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View Point

ADMM PLUS: ENHANCING ASIA PACIFIC SECURITY

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In 2007, the ASEAN countries agreed to expand the composition of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) to include friends and dialogue partners in the form of ADMM Plus 8. The eight partners include China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States. The choice for these countries is quite natural given that these are ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum) partners and six of them (other than Russia and the US) are EAS (East Asia Summit) members.

It is envisaged that the expanded engagement and interactions with the eight partners "would allow us [ASEAN] to further expand and deepen interactions and cooperation with these extra-regional countries." It was also agreed that such interactions would be "held once every three years, the frequency of which may be adjusted in the future based on the comfort-level of participants."

Early this year, during their meeting in Hanoi, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' agreed to host the first ADMM Plus 8 meeting in Hanoi in October 2010. The Vietnamese Deputy Minister of Defence Nguyen Chi Vinh has noted that "Each country and even the entire bloc cannot deal with regional security challenges, as non-traditional security matters are trans-national and even global issues. It is necessary to exchange resources with ASEAN's partners," Similar sentiments have been echoed by Mr Teo Chee Hean , Singapore Defence Minister who observed "Over time, the ADMM-Plus could also

provide a platform for practical co-operation between ASEAN and its partners on key security issues, especially on non-traditional and transnational challenges."

There is a general support for ADMM Plus among regional countries and the group will focus on training together to address threats and challenges posed by terrorism, piracy, disaster relief and transnational crime. Although the stated aim is to address non-traditional security issues, apparently there is an implicit component to address other regional security issues such as tensions in the Korean peninsula, competing claims in South China Sea, and even China US relations that turn acrimonious on regular basis and could undermine regional security.

What prompted the ADMM to expand the composition and include friends and dialogue partners? There are several arguments that have been propounded. First, it is generally agreed that it is not possible for any one country to address all non-traditional security challenges by itself and given the transnational nature of these challenges, it is important to develop synergy and build institutionalized cooperative arrangements to address the issues.

Second, the existing ARF dialogue structure is essentially a 'foreign ministry dominated structure' and the ADMM Plus would offer a platform to discuss both traditional and non traditional security issues.

Third, as far as ASEAN countries are concerned, they wish to be in the drivers' seat to shape the security architecture of the Asia Pacific region. Further, ASEAN's interest is to include as many stakeholders in the regional security architecture to ensure stability.

Fourth, such an arrangement would enhance the profile of the ASEAN and it could emerge as a major facilitator to encourage dialogue to resolve any security crisis in the region. It would like to be understood as a neutral and consultative actor.

Fifth, the ADMM Plus is a convenient arrangement to include the US into the regional security discussions. This is important given that the US President has global commitments and it is not possible for him to visit the region on an annual basis.

However, participation by the Secretary of State for Defence would ensure continued US engagement in the region.

Sixth, by including Russia and the US in the ADMM Plus ‘implicit in the proposal is the expectation that it will also provide a collective countervailing constraint on China’ and prevent any assertive tendencies by Beijing to shape regional security.

Finally, there is also a belief among ASEAN countries that it is important for Asian countries to have their own Track 1 forum where “the ministers will be present, and they will discuss things as ministers, not just as individual participants in a dialogue,” referring to the Shangri-La Dialogue where the discussions are quite diffused and cover ‘a wider range of topics and discuss ideas that are not completely formed’.

What does ADMM Plus portend for India? It has been India’s policy to support “open, inclusive and multi-layered” economic and security architecture for the region and the ADMM Plus fit well into New Delhi’s policy articulations for the region.

Further, India’s growing economic engagements with the Asia Pacific countries have advanced its strategic interests. In 2003, India acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and has also endorsed the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) which has been welcomed by Southeast Asian countries. The 2004 ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity paved the way for India’s commitment to cooperate in combating international terrorism and transnational crimes through institutionalised linkages and capacity building.

In essence, the ADMM Plus is a welcome development and offers phenomenal opportunities to India to be an important stakeholder in the Asia Pacific security architecture. The security cooperation through the ADMM Plus would further reinforce economic engagement particularly in the maritime domain which is the primary artery of economic vitality of the region.

Nearly fifty five percent of India’s sea borne trade is east bound for countries in Southeast Asia, East Asia, east coast of US and Canada and transits through the Southeast

Asian waters. This makes India an important stakeholder in the security of sea lines of communications (SLOCs) transiting through the Asia Pacific region and Asia Pacific countries such as Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asian countries acknowledge India's participation in initiatives to enhance the security of regional waters.

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