



## **CO-CHAIRS' SUMMARY REPORT**

### **ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM DEFENCE OFFICIALS' DIALOGUE**

1 July 2020, Video Conference

#### **INTRODUCTION**

1. The ASEAN Regional Forum Defence Officials' Dialogue (ARF DOD) was held virtually on 2 July 2020 and was co-chaired by Lieutenant General Vu Chien Thang, Director-General, Foreign Relations Department, Ministry of National Defence of Viet Nam, and Mr. Christopher Johnstone, Principal Director for South and Southeast Asia, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense of the United States. The Dialogue was attended by representatives from all ARF Participants except Bangladesh, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, and Papua New Guinea. Representatives from the ASEAN Secretariat were also in attendance. The List of Participants appears as **ANNEX 1**.

#### **AGENDA ITEM 1: OPENING REMARKS BY CO-CHAIRS**

2. Observing the complexities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and its widespread impacts, in his Opening Remarks, LG Vu reiterated the commitment to sustaining defence cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region including through the ARF as well as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). LG Vu further shared with the Dialogue that despite the disruption prompted by the current pandemic, the ASEAN defence sector continued to work in pursuit of Viet Nam's ASEAN Chairmanship theme "Cohesive and Responsive". In the same context, he highlighted that ASEAN had demonstrated the cohesiveness and responsiveness in responding to the pandemic, including through various COVID-19-specific meetings and an exercise under the ADMM. Noting the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic would be an opportunity to further promote cooperation among all ARF Participants, LG Vu looked forward to a successful DOD.

3. At the outset, Mr. Johnstone expressed his appreciation towards Viet Nam for arranging the virtual Dialogue with the view to furthering cooperation under the ARF, amidst the constraints caused by the current crisis. Highlighting the commitment of the

United States in tackling the pandemic, Mr. Johnstone underscored the key role of the Department of Defense in this aspect, both domestically and as part of the United States' international outreach. Currently as the largest global provider, the United States had allocated more than USD 12 billion in financial, humanitarian, technical and scientific support to tackle COVID-19 worldwide. Mr. Johnstone further mentioned that this effort is consistent with the United States' global strategy and long-standing engagements with its partners to respond to various health crises, such as the Ebola Virus and HIV/AIDS, and to improve regional preparedness for similar events in the future. He also reiterated the importance of enhancing transparency, trust, and civil-military coordination to allow rapid and effective response to public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **AGENDA ITEM 2: ADOPTION OF AGENDA**

4. The Dialogue adopted the Agenda, which appears as **ANNEX 2.**

## **AGENDA ITEM 3: SESSION ONE: Military Medicine and Practical Cooperation Responding to Pandemic Outbreaks**

5. The United States briefed the Dialogue on the Department of Defense's Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program. The CTR Program, particularly through the Biological Threat Reduction Program (BTRP), has assisted over 30 partners worldwide, including Southeast Asian countries, aiming to develop an effective global bio-surveillance system, which would allow accurate detection of infectious disease outbreak. The Dialogue further noted that the CTR Program focused on several areas of cooperative partnership between human and animal health sectors, such as: (i) physical construction or renovation of facilities; (ii) personnel training; (iii) equipping laboratories; (iv) supporting electronic disease reporting system; (v) conducting exercises to increase effective and sustainable bio-surveillance capacity, capability, and coordination; and (vi) providing opportunities for scientific research communities. The United States also reiterated the importance of rapid, coordinated, open and transparent response so that global public health emergencies could be better mitigated.

6. Australia briefed the Dialogue on the main elements of the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) engagement in their response to COVID-19. It was noted that ADF personnel were assigned to support contact tracing and testing, quarantine and isolation, as well as other customised support, with deployment in all states and territories. It was also shared that at the policy level, the Surgeon General of the ADF was a member of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee. Australia's presentation appears as **ANNEX 3.**

7. Japan briefed the Dialogue on the role of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic particularly through the: (i) Operation “Diamond Princess”; (ii) complementary COVID-19 disaster relief operation; and (iii) large-scale admission of COVID-19 positive patients at the SDF Central Hospital. It was noted that the JSDF provided a wide range of assistance in these three operations, such as quarantine, transportation, testing, treatment, prevention and training. The Dialogue further noted that Japan had shared the lessons learnt and findings from the JSDF operations with 83 countries and 6 international organisations. In relation to this, Japan reiterated the importance of transparent and timely information sharing in managing public health emergencies. Japan’s presentation appears as **ANNEX 4**.

8. China briefed the Dialogue on the efforts of its military medical personnel during the pandemic and in support of the government’s national response. It was highlighted that the success of the People’s Liberation Army in handling the pandemic was attributed to the following contributing factors: (i) unified command system; (ii) rapid development in medical personnel; (iii) improvement in the treatment capacity; (iv) precise prevention at all levels; (v) application on defence scientific research; and (vi) continuous logistical support. Going forward, China expressed its commitment to working collaboratively in the areas of information sharing, resource sharing, scientific research and development, as well as training and exercises, among others.

9. Viet Nam briefed the Dialogue on the management of the COVID-19 situation, particularly from the experience of its Ministry of National Defence’s Department of Military Medicine. It was observed that the Department had been involved from the early stage of the pandemic and that the public health emergency is presently under control with zero transmission in the past 75 days. Viet Nam shared that the Department played a key role in promoting international cooperation mainly through information sharing as well as provision of medical supplies and equipment. It was added that the Department co-hosted the ADMM COVID-19 Table-Top Exercise (TTX) with the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine virtually on 27 May 2020, involving Ministries of Defence and Health Ministries of ASEAN Member States, as well the World Health Organization. The TTX identified the roles of military medicine, cooperation mechanisms and areas of further cooperation at the regional level. On a final note, Viet Nam stressed that it would stand ready to share its resources in the fight against the COVID-19 and looked forward to furthering cooperation in the area of information sharing, exchange of points of contact for public health emergencies, sharing of experiences, as well as training and research.

10. Cambodia briefed the Dialogue on the efforts of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) in combating the COVID-19. On community engagement, the RCAF was involved in preventive measures and in crisis communication such as

broadcasting official announcements. On improving health system capacity and enhancing preparedness, the RCAF contributed to the preparation of medical facilities and other necessary infrastructures as well as organising trainings and education. The RCAF also worked with its international partners including through their participation in the ADMM COVID-19 TTX on 27 May 2020. The Dialogue also noted that the RCAF was currently working to: (i) strengthen and enhance education on health care; (ii) develop relevant information systems; (iii) enhance medical personnel capability; and (iv) collaborate with medical assessment teams. Cambodia's presentation appears as **ANNEX 5**.

11. The Republic of Korea (ROK) briefed the Dialogue on the experience in containing the COVID-19 pandemic without a nation-wide lockdown. It was shared that the ROK employed a whole-of-government approach, with a strong focus on the 3Ts, i.e. massive and rapid testing, tracing and treating. The Dialogue observed that because there was a close cooperation between the Government and civil societies, this approach resulted in a relatively high public compliance, as well as the all-asset deployment of the ROK Armed Forces, which allowed large-scale COVID-19 related measures to be put in place. The ROK expressed its appreciation towards multinational cooperation, taking into account that the crisis could not be controlled single-handedly, and in this regard, it was also stressed that openness, transparency and democracy would be helpful in ensuring that outbreaks could be contained at the early stage.

12. The European Union (EU) shared that the armed forces of its Member States played critical roles in fighting COVID-19 at home and abroad, including through diagnostic, treatment, medical evacuation and logistics services. The briefing further underscored the importance of (i) cohesive military and public health cooperation; (ii) reinforcement of civilian crisis response and planning mechanism; (iii) harmonisation of applicable guidelines; and (iv) intensification of information exchange. Towards this end, a dedicated EU military task force was set up by the European External Action Service (EEAS), which served as an information sharing platform to facilitate the exchange of lessons learnt and updates on national military assistance. It was stressed that the Task Force was not mandated to coordinate national or bilateral efforts, or share information on how COVID-19 may have affected the EU Common Security and Defence Policy. The EU's presentation appears as **ANNEX 6**.

13. New Zealand briefed the Dialogue on the role of its defence agencies as essential services and an integral part of its all-of-government domestic response to COVID-19. It was noted that the New Zealand Defence Forces (NZDF) was involved in facilitating coordination and planning throughout the public sector, managing quarantine procedures and isolation facilities as well as providing air transport support to deliver personal protective equipment (PPE), testing kits and medical equipment to Pacific Island countries. At the same time, the NZDF continued to deliver its regular

functions, including assisting in the response to the damage caused by the Tropical Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu, Tonga and Fiji.

14. Brunei Darussalam briefed the Dialogue on its whole-of-nation approach to COVID-19. The Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF) has lent its support to national efforts, which involved the setting up of the Task Force Support (TFS) Operations Room to aid the Ministry of Health in the early stages of the outbreak with the aim of coordinating support amongst each other. The RBAF has also provided additional manpower in the effort to conduct contact tracing, allocating donations and expertise at the National Virology Lab. Regionally, the RBAF has also participated in the virtual ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) COVID-19 TTX organised by the ACMM. The culmination of RBAF's efforts has supported Brunei's co-chairmanship of the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on Military Medicine for the 2021-2023 cycle with Australia. Lastly, Brunei Darussalam extends its appreciation to all healthcare professionals amidst challenging times.

15. Singapore briefed the Dialogue on its regional response particularly under the ambit of the ADMM. It was noted that Singapore hosted a virtual Workshop on Promoting Scientific Cooperation to Manage Infectious Disease Outbreaks, as a COVID-19-related initiative by the Network of ASEAN Chemical, Biological and Radiological Defence Experts. The Workshop, among others, facilitated the exchange of information on laboratory diagnostic methodology and research on COVID-19, as well as looked into the possibility of harmonising relevant protocols at the regional level. Singapore informed the Dialogue that the Network would organise a second workshop by the end of the year.

16. Malaysia briefed the Dialogue on the involvement of the Malaysian Armed Forces in supporting government's efforts to tackle the COVID-19. The Dialogue noted that the military had been deployed to assist with screenings, provide medical assistance in the red zones, and transform facilities into additional hospitals. Malaysia added that the collaboration between civilian health authorities and military medicine in the domestic setting may serve as a model of civilian-military coordination for public health emergencies at the regional level.

#### **AGENDA ITEM 4: SESSION TWO: Preparation for the 17<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum Security Policy Conference**

17. On the Provisional Agenda of the 17<sup>th</sup> ASPC, scheduled to be held via video conference on 8 July 2020, the Dialogue took note on the three proposals put forth by Viet Nam, namely: (i) for the ARF DOD to consolidate defence and relevant security cooperation activities to be reported to the ASPC, and subsequently for the ASPC to report directly to the ARF Ministers; (ii) to enhance the coordination of activities under

the ARF and the ADMM-Plus, such as the ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (DiREx) and the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief exercises; and (iii) to enhance exchange of information on defence cooperation within the ARF and the ADMM-Plus, at the level of ASPC and the ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meeting Plus (ADSOM-Plus).

18. It was added that those proposals are aimed to revive defence cooperation and its role in the ARF, and to enhance the linkage between the ARF and the ADMM-Plus. On the latter, particularly pertaining to the proposed exchange of information between the ASPC and the ADSOM-Plus, it was noted that such exchange shall be facilitated by the Chair of the ASPC/ADSOM-Plus or by the ASEAN Secretariat during their briefing on recent developments in ASEAN at the ADSOM-Plus.

19. The Dialogue noted a number of initial comments made in response to the three proposals including on whether the proposed direct reporting of the ASPC to the ARF Ministers suggested a change in the current ARF process. In this context, it was recalled that as stipulated in the Concept Paper of the ASPC, the Conference was informal in nature, and therefore was not required to formally report to the ARF Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) and to the ARF Foreign Ministers. It was further noted that as per the practice in the ARF, the Summary Report of the ASPC is annexed to the Report of the ARF SOM and the ARF Chairman's Statement. Another query was raised on the possible implications of the proposed enhanced coordination between the ARF and the ADMM-Plus, taking into consideration that the two mechanisms fall within the purview of different sectoral bodies and had different memberships.

20. The ASEAN Secretariat added that based on the current processes and procedures of the ARF, a concept paper would be required for any new initiatives in the ARF. The proposal/concept paper must then be coursed through the due processes of the ARF, i.e. through the ARF Inter-Sessional Support Group Meeting on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy (ISG on CBMs and PD) and subsequently through the ARF SOM, before being tabled for the ARF Ministers' approval.

21. During the discussion, it was reiterated the ARF was a mechanism led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and that matters on ARF policy and process shall therefore be duly consulted with the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the ARF Participants. In this regard, it was noted that ample time to examine the three proposals would be required. In the event that the Chair would submit a concept paper to the 17<sup>th</sup> ASPC, the ARF DOD welcomed the suggestion for that document to be tabled for discussion only and that the Conference would therefore not be bound to make decision on the matter.

## **AGENDA ITEM 5: CLOSING REMARKS**

22. In his Closing Remarks, Mr Johnstone extended his appreciation towards Viet Nam, as the Co-Chair of the ARF DOD, and to all ARF Participants in attendance for sharing their lessons learnt and experiences. He stressed the importance of strengthened cooperation and coordinated response in addressing the destabilising effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and in better understanding future outbreaks. Mr. Johnstone further reiterated the United States' commitment to support all partners in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, through collaborations in an open and transparent manner.

23. In his Closing Remarks, LG Vu expressed his appreciation to the ARF Participants for their active contributions. He emphasised on the need to advance defence cooperation and enhance the role of the defence sector in the ARF and looked forward to welcoming ARF Participants to the upcoming 17<sup>th</sup> ASPC.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

24. The Dialogue expressed appreciation to the Co-Chairs for the effective co-chairmanship. The Dialogue also commended the frank discussion and active participation of all the ARF Participants that contributed to the success of the Dialogue and conveyed gratitude to the Government of Viet Nam for their excellent arrangements of the virtual Dialogue.

