diesel engines), and Thailand (soda ash fertilizer) turned out to be unfeasible and were all dropped.

ADIC will face similar hurdles that the AIPs encountered in the past, including excessive bureaucratic interference, competition with the private sector, and inefficiency. Nevertheless, the ADMM can try to start some practical ADIC projects on the basis of 2 plus X: two ASEAN militaries can start and let others in ASEAN join when they see advantages to doing so.

ASEAN Centre of Military Medicine

In April 2016 the ADMM established in Bangkok the ASEAN Centre of Military Medicine. This was a welcome development after the idea was already agreed in 2015.

The Centre will be instrumental in supporting joint medical responses of ASEAN militaries in a crisis, as well as in working with “Plus” countries in training and crisis response. It is crucial to support the Centre with the necessary resources so that it can realize its huge potential and deliver life-saving services.

Direct Communications Link

The ADMM has established its direct communications link (DCL) in the form of 45 sets of bilateral secure computer links between two ASEAN defence ministers. How useful such DCL will be remains to be seen.

Ministries of Foreign Affairs in the ASEAN 10 countries and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs have reportedly established their “hotline” for calling one another

by handphones. The ASEAN-China MFA-to-MFA “hotline” is supposed to facilitate urgent discussion in times of maritime emergencies in the South China Sea. However, it is difficult to imagine the Chinese foreign minister wanting to talk to all 10 ASEAN foreign ministers should there be a clash between Chinese and Philippine forces in the disputed Scarborough Shoals. Most probably, the Chinese foreign minister would just call the Philippine secretary of foreign affairs alone in order to avoid internationalising the incident.

CHALLENGES IN THE ADMM-PLUS

By and large, the ADMM is facing more daunting challenges in the ADMM-Plus. These challenges arise from the success in the ADMM-Plus as well as from the interests of some dialogue partners who see the exciting potential of the process, and want to have more say in it.

Increasing Frequency

The ADMM-Plus started with the frequency of meeting at the ministerial level once every three years. Hence, after the inaugural ADMM-Plus in Hanoi on 12 October 2010, the Second ADMM-Plus was held three years later, on 29 August 2013, in Bandar Seri Begawan.

In between the two meetings, the ASEAN defence ministers, at their Sixth ADMM in Phnom Penh on 29 May 2012, agreed to increase the frequency of the ADMM-Plus to once every two years, chiefly because of the enthusiasm of several dialogue partners who wanted to meet with ASEAN more often. Hence, after the Second ADMM in 2013, the Third ADMM was held two years later, on 4 November 2015, in Kuala Lumpur.

Now, it is possible that the ADMM will soon agree to further increase the frequency of the ADMM-Plus to once every year, perhaps after the Fourth ADMM-Plus this year, which will be hosted by the Philippines in Manila on 24 October 2017, back-to-back with the 11th ADMM. Singapore, which will chair ASEAN in 2018, would be delighted to host the Fifth ADMM-Plus next year, if the frequency is indeed increased.

This year the Philippines, which is chairing ASEAN as well as the ADMM and the ADMM-Plus, has no plans for any ADMM Retreat, which used to be held in the third or fourth quarter in the past few years. And instead of holding the ADMM in May, the Philippines plans to have the 11th ADMM on 23 October 2017, and the Fourth ADMM-Plus on the next day. Apparently these arrangements are aimed at reducing hosting costs.

One unintended consequence of this is that there may be no informal meeting of the ASEAN defence ministers with their counterparts from China or the US this year. In the past, the ASEAN defence ministers had an informal meeting with their Chinese counterpart on the sidelines of the annual ADMM in May. Their informal meeting with

the US secretary of defence would usually take place on the sidelines of their annual ADMM Retreat in the third or fourth quarter.

Skipping the informal meetings with China and the US this year is a welcome respite for ASEAN. Such informal meetings with China and the US have created some anxiety, if not jealousy, in some other dialogue partners, who also want to have a similar regular informal meeting with ASEAN defence ministers every year. The informal meeting with China also led the Chinese side to try to up the ante in proposing to formalize the informal meeting into a regular annual ADMM+China meeting. So far the ADMM has wisely managed to fend off the Chinese overture.

Growing Cooperation Areas

The number of cooperation areas of the ADMM-Plus has increased from five to seven, with each area being handled by a joint expert working group (EWG) co-chaired by one ASEAN member and one dialogue partner. The first five areas are: HADR, maritime security, PKO, military medicine, and counter-terrorism. At the Second ADMM-Plus, humanitarian mine action (deminig) was added. And at the 10th ADMM in Vientiane on 25 May 2016, ASEAN defence ministers agreed to add cyber security as yet another new area for cooperation in the ADMM-Plus.

The EWG on Cyber Security will be co-chaired by the Philippines and New Zealand. The other existing EWGs and their co-chairs are: HADR – Malaysia and the US; Maritime Security – Singapore and the RoK; Counter-Terrorism – Thailand and China; PKO – Indonesia and Australia; Military Medicine – Myanmar and India; and Humanitarian Mine Action – Laos and Russia.

The expansion of cooperation areas creates more workload for defence officials in ASEAN. Attending more EWG meetings, especially those held outside of the ASEAN region, is too costly. Some ASEAN members may not be able to send a delegation from the capital, and may just let their available military attaché officers overseas show up to collect papers and take some notes. The quality of overall ASEAN participation in these EWG meetings will decrease. The more active dialogue partners can drive the EWGs in which their ASEAN co-chairs are weak.

Overlapping with the ARF²

Another continuing challenge is how to overcome the duplication of efforts in the overlapping of areas of cooperation in the ADMM-Plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ARF involves ASEAN member countries plus 17 external partners. Eight of the 17 are the dialogue partners who are also participating in the ADMM-Plus.

² See the author's discussion of the same issue in "ASEAN Defence Diplomacy and the ADMM-Plus", *Perspectives*, No. 49, 2013, the online publication of ISEAS, at www.iseas.edu.sg.

Three areas of cooperation that both the ADMM-Plus and the ARF have are: HADR, maritime security, and counter-terrorism. The ARF is also exploring the possibility of starting an inter-sessional meeting on information and communications technologies (ISM on ICTs). This will overlap with the work of the ADMM-Plus's EWG on Cyber Security.

One crucial question that MFA officials in the ARF need to ask themselves is whether their ministries really have the manpower, equipment, financial resources, and technical expertise to carry out concrete cooperation activities in these four areas in question. If they do not have what are needed, they had better leave these four areas to the ADMM-Plus and turn to concentrating on doing more work in preventive diplomacy in the ARF.

Since most of the necessary legal groundwork for HADR has been completed, there is no point for the ARF to continue the inter-sessional meeting on disaster relief (ISM-DR), much less to attempt another costly ARF Disaster Relief Exercise, like the last one in May 2015 in Malaysia. Such exercises inevitably require the participation of military personnel who have their own HADR work under the ADMM-Plus, the ADMM, and the ACDFIM to tend to already.

Likewise, cooperation under the ARF Heads of Defence Universities/Colleges/Institutions Meeting (HDUCIM) can be transferred to the ADMM-Plus because these participating bodies are mostly under the supervision of the defence ministry, not the foreign affairs ministry.

Space security is yet another area in the ARF which should also be left to the ADMM-Plus to pursue. The dilemma for ASEAN here is that it lacks the expertise to lead this highly specialized area. If space security comes under the ADMM-Plus, its EWG will certainly be driven by major space powers.

ADMM-Plus to Report to the EAS?

Some think-tanks in some dialogue partners in the ADMM-Plus are talking about having the ADMM-Plus report to the East Asia Summit (EAS). This is not a good idea.

Although the same eight dialogue partners are participating in both the ADMM-Plus and the EAS, this is just coincidental. The ADMM decided in 2009 to invite the eight dialogue partners to join the launching of the ADMM-Plus in Hanoi in 2010. On the other hand, when the EAS was launched in Kuala Lumpur on 14 December 2005, Russia and the US at first did not qualify to join, because each of them lacked one of the three qualifications for EAS participation. Russia lacked a "substantive relationship with ASEAN" although it had been a dialogue partner of ASEAN since 1996, and acceded to the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in November 2004. The US has been a dialogue partner since the early 1970s and has had a "substantive relationship with ASEAN" over the years; but it had not acceded to the TAC. The US finally acceded to the TAC in July 2009. The number of dialogue

partners in the EAS increased to eight only when Russia and the US started attending the Sixth EAS in Bali on 18-19 November 2011.

As mentioned above, there is no direct relationship between membership in the ADMM-Plus and in the EAS. Having the ADMM-Plus report to the EAS will imply that there is such a relationship. In the future, the ADMM-Plus may accept new members but the EAS may not want to expand its membership. ASEAN should keep this important flexibility of delinking the ADMM-Plus from the EAS. Moreover, there is no need to trouble the EAS leaders with yet another formal annual report. Too many EAS ministerial bodies are already reporting to the EAS. The EAS leaders should spend more time discussing strategic issues of common concern, instead of reading about or listening to ministers' reports.

SUPPORTING ASEAN CENTRALITY

When ASEAN defence establishments and militaries can develop their synergy, they can, together, play a significant role in supporting ASEAN governments in taking the “pro-ASEAN” position of neutrality and constructive engagement, without collectively taking sides in the intensifying rivalry between China and the US. Separately, individual ASEAN members may have different security orientations: The Philippines and Thailand are “non-NATO” allies of the US, although both of them, of late, have been portrayed in the international media as drifting away from the US towards the Chinese camp; Malaysia and Singapore are in the UK-led Five Power Defence Arrangement, although Malaysia is perceived as becoming more “pro-China” whereas Singapore is perceived as being “pro-US”; Brunei Darussalam just wants to be left alone, although it continues to rely on the UK for security support; Cambodia and Laos are clearly moving under China's economic domination; whilst both Myanmar and Viet Nam are trying to wriggle their way out of the Chinese embrace.

However, when ASEAN members act collectively in ASEAN, they can choose to be “pro-ASEAN”, working harder together in ASEAN with the “Spirit of ASEAN” in building the ASEAN Community towards 2025, and at the same time pursuing constructive engagement with all external powers. ASEAN defence ministers have taken the correct approach of maintaining equal treatment of China and the US. After they went out to meet with US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel in Hawaii in early April 2014, the following year, they made a trip to Beijing to meet with Chinese Defence Minister General Chang Wanquan on 16 October 2015. Since they went to Hawaii for the second time to meet with US Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter on 30 September 2016, now the ASEAN defence ministers may have to pay another visit to Beijing soon.

Four Components of ASEAN Centrality³

The ASEAN centrality has four basic components, of which the most visible one is ASEAN's leadership and management of its growing external engagement processes, such as the ADMM-Plus, the ARF, and the EAS. But in fact the more important part of the ASEAN centrality is inside ASEAN. It is the ongoing community-building endeavour to increase more weight to ASEAN in all aspects: political, security, diplomacy, economic, socio-cultural, and functional. In demography, ASEAN has more than enough weight, with over 650 million in combined population in 2017; this is the world's third largest after China's and India's.

Both ASEAN's external engagements and community-building efforts are supported by the third component of the ASEAN centrality, which is the institutional framework of ASEAN based on the ASEAN Charter. And the most important part of the ASEAN centrality, albeit the least visible one is the political will of all ten member governments to undertake the shared responsibility in ASEAN and to fulfil their collective commitment to ASEAN in enhancing regional peace, security and prosperity.

ASEAN Centrality in Community-Building

At the 27th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, 20-22 November 2015, ASEAN leaders adopted the new ASEAN Roadmap, *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*, which includes the three new community-building Blueprints for the APSC, the AEC, and the ASCC.

In community-building, the ASEAN centrality calls for giving due importance to ASEAN, with goodwill in exercising the equal rights of the ASEAN membership, and best national efforts in fulfilling all obligations in ASEAN. In the ASEAN Charter, Article 5 Paragraph 2 states: "*Member States shall take all necessary measures, including the enactment of appropriate domestic legislation, to effectively implement the provisions of this Charter and to comply with all obligations of membership.*"

All ASEAN members are obliged to ratify without delays and implement all ASEAN agreements signed by their leaders and ministers. Better still, they should also adjust their national policy to keep it in line with what they are doing in ASEAN at the regional and international levels.

At the 25th ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, ASEAN leaders endorsed a long list of recommendations from the High Level Task Force on Strengthening the ASEAN

³ See the author's article "Understanding the ASEAN Centrality Beyond 2015", presented to "Regional Conference on Cambodia and ASEAN: Managing Opportunities and Challenges Beyond 2015", organized by the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, in Phnom Penh on 28 March 2016. The paper is available at the website of the CICP at www.cicp.org.kh. A revised version of the paper was also submitted for the perusal of participants at the Ditchley Foundation's international conference "ASEAN: The Key to East Asia's Future?", held at Ditchley Park in the UK, 13-15 October 2016.

Secretariat and Reviewing the ASEAN Organs. Implementing these recommendations will involve investing more resources in ASEAN. After one year of the new strengthening effort, the ASEAN Secretariat's staff reported a satisfying positive outcome.⁴

Political Will and Commitment to ASEAN

ASEAN will be as strong as its member governments and leaders want it to be. If they truly believe in sharing their common destiny in ASEAN, then they must be serious about community-building, and fulfil their shared commitment and collective responsibility to ASEAN. It is imperative that they promptly ratify and implement all the ASEAN agreements that have been signed. They must also comply in good faith with the ASEAN Charter.

As things stand now, ASEAN will continue to be an intergovernmental organization in which all the member governments have an equal say in making ASEAN decisions on the basis of sovereign equality and consensus. There is no punishment for not ratifying signed ASEAN agreements⁵ or for ignoring ASEAN agreements which are in effect. Under the APSC, two of the four agreements still awaiting full ratification are: Agreement on the Privileges and Immunities of ASEAN, signed on 25 October 2009 (Malaysia has not yet ratified this agreement), which includes operationalisation of the legal personality of ASEAN; and Protocol to the ASEAN Charter on Dispute Settlement Mechanisms, signed on 8 April 2010 (still needs two ratifications, by the Philippines and Singapore), in order to make the dispute settlement mechanisms outlined in the ASEAN Charter's Chapter VIII operational.

ASEAN issues have never been raised in any election campaigns in ASEAN member countries. This is due largely to the widespread lack of public interest in ASEAN. Voters in ASEAN countries do not see any connection between their well-being and ASEAN's performance. Most politicians in ASEAN countries want to keep it that way. This explains why there will be no Brexit repeat in ASEAN.⁶

However, ASEAN could break down if it is not strengthened now because there is a serious mismatch between its institutional capability and growing ASEAN aspirations. Some ASEAN members may lose interest in ASEAN and let it drift. This is why it is crucial for the ADMM to deliver concrete results. In many other ministerial bodies in ASEAN, there are more words than actions.

⁴ The author's interviews with the ASEAN Secretariat's staff during a working visit as part of the team from the ASEAN Studies Centre, 21-22 March 2016. The team met the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) in a working lunch on 21 March 2016.

⁵ In the AEC, 18 of the 58 signed economic agreements have not entered into force because of incomplete ratification. See details at the website of the ASEAN Secretariat at www.asean.org. Go to "Legal Instruments" in the "Resource" section. All eight agreements under the ASCC have entered into force.

⁶ See the author's article "No Brexit repeat in ASEAN" in *The Diplomat* online blog on 28 June 2016.

Brexit already shows that some countries feel as if regional cooperation does not bring clear-cut or equal benefits to all. Regional cooperation is like evolution: there may be adaptation and survival, growth and development, but there may also be reversal, mutation, and even extinction. ASEAN members cannot assume that community-building will continue to progress to a higher plane without their conscious efforts.

Even though no ASEAN member is seriously considering quitting ASEAN, all the member countries are calculating the costs and benefits of ASEAN membership. Should any one of them see that it can benefit more by openly joining either the Chinese camp or the US alliance, then ASEAN will face a crisis of *raison d'être*, and worse, a new “Cold War” in Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSION

The ADMM needs further strengthening by managing and developing its synergy with the ASEAN militaries. The ADMM also needs to translate its cooperation plans into action to produce more concrete results.

In order to succeed, the ADMM needs unity, a revitalized “ASEAN Spirit” of its members and stronger organization. A stronger ADMM will make it possible for ASEAN to continue to maintain control and enhance ASEAN centrality in the growing ADMM-Plus process. It can help support ASEAN governments in assuming the collective “pro-ASEAN” position, without having to take sides in the China-US rivalry.

At the same time, ASEAN defence ministers must continue to try to make all their external partners in the ADMM-Plus feel comfortable and see that they have a stake in maintaining regional peace and security in Southeast Asia, where ASEAN shall continue to play the primary driving force role constructively.

A peaceful and prosperous Southeast Asia under ASEAN is no threat to any external powers. In fact both China and the US will have one fewer region in the world to worry about.

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