

## Evolution of the ASEAN Political–Security Community (APSC) and Thailand’s Defence Diplomacy

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### Abstract

The ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), being one of three ASEAN pillars ASEAN Community Integration, has evolved through considerable contributions from defence diplomacy practices among ASEAN nations. This article investigates how the APSC has been driven by the ASEAN nations’ defence diplomacy, focusing on Thailand’s practices. Principles of defence diplomacy and constructivism theories were studied and applied for the subsequent analysis. Through the documentary research, a wide range of primary and secondary documents were analyzed to seek a holistic understanding of Thailand’s defence diplomacy practices within ASEAN-relevant contexts while the interviews with key informants enabled the researcher to attain greater insights of such research data and analysis. This study finds that Thailand’s role in defence diplomacy has been an effective geopolitical tool for ASEAN community integration, through ASEAN’s cooperative framework and practical mechanisms practiced among ASEAN countries.

**Keywords:** ASEAN community, ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), Defence diplomacy, Regional Integration, Thailand

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### บทคัดย่อ

ประชาคมการเมืองและความมั่นคงอาเซียน ซึ่งเป็นหนึ่งในสามเสาหลักของประชาคมอาเซียนนั้น ได้มีวิวัฒนาการที่เป็นผลมาจากการดำเนินความร่วมมือด้านการทูตฝ่ายทหารอย่างกว้างขวางของประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียน บทความนี้ได้นำเสนอถึงแนวทางที่การทูตฝ่ายทหารของไทยได้ขับเคลื่อนประชาคมการเมืองและความมั่นคงอาเซียน การศึกษานี้ได้ดำเนินการโดยใช้วิธีการวิจัยเอกสารจากแหล่งปฐมภูมิและทุติยภูมิรวมถึงการสัมภาษณ์บุคคลสำคัญในภาคกลาโหม การนำข้อมูลจากเอกสารมาวิเคราะห์ทำให้เกิดความเข้าใจอย่างถ่องแท้ในการดำเนินการ การทูตฝ่ายทหารของไทยในขณะที่ยังข้อมูลที่ได้จากการสัมภาษณ์ได้ช่วยให้มีความเข้าใจข้อมูลและวิเคราะห์ผลการวิจัยได้อย่างลึกซึ้ง ซึ่งผลการวิจัยที่ได้นี้ ทำให้ทราบว่าบทบาทของการทูตฝ่ายทหารของไทยเป็นเครื่องมือสำคัญทางภูมิรัฐศาสตร์สำหรับการรวมตัวกันของประชาคมอาเซียน โดยผ่านกรอบความร่วมมือของอาเซียน รวมทั้งกลไกต่าง ๆ ที่ประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียนได้นำมาปฏิบัติ

**คำสำคัญ:** ประชาคมอาเซียน, ประชาคมการเมืองและความมั่นคงอาเซียน, การทูตฝ่ายทหาร, การรวมตัวของประเทศในภูมิภาค, ประเทศไทย

### Introduction

Since it was established in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has very much relied on international diplomacy (Ewing-Chow and Hsien-Li, 2013). Bilateralism has been the fundamental choice of ASEAN states in terms of defence cooperation, in spite of enduring debates over the role and value of multilateralism (Tao, 2015). However, after the Cold War ended, leaders of ASEAN countries

have reconsidered ASEAN security framework as a multilateral approach, particularly when the ASEAN Community emerged.

Throughout its evolution, ASEAN has consistently maintained its attachment to the full respect of national sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs (Portela, 2013). In 1997, the ten ASEAN member states proclaimed their vision for closer integration as a region with the goal of becoming a community which would resolve disputes peacefully, forge closer economic integration, and be bound by a common regional identity, which was eventually laid out as the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). At the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in January 2007, the ASEAN Charter was signed to accelerate the formation of the ASEAN Community by 2015 (ASEAN Charter, 2008).

In building a cohesive, peaceful and resilient Political Security Community, ASEAN subscribes to the principle of comprehensive security and also committed to conflict prevention/confidence building measures, preventive diplomacy, and post-conflict peace building (APSC Blueprint). ASEAN has promoted multilateral defence cooperation through gradual and institutionalized approaches such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the meetings of ASEAN Chiefs of Military

Services. This study examines and presents how such defence diplomacy activities have contributed to the evolution of APSC, which accordingly support the ASEAN's regional integration.

### **Defence Diplomacy, Regional Security, and ASEAN's Community Integration**

Defence diplomacy can be described as the collective application of pacific and/or cooperative initiatives by national defence establishments and military practitioners for confidence building, trust creation, conflict prevention, and/or conflict resolution (Morgenthau, 1973). Similarly, Muthanna (2011) views defence diplomacy as constructing sustainable cooperative relationships, which builds trust and facilitating conflict prevention; and introduces cooperation in other areas. According to Winger (2014), defence diplomacy is a nonviolent use of military forces through activities to further a country's international agenda.

Since its establishment, bilateralism has remained the fundamental choice of ASEAN states in terms of defence cooperation (Tao, 2015). Also, ASEAN's principle of non-interference in internal affairs has led to its traditional consensual political decision-making rather than legally-binding agreements (Portela, 2013). However, the end of the Cold War has changed intra-ASEAN defense relations and there have been successive establishments of multilateral mechanisms for defence and security cooperation. For more

extensive regional security, ASEAN also welcomed engagement with the great powers such as the United States and China for security cooperation beyond Southeast Asia.

Security cooperation arena such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), was designed to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues so that it makes significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region (ARF, 2011). ASEAN members believe that engaging the great powers in multilateral endeavors is the best way to maintain their security because the ARF has raised concerns on various issues that are relevant to the security concerns of members across the region (Whelan, 2012).

Regarding the ARF initiatives, Thailand has been highly supportive since the early stage by hosting the first ARF Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok in July 1994 and regularly host major meetings and field exercises within the ARF the frameworks. The ARF have also been the venues to discuss the regional security issues such as the South China Sea case, in which Thailand acts as country coordinator for ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations. In this regards, Thailand has continued to exert its defence diplomacy and play both proactive and constructive role to keep the momentum of dialogue and consultations between ASEAN and China to move forward the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (CoC) process.

The emergence of the ASEAN Community Integration initiative was largely influenced by the concept of Security Community, developed by Karl Deutsch and his associates in the 1950s, aiming to develop to explore 'the conditions and processes of long-range or permanent peace' (Shaun, 2009). The concept describes groups of states that have developed a long-term habit of peaceful interactions and ruled out the use of force in settling disputes with other group members in which impacts of regional institutions can be analyzed in order to promote peaceful change in international relations (Acharya, 2009). ASEAN has been successful in reducing and minimizing regional conflicts particularly inter-state conflicts among ASEAN members. Strong collaboration between ASEAN members include military-to-military cooperation such as Exchange of Information, Joint Exercise and Training and Defence Industry (Saicheua, 2012).

Specific activities such as officer exchanges, ship visits, training missions, and joint military exercises have all been denoted as practices of defence diplomacy that effectively strengthen relationships among ASEAN countries. As such, regional collaborations through defence diplomacy activities are significant actions within the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC). Through the APSC's principles and guidelines, Thailand's has employed defence diplomacy to lay the importance of both confidence building measures to assist in the development of the community

and efforts required to develop methods of engaging in preventative diplomacy (Whelan, 2012).

Through the multilateral cooperation framework, Thailand's defence sector has particularly played significant role in enhancing ASEAN regional capacity for disaster response operations. Thailand has participated in and hosted several ASEAN-initiated multilateral ad-hoc exercises in disaster management including the ADMM-Plus HADR/Military Medicine Exercise and the ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF DiREx). Thailand's participation and leading roles in such ASEAN security-related activities has contributed to more effective multinational military responses to disasters, by enhancing operational coordination among military responders (RSIS, 2015). This kind of multinational cooperation is one of defence diplomacy tools that have significantly strengthened security cooperation among ASEAN members throughout the APSC evolution.

### **Evolution of the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC)**

ASEAN has initiated its security cooperation since its early days of establishment. The Declaration of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), signed in 1971, and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, created in 1976, and the Treaty on the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) were important documents that provide guidelines that promote regional peace and security for ASEAN members.

Security cooperation among ASEAN countries has consistently evolved so that the ARF was created and its first meeting was held in Thailand in 1994. When ASEAN agreed upon the inauguration of ASEAN Community in 2015, the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) has become one of the main three pillars that further drive and strengthen ASEAN cooperation on regional security.

The APSC has evolved and developed its own Blueprint document as a major guideline for ASEAN's common interests in strengthening its security cooperation. Such guiding principle also emphasizes that the APSC has its genesis of over four decades of close cooperation and solidarity. The APSC Blueprint has the flexibility to continue programs/activities in order to retain its significance and have an enduring quality (APSC Blueprint, 2009). With the APSC Blueprint, the ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action has laid out the activities needed to realize the APSC's objectives.

The ASEAN Charter (2008) has emphasized that the measures envisaged for future cooperation activities are formulated in terms of: "strengthening regional defence and security cooperation"; "enhancing existing practical cooperation and developing possible cooperation in defence and security"; "promoting enhanced ties with Dialogue Partners" and "shaping and sharing of norms". The ASEAN Defence Ministers' meeting (ADMM), is the only defence body in the APSC sphere (ASEAN, 2014) and serves as a forum to

enhance transparency and build confidence rather than coordinating security policies or framing joint initiatives, particularly in the field of non-traditional security. In addition, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) was also established aiming to engage ASEAN with its Dialogue Partners in cooperation on defence and security matters.

### Research Methodology

With a primary purpose to explore and examine relevant factors that are key drivers to achieve the APSC's goal, this study was carried out via the documentary research technique for qualitative analysis by examining a wide range of primary and secondary documents, empirical data, news analysis, and academic research reports. This technique is a useful tool to analyze documents containing information about the phenomenon interested by a researcher (Bailey, 1994) and enables the researcher to categorize, investigate, interpret, and identify limitations of physical sources (Payne and Payne, 2004). Together with documentary research, interviews with key persons involved with Thailand's defence diplomacy practices, at both policy and operational levels, were also conducted in order to attain greater insights of research data and analysis.

Based on literature reviews and consultation with experts, a framework for examining the defence diplomacy practices was developed as shown in Figure 1.

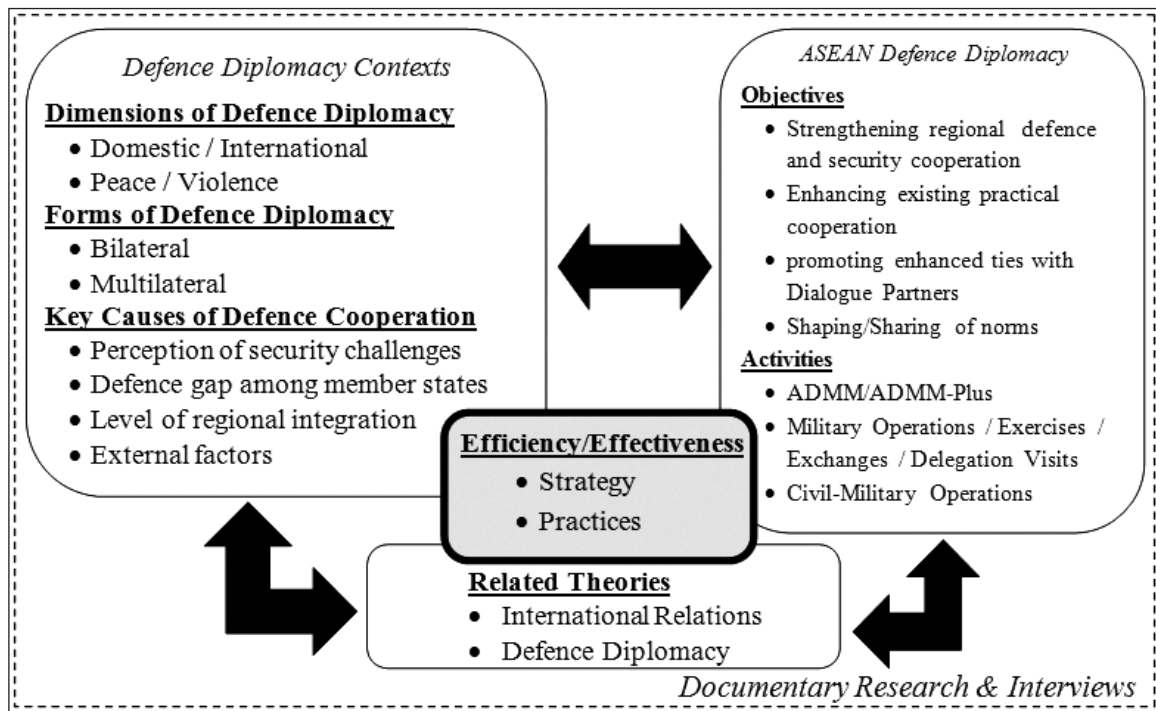


Figure 1 Research Analytical Framework

This research's analytical framework focuses on reviewing the relevant theories of international relations specifically related to defence diplomacy perspectives. Results of such reviews lead to gain of knowledge in dimension, forms, and key causes of defence cooperation outside and within the region. Further investigation in this research examined deeper into objectives and defence diplomacy activities performed by Thailand and ASEAN countries. The research employed a documentary research technique, in which understanding is sought by taking a holistic perspective, enabled researcher to draw conclusion and make recommendations based on research findings.

## Result and Analysis

Results obtained include the study and analysis of actual practices and results of defence diplomacy carried out by Thailand's Ministry of Defence and Royal Thai Armed Forces in order to examine their role and performance to support ASEAN integration process. The result from documentary research and key-informant interviews presents the perceived evolution of defence diplomacy in ASEAN together with Thailand's involvement in ASEAN's defence diplomacy activities, at both ASEAN level and the Asia-Pacific level, carried out to support the APSC as one of the major pillar of ASEAN Community Integration.

This study finds that Thailand's Ministry of Defence (TMOD) had played an important role prior to the ASEAN Community Integration in 2015 and continued its influencing role until present. As such, the Defence Diplomacy has been significant tool for the TMOD to act as a primary organization in the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) in two distinctive dimensions. Firstly, the TMOD had served as a domestic cooperative organization in carrying out government policies to prepare Thailand for the realization and integration of an ASEAN Community. Secondly, the TMOD still serve as an organization to cooperate with international agencies to integrate Thailand and other ASEAN Member States into the ASEAN Community.

Thus, the TMOD has continuously participated with the Ministry of Defence of other nations in preparing towards an ASEAN Community on every level and in every aspect. As for the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters (RTARF HQ) and Armed Services, there are also continuous and extensive participation in activities. For instance, besides the ADMM and ADMM-Plus, important meetings in the defence

sector include ASEAN Chief of Defence Forces Informal Meeting (ACDFIM), the ASEAN Military Intelligence Informal Meeting (AMIIM), and the ASEAN Military Operations Information Meeting (AMOIM) and the ASEAN Chief of Services Meetings (ACSM).

The ADMM-Plus has evolved into an effective platform for practical cooperation among the participating countries' defence establishments. Currently, cooperation under ADMM-Plus covers seven areas including Military Medicine (MM), Maritime Security (MS), Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA), Counter Terrorism (CT), and Cyber Security (CS) (ASEAN, 2017).

Activities of Defence Diplomacy practiced by the TMOD with ASEAN countries, within the APSC Pillar, are summarized in Figure 2. It can be seen that the ASEAN secretariat communicates ASEAN policy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), which further conveys to the TMOD, which shall plan and carry out defence diplomacy activities accordingly.



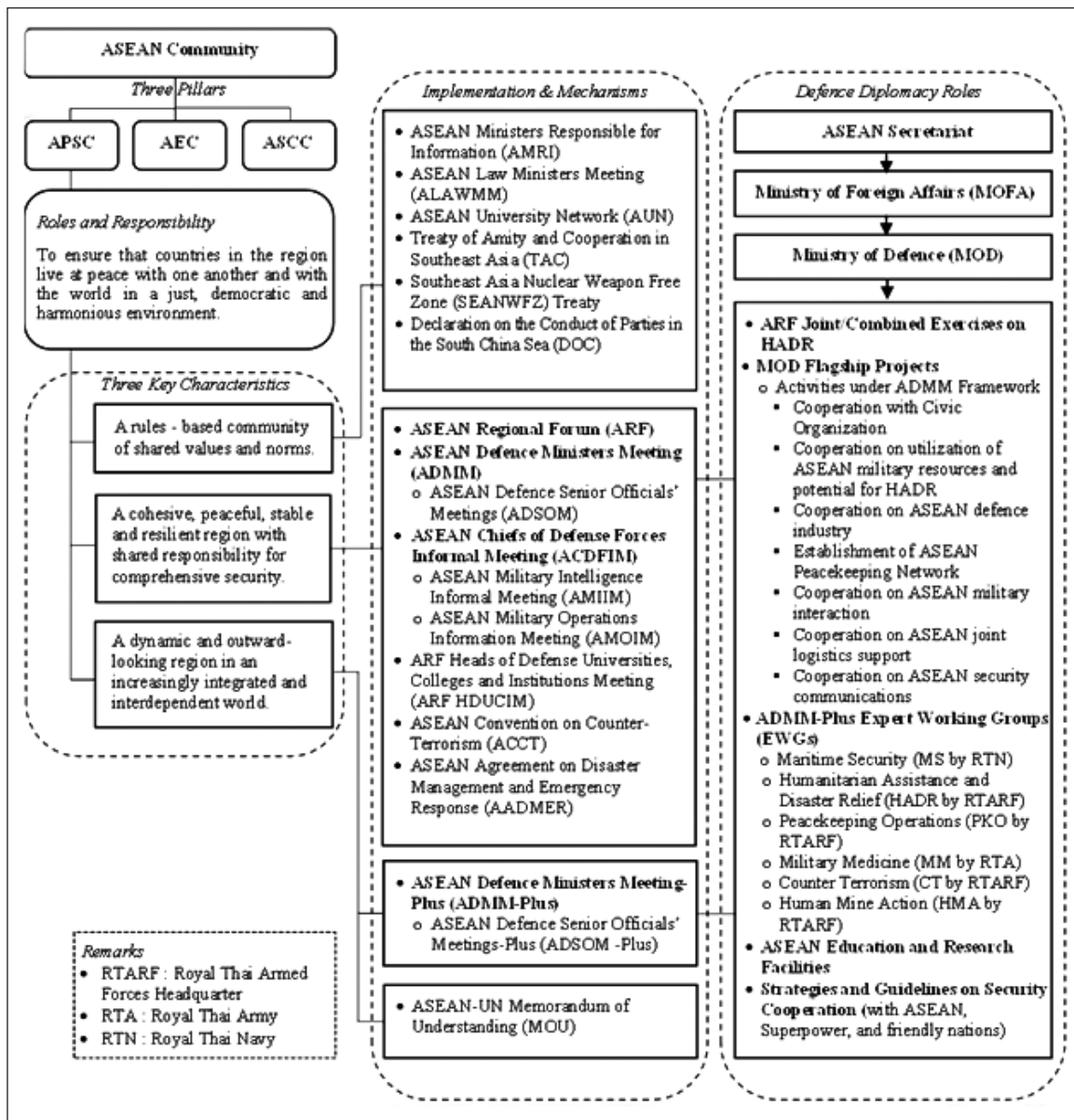


Figure 2 Defence Diplomacy Activities in ASEAN's Cooperation Mechanisms (Source: Manowong et al, 2017)

Align with preparation for ASEAN Community Integration; cooperation through defence diplomacy among ASEAN countries has gradually evolved. For instance, defence cooperation has advanced with the adoption

of the Concept Paper on the Establishment of ASEAN Peacekeeping Centers Network, the ASEAN Defence Industry Collaboration, the ASEAN Defence Interaction Program, the ADMM Logistics Support Framework, and the ADMM Direct



Communications Link. These fields of defence cooperation have built up confidence and security-building measure among ASEAN members aiming to promote quick response cooperation in emergency situation, in particular relating to maritime security.

The APSC pillar has been a means allowing ASEAN Member States to seek for closer interaction and cooperation to forged shared norms and create common mechanisms to achieve ASEAN's goals and objectives in the political and security fields. It therefore promotes the process of ASEAN integration and community building. Meanwhile, in the interest of preserving and enhancing regional peace and stability, the APSC seeks to strengthen the mutually beneficial relations between ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners and other friendly countries. It is aimed that cooperation in political development will bring to maturity the political elements and institutions in ASEAN, aiming to foster inter-state solidarity on political systems which can be achieved further through the shaping and sharing of norms.

It has been learned that ASEAN countries initially forged bilateral relationships in order to cope with various threats. With ASEAN Community Integration, in light of the changing security context, ASEAN has promoted multilateral defence cooperation through gradual and institutionalized approaches, under the APSC umbrella, such as the ARF and ADMM in which Thailand has been one of the key actors. Defence cooperation between

ASEAN and major regional powers was further expanded to the ADMM-Plus with its eight Dialogue Partners in order to engage larger scale of regional political and security cooperation.

It is evident that Thailand's major role in the APSC has been practiced through its defence diplomacy tools. Examples of significant achievements of Thailand's defence diplomacy include the expedition of the APSC implementation, cooperation in regional peacekeeping operations, enhancement of the Ministry of Defence roles for the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), engagement of regional security problem resolution such as the case of the South China Sea, and promote important initiatives within the ARF framework including the confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and the preventive diplomacy. All of long-standing security cooperation via defence diplomacy practiced by Thailand and ASEAN countries have greatly contributed to furthered and strengthened cooperation that finally established the APSC.

## Discussion and Recommendations

One of the aims and purposes of ASEAN Community Integration is to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter (Ewing-Chow and Hsien-Li, 2013). Through Defence Diplomacy, ASEAN countries seek to maintain

their close and beneficial cooperation, while exploring all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves, and extend similar relations with existing international and regional organizations having similar aims and purposes (Acharya, 1990 and Gindarsah, 2015). The APSC, having recognized the strong interconnections among politico-economic and social realities, acknowledges the principle of comprehensive security, and commits to address the broad political, economic, social and cultural aspects of building an ASEAN Community. The idea of regional security can be attained by established regional community structure was previously explained by Buzan and Waever (2003)

Achievement of multilateral cooperation, as aimed by ASEAN Community integration plan, has therefore been accelerated by several forms of bilateral defence cooperation among ASEAN states (Tao, 2015). Concept papers, cooperation on the issues of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief has been progressing significantly in the ADMM. The ACDFIM, AMIIM, and AMOIM meetings are organized to enhance practical cooperation among defence forces. As the success of ASEAN became evident, the countries outside ASEAN also seek to enhance regional security cooperation via strengthening relationship with ASEAN (Fris, 2013).

Defence diplomacy has been extensively employed by ASEAN countries, particularly Thailand, conduct of a country's diplomacy

and international agenda, including specific national foreign and security policy objectives by managing defence foreign relations and supporting other diplomatic initiatives of the government. It has been observed that Thailand's defence diplomacy has an important role in supporting ASEAN Community integration process. Domestically, the Ministry of Defence actively operates under the mechanism of the Supervising Committee. Internationally, there are cooperation with international organizations and Ministry of Defence of other nations, on every level and in every aspect.

It is evidently found in this exploratory study that defence diplomacy practiced through foreign relations among ASEAN nations have been adjusted from anti-subversion cooperation to transparency-oriented cooperation, mainly aiming to gain mutual understanding and, eventually, trust among ASEAN nations. Besides the strengthening of intra-region defence cooperation, at the same time, ASEAN also attempts to strengthen regional security with other countries outside ASEAN, through several multilateral arrangements, mainly powerful countries in terms of both military and economy strength, through ASEAN-Plus mechanisms.

However, implementation of defence diplomacy in relation with the ASEAN Community Integration has not been in perfection. There are several aspects which are opportunities and challenges of implementing defence diplomacy

practices to further support the integrated ASEAN Community in the future. In terms of opportunities, it is seen that there are several mechanisms, which were created to support and facilitate ASEAN Community Integration, have achieved their established goals such as the continuing interactions among ASEAN defence leaders on every level and sustaining extensive participation in activities between ASEAN Armed Forces.

On the contrary, implementing defence diplomacy has faced several noticeable challenges along the process of ASEAN Community Integration and such challenges tend to continue unless there are appropriate remedies. The most obvious one is the conflict of interests among ASEAN countries could significantly affect ASEAN's unity. For example, the South China Sea disputes between some ASEAN members and China may not be easily solved because not all ASEAN countries are having such conflicts with China, which is a member of ASEAN-Plus.

Differences in political systems, ideologies, and socio-economic capabilities remain significant factors for ASEAN countries to affect the process of trust-building and, hence, achievement of the consensus solution for regional sensitive issues.

It is therefore suggested that the above-mentioned gaps be effectively overcome in order to strengthen confidence-building measures, promote greater transparency and understanding of defence policies and security perceptions, build up the necessary institutional framework

to strengthen the cooperative process in further support of the APSC and the ASEAN Community as a whole.

## Conclusion

This research was carried out via the examination of a wide range of primary and secondary documents, empirical data, news analysis, and academic research by using content analysis. Interviews with key persons involved were also conducted. Actual practices of the defence diplomacy employed by Thailand were analyzed and references were made to the theoretical aspects of defence diplomacy and other theorem of international relations. Consultation with experts then helped the researcher to justify the theoretical findings and properly present such justification.

Findings in this research show that, at early days of ASEAN, its member countries largely emphasized on bilateral cooperation among themselves. Through changes of the global security environment, the concept of ASEAN Community Integration emerged and the primary aim is to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region. The policies of creating the military relationship Leaders in ASEAN military sectors have common agreement and encouragement to create stronger community with strengthened political and security cooperation. With better assets already

in possession, the ASEAN countries including Thailand have successfully utilized such strength, though channels of defence diplomacy, to promote regional security, particularly human security that may be affected by unexpected natural disasters. Furthermore, when the regional political conflict between ASEAN and China arises, Thailand has been entrusted to act as country coordinator to facilitate alleviation of the disputes. This has proved that Thailand's defence diplomacy has a considerate level of effectiveness at regional level and this resulted in the country's creditability in giving voices to introduce initiatives for ASEAN security such as the establishment of APSC.

Defence diplomacy has been exercise as a political tool of ASEAN's foreign relations

approach to carry out activities created by action plans of the APSC Blueprint. The APSC's established forums, such as ADMM, have evolved into an effective platform for practical cooperation among the participating countries' defence establishments. However, achieving ideal results of ASEAN Community Integration via implementation of defence diplomacy is highly challenging because of several existing gaps. Eliminating the hindering factors would strengthen efforts in maintaining mutual respect and unity of ASEAN Member States and enhance ASEAN defence and security cooperation, which would eventually make ASEAN Community completely integrated.

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