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ASEAN DEFENCE MINISTERS MEETING-PLUS

Defence Ministers of the 18 strong ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus Forum {better known by the shorthand ADMM+} meet in Brunei on 29 August. The inaugural meeting of ADMM+ Ministers took place in Hanoi in 2010. It brought together for the first time in an official setting the Defence Ministers of the ten-strong ASEAN community and of eight other Asia Pacific countries: Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States. ADMM+ thus mirrors the membership of the East Asia Summit.

The concept paper for this forum had been adopted by the ASEAN Defence Ministers three years earlier as a tool to engage ASEAN Defence Dialogue partners in cooperation on defence and security matters. ASEAN was therefore the driving force in establishing for the first time a regional security mechanism that promoted defence diplomacy at the most senior levels. New Zealand was invited to join this select group in recognition of our longstanding commitment to the security of the South-east Asian region dating back to our role in the Malayan Emergency in the early 1950's, and more recent efforts including active participation in the Five Power Defence Arrangements and in contributing to the development of the defence dialogue process in the ASEAN Regional Forum.

At their inaugural meeting in Hanoi Ministers signed a joint declaration in which they agreed to promote the ADMM+ as an effective forum for cooperation on defence and security issues; to enhance mutual trust and cooperation through greater dialogue; to establish an ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting to implement Ministers' decisions, and to task that body with setting up specific Expert Working Groups that would build capacity, develop expertise and enhance coordination in areas that that can contribute to regional peace and security.

Five Expert Working Groups were subsequently established each with an ASEAN and non ASEAN co-chair for a three year term. The Groups are Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief; Maritime Security; Peacekeeping Operations; Military Medicine and Counter-Terrorism. New Zealand notified the ASEAN members of its interest in co-chairing one of the Working Groups as a demonstration of its strong commitment to the successful development of this new forum. That led to a request by the Philippines for New Zealand to join that country as co-chair of the Peacekeeping Operations Working Group. This Group has since held several meetings on issues such as the legal aspects of peacekeeping and building capability for

peacekeeping operations. In November 2012 one of these meetings was hosted by Indonesia to showcase their impressive new Peacekeeping Centre at Bogor. The International Red Cross has strongly supported the efforts of this Working Group and made a very useful contribution to the Bogor meeting. Our co-chairmanship is now coming to an end, but the high profile this role has given New Zealand in the ADMM+ will continue as we have been invited by Brunei to join it as co-chair of the Maritime Security Working Group from April 2014.

Significant progress has also been made by the other four Working Groups. In June the first ADMM+ Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief and Military Medicine exercise was held in Brunei with more than 3,000 personnel including from New Zealand taking part. And planning is well underway for a counter-terrorism exercise in Indonesia in September, and a maritime security exercise also in September, in Australia.

During their meeting in Brunei Ministers will be briefed on the progress made to date in giving substance to this important new element in the region's security architecture, will discuss contemporary security issues, and consider plans for the further evolution of this forum.

ADMM+ has been criticised by some commentators for avoiding the hard security issues in the region. That is unfair. The primary objective was to build and sustain confidence between military and civilian defence officials and develop the habit of working together on transnational security issues. The activities undertaken to date demonstrate that remarkable progress has been made in such a short time.

One unstated but very important objective has been the space the forum has created for China and the United States to work together. That United States Defense Secretary Hagel was prepared to continue with his Brunei programme despite the pressing preoccupations of Syria, demonstrate the significance Washington attaches to ADMM+. In Beijing the ADMM+ is seen as a forum that in the words of Teng Jianqun, Director of the Department for American Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, "engages and reassures China, rather than isolates and threatens it".

ADMM+ has made an excellent beginning in its contributions to evolving defence engagement in the Asia/Pacific region. There will inevitably be challenges ahead, but by building trust and confidence among the defence forces of a region in which these have generally been in short supply, ADMM+ is making a very important contribution to stability and prosperity in the Asia/Pacific. The forum has offered a very useful opportunity to New Zealand to demonstrate its commitment to support and contribute in a meaningful way to this vital process.

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