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ADMM Strategy in Overcoming the Covid-19 Pandemic: Defense Diplomacy Perspective

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ABSTRACT

ASEAN as a regional organization is considered slow and less unified in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. In the midst of these problems, ADMM as the main defense cooperation organization was more agile in responding to the pandemic that had begun to spread. This study aims to analyze ADMM's strategy in overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of defense diplomacy. The research uses a quasi-qualitative approach with interactive model analysis technique and with data obtained from literature study technique. The findings show that ADMM has carried out securitization of Covid-19, which has had an impact on the formation of regional perceptions regarding the threat of a pandemic that attacks common interests. To overcome the pandemic, ADMM has deployed defense cooperation in the fields of military medicine and CBR. In the midst of space and time constraints, ADMM was forced to modify their defense diplomacy strategy into virtual defense diplomacy. This model of defense diplomacy is an important lesson for ASEAN's defense diplomacy activities to face the same threat in the future

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has become a real threat to all international actors at various levels. At the regional level of Southeast Asia, as of 23 December 2022, 5 countries in ASEAN are in the top 10 countries with the highest mortality rates in Asia (Annur, 2021). Indonesia is in second place with 160 thousand. Followed by the Philippines in fifth place with 65 thousand people, Vietnam seventh with 43 thousand people, Malaysia eighth with 36 thousand people, and Thailand ninth with 33 thousand people. With a high mortality rate, the number of deaths from Covid-19 in Asia contributes 22.57 percent to the number of mortalities worldwide.

The response at the regional level in Southeast Asia was considered low in overcoming the threat of Covid-19 in the early stages. ASEAN as the main regional organization in Southeast Asia is considered uncoordinated and slow in the first two months of 2020 (Djalante et al., 2020). Important initial steps to guide member countries took place in the third and fourth months, that have actively recognized and used existing regional health mechanisms to respond in a clear and orderly manner to the impact of the pandemic.

Other research shows that the factors that hinder ASEAN's movement in responding to the pandemic as a regional organization are due to differences in groupings within global health organizations (Lilian, 2020). Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar are members of WHO's Southeast Asia Regional Office (SEARO). Meanwhile, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei, Cambodia and Laos are members of the West Pacific Regional Office (WPRO). This is an obstacle to communication and coordination between members, which is also not intuitive from a geographical perspective.

Even though ASEAN has held several meetings including a summit, the regional organization is considered a failure and too late in stopping the spread of infection (Kashyap & Bhattacharya, 2021). The ASEAN Summit and the ASEAN+3 Summit which discussed Covid-19 were only held one month after the declaration of a global pandemic by WHO. What is worse, these meetings failed to take examples of steps taken in dealing with infectious diseases in the past. The steps taken by ASEAN member countries are divided and determined by their respective capabilities. Countries that have the ability to trace early with an excellent health and

economic system, such as Singapore, are considered successful in overcoming the pandemic at an early stage. Meanwhile, countries that are not prepared, such as Indonesia, are overwhelmed. ASEAN cannot help because it does not have the right mechanism.

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on other fields such as defense and the military (Lin, 2021). With a slumping economy, many ASEAN member countries are cutting defense budgets, which can then have a follow-up effect on investment and implementation of regional defense diplomacy. Even though military medicine is the right field to deal with Covid-19, this cooperation is considered to have many challenges, such as competition in vaccine research and development. National security can also be a sensitive issue because the Covid-19 pandemic is related to biological technology and biological weapons.

Interestingly, the Southeast Asian defense ministers who are members of the ADMM have been swift in overcoming the pandemic. They held the ADDM Retreat meeting in Hanoi Vietnam on 19 February 2020. At the meeting, they emphasized the importance of ASEAN unity and solidarity in overcoming the pandemic and promoting defense cooperation such as cooperation in military medicine and information sharing in the defense sector to create a stable and secure area (ADMM, 2020b). Moreover, ADMM Plus also agreed to be used as a dialogue partner with the aim of increasing the overall capacity of military medicine in dealing with an increasingly widespread pandemic (Chongkittavorn, 2020).

Military assets are proven to have benefits in fighting Covid-19 (Tsjeng, 2020). In China, their soldiers were sent as medics to Wuhan where the Covid-19 pandemic was discovered and started to spread. The term military relates not only to physical resources such as medical equipment, but also to their capacity to support the health and infectious disease sectors. By looking at the military and defense sector as one of the pathways to countering Covid-19, how is ADMM's strategy as the main regional organization in the defense sector in tackling Covid-19 from the perspective of defense diplomacy?

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research approach. According to Burhan Bungin (2007) in his book entitled *Penelitian Kualitatif: Komunikasi, Ekonomi, Kebijakan Publik, Dan Ilmu Sosial Lainnya*, the qualitative descriptive research approach is also known as quasi-qualitative because it is still influenced by the tradition of quantitative research, especially in placing theory in extracting field data. For this reason, qualitative research with a descriptive approach plays a role in forming a variable in research that attempts to summarize a social phenomenon that occurs. Data collection used the literature study method which was then analyzed using the Interactive Model data analysis technique made by Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014) namely in the form of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

ADMM Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

In February 2020, ASEAN defense ministers met at the ADDM Retreat forum chaired by Vietnam. In his opening speech, the Minister of Defense of Vietnam, Ngô Xuân Lịch emphasized that the ADMM Retreat took place amidst the development of security challenges, especially the outbreak and spread of acute respiratory disease caused by Covid-19 (VietnamNet, 2020). As Chair of ASEAN Military Medicine, Vietnam proposed that member countries consider holding drills to overcome pandemics in 2020. He also pushed the idea of including disease outbreak control in field exercises during the three-year work program to Brunei and Australia as co-chairs of ADMM- Plus Experts' Working Group on Military Medicine in 2020-2023. Vietnam also called on that in order to increase the capacity of ASEAN countries in the field of military medicine, especially in responding to disease outbreaks, the cooperation of partner countries is needed in the ADMM-Plus mechanism.

Joint Statement by The ASEAN Defence Ministers on Defence Cooperation Against Disease Outbreaks was produced by the 2020 ADMM Retreat meeting. Commitments in defense cooperation such as military medicine and ASEAN unity and solidarity were again emphasized. In addition, the defense ministers also encouraged strong collaboration among ASEAN, including the

ASEAN Center of Military Medicine, ASEAN Chiefs of Military Medicine Conference, ASEAN Military Medicine Conference, and the Network of ASEAN Chemical, Biological and Radiological (CBR) Defense Experts and collaboration with our external partners in the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus Experts' Working Group on Military Medicine (ADMM, 2020b).

At the 14th ADMM meeting on 9 December 2020 which was held virtually in Vietnam, the ASEAN defense ministers adopted *Joint Declaration of The ASEAN Defence Ministers on Defence Cooperation For A Cohesive And Responsive ASEAN* which once again recognized effective cooperation between ASEAN Member States in tackling disease outbreaks, including Covid-19 (ADMM, 2020a). A year later, the 15th ADMM meeting which was virtually held in Brunei Darussalam on 15 June 2021 resulted in the defense ministers agreeing to deepen cooperation on pandemic response, as guided by ACRF and the *Joint Statement by the ASEAN Defence Ministers on Defence Cooperation Against Disease Outbreaks* between ASEAN defense agencies and external partners (ADMM, 2021). From here, ADMM began to take advantage of the role of the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine and the Network of ASEAN CBR Defense Experts in the form of dialogue, sharing training, and learning and exploring new forms of collaboration including cross-pillar and cross-sectoral cooperation, to support ASEAN's capacity and preparedness in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. 19 which has created a public health emergency.

The development of ADMM in tackling Covid-19 has increased in the following year. As part of regional efforts to increase synergy and collaboration in tackling global infectious and contagious diseases, the defense ministers agreed to adopt the Concept Paper on Enhancing Cooperation Amongst Defense Forces of ASEAN Member States (AMS) in Cross-Border Pandemic Containment at the 5th ADMM meeting 16 in Cambodia in 2022 (ADMM, 2022). In the same event, ADMM agreed on the Phnom Penh Vision on The Role of Defense Establishments in Support of Covid-19 Recovery which emphasized the importance of collaboration with ADMM-Plus to increase capabilities in military medicine and CBR in dealing with Covid-19.

Defense Cooperation within ADMM in Overcoming Covid-19

At the 8th ADMM-Plus meeting in Brunei Darussalam on 16 June 2021, the defense ministers who attended produced *the Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration by the ADMM-Plus in Commemoration of the 15th Anniversary of The ADMM on Promoting a Future-Ready, Peaceful and Prosperous ASEAN* is aware that Covid-19 is a non-traditional threat that can have a negative impact on regional security (ADMM Plus, 2021). They re-emphasized the importance of leveraging the capacities of the ADMM-Plus EWG on Military Medicine, the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine, and the Network of ASEAN CBR Defense Expert and also jointly agreed to strengthen the contributions of defense organizations to prevent, detect, control and respond to the spread of infectious disease Covid-19.

ADMM-Plus EWG on Military Medicine

At the 12th meeting of the ADMM-Plus EWG on Military Medicine on March 17 2021 chaired by Brunei Darussalam and Australia, the defense ministers discussed several provisions related to health and safety at the regional level as well as the empirical experiences of member countries regarding the Covid-19 vaccination. The meeting also produced an EWG on Military Medicine framework that implements project-based community medical deployment (PCMD) in one of the selected ASEAN communities according to the ASEAN Standby Arrangements Standard Operating Procedures (SASOP) guidelines as the main focus and approach. As the main instrument for coordinating and facilitating the interoperability of capabilities and capabilities of various participating countries during PCMD, the ASEAN Center for Military Medicine will also be involved in the framework program. (MoD Brunei, 2021c).

The 13th ADMM-Plus EWG on Military Medicine meeting on 2 June 2021 with the same chairman elaborated further on the PCMD initiative proposed by Brunei Darussalam, which proposes deployment in 2023 with the aim of improving existing health provisions in ASEAN countries. In this meeting, specific issues related to proposed medical deployments, which include Force Health Protection, legal aspects related to medical deployments, and the role of the ASEAN Center for Military Medicine in medical deployments were

elaborated by several presentations from speakers, including highlighting matters related to health security that are relevant to the region. Regional (MoD Brunei, 2021d).

ASEAN Center of Military Medicine

Since its establishment in 2016, the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine (ACMM) has a mission to establish sustainable, effective and practical cooperation in both normal and crisis situations between Military Medical Services (MMS) member countries of ADMM-Plus (Kemhan RI, 2021). In the Covid-19 pandemic situation in the ASEAN regional scope, ACMM has contributed as a means of exchanging experience and knowledge between ASEAN and ASEAN Plus member countries. On May 27 2020, ACMM held the ADMM Covid-19 Table Top Exercise (TTX) which aims to review lessons learned about Covid-19 from member countries, identify areas of interdependence between MMS and other sectors, develop an action plan to strengthen MMS , and make a gap analysis of the Covid-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRC) (ACMM, 2020a). In addition, ACMM has also held several workshops such as the ADMM Covid-19 TTX follow up Workshop "Quarantine Camp Management" on August 27 2020, ACMM Logistics Management in Pandemic Workshop on April 8 2021, and the Covid-19 Management in Disaster Area Workshop in September 14-15 2021. All of these workshops are held online.

ACMM has also produced a Roadmap for the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine (2020-2024) which contains the organization's strategy in developing joint regulations, exercises and facilities in tackling Covid-19 (ACMM, 2020b). Within two years, ACMM has produced four guidelines in the form of Assessment form of Military Training Arrangement, China Model of Covid-19, Guideline for Field Hospital Set up in EIDs Outbreak, and Guideline for Surveillance and Disease control (ACMM, 2021).

Network of ASEAN CBR Defence Experts

The Network of ASEAN Chemical, Biological and Radiological Defense Experts held an online workshop with the theme "Promoting Scientific Cooperation to Manage Infectious Disease Outbreaks" on 30 June 2020 chaired by Sng Mui Tiang, Head of the Network of ASEAN CBR Defense Experts Secretariat. As a workshop on this

platform that discusses pandemics, the meeting aims to fight the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular the use of the best scientific methods in the identification and detection of the SARS-CoV-2 Virus through information sharing activities and practical experiences (MoD Brunei, 2020). In addition, the workshop serves as a platform for collaboration among ASEAN member states in the future in accordance with the *Joint Statement by the ASEAN Defense Ministers on Defense Cooperation Against Disease Outbreaks* at the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Retreat in February 2020 and the *Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019* in April 2020.

The following year on 1 December 2021, the 3rd Annual Network of ASEAN (CBR) Defense Experts meeting led by the ASEAN CBR Network, Republic of Singapore was held virtually. During the one-day meeting, defense and CBR experts from ASEAN countries discussed potential scientific collaborations, including harmonization of protocols for the transport of biological samples and exchange of information on laboratory diagnostic capabilities (MoD Brunei, 2021b).

ASEAN Military Medicine Conference

The ASEAN Military Medicine Conference (AMMC) is part of the Military Medicine Cooperation Area under the ADMM-Plus platform. On 25-26 May 2021, the Ministry of Defense of Brunei Darussalam as chairperson held a conference with the theme "Pandemic Preparedness: Enhancing Readiness to Respond to and Manage Infectious Diseases Outbreaks". The goal of the conference is to encourage sharing of strategies, management, practices and challenges faced among ADMM-Plus member countries in pandemic response, exploring possible solutions to various problems in pandemic preparedness through interactive discussion and learning with subject matter experts (SMEs), and serves as a vehicle for discussing opportunities for networking, collaboration, and exchange of ideas among military healthcare and medical professionals working in fields related to pandemic preparedness (MoD Brunei, 2021a).

A year later, the 4th AMMC conference with the theme "Challenges, Breakthroughs, and Regional Cooperation," was organized by The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) with the aim of strengthening military medical services by building sustainable collaborations (Leon, 2022). AMMC

Chairman Brigadier General Fatima Claire Navarro said that the conference was AMMC's dedication in developing the capabilities of professionals on health issues for military medicine through information exchange. Collaboration in the field of military medicine as a neighboring country in ASEAN is important to be encouraged through formal meetings such as the AMMC.

Discussion

Ends

At the beginning of 2020, the emergence of Covid-19 was a new surprise for ASEAN member countries. By monitoring China struggling to contain the spread of the infectious disease, ASEAN defense ministers have realized that Covid-19 has the potential to threaten public health. For this reason, in February 2020, they agreed to securitize Covid-19 as an emerging public health threat. Through this joint statement, ADMM has an initial goal against a pandemic, namely to unite voices among member countries that Covid-19 is a common threat that can attack the common interests of ASEAN in the near future. Viewed from strategy theory (Lykke, 2001), it is very clear that ADMM was trying to reach a common policy on pandemics with member countries.

ADMM's policy at the beginning of 2020 which stated that Covid-19 was an emerging threat was followed by their steps in their commitment to create collaboration and cooperation between members in the defense sector. At the 15th ADMM meeting, the ASEAN defense ministers tried to explore the role of the military and defense sectors in countering Covid-19. The AMMC and the Network of ASEAN CBR Defense Experts were brought into their efforts through knowledge sharing, practice and dialogue. This defense diplomacy activity was ADMM's strategy in achieving wider foreign and security policy goals (Cottey & Foster, 2013), in the form of handling the spread of the Covid-19 infectious disease in the ASEAN regional scope. In addition, the defense cooperation carried out by ADMM in building a perception of shared interests regarding the impact of the Covid-19 threat is the character of defense diplomacy used to create mutual trust (CBMs) (Syawfi, 2009).

Means

ADMM succeeded in utilizing and sharing the role of the resources they had to deal with Covid-19. Aware of the limited capacity of regional defense cooperation in overcoming health threats, ADMM uses the ADMM-Plus EWG on Military Medicine with the aim of adding to the skills shared by developed countries members of ADMM-Plus. In the perspective of defense diplomacy offered by Syawfi (2009), strategic cooperation in military assistance (in this case the assistance of military knowledge regarding public health and safety during a pandemic) by ASEAN-Plus countries to ASEAN countries is one of the characteristics of the activities defense diplomacy carried out to increase defense capability.

ADMM also takes advantage of the role of military medicine in dealing with pandemics. ACMM is used as a leading sector that provides facilities for information exchange activities and training practices among member countries. The crisis situation caused by the pandemic forced ACMM to work hard within the limitations of virtual meetings. Workshops, TTX, Roadmaps and guidelines were achieved by ACMM in the first year the pandemic spread in ASEAN. To expand cooperation in order to increase regional military medical capabilities, ADMM has also utilized AMMC which is under the ADMM-Plus platform. Thus, ADMM has never limited the scope of their defense cooperation to their own regional scope. The building of mutual trust has crossed the boundaries of the regional level. This finding is in line with the statement that the initiatives to fight COVID-19 have pushed the military medical cooperation to a new level (Lin, 2021).

Covid-19 has touched on various security areas, including the CBR area. ADMM has used the Network of ASEAN CBR Defense Experts as a resource in information sharing activities with a scientific method approach for the identification and detection of infectious diseases. Thus, ADMM has realized that the impact caused by Covid-19 can attack many vulnerable sectors in regional security, including as a CBR weapon. This finding also simultaneously updates a statement from Adi et al. (2021) which states that ASEAN's Network of Biological and Radiological Defense Experts has not shown joint action to manage the COVID-19

pandemic because many countries consider COVID-19 not to be a military threats.

Ways

ADMM changed the method and approach to strategic engagement in defense cooperation to overcome Covid-19. The pandemic forced many meetings to be held online. However, it can be seen that ADMM member countries are still able to communicate and reflect their solidarity. More importantly, there is still a commitment to work together in the long term through several outputs produced together.

Regional defense cooperation under ADMM in dealing with Covid-19 created a new style of defense diplomacy in the form of virtual defense diplomacy. This diplomatic style overcomes many limitations, but does not reduce the essence of defense diplomacy. Communication and interaction can still run at a strategic level. Meanwhile at the operational level, meetings held by the ADMM-Plus EWG on Military Medicine, ACMM, AMMC, and the Network of ASEAN CBR Defense Experts can be held. With Covid-19 starting to subside at the end of 2022, ASEAN regional defense cooperation is predicted to be more effective with better output. The face-to-face meeting is a momentum to improve strategy and expand defense diplomacy activities, which can be useful for overcoming similar threats in the future.

CONCLUSION

ADMM was forced to modify their strategic engagement in regional defense cooperation to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. They use a new style of defense diplomacy activity called virtual defense diplomacy. Despite all its limitations, ADMM has succeeded in leveraging several defense cooperation under the ADMM and ADMM-Plus platforms. In addition, the communication and solidarity shown through several meetings and workshops show that there is still a commitment from ASEAN strategic leaders in building mutual trust, while increasing regional defense capabilities in overcoming infectious diseases. ASEAN regional defense diplomacy during a pandemic is an important lesson and experience for member countries to further increase activities and improve diplomacy output in the future.

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