CONCEPT PAPER ON
ENHANCING COOPERATION AMONGST DEFENCE FORCES OF ASEAN
MEMBER STATES (AMS) IN CROSS-BORDER PANDEMIC CONTAINMENT

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose:

1. The purpose of this paper is to propose the development of increased AMS’s defence forces cooperation in cross-border pandemic containment (land, air and sea).

B. Background:

2. The AMS are not immune to a heightened risk of deadly infectious disease outbreaks. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, has worsened health insecurity and caused irremediable calamity to national and regional economies. Such a pandemic has proven to be a common threat which requires collective efforts to contain and overcome it. The huge magnitude and unpredictable nature of challenges of the pandemic have forced several AMS to prioritise their own security measures, including the cross-border pandemic control. In some of the most critical situations, those measures were enforced unilaterally rather than in consultation with countries involved. This issue was brought forward at the ASEAN Special Summit on COVID-19, held virtually in April 2020, where the ASEAN Leaders called for collective efforts in response to the pandemic.

3. A pandemic such as COVID-19 can cripple a nation or at least drastically derail a government’s response capacity if acting alone. Experience shows that no country can single-handedly defeat a pandemic or can effectively deal with a cross-border pandemic outbreak. Because of the paucity of the regional cooperation in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that a closer multilateral cooperation be formed through the synergy of the AMS in managing and controlling the cross-border pandemic. A robust multilateral cooperation will be key in strengthening regional efforts to successfully overcome the current and future pandemics. Through collective efforts and synergy, the AMS will gain confidence and develop effective capabilities through practical military cooperation among AMS to contain the spread of the current and future pandemics.

4. This Concept Paper is developed with a firm belief that it is important and necessary to address the common threats and challenges and prevent this pandemic collectively. The overarching goals are to develop collective capabilities and work together as a region through
practical steps and take action collectively, where necessary, to address the common challenges and threats so as to successfully overcome them.

C. Rationale:

5. The role and potential of the AMS have yet to be leveraged and reinforced in the cross-border pandemic containment. In this regard, the AMS’s defence forces play a pivotal and synergic role in national and regional COVID-19 response operations and have a great potential to reinforce regional emergency measures in tackling cross-border pandemics and in the protection of security and social orders.

D. Principles:

6. This Concept Paper is guided by the following principles:
   a. It is acknowledged that not all ASEAN defence establishments have a role in cross-border pandemic containment and management;
   b. Participation and contribution shall therefore be dependent upon individual AMS’s capabilities and be conducted in a manner that is flexible, non-binding and voluntary;
   c. Participation shall be based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and in accordance with respective domestic laws, rules, regulations and policies; and
   d. Decisions made shall be based on mutual consent.

II. OBJECTIVES

7. In line with the Joint Statement by the ASEAN Defence Ministers on Defence Cooperation against Disease Outbreaks, dated 19 February 2020 and the Phnom Penh Vision on the Role of Defence Establishments in Support of COVID-19 Recovery, dated 22 June 2022, the proposed joint cross-border cooperation to contain the pandemic has the following objectives:

   a. Develop response guidelines and regional capabilities in cross-border pandemic containment as well as in coping with other common threats and challenges arising from pandemic outbreaks along the shared borders;
   b. Strengthen effectiveness in the exchange of information held by the defence sector, mutual notification of the implementation of health security measures by respective AMS, and joint bilateral or multilateral public health emergency planning;
   c. Maintain communication and coordination to facilitate mutual support and assistance, such as the use of reliefs, tools and means of transport, among other things, along the borders; and
d. Enhance civil-military relations to promote more effective humanitarian responses and effectiveness in pandemic management.

III. SCOPE

8. The scope and areas of cooperation for the military cooperation in the containment of cross-border pandemics cover the following:

   a. Responsive cross-border health security cooperation and arrangements, including establishing permanent Points of Contact (POC), representing each AMS;
   b. Exchanges of essential information held by defence sector, for example health security measures along the borders in relation to pandemic;
   c. Mutual support and assistance on the ground, in and when dealing with movement and deployment in containing pandemic, disease control operations, safety control and quarantine;
   d. Conduct of workshops, joint exercises, exchanges of skills, experience, expertise and capacity development of military personnel that lead, engage in, and support the activities; and
   e. Reinforcement of existing bilateral and multilateral approaches, mechanisms and other cross-border security cooperation frameworks, on needs basis.

IV. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

9. As the AMS’s defence forces reinforce their roles in the cross-border pandemic containment under this proposed initiative, the following outcomes are expected:

   a. ASEAN unity and solidarity in response to transboundary spread of a deadly disease outbreak that could harm the people of ASEAN;
   b. Improved harmonisation of cross-border pandemic responses when dealing with transboundary disease transmission and outbreak;
   c. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and related documents will be developed as a guide for the implementation of collective efforts;
   d. Enhanced response capabilities of the AMS in cross-border pandemic containment;
   e. Closer cooperation and enhanced effectiveness of cross-border disease control in ASEAN that support and contribute to the realisation of the Joint Statement and the Phnom Penh Vision; and
   f. Military medicine cooperation and mutual support and assistance in cross-border pandemic containment operations will be realised.

V. PLAN OF ACTION

10. The following milestones and activities will be undertaken in separate stages or simultaneously:
a. Stage 1: Operationalisation
   i. Establishment of POC and a coordination team, where appropriate, to operationalise the cooperation framework, conduct the monitoring and surveillance of cross-border activities, and enforce prevailing laws and regulations, and prevention of illegal cross-border movement in relation to the pandemic.
   ii. Establishment of SOPs for military coordination and information communication rules related to outbreak containment and prevention, and a standard guideline for implementation of the rules and procedures for the AMS, particularly those countries that share land and/or sea borders.
   iii. Creating a joint review, monitoring and evaluation team and process.
   iv. This initiative may involve the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine and ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus Experts’ Working Group on Military Medicine (ADMM-Plus EWG on MM), if necessary.

b. Stage 2: Development of Cooperative Activities
   i. Online seminar / physical workshop and capacity development training on recent developments of pandemic and updates of cooperation measures for land border and maritime cooperation.
   ii. Exchange of knowledge, expertise, and skills in the joint containment of the pandemic taking into account risk and threat factors for national health security and national security of respective AMS.
   iii. Capacity-building of relevant defence staff in the prevention and containment of the spread of pandemic.

c. Stage 3: Joint Review, Monitoring and Evaluation
   i. Conduct regular or ad hoc review and monitoring on the progress of ongoing operation.
   ii. Conduct evaluation on practical implementation process, propose recommendations, and update the plan and activities, if needed.

VI. NEXT STEPS

11. Following the adoption of this Concept Paper, an initial planning conference involving all AMS’s defence forces will be held to discuss the implementation of section V above. This will include consideration of individual countries’ plans and capabilities.
VII. REVIEW AND REPORT

12. The progress of this initiative will be annually updated and reported to the ADMM through the ASEAN Defence Senior Officials Meeting (ADSM) and the ADSM Working Group.