

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

The 12th ADMM-Plus Meeting: Future Prospects

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Summary

Since its inception, the ADMM-Plus has evolved into a major convening platform for addressing key security-related issues. Through collaboration among ASEAN's militaries and its partners, it helps maintain the bloc's centrality and ensures that no single power dominates the region.

The 12th ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) took place in Kuala Lumpur on 1 November 2025. The event marked the 15th anniversary of the ADMM-Plus, during which senior defence officials from ASEAN and eight key partners exchanged views on charting the future commitments, amid the current and complex security challenges. The ADMM-Plus is ASEAN’s premier platform for dialogue and enables cooperation amongst the bloc members and their dialogue partners. Its role is critical in the current uncertain multilateral rules-based order. By leveraging its neutral stance, ASEAN has helped bring major countries together on a common platform and conduct dialogues on key regional security issues through its security mechanisms, including the ADMM-Plus.

Origins of the ADMM-Plus

ASEAN was primarily intended to be a platform for member nations to engage in dialogue to manage their differences. In the first few decades since its establishment, ASEAN had to manage intra-state tensions through its cooperative mechanisms. This created a sense of a security community. The geopolitical shifts witnessed in the aftermath of the Cold War additionally presented the region with new threat perceptions. Under these new circumstances, ASEAN emerged as a pivotal regional bloc and went beyond its traditional role, taking the initiative to manage new threats that required collective action.¹

Therefore, the establishment of ASEAN-led mechanisms to promote security cooperation began to gain momentum at the end of the 20th century. Efforts to shape an ASEAN-led multilateral mechanism for regional security cooperation were driven primarily by member states' shared threat perceptions. However, it needs to be noted that their intent in doing so remained far from developing any strong military overtones.²

The pivot towards a multilateral approach with ASEAN centrality was necessary to address a host of cross-border challenges deemed detrimental to economic growth. Issues ranging from terrorism, piracy, illegal migration, climate change and infectious diseases required a coordinated approach and global response. Therefore, between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, further expansion of ASEAN-led security multilateralism was witnessed, which, apart from the ADMM-Plus, included the ‘ASEAN Regional Forum’ (ARF) and the ‘East Asia

¹ Mely Caballero-Anthony, “Reflections on Political Change, Democratic Transitions, and Regional Security in Southeast Asia”, in Mely Caballero-Anthony (ed.), *Political Change, Democratic Transitions and Security in Southeast Asia*, Routledge, Oxon, 2010, p. 138.

² Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2003, pp. 30–34.

Summit’ (EAS).³ The normative approach remains fundamental in anchoring the development of all security and defence forums under the Association. This ensures continuity of regional autonomy, as expressed through the ‘Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality’ (ZOPFAN) framework.⁴

The turn of the 21st century witnessed major geopolitical and geo-economic shifts, during which Southeast Asia faced challenges that required a fresh policy appraisal. ASEAN leaders agreed on the need to collaborate and enhance cooperation to effectively respond to economic and security uncertainties. During the ASEAN Summit in Bali on 7 October 2003, the ‘Declaration of ASEAN Concord II’ or ‘Bali Concord II’ was signed. The ‘Declaration of ASEAN Concord II’ laid the foundation for the setting up of an ‘ASEAN Community’. The ‘ASEAN Community’ rested on three pillars: (i) ‘ASEAN Security Community’ or ASC, for political and security cooperation, (ii) ‘ASEAN Economic Community’ or AEC, for economic integration, and (iii) ‘ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community’ or ASCC, for socio-cultural cooperation.

The three pillars are closely interlinked, which helps to reinforce peace, stability and growth in the region. For instance, the AEC seeks to establish a comprehensive and viable Southeast Asia economic region through a single market and manufacturing. The objective of ASCC is to strengthen collaboration for socio-economic development and to help elevate the livelihoods of the weaker sections. Finally, through the ASC, the intention is to promote peace and stability through dialogue and participation to manage security challenges.⁵

The purpose of the ASC, as one of the pillars of the ‘ASEAN Community’, was to offer a mechanism to help in the settlement of intra-regional disagreements, which posed a challenge to peace and stability. The ‘Vientiane Action Programme’ (VAP) adopted by ASEAN in 2004 stated that the role of ASC is to “promote political cooperation and deeper regional integration”. The VAP defined the purpose of the ASC to help build ‘a democratic, tolerant, participatory, and open community in Southeast Asia’.⁶

The ‘ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action’, signed in 2024 during the 10th ASEAN Summit, states that ‘ASEAN shall work towards the convening of an annual

³ Byron Chong Wenzhong, “[The Future of Multilateralism in Southeast Asia](#)”, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 13 September 2024.

⁴ The ZOPFAN Declaration of November 1971 ensured that ASEAN was not perceived as a security arrangement. Much of the bloc’s effort was aimed to promote intra-ASEAN political cooperation and conflict avoidance through dialogue. By leaving out the security cooperation from the scope of ASEAN, the regional grouping wanted to keep its focus on the socio-economic development of the region. See Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, Routledge, Oxon, 2009, p. 198.

⁵ Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia*, Routledge, Oxon, 2015, pp. 86–87.

⁶ Mely Caballero-Anthony, “Reflections on Political Change, Democratic Transitions, and Regional Security in Southeast Asia”, no. 1, pp. 138–139.

ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting’ (ADMM). The inaugural ADMM was held on 9 May 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The ADMM

It is the highest defence consultative and cooperative mechanism in ASEAN. It aims to promote mutual trust and confidence through greater understanding of defence and security challenges as well as enhancement of transparency and openness. The key objectives of the ADMM are to promote peace and stability through dialogue and cooperation in defence and security.⁷

Since its inception, it has built defence cooperation among ASEAN member states to address non-traditional security threats, ranging from HADR to counter-terrorism and piracy at sea, according to Siew Mun Tang. The establishment of the ADMM, 12 years after the ARF, indicated not only ASEAN’s cautious approach to establishing security regimes but also its growing comfort in addressing security-related issues. Therefore, the ADMM added a new dimension to the bloc’s regional security role, moving beyond diplomacy to military collaboration. This also, for the first time, helped formalise a regional framework for defence cooperation amongst the ASEAN member states.⁸

On 12 October 2010, the ADMM Plus was inaugurated as a forum for ASEAN with eight Dialogue Partners—Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and the United States of America. The ADMM-Plus focuses on seven areas of practical cooperation: maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster management, peacekeeping operations, military medicine, humanitarian mine action and cyber security. Through the establishment of Experts Working Groups (EWGs), the ADMM-Plus helps facilitate cooperation in these areas.⁹

The ADMM-Plus format has today become a vital mechanism for building trust amongst ASEAN and its partners. It expands the ADMM framework by including eight extra regional partners, facilitating broader security and defence cooperation through enhanced operational coordination. The security forum offers an established mechanism for Southeast Asian countries to diversify and deepen their defence collaboration. This is critical for the region as it seeks to build capacity to address new and emerging security challenges. The ADMM-Plus also helps reinforce ASEAN’s centrality and ensures no single power dominates the region.¹⁰

⁷ [“ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting”](#), ASEAN, 28 April 2025.

⁸ Siew Mun Tang, [“ASEAN and the ADMM-Plus: Balancing between Strategic Imperatives and Functionality”](#), *Asia Policy*, No. 22, July 2016, pp. 76–82.

⁹ [“ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus \(ADMM-Plus\)”](#), ASEAN, 28 April 2025.

¹⁰ Siew Mun Tang, [“ASEAN and the ADMM-Plus: Balancing between Strategic Imperatives and Functionality”](#), no. 8.

Ensuring Regional Stability amidst Complex Geopolitical Dynamics

Southeast Asia is located in the centre of the Indo-Pacific region and encompasses major geopolitical hotspots, such as the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. Further, as one of the world's fastest-growing economic regions, its geopolitical significance has increased. The region, however, is impacted by the ongoing US–China rivalry, which predominantly prioritises geopolitics over geo-economics. ASEAN countries have to balance their engagement with the US *vis-à-vis* China in defence and security, while also engaging with China for economic and infrastructure development.

As China further strengthens its influence through economic ties, including developmental projects under the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ and the ‘Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership’, the US is falling behind. During the first Trump administration, Southeast Asia benefitted from the US–China trade wars. However, the current US administration has been disruptive to the region, as most Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, have built large trade surpluses with the US.

Further, Southeast Asia, having a high degree of economic integration with China, was among the hardest hit by reciprocal tariffs announced by President Trump in April 2025. Except for Singapore, which ran a trade deficit with the US and received a new baseline 10 per cent tariff rate, the others were hit with massive tariffs. While ASEAN released a joint statement vowing to pursue a concerted response and avoid retaliation, individual member states prioritised bilateral negotiations with the US to secure the best deals.

Southeast Asia has also been impacted by the Trump policy, which has cut foreign assistance and other US government programmes. The closure of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which had been active throughout the region, has prompted China to step up its assistance. In March 2025, when a catastrophic magnitude 7.7 earthquake struck near Mandalay in Myanmar, the first responders were China and Russia; the US was missing due to the pause in the development assistance from the USAID. Tariffs imposed on Southeast Asia, along with radical policy shifts that have led to the closure of assistance programmes, have raised concerns about the US's commitment to the region.¹¹ The US actions towards Southeast Asia have therefore undermined its position *vis-à-vis* China, which has gained further influence and is seen as a more trusted partner for the region. Given that the area remains strategically important to Washington amid its competition

¹¹ Gregory B. Poling, “[Southeast Asia Navigates Trump's Return: Quick Deals, Lasting Dread](#)”, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), October 2025.

with China, Washington would want to ensure there are no significant divergences in its security commitments.

The Philippines and the US face a shared threat from China, and, as treaty allies, the former continues to receive support from the Trump administration. Despite cuts to foreign assistance and other US government programmes by the Trump administration, in April 2025, the military financing of US\$ 336 million to the Philippines was unfrozen. Further, in July 2025, the State Department announced US\$ 60 million in aid to the Philippines, the first new overseas development assistance awarded by the administration to any country.¹² While the Philippines has been reassured about its bilateral alliance, the visit by US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth to Vietnam on 2 November 2025 was significant. Both sides reaffirmed their partnership, with the US reiterating its commitment to support Vietnam in its defence capacity-building, modernising its defence industry and expanding its human resource training programme.¹³

President Trump’s visit to Kuala Lumpur in October 2025 to participate in the 13th ASEAN-US Summit was also significant, signalling Southeast Asia’s value in Washington’s Indo-Pacific vision. Both sides signed the ‘ASEAN-US Joint Vision Statement for a Stronger, Safer, and More Prosperous ASEAN and America’. The United States reinforced the importance of ASEAN centrality. It emphasised further deepening its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in new areas, such as combating online scam operations through new initiatives to enhance cyber threat awareness and promote public-private anti-scam partnerships.¹⁴

Therefore, the US in Southeast Asia would continue to build its alliances and partnerships. However, as with Europe under Trump, allies in Southeast Asia would also be required to step up their defence spending rather than rely entirely on the US.¹⁵ Southeast Asian nations, despite the negative impact of Trump’s policies, view Washington’s support as essential to preserving their vital interests amid increasing threats from Beijing. This has forced Southeast Asian countries to accommodate the protectionist shift in US foreign policy and preserve their alliances and partnerships.¹⁶

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “[Vietnam, US Deepen Strategic Partnership through Defence Cooperation](#)”, *Vietnam Net Global*, 3 November 2025.

¹⁴ “[ASEAN-United States Leaders’ Joint Vision Statement to Promote Stronger, Safer, and More Prosperous ASEAN and America](#)”, ASEAN, 27 October 2025.

¹⁵ Stephen Olson, “[Southeast Asia Must Prepare for Trump’s Everything’s on the Table’ Approach to Trade](#)”, *Fulcrum*, 20 February 2025.

¹⁶ Robert Sutter, “[Trump, China, and Declining US Influence in Asia](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 14 October 2025.

ADMM-Plus: Commitments for the Future

In this evolving and complex geopolitical landscape, the ADMM-Plus becomes crucial, providing a neutral forum for the major powers to engage in constructive dialogue. Since its inception, the ADMM-Plus has grown into a platform for wider defence diplomacy, though its focus remains on building capacity and capabilities. Given the current geopolitical climate, this forum, by engaging the two major rivals—the US and China—ensures strategic stalemate and wider cooperation amongst other dialogue partners.

The ADMM-Plus has reaffirmed its commitment to regional peace and stability through enhancing practical cooperation. At the 12th ADMM-Plus, the Ministers, while exchanging views on charting the forum's future direction, emphasised the importance of upholding international norms.¹⁷ The Joint Statement marking the 15th anniversary of the ADMM-Plus reaffirmed ADMM-Plus's commitment to practical cooperation through Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) that address areas such as capacity building, resilience strengthening and bridging strategic differences. Key initiatives include fostering information sharing, prioritising inclusivity, expanding capacity-building efforts, and maintaining mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁸

At the 12th ADMM-Plus, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh emphasised that the platform had evolved into a dynamic framework for regional peace, stability and practical defence cooperation. Describing “ADMM-Plus as an essential component of India’s ‘Act East Policy’ and broader Indo-Pacific vision”, the Defence Minister emphasised that defence collaboration with ASEAN and its dialogue partners was vital for regional peace, stability and capacity building. Addressing the forum on ‘Reflection on 15 years of ADMM-Plus and Charting a Way Forward’, the Defence Minister stated that

...India’s strategic engagement with ASEAN is not transactional but long-term and principle-driven, and it rests on a shared belief that the Indo-Pacific should remain open, inclusive, and free from coercion...¹⁹

At the very beginning, the ADMM-Plus established the EWG to foster collaboration through consultations and promote practical cooperation between defence forces on specific issues of mutual concern. Five EWGs were initially established, focusing

¹⁷ [“ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus Sets Future Direction as Forum Marks 15 Years”](#), *In Diplomacy News*, 3 November 2025.

¹⁸ [“Joint Statement By The ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus \(ADMM-Plus\) In Commemoration Of The 15th Anniversary Of The Founding Of The ADMM-Plus”](#), ASEAN, 1 November 2025.

¹⁹ [“India’s emphasis on rule of law and freedom of navigation & overflight in Indo-Pacific is not against any country, but to safeguard interests of all regional stakeholders: Raksha Mantri at ADMM-Plus”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1 November 2025.

respectively on counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, military medicine and peacekeeping operations. Subsequently, EWGs on humanitarian mine action and cybersecurity were also included in 2013 and 2016, respectively. The continuity, along with the broadening of the EWGs since the inception of the ADMM-Plus, indicates its role towards securing peace and stability in the region.²⁰

Conclusion

Since its inception, the ADMM-Plus has evolved into an important security mechanism, facilitating cooperation between ASEAN and its dialogue partners. The ADMM-Plus, through the EWGs, has also built practical collaborations between the intra- and extra-regional defence forces to tackle key non-traditional security threats jointly. The future effort, as per the Joint Statement of the 12th ADMM-Plus, emphasises enhancing capacities and capabilities and building resilience. ADMM-Plus remains focused on non-traditional security areas such as HADR, counter-terrorism and cybersecurity. While these are serious security challenges, they are also non-contentious issues, where building consensus is often met with lesser contention. However, circumstances are now changing, and for the ADMM-Plus to retain its relevance, it would need to broaden its scope of collaboration into new and critical areas.

Within the ADMM-Plus, several underlying issues exist that challenge its effectiveness. These issues range from territorial disputes in the South China Sea to a lack of political trust among the parties, which impedes deeper cooperation. The ADMM-Plus also faces significant challenges amid worsening China-US competition, as well as intra-regional contestations and conflicts. The threat to ASEAN centrality posed by major-power rivalries has raised questions about the future of the ASEAN-led multilateral approach to security cooperation. As a result of its institutional weaknesses, ADMM-Plus, like other ASEAN-led security institutions, has not made substantive progress towards its stated goals of preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution. Therefore, while the ADMM-Plus has made incremental progress in non-traditional security areas, its future role will depend on deeper, more meaningful cooperation.

²⁰ Sarah Teo, “[The Future of ADMM-Plus in the Indo-Pacific](#)”, The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2 May 2023.

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