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Role of ADMM/ADMM-Plus: Preparing ASEAN for an Era of Conflict

Muhammad Faizal Bin Abdul Rahman

SYNOPSIS

At their summit in October 2024, ASEAN leaders discussed regional and international issues that significantly affect the political security landscape. As these issues constrain ASEAN's diplomatic space and herald an era of conflict, ASEAN leaders should review and strengthen ASEAN's existing institutional mechanisms for conflict prevention and mitigation.

COMMENTARY

According to the [Chairman's Statement](#) of the 44th and 45th ASEAN summits, ASEAN leaders discussed five regional and international issues of common interest to the ASEAN political security community.

At the international level, ASEAN leaders are first concerned over tensions on the Korean peninsula and the recent surge in North Korean missile launches. They reiterated their readiness to use ASEAN-led platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to promote peaceful dialogue between the rival parties. Second, ASEAN leaders are concerned about the situation in Ukraine. They emphasised the need for the cessation of hostilities, compliance with international law, and genuine dialogue to resolve the conflict peacefully. Third, ASEAN leaders expressed their concerns over the situation in the Middle East. They highlighted the extreme humanitarian situation in Gaza and commended the efforts of various ASEAN countries to deliver humanitarian assistance to the affected people.

At the regional level, ASEAN leaders first discussed the South China Sea situation — where tensions are increasing owing to actions that have endangered lives and damaged the marine environment — as well as the slow momentum of dispute resolution according to international law. Second, ASEAN leaders expressed their

concerns over developments in Myanmar, denouncing the continued acts of violence against civilians and public facilities in the country. They also reaffirmed their united position on the [Five-Point Consensus](#) as the main mechanism to address the crisis.

This paper posits that developments in Myanmar and the South China Sea situation are of utmost importance to ASEAN and could make the political-security landscape less conducive to the ASEAN community-building process. In the long term, these issues could affect plans developed by the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) for realising the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.



ASEAN leaders discussed five regional and international issues of common interests at the 44th and 45th ASEAN summits. ASEAN should strengthen its institutional mechanisms for conflict prevention and mitigation as it braces itself for a more turbulent future. *Image from ASEAN Secretariat.*

Key Conflict-related Issues for ADMM/ADMM-Plus

Essentially, developments in Myanmar and the South China Sea situation exert the most pressure on the common political-security interests of ASEAN's members. The persistence of these issues risks undermining the regional peace and stability that enabled ASEAN countries to enjoy sustained economic and socio-cultural progress for decades. The complexity of these issues challenges the cohesion and effectiveness of ASEAN, which the organisation needs for its community-building efforts and which member countries view as a cornerstone of their foreign policies.

As these issues intersect with the return of great power politics, they could impede efforts to engage ASEAN's dialogue partners meaningfully through an open and inclusive regional security architecture, i.e., the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). Furthermore, if ASEAN cannot manage these issues, there is a risk of international confidence in ASEAN-led platforms such as the ARF and ADMM-Plus eroding. This is particularly true for their ability to address security issues in the

Indo-Pacific, such as Korean peninsula tensions, and promote conflict avoidance through functional cooperation in non-traditional security areas.

But what can ASEAN, including the ADMM/ADMM-Plus, do to address these issues, given that progress in implementing the Five-Point Consensus in Myanmar and in the negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) has been [slow](#)? It could be argued that the geopolitical context that enabled existing ASEAN mechanisms — such as the ARF, East Asia Summit (EAS), and Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) — to keep the peace and stability in Southeast Asia successfully has changed dramatically, rendering these mechanisms [inadequate](#) to address the most pressing security issues today.

And with these changed circumstances comes the dissatisfaction over ASEAN's over-emphasis on norms and processes that has led to its extra-regional partners establishing "[out of ASEAN](#)" or minilateral arrangements focusing on results. As ASEAN reviews its institutional mechanisms, it begs the question whether the organisation has the capacity to create and implement new mechanisms for conflict prevention and mitigation.

What Can ASEAN and ADMM/ADMM-Plus Do?

Instead of creating new mechanisms, it might be more practicable for ASEAN to reflect on whether existing mechanisms could be [better utilised](#) and adapted to suit the unique circumstances of each regional security issue, especially when these issues coalesce with a conflict.

De-escalation and conflict prevention

Diplomatic mechanisms, such as the ARF and High Council of the TAC, are centred on dialogue, mediation, and consultation. They are perhaps the best, if not the only, way for ASEAN to de-escalate tensions and prevent conflict from occurring, for example, in the South China Sea. Contrary to the common perception that the "talk shop" function of ASEAN has no value, dialogue and consultation could prevent the door to peaceful resolution of tensions from being closed and, if necessary, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian goods to places — both on land and at sea — affected by tensions.

ASEAN should examine how some of these mechanisms could be revised to focus on the results as much as the processes. First, the revisions should enable ASEAN to enhance engagement with extra-regional partners, empowering it to act as a countervailing influence against possible actions — such as turning these places into proxy battlegrounds — that could worsen the situations in Myanmar and the South China Sea. Second, ASEAN could work towards better synergy between these diplomatic mechanisms, particularly the ARF and the ADMM/ADMM-Plus, enhancing its efforts in de-escalating tensions and conflict prevention.

Conflict mitigation

As I suggested in an earlier [paper](#), ASEAN could heed the age-old adage "*Sī vīs pācem, parā bellum*", which translates as "If you want peace, prepare for war." This

adage could be interpreted as ASEAN countries — at the ADMM/ADMM-Plus level — maintaining the cooperative momentum to bolster the resilience they require to face the spillover effects across Southeast Asia of a conflict. An example would be a conflict between China and the United States in the South China Sea, which could create supply chain disruptions and maritime insecurity.

The ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) have benefited ASEAN countries. ASEAN could explore how the lessons learned and the capacities built through the achievements of the EWGs — such as the ASEAN Militaries Ready Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (AMRG on HADR) and the ASEAN Direct Communications Infrastructure (ADI) — could be adapted and utilised to help ASEAN countries mitigate the spillover effects of conflict.

For example, it might be possible for ASEAN defence agencies to use the AMRG on HADR as a mechanism to coordinate with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) to facilitate civilian evacuation, information exchange, and distribution of goods and medical aid at certain affected places. However, this requires testing the mechanism to ensure it would work for a humanitarian crisis arising from a conflict.

Additionally, the ADI, established as a ministerial-level hotline, could be useful for ASEAN countries to maintain military-to-military communications with a view to preventing misunderstandings between member states if a wider conflict in the region creates a fog of uncertainty in Southeast Asia. However, this might require streamlining the ADI's bureaucratic procedures to make it an effective hotline for quick response during a conflict.

Conclusion

The discussions on regional and international security issues at the 44th and 45th ASEAN summits made clear that the era of conflict could significantly impact ASEAN's diplomatic space and political security landscape. As ASEAN braces itself for a more turbulent future, it should review and strengthen its institutional mechanisms for conflict prevention and mitigation.

This paper's suggestions are not exhaustive, but they aim to provide food for thought for the ADMM/ADMM-Plus.

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