

Note on the Inaugural ASEAN-US Defense Ministers Meeting

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United States Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel hosted a ministerial meeting with his 10 ASEAN counterparts in Hawaii from April 1, 2014 to April 3, 2014. It was the first time the United States had hosted such a ministerial meeting on its own soil, and it came at a time when it is trying to build the partnerships necessary for its Asia rebalancing strategy. Prior to this event, the United States participated in the ADMM-Plus (made up of the 10 ASEAN defense ministers and those of the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, New Zealand and Russia).

At this inaugural ADMM-Plus US, ministers agreed on five areas of practical cooperation: maritime security, counter-terrorism, disaster management, peacekeeping operations and military medicine. The meeting gave the Obama administration the opportunity to go beyond commonly discussed global threats like terrorism and state-on-state conflict and give its view of the particular security challenges facing Southeast Asia, .

The meeting deliberated on non-traditional security matters and participants visited the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's tsunami-threat and detection facility. Secretary Hagel also focused on one of its top priorities: climate change. In a blog post on the White House website describing the meeting, influential Obama adviser John Podesta wrote that ASEAN members are among those “expected to face some of the worst effects of climate change.” He stressed that the US and partner nations needed to “identify how our militaries can work together more effectively to tackle non-traditional security challenges, including climate change and natural disasters.”

Linking the meeting in Hawaii to language in the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, Podesta wrote that “climate change is not just an environmental problem; it’s an economic and security problem as well.” Quoting from the recent report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that the Asia Pacific falls victim to more than 70 per cent of all recorded natural disasters, US International Aid administrator Dr. Rajiv Shah concluded that it was necessary for governments to collaborate and work together to mitigate the impact of typhoons, flooding and other extreme weather events.

Natural disasters and climate change are long-term problems with no simple one-time fixes. They are also traditionally 'safe harbour issues, ones that do not generate too much controversy, at least insofar as defense ministers are concerned. The absence of focus on the behaviour of specific countries also means that discussions can be conducted in a non-confrontational manner. This would no doubt explain why there is duplication on these matters within ASEAN.

At the same time, the ASEAN-US defense ministers meeting served to highlight the US military's capabilities and technology, two things that would no doubt underscore what ASEAN already knows and that is the importance of having the US as a friend and ally. On April 2, ASEAN defense ministers toured Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam where they were shown B-52 and B2 bombers and F-22 fighters. The defense ministers also paid a visit to the USS Anchorage (LPD 23), an amphibious transport dock. The USS Anchorage houses an advanced command and control center. It is capable of embarking land craft air cushion and amphibious assault vehicles as well as the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft. All together, the USS Anchorage is capable of conducting ship-to-shore missions ranging from combat to delivering humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

As is to be expected, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea were a major topic of interest. It was revealed later that Secretary Hagel and the Defense Ministers had only touched on the issue during the formal segment of their meeting and continued further during an informal session on regional security issues. The need to convene an informal session clearly demonstrates yet again the sensitivities of some ASEAN countries to unnecessarily antagonising China by conducting discussions on the issue within the Plus One format. Placing the issue front-and-centre of the meeting would have been more likely to provoke a strong response from the super-power.

Even then, the South China Sea disputes were only one of the topics discussed albeit the one with the closest and most direct relevance to ASEAN. Other matters up for discussion were Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the role of NATO in bringing European nations together to deal with the Crimean Crisis and U.S. fiscal restraints. It

is not known what ASEAN defense ministers' position on the former matter were but going by later attempts to include it in a ministerial state clearly showed that most were concerned by it.

All in all, the exploratory inaugural ASEAN-US Defense Ministers Meeting appeared to be carried off without incident, setting the stage for the institutionalisation of further meetings. It helped boost confidence that such meetings could be held without negative fallout. Many ASEAN countries would unquestionably want this given their strategic security perspectives and the opportunity to be given quality face time by the US. Still, the possible implications and reactions of this on China, and the need for high comfort levels among ASEAN participants themselves, however, did not seem to go astray. When Secretary Hagel was asked at a press conference if he had any plans to make the U.S.-ASEAN Defense Forum an annual event, he diplomatically replied, "That's not my decision, that is the ASEAN ministers' decision."