CONCEPT PAPER:
ESTABLISHMENT OF A VIRTUAL NETWORK OF ASEAN CHEMICAL, BIOLOGICAL AND RADIOLOGICAL DEFENCE EXPERTS

Introduction

1. ASEAN will need to step up collective efforts to deal with the proliferation of diverse and complex non-traditional threats amidst a volatile regional security environment. At the 11th ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) in October 2017, ASEAN Member States (AMS) recognised that the region’s defence establishments could play a pro-active role in addressing non-traditional security challenges. The 11th ADMM also reaffirmed its commitment to shore up cooperation and enhance regional capabilities on Counter-Terrorism (CT).

2. The 2007 ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism (ACCT) which entered into force on 27 May 2011 provided the broad framework for regional cooperation to counter, prevent and suppress terrorism. In addition, the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025 adopted on 22 November 2015 called on AMS to intensify information sharing on illicit terrorist activities including the smuggling and misuse of chemical, biological, radiological (CBR) materials, and to enhance ASEAN’s capacity to address accidental/deliberate release of hazardous substances/agents of weapons of mass destruction. More recently, our Leaders at the 12th East Asia Summit on 14 November 2017 recognised the need to address the ongoing chemical weapons challenge, and encouraged cooperation to develop a state of readiness to provide timely, adequate and effective assistance to respond, when an incident occurs.

3. In light of ASEAN’s strong commitment to combat terrorist acts in all forms and manifestations, practical CT cooperation can be further enhanced to encompass niche threats such as CBR attacks by non-State actors or terrorist groups. There is a significant risk of the misuse of toxic materials by State and non-State actors: the use of the nerve agent sarin during the Syrian civil war (2013-2017) and in Japan (1995), as well as the use of anthrax in Japan (1993) and post-9/11 (2001) demonstrated that it is not uncommon for non-State actors and terrorist groups to amass and employ CBR weapons.
Objectives and Principles

4. ASEAN can take steps to strengthen regional CT preparedness and cooperation against CBR threats. As the necessary expertise and resources to respond to a CBR attack tend to reside with AMS’ defence establishments, the establishment of a virtual ASEAN network of CBR defence experts, initiated under the ambit of ADMM, would facilitate the sharing of information and best practices, and provision of mutual assistance in the event of a regional CBR attack or disaster.

5. The network aims to fulfil the following objectives:

   a. To reaffirm the region’s commitment to address the ongoing concerns regarding the misuse of CBR materials by developing a state of readiness to provide timely, adequate and effective assistance as part of an integrated response when a CBR incident occurs.

   b. To serve as a regional confidence building mechanism, and promote multilateral cooperation and coordination among ASEAN policymakers and CBR defence experts against potential CBR threats for the benefit of the region’s collective peace and security.

   c. To function as a single node for regional CBR defence experts to make contact, and share information, best practices, expertise and experiences on common CBR threats and hazards.

   d. To encourage regional CBR defence experts to deepen professional links with peers from other AMS, and to advance their knowledge and techniques for responding to CBR attacks.

   e. To enhance regional safety, security, and safeguards, based on implementation of relevant commitments to the international standards and guidelines, and other relevant international instruments, through close cooperation with existing mechanisms at the regional framework.

6. The network shall be:

   a. Guided by established ASEAN principles of respect for sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs of AMS as enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, and in accordance with ASEAN principles and processes.
b. Based on mutual trust, transparency, and cooperation, and in accordance with relevant national laws, rules and regulations.

c. In line with the spirit of the 2007 ASEAN Convention on CT, APSC Blueprint 2025; and as determined by the ADMM in accordance with the mutual interest and common operational needs of AMS.

Scope and Form of Activities

7. An online portal shall be established for CBR defence experts from AMS to facilitate the linking up of subject-matter experts, and the sharing of information, best practices, expertise and experiences.

8. Practical forms of cooperation under the ambit of the network could include:

a. Sharing of a directory of regional CBR defence experts to allow AMS to make contact and provide practical mutual assistance to prepare for, as well as to respond to regional CBR incidents. AMS may suggest one to two defence/national experts in each of the C, B and/or R domains.

b. Organisation of meetings, workshops and conferences to facilitate information sharing and promote cooperation amongst regional CBR defence experts towards countering possible CT threats, by representatives. The events could expand upon, or be modelled after, existing platforms such as the Singapore International Symposium for Protection against Toxic Substances (SISPAT) or Scientific International Conference on CBRNE (SICC).

c. Forging regional cooperation in the areas of CBR emergency preparedness and response in close cooperation with existing regional framework.

d. The organisation of visits or exchanges to relevant facilities.

9. The network could consider collaboration with reputable regional networks, international organisations and research institutions such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Organisation for the Prohibition of Biological Weapons (OPBW), International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and United Nations
Secretary-General Mechanism’s (UNSGM) biological analysis network in its activities.

10. Subsequently, the ADMM could decide on whether to expand the network to cover the nuclear domain. If the nuclear domain is included, the work of the Virtual Network of ASEAN CBRN Defence Experts shall complement the existing regional network and mechanisms, including the ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM), existing regional obligations on nuclear safety, security, and safeguards under the Treaty on Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), and relevant international instruments, including the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1540 (2004), 1267 (1999), and 1373 (2001), with regards to the international commitment on the prevention and countering the development, production, trafficking, and use of CBRN weapons and their means of delivery by non-State actors, and terrorist groups.

Conclusion

11. Given the growing sophistication of terrorists and non-State actors’ capabilities and tactics, ASEAN needs to bolster our collective resolve and step up cooperation and capacity building in dealing with CBR threats that can undermine the region’s peace and stability. The establishment of a virtual network of ASEAN CBRN defence experts is a critical first step towards building up AMS’ individual capabilities, and enhancing ASEAN’s shared confidence towards the spectre of these non-traditional security threats.

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