



## SUMMARY REPORT

### THE EIGHTEENTH ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM SECURITY POLICY CONFERENCE (ASPC)

27 May 2021, Video Conference

#### INTRODUCTION

1. The 18<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum Security Policy Conference (ASPC) was held via video conference on 27 May 2021. The Conference was chaired by Brigadier General (Rtd) Dato Seri Pahlawan Shahril Anwar bin Haji Ma'awiah, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence Brunei Darussalam. The Conference was attended by representatives from all ARF Member States except the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Papua New Guinea. The List of Participants appears as **ANNEX 1**.

#### AGENDA ITEM 1: CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

2. In his Opening Remarks, the Chair welcomed all delegates and conveyed his hopes that all delegates are safe and healthy amidst the challenging circumstances as the region continues to navigate an evolving security landscape coupled with the effect of the pandemic. The Chair also expressed his condolences to Indonesia over the incident with the KRI Nanggala-402 submarine and to all countries over the devastating losses caused by the pandemic and natural disasters. The Chair expressed his gratitude to all delegates for their virtual participation despite the difference in time zones and highlighted the common aspiration of facing present and future challenges with resilience while remaining future-ready as reflected under Brunei Darussalam's Chairmanship theme, "*We Care, We Prepare, We Prosper*".

3. In highlighting the importance of building on the positive momentum of the region's defence cooperation, the Chair commended all ARF Members for their commitment and support in ensuring the region's engagements continue and remain robust. The Chair also emphasised the importance of engaging with partners beyond the defence sector and to seize opportunities across the ASEAN Community. The Chair further expressed hope for a positive outcome from discussions and highlighted

the role of defence and military interactions under the ARF as valuable particularly in bringing inter-regional perspectives on defence and security issues and in sharing a broad range of initiatives of the wider regional defence platforms.

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

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

#### **AGENDA ITEM 3: EXCHANGE OF VIEWS ON REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES**

5. The Conference exchanged views on regional and international issues including regional and international issues, impacts of non-traditional security threats such as emerging technologies and confidence building measures for peace and stability in respective sub-regions and wider Asia-Pacific.

6. The Conference expressed its condolences to Indonesia over the incident with the KRI Nanggala-402 in April 2021.

7. The Conference noted that the COVID-19 pandemic added another layer to the region's security. The Conference commended the contributions of several ARF members to the region's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic including Australia's pledge to contribute USD500 million in aid. The Conference also took note of the contributions made by the United States by working hand-in-hand with international partners to combat the spread of diseases and to develop safe and effective vaccines. The United States briefed the Conference on its COVID-19 efforts including the provision of vaccines to 61 countries including several Indo-Pacific countries. Under the Biden administration, the United States expressed its commitment to lead an international coordinated vaccination effort as well as its intent to provide 80 million vaccine doses by early June 2021.

8. The Conference also exchanged views on the importance of multilateralism and the critical role of ASEAN as the cornerstone of the region's defence and security cooperation, towards ensuring a collective vision based on inclusivity, respect for sovereignty and international law. Cambodia highlighted the crucial roles played by ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASPC towards promoting inclusivity as the only way to reap the benefits of stability, peace and prosperity. Towards enhancing synergy between existing ASEAN mechanisms, Viet Nam expressed its support to Brunei Darussalam's proposal for developments on other regional defence mechanisms such as the ADMM and ADMM-Plus to be shared at the ARF DOD.

9. The Conference recognised the profound challenges that arise with non-traditional security threats such as the emergence of new technologies whereby while the use of artificial intelligence in defence establishments may be advantageous, development of new technologies also present risks to national security.

10. Lao PDR shared that while vaccines have been rolled out in many countries, the number of new infections are still on the rise worldwide, bringing about socioeconomic implications to the region. At the same time, the onset of the pandemic also brought about advancement in technologies which subsequently led to significant socioeconomic development in the region. However, increased connectivity may also open the region up to vulnerabilities. Lao PDR placed emphasis on the need to redouble efforts in enhancing cooperation to address technological gaps and maximise capacity building ahead of addressing threats that may bring devastating consequences. Thus, regional confidence building measures are needed in order to avoid misunderstanding and conflict as well as to build trust in the region. Lao PDR also noted the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus as vital platforms for exchanging lessons learned and best practices particularly through the 7 areas of cooperation under the Experts' Working Groups (EWGs).

11. Malaysia shared similar sentiments to Lao PDR whereby the surge in COVID-19 cases worldwide has brought about hardship and loss of income which may become a point for terrorists to express discontentment on and utilise as an agenda for recruitment. The Conference acknowledged that the cyber domain cannot be understated and that any disruptions may be damaging. Therefore, that it is imperative for defence establishments to be aware of any developments in the cyber space which includes new civilian technologies having been adapted from military technologies.

12. In dealing with misuse of technologies, the Conference emphasised on the need to work together to increase cooperation by establishing cyber security frameworks and norms in the cyber space. In this regard, the Conference also took note that Malaysia and the Republic of Korea will be co-chairing the ADMM-Plus EWG on Cyber Security, where member states will share experiences and best practices in CS and where the co-chairs will host an exercises aimed to better equip participants to counter cyber threats.

13. Singapore highlighted the need to tackle threats related to disinformation and misinformation as they have the potential to undermine public support and damage national resilience. Singapore also expressed its support for Malaysia's ADMM initiative, the ASEAN Cyber Defence Network (ACDN) which will complement Singapore's ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence. The Conference took note that the ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence will function as a regional and global information sharing mechanism, to develop a deeper understanding of threats from the cyber and information domains, and welcomes the support of ARF members.

14. The Conference also exchanged views on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in whereby several ARF members raised on the ongoing developments in the South China Sea and noted that the increasing militarisation had caused for the situation to be increasingly unpredictable and posed challenges to the sovereignty of respective stakeholders. Canada noted that the South China Sea continues to witness unilateral claims that are contrary to the spirit of the UNCLOS and called on the Conference to step up initiatives to advance peace and security. ARF Members such as Australia highlighted the need to take steps to ensure territorial claims are resolved peacefully.

15. Japan highlighted actions that increase tensions such as ballistic missile launches and further militarisation of features, and claims that are inconsistent with the UNCLOS. Japan expressed opposition on the unilateral attempts to change the status-quo by coercion in South China Sea and the creation of a fait accompli or any activities that heighten tensions. Japan urged all parties concerned to work towards peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with the UNCLOS to maintain a free and open maritime order consistent with rule of law.

16. Thailand emphasised the importance of self-restraint of all parties concerned and peaceful resolution of disputes including full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Thailand expressed hope for the conclusion of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea within the mutually agreed time-line. Thailand expressed determination to promote a win-win cooperation with a view to ultimately transforming the South China Sea into a sea of peace, stability and sustainable development. As the co-chair of ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on Maritime Security under ADMM-Plus with the U.S. in the current cycle, Thailand affirms its commitment to closely cooperate with ADMM-Plus member countries to effectively promote regional maritime security cooperation.

17. The European Union expressed its intent to deepen cooperation with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific and expressed its concern on the presence of vessels in the South China Sea as affecting the peace and stability of the region. Towards a free and open supply routes in the Indo-Pacific, the EU urged on parties to exercise self-restraint, compliance with international law, particularly UNCLOS, and to resolve disputes through peaceful means in the interest of all. Similarly, Viet Nam emphasised the need to maintain a peaceful, stable and safe environment in the South China Sea so as to ensure free flow of goods in the interests of all parties and not only coastal states. The Conference also expressed its supports towards the finalisation of the Code of Conduct through an ASEAN-led process.

18. The Conference highlighted the development of North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities as a violation to peace and security and urged the international community to continue to support the sanctions on the North Korea. The Conference

also called for the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula towards ensuring lasting peace and stability. The Republic of Korea expressed hope for positive developments for the resumption of US-North Korea dialogue. Thailand expressed support towards ASEAN and other nations to maintain interaction with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to enhance trust and confidence on both bilateral and multilateral levels, particularly, through ARF, which is an important dialogue platform for promoting trust and confidence-building and explore collective solution.

19. On the recent developments in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, several ARF members including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, Japan, the United States, New Zealand and the European Union called on Myanmar to exercise restraint on the ongoing violence, to engage in constructive dialogue and respect the will of the Myanmar people. Several participants also expressed strong condemnation on the coup. The Conference also urged on the effective implementation of the Five-Point Consensus as agreed by the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on 24 April 2021.

20. The Conference took note of the statements raised by respective ARF members on the developments in Myanmar. In response, Myanmar conveyed that the National League Democracy (NLD) failed to uphold the foundation of multiparty democratic systems which includes a free and fair honest politics. Following this, Myanmar also shared that the 2018 constitution of Myanmar mandated for legislative, judicial and executive power to the Commander-in-Chief and a state of emergency was declared. In line with the Five-Point Consensus, Myanmar will give careful consideration to constructive suggestions made by the ASEAN Leaders and stressed that Myanmar's current priority is to maintain law and order.

21. The Conference took note of the comments by Indonesia and Malaysia regarding the ongoing situation in Palestine. Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam called on countries to support the de-escalation of violence in the Occupied Palestinian territories and expressed strong condemnation of the repeated aggressions on civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly in East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip. Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam called upon the international community to remain resolute in their commitment to safeguard the "two-state solution" on the basis of the internationally agreed parameters.

#### **AGENDA ITEM 4: OTHER MATTERS**

22. The Conference raised no other matters.

## **AGENDA ITEM 5: CHAIR'S CLOSING REMARKS**

23. In his Closing Remarks, the Chair expressed appreciation to all ARF Members for their active participation and positive contributions to discussions. He also expressed hopes for ARF Members to continue to meet on platforms such as the ASPC despite the challenges the region may endure. Before concluding the Conference, the Chair commended all ARF Members for their resilience in ensuring regional defence cooperation remains strong and expressed hopes to meet in a physical setting.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

24. The Participants expressed gratitude and appreciation to Brunei Darussalam for the effective chairmanship and excellent arrangements made for the Conference. Participants also commended the frank discussion that contributed to the successful convening of the Conference

