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Security Nexus Perspectives

STRUCTURING ASEAN MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND THE ASEAN MILITARIES READY GROUP

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ABSTRACT

Since the December 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, the ASEAN region has made significant strides to becoming a global model for a comprehensive and coordinated regional response to international disasters. Throughout the ASEAN member states, military forces are primary responders and managers of domestic disasters. While international guidelines recommend the provision of foreign military forces and assets as a “last resort” for international responses, their deployment to disasters is common in the Indo-Pacific region due to the niche critical life-saving capabilities they can bring to the immediate aftermath of a disaster.¹ The provision of these foreign military assets is typically coordinated through bilateral offers of disaster assistance. One of the ASEAN capabilities under development is a common and coordinated ASEAN military capacity that would deploy under the One ASEAN, One Response framework to regional and possibly international disasters. In support of this effort, the 2017-2020 Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Response Expert Working Group of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus developed standard operating procedures for the concept of an ASEAN Militaries Ready Group. The intent was to guide the development and management of a multinational military team for quick coordinated deployment to areas of crises. The military ready group concept provides an opportunity for ASEAN to become a global model for a regional approach to the deployment of military assets in response to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

INTRODUCTION

For several decades, the frequency of natural disasters has increased in the Asia-Pacific region, which has experienced the human and economic impacts of these crises to a higher degree than any other region

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globally. The Asia-Pacific region, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in particular, has witnessed an increase in disaster management efforts mounted by the military, law enforcement and civilian agencies to improve response capacity and coordination. These efforts to improve regional response capacity include the development of guidelines and standard operating practices (SOPs) as well as numerous military exercises (ASEAN affiliated, bilateral and multilateral). Other significant regional efforts by the international humanitarian community and major donors facilitated the development of regional guidelines for the deployment of foreign military forces and assets (FMA) to disasters and integrated plans to prepare for and better coordinate response to the region's most likely and highest risk disasters. Such initiatives include the development of regional guidelines for the deployment of military assets to foreign disasters with the Asia-Pacific series of Conferences on Military Assistance to Disaster Relief Operations (APC-MADRO) and its subsequent annual Regional Consultative Group (RCG) on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific. The RCG has become an annual engagement to bring together response actors from the region with a core focus of preparing for the five most likely disaster scenarios in the region (three of which are in the ASEAN region).

While disaster response capacity building is a constant and urgent requirement in the Asia-Pacific, weather disasters create an opportunity to bring together foreign militaries to train together to enhance traditional military capabilities and interoperability without the sensitivity of a geopolitical narrative. These capacity-building engagements allow for the many actors engaged in response to develop working relationships while testing the utility and effectiveness of existing response frameworks and plans before a disaster occurs. Such engagements promote a common understanding of roles and responsibilities across civilian and military actors at the national, regional and international levels.

The frequency of regional disaster events requiring an international response, and the exercises conducted to build response capacity, have highlighted the need for improvements in structure and organization of response mechanisms to reduce victim assistance times and increase efficiency. This has led to the development of numerous guidelines for mechanisms and processes to enable efficient response coordination by affected states, assisting states, and the international humanitarian response community. When providing a deployable disaster assistance capability there are core coordination functions or mechanisms that should be considered to ensure that resources and capabilities are appropriately integrated into the overall response. These functional hubs look different in every national plan but they are the focal point for the core actors commonly found in an international response: national disaster management actors, international humanitarian assistance actors, and foreign military assets deployed as part of bilateral assistance. There are three core coordination centers/functions for these actors.

- Emergency operations center (EOC) run by the affected state
- International humanitarian assistance coordination center - E.g. United Nations On-Site Operational Coordination Center (OSOCC)
- Coordination center or process for management and tasking of foreign military assets (e.g. Multinational Military Coordination Center (MNCC))

Essential to the successful function of these entities and processes is whether they are complementary and supporting, rather than competing and redundant, and have appropriate liaison across the nodes. For the regionalized response under the ASEAN blanket, there is a requirement to mirror coordination processes and liaison arrangements across all of these nodes. To this end, ASEAN has developed its SOPs with clear guidance on supporting and supported roles along with the responsibilities the regional supporting response will have across each of these coordination nodes. While these relationships are addressed in written guidance, they must be tested and socialized to ensure they are adhered to during a response operation. Failure to do so often results in coordination centers competing with each other due to a lack of understanding in key actors on the ground.

The deployment of foreign military assets in response to a disaster often provides important life-saving resources. In the early stages of the response, the affected civilian community is often granted access to unique and critical, life-saving capabilities that militaries bring, such as heavy lift, transportation, engineering, communications and other gap-filling assistance. The importance of effective coordination of FMA during this life-saving phase has exposed issues with the coordination of multiple militaries. Thus, the US, ASEAN and others have proposed SOPs. However, the state of military readiness varies from country to country and there are no standby forces dedicated to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Additionally, while the roles security sectors assume during disasters varies between ASEAN Member States (AMS), , most populations still expect their defense and military sectors to be trained and ready to respond speedily, effectively and in a coordinated manner with appropriate and reliable assets.

In the area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), ASEAN is a potent and highly relevant regional force. This paper explores the most recent efforts by the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) Experts Working Group on HADR 2017-2020 to support ASEAN's response capacity with the development and adoption of SOPs for an ASEAN Militaries Ready Group (AMRG). This work builds upon the work of the previous ADMM-Plus Experts Working Group on HADR which developed an SOP for ASEAN nations to develop and integrate a Multinational Military Coordination Center (MNCC)² within national plans in response to a disaster. Taking the ASEAN response framework one step further, the AMRG concept provides an opportunity for ASEAN to become a global leader in the multinational coordination of military responses to HADR.

The ASEAN Context

The strength of ASEAN's response will depend on the ability of Member States to have a fast, reliable, and collective response. To achieve this, ASEAN Member States should strengthen and empower the existing ASEAN's mechanisms and multi-sectoral actions by utilizing the AADMER as the main common platform for disaster management in ASEAN, and further support the operationalization of the AHA Centre to enhance its capability.³

It has been 15 years since the 2005 passage of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER)^{4,5}. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) cites the devastating impacts of the December 2004 Boxing Day

Structuring ASEAN military involvement in disaster management and the ASEAN Militaries Ready Group

Tsunami, the May 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, and the November 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines as formative events that shaped the evolution and current capacity of AADMER. The continuous efforts of ASEAN to realize the full potential of AADMER has led to the development of a number of arrangements and instruments reflecting the urgency to establish an effective emergency response capacity for the region.

AADMER implementation is managed by the AHA Center⁶ based in Jakarta, Indonesia. The AHA Center was conceived in 2005 and formally established by the Agreement on the Establishment of the AHA Centre in 2011. The AHA Centre serves to coordinate and manage AADMER tasks outlined in disaster monitoring, preparedness and response, and capacity building, and sends progress reports to the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM). AHA Centre operations are guided by the Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operation (SASOP).⁷

The ASEAN response capacity outlined in AADMER envisioned a regional capacity guided by a standard operating procedure, institutionalized training and capacity building, disaster information sharing and communication network, rapid assessment team, and tested with a regular simulation/exercise. To this end, the AHA Centre operates as the central location for monitoring disasters and coordinates ASEAN's collective response. The AHA Center manages the development and deployment of the ASEAN Emergency Response Assessment Team (ERAT) and is supported by the online-based ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) platform called the Web Emergency Operations Centre (WebEOC)⁸. During disasters, it leads the Joint Operations and Coordination Centre of ASEAN (JOCCA) and is responsible for the Disaster Emergency Logistic System for ASEAN (DELSA), which consists of a stockpile of relief items located in Subang, Malaysia with two satellite warehouses established in the Philippines and Thailand.

Stakeholder management, capacity-building and methodology testing are key functions of the AHA Center, which coordinates with ASEAN and partner states in periodic simulations and exercises (e.g., ARDEX) using the ASEAN Joint Disaster Response Plan (AJDRP). This plan frames the ASEAN response and provides regional scenarios to test and improve the response with contingency planning, joint procedures/operation, standby arrangements, and use of regional assets.

The 2nd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management in Brunei adopted the strategy "One ASEAN, One Response: ASEAN Responding to Disasters as One" in Oct 2014, and a declaration was signed as part of the 28/29th ASEAN Summit in Lao PDR held in Sep 2016. The mission of the AHA Center was extended by this strategy, which expands response capacity inside and outside the region⁹.

Since the passage of AADMER, the number of actions, groups and documents developed to support the development of this regional capacity is impressive. For instance, there is the Joint Task Force to Promote Synergy on HADR, developed to promote civil-military coordination and coordinated HADR efforts in the ASEAN region.¹⁰ There is the ASEAN Center for Military Medicine (ACMM), established in April 2016 from an idea ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). ACMM's purpose is to help build military medical capacities among AMS with some aligning to disaster response missions. Other documents and

actions include: the Terms of Reference of the Secretary-General of ASEAN as the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Coordinating Council in May 2014, and welcomed by the ASEAN Leaders at the 24th ASEAN Summit in May 2014; the Concept Paper on the Use of ASEAN Military Assets and Capacities in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), adopted at 3rd ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) in Pattaya, 2009; Provisional Standard Operating Procedure for ASEAN Armies in HADR Operations; and the Combined ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group (EWG) on HADR and Military Medicine Exercise in June 2013, Brunei Darussalam.

These endeavors are all ASEAN focused and do not directly address how ASEAN nations individually develop their national frameworks to accept and provide assistance under the ASEAN response. This was the topic of a 2017 publication by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *ASEAN Disaster Law Mapping Implementing AADMER: A Regional Stocktake*.¹¹ This publication provides an analysis of the progress of ASEAN nations within the AADMER framework for disaster-affected states receiving ASEAN assistance and as ASEAN assisting state under AADMER.

ASEAN Militaries Ready Group (AMRG) on HADR

In Nov 2014, the ADMM retreat in Bagan, Myanmar, accepted a recommendation to establish a ready group comprised of personnel from ASEAN Member State militaries for quick deployment to countries facing disaster emergency. The Defence Ministers of ASEAN Member States adopted the Concept Paper on ASEAN Militaries Ready Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (AMRG on HADR) at the 9th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) on March 2015 in Malaysia. Terms of Reference of the AMRG on HADR was accepted at the 10th ADMM in May 2016 in Lao PDR.

The ASEAN Militaries Ready Group (AMRG) represents the third phase in the "One ASEAN, One Response" vision in that it establishes and operationalizes a standby mechanism for coordinating ASEAN militaries in a joint response to disasters in the ASEAN region. The development of the AMRG SOP is an important step toward operationalizing Chapter 6 of SASOP, Facilitation and Utilisation of Military Assets and Capacities. It provides guidance on the relationships, roles, and responsibilities of the AMRG in relation to the JOCCA, OSOCC, the EOC, MNCC, and where supporting liaison and technical (ACMM) actors fall into the ASEAN One Response operational framework.

The AMRG complements existing arrangements under the AADMER and the AHA Centre and builds on cooperation with other relevant regional and international HADR partners. The challenges of coordinating joint services at the national and international levels, working under a single country and the ASEAN banner are addressed by this new entity. The purpose of the AMRG is to prepare an ASEAN military team for quick coordinated deployment to areas of crises. Participation in the AMRG is flexible, non-binding and voluntary.

This concept has some similarities with one other regional agreement in the Caribbean.¹² The CARICOM Disaster Relief Unit (CDRU) is a regional response mechanism that mobilizes and deploys to CARICOM States after disaster strikes. The CDRU has Sub-Regional Focal Points that are responsible for maintaining comprehensive information on the response capacity of states for which they bear responsibility. The

SRFPs communicate regularly with CDEMA and coordinate the transportation of supplies and personnel. Military components from up to 18 island countries take part in the CDRU to support the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA). This robust multinational regional endeavor has successfully provided over 25 years of service to the region in response to disasters involving hurricanes, earthquakes and flooding. The similarities between ASEAN and CARICOM are limited to processes and mechanisms, as it is clear that the vision for ASEAN to take on a global role in the response under the “One ASEAN, One Response” Declaration is much broader than the role of CARICOM.

At the 10th ADMM-Plus Experts Working Group on HADR in Kuala Lumpur, May 10-13, 2017, Malaysia briefed the first draft of the AMRG SOP that had been discussed and approved during the AMS meeting on May 8-10, 2017. During the ADMM-Plus EWG on HADR 2017-2020 cycle, the US and Malaysia co-chairs planned and executed a series of working groups to draft and refine the AMRG SOP and several exercises to test and validate the concept. A tabletop exercise (TTX), held in 2018, served to test/validate the roles, responsibilities, processes, and procedures of the AMRG within the existing regional disaster response framework bringing together the actors that would be part of a regional disaster response. The SOP was further refined after the TTX and tested again in 2019 with a staff exercise (STAFFEX) for decision-makers.

The final draft of the AMRG SOP is to be tabled at the next ASEAN Defence Senior Officer Meeting (ADSOM) to be held in October 2020 marking the conclusion of this iteration of the ADMM-Plus EWG on HADR in 2020. The final document to be submitted in October 2020 consists of 56 pages with nine chapters outlining: the guiding principles; scope of assistance; structure and arrangement; concept of operation; command, control and coordination; administration; logistics; communication; and training and exercise in support of the implementation of the AMRG on HADR. The SOP is not directive, but guides the actions of the AMRG during disaster response operations in a manner that is aligned with internationally accepted protocols for the use of military assets and capabilities in assisting the affected state.

Forecast

In October 2016, the former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Russell, stated, “...ASEAN is an extraordinarily successful regional arrangement.” The AMRG concept derives from the notion that ASEAN Member States are now ready to designate and train a portion of their militaries to provide humanitarian assistance, pre-disaster support, peacekeeping and disaster relief to AMS requiring assistance before, during and after times of emergency and crisis. To bring this practical and useful cooperation to another level, a systematic approach should be in place to minimize the damage and, in some cases, perhaps avoid the catastrophic consequences of inaction. If brought to completion, the AMRG concept will expedite HADR-prepared military support from ASEAN in disaster operations. This will result in one of the first truly multilateral approaches to HADR in Asia-Pacific, which will position ASEAN to become world leader in multinational coordination and HADR response.

In 2017, the work of the AHA center expanded beyond crises of natural origins when it provided humanitarian assistance to Marawi, Philippines after the siege by ISIS¹³. Following that, it deployed an

ERAT team to assess the conditions for return of Rohingya in Myanmar.¹⁴ As of June 2019, the AHA Center had responded to total of 25 incidents in 7 countries across the region and had conducted preparedness and assessment missions on another 5 occasions.¹⁵ As the AHA Centre broadens its scope beyond natural disasters, it remains to be seen if this will have implications for the AMRG construct. Most likely, the AMRG will remain tethered to natural disasters that are largely free from the sorts of sovereignty issues existing in conflict situations.

It is clear from the ambitious vision of the One ASEAN, One Response declaration that ASEAN will continue to play an important role in international disaster response and even in conflict and peacekeeping. This vision is articulated in a provision of the foundation documentation for the AMRG which outlines the possibility of the AMRG to serve as a preventive or even peacekeeping mechanism in addition to being reactive towards a crisis. It remains to be seen whether this ambition will move forward. It would be prudent to first develop the full capacity to support regional disasters and further develop the ASEAN reputation as the trusted response actor before moving into the conflict and peacekeeping realm. Developing regional capacity for the conflict realm is far more controversial because conflict is more political and sensitive than events caused by Mother Nature. Peacekeeping is much more costly to sustain with average missions lasting 14 years and civil conflicts averaging 12 years.¹⁶ Thus, any traditional HADR institution moving into this area would struggle to produce successful outcomes within the timeframes with which they are accustomed.

The ASEAN region has been incredibly productive in developing a comprehensive framework and capacity to realize the vision of AADMER and expand this vision to a global level. Despite this, the region has a long way to go to realize the full capacity articulated in the documents. At present, only a few ASEAN nations have some sort of coordination center built into their national response plan to facilitate the management of foreign military assets. Allocating resources to developing this capacity will prove essential should the AMRG deploy to an affected state. However, with appropriate resourcing to support this framework at the regional and national levels there is no reason to think that ASEAN will not become a global model for regional comprehensive security engagement across a spectrum of operations.

The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.
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Structuring ASEAN military involvement in disaster management and the ASEAN Militaries Ready Group

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