

ASEAN DEFENCE SECURITY FORE-SIGHTING IN THE NEXT TWO DECADES

Presented by
Vice Admiral Dato' Ganesh Navaratnam
Chief Executive of Malaysian Institute of Defence and Security

Reflecting on past NADI meetings, the general consensus is that ASEAN has been challenged by much more increased vulnerabilities, uncertainties, complexities and trust deficit evoked by economic competition, big power rivalry, increased influence of middle powers, continued emergence of non-traditional security threats, internal security issues resulting in trans-boundary concerns and the surge in regional military modernisation programmes. Based on past and current trends, it is possible to fore-sight that these issues will invariably be the constants in shaping the political outlook and security situation in the region.

It is assessed that in the next two decades, this region and the rest of the world will continue to be challenged by a range of mega trend disruptors such as the shift from a unipolar to multipolar world; the geo-climate shift which is impacting on water, food, energy and environment sustainability and the technological shift which has already seen its disruptive impacts on jobs as well as security of nation states in the cyber realm. According to a report recently released by the World Economic Forum (WEF), nations would fight over weather manipulation tools, food supply chains, space and effective computing. The next twenty years would foresee ASEAN member states embracing much more the fruits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution or Internet of Things (IoT) such as automation, cloud computing, robotics and artificial intelligence in their political, economic and security domains. Wouldn't these technological advances be the very thing that attract and expose them to the threats of cyber politics and warfare?

Recommendations:

- In managing the shift from unipolar to multipolar, it is imperative that ASEAN continuously advocates its centrality as “good international citizenship” in the image of a “middle power” in all engagements its members partake. To be

accepted as a middle power, ASEAN centrality must be recognised as being a stabiliser and legitimiser of the world order.

- In appreciating the impacts of the shift in geo-climate vis-à-vis the security of the region, it is timely joint research projects between government-affiliated policy and strategic research institutes in the region are commissioned as stipulated in the confidence building measures section of the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint.
- In ensuring the technological shift does not impact the security of the region, it is suggested that there should be an initiative beyond cyber security to establish a practical cooperation in promoting the development of norms for utilising artificial intelligence in robotics either in manned or unmanned military assets which may be exposed to cyber warfare/threats.
- Whilst ASEAN through ADMM has successfully enhanced defence security cooperation through its many confidence-building measures (CBMs); perhaps it is time to consider moving to the next higher plane of Trust-Building Measures (TBMs) and one recommended initiative is the publication of a Defence White Paper (DWP). Malaysia is in the process of developing its 1st Defence White Paper which will be launched this year.

In conclusion, ASEAN has to remain vigilant of big power influences and must never be perceived as being a client state as this jeopardises its centrality. ASEAN must continuously reflect on its agency to be recognised as a “middle power” that is able to influence and shape its regional geo-strategic environment.