

# Sketching out a future ASEAN-NATO partnership

As the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enters its seventh decade and as ASEAN consolidates its regional community building ahead of and beyond 2015, the bodies have much to learn from each other.

For NATO, ASEAN will be increasingly critical for the future of Asian stability and order and would be an ideal candidate for a strategic counterpart to tackle common regional and global security challenges — especially when ASEAN consolidates its regional community building, allowing it to share NATO's role as a community of like-minded nations that respect democracy and rule of law.

Southeast Asia's geopolitical, geo-strategic, and geo-economic value also suggests that NATO's future missions beyond its traditional area of operations might increasingly depend on ASEAN.

For ASEAN, as it further institutionalizes common security and defense arrangements, NATO's ability to conduct multilateral defense planning and operations — as well as the standardization of arms, joint procurement or regional research and development — provides a wealth of learning materials and proven practices. There is also something to be learned from NATO's multilateral crisis management.

And as some ASEAN militaries still struggle to improve operational readiness and effectiveness while circumnavigating the complexities of institutional management, NATO's educational and training reform programs will come in handy.

If we can venture into the future for a second, how would a dialogue or partnership mechanism between ASEAN and NATO look?

Any future ASEAN-NATO partnership could at least be placed within five major policy areas: peacekeeping, humanitarian assis-



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tance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, defense reform and counterterrorism.

On maritime security, for example, there is much to learn from each other and there is ample room for cooperation between ASEAN and NATO in counter-piracy efforts, especially in the Gulf of Aden where the Alliance has an ongoing naval operation as part of the Standing NATO Maritime Group 1.

The same could be said for peacekeeping and HADR operations, where NATO has had a wealth experience, while ASEAN is in the process of revamping its own capabilities. Indeed, both are among the top agendas of Indonesia as ASEAN chair nation this year.

These five areas of engagement could be further executed in four levels of cooperation: strategic, institutional, operational and people-to-people.

Strategically, NATO can engage ASEAN in discussions and dialogue regarding the five security issues using two tracks.

In track one, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (consisting of all ASEAN countries plus Australia, the US, China, South Korea, Japan, India, Russia and New Zealand) as well as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) provide critical dialogue venues.

In track two, two groupings are crucial: the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), a network of nine major think tanks in Southeast Asia, and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP),

a network of nearly all major Asia Pacific think tanks.

Both are critical because they have access — and have been recognized as such — to the track one process within ASEAN and the ARF. CSCAP in particular has several study groups that may be of interest to NATO, such as those pertaining to WMD proliferation, cyber crime or regional naval enhancement.

Institutionally, NATO could explore future cooperation or collaboration with either the ASEAN Secretariat, the network of ASEAN Peacekeeping Centers, the ASEAN Center for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief or even the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation.

Such links could either explore practical issues of cooperation or focus on research regarding common issues of interest dealing with HADR, crisis management, maritime security or peacekeeping operations. They could also open the way for a future operational collaboration.

NATO, for example, could participate in a future region-wide peacekeeping or HADR exercises. This could either be done through the creation of a new venue or by piggybacking on existing operations such as Garuda Shield, ARF DIREX or ADX.

Other forms of diplomatic defense activities such as port visits or officer exchanges that are more practical and "neutral" might also help alleviate some of the sensitivities of regional countries regarding NATO's visibility.

Only then, perhaps, can we consider various exercises to deepen the defense reform or transformation process in certain ASEAN countries or focus on new missions such as improving counterterrorism capabilities.

Finally, at the people-to-people

level, NATO could engage ASEAN through research and academic engagements with regional think tanks and universities or through various public diplomatic events.

This would slowly and gradually raise the public profile and awareness of NATO's potential contribution to regional stability.

If we can now come back down to earth for a while, it is easy to think of these sketches to be ahead of their time. This is at least the writer's impression from discussions with various NATO officials on a recent trip.

While acknowledging the growing importance of non-member partners of NATO, they would prefer the Alliance to have a more careful and calibrated approach to regional engagements, especially given existing budgetary constraints, the various intra-alliance debates and regional sensitivities in Asia about NATO — as well as the imperative to conclude current operational missions.

But it should be remembered that Asians in general — and Southeast Asians in particular — need time to warm up to new actors, which is why we always prefer a sustainable "process" to deepen our sense of comfort with each other.

As such, NATO should at least start thinking of engaging ASEAN early to avoid any surprises when a new, region-wide crisis in Asia comes knocking. For ASEAN, if we are serious about boosting our regional security community building, would it hurt to learn from a multinational organization that has had the longest practical experience in the endeavor?

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