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AMF and EAMF: An Uncertain Future?

By Shafiah F Muhibat

Synopsis

The ASEAN Maritime Forum and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum have been hailed as apt back-to-back venues for regional cooperation on maritime issues. Their future, however, is now uncertain.

Commentary

FOLLOWING ITS inaugural meeting in 2010 in the Indonesian city of Surabaya, the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) issued a press statement. It declared that its establishment was “one of the important action lines as stipulated in the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) Blueprint”.

Two years later, at the 3rd AMF in Manila, the first Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) was also launched, designed to encourage a dialogue on maritime issues that would involve participants from the wider East Asia Summit (EAS), thus building upon the existing AMF.

Growing Uncertainty

AMF and EAMF’s path-breaking meetings seemed to have got off to a good start. Both forums have been hailed as the most appropriate platforms for regional cooperation on maritime issues. At present, there are in ASEAN 10 groups on maritime issues discussed in 12 ASEAN Sectoral Bodies. These 10 issue groups are cross-cutting and overlapping.

As ASEAN does not have a sectoral ministerial body dedicated to maritime affairs,

AMF thus serves as the only forum where maritime issues are discussed comprehensively among ASEAN member states.

EAMF, on its part, is considered a suitable related platform as it mirrors the EAS member states involved. EAS is the only mechanism in the region that meets at the head of government level. It comprised all the countries necessary to address regional challenges, and while not perfect, it has the ingredients required to evolve into an effective institution based on the member states.

Nonetheless, the future of these two related regional maritime forums is uncertain.

The 7th AMF and 5th EAMF were supposed to be held in Brunei Darussalam in the second half of 2016, but were postponed without explanation. This was despite the plan to hold both forums being expressed clearly in the Joint Communique of the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Vientiane in July the same year. As stated in paragraph 24, the ministers declared: "[We] looked forward to the convening of 7th AMF and 5th EAMF in Brunei Darussalam in 2016."

The plan was underscored a few months later in the Chairman's Statement of the 11th East Asia Summit in September, in paragraph 21: "We looked forward to the convening of the 5th Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) back-to-back with the 7th ASEAN Maritime Forum to be held in Brunei Darussalam."

Status of 2016 AMF, EAMF

The convening of these two forums was kept uncertain until the end of 2016, without any clarification when and where they would be held. No statement came out of ASEAN nor Brunei on the postponement or cancellation of the forums - at least not publicly.

The confusion spilled over into the beginning of 2017. The forums were at last mentioned again at the end of the 30th ASEAN Summit in Manila on 29 April 2017. As stated in Paragraph 122 of the Chairman's Statement: "We expressed anticipation of the forthcoming seventh AMF and fifth EAMF to be held in Jakarta later this year."

Again, there was no official clarification as to why Brunei did not host the meetings as scheduled, even as they were being moved to Indonesia. There was also no clarity on the precise schedule, as the Chairman's Statement merely said "later this year".

These developments beg the question: what is going on with the AMF and EAMF? There are three possible explanations. Firstly, it might have simply been an organisational/logistical issue on the part of Brunei. If this was the case, however, a clarification would have been helpful. Moreover, other states should have volunteered to take over as soon as Brunei conveyed its unpreparedness to host the meetings.

Secondly, there might have been commitment issues from the member states. ASEAN is notorious for having more meetings than the number of days in a calendar

year. Understandably, states might experience fatigue. Lacking the human resources for all these meetings, they might want to cut back on their commitment to some engagements.

However, if this was the case, it is difficult to understand why member states would want to cut on AMF/EAMF meetings, because both forums have been acknowledged as the most suitable for regional cooperation on maritime issues.

Is there a Rethink on AMF and EAMF?

Thirdly, and this is the most worrying possibility, could member states be rethinking, if not questioning, the existence and worth of both forums? Thus far, the agenda prescribed for several meetings of the forums seems to be quite broad and includes cross-cutting issues of security concern. The format of the work is very much directed at nurturing policy dialogues, exchanges of views, and country briefings.

Accordingly, it is process-oriented and based on organisational practices familiar to ASEAN, without programme-based activities or projects being planned in a systematic manner. Therefore there could have been problems with the format.

Furthermore, precisely because ASEAN does not have a dedicated sectoral body on maritime issues, it has very limited drive on EAMF. The implication of this is that the agenda-setting of EAMF would be driven by the non-ASEAN countries, which also happen to be the countries with the resources to fund programmes and projects. ASEAN countries are collectively unhappy about having their agenda set by others, and would probably try to discontinue the existence of such platforms.

It is also noteworthy that Indonesia offered to host the meetings later this year - a move supported by the Philippines, according to some reports. This means that this will be the third AMF and second EAMF meeting that Indonesia hosts; this is quite a lot since there have only been six and four meetings respectively. Does this imply that only a couple of ASEAN states are still eager to hold the related regional maritime forums?

It is important to highlight that ASEAN should continually seek to strengthen maritime cooperation in the region as part of its efforts in ASEAN community building. Both AMF and EAMF serve as fitting platforms for this purpose. Let's see whether the two forums will indeed be carried out later this year in Jakarta.

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