DISCUSSION PAPER ON PROMOTING INFORMATION-SHARING BETWEEN THE SOUTHEAST ASIA MARITIME LAW ENFORCEMENT INITIATIVE (SEAMLEI) AND THE ASEAN DEFENCE MINISTERS’ MEETING PLUS (ADMM-PLUS) IN THE AREA OF MARITIME SECURITY

I. PURPOSE

1. This discussion paper explores the possibility of promoting information-sharing between the SEAMLEI and the ADMM-Plus Experts’ Working Group on Maritime Security (EWG on MS), noting that there are potential areas of common interest.

2. The discussion paper will serve as future reference, and in its current format is not intended for immediate operationalisation. Further deliberation that implies possible implementation must be undertaken with full respect for applicable ADMM/ADMM-Plus guidelines and relevant practices in the defence sector.

II. BACKGROUND

3. The Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative (SEAMLEI), formerly known as the Gulf of Thailand Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative (GOTI), is a regional forum meant to increase maritime law enforcement cooperation and information-sharing among Southeast Asian nations. The GOTI was established in 2012 as a partnership between the United States and the maritime law enforcement agencies of the four countries bordering the Gulf of Thailand, namely Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, to enable seamless collaboration among these agencies in the region.

4. In 2018, it was expanded to include the Philippines and Indonesia and ultimately, is expected to include all ten countries of Southeast Asia. It now has a well-organised framework and brings together maritime law enforcement practitioners and maritime security agencies from all member countries. Those agencies are: Cambodian National Committee for Maritime Security (NCMS), Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (BAKAMLA), Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), Philippine Coast Guard, Thailand Maritime Enforcement Command Center (Thai-MECC) and Viet Nam Coast Guard.

5. The SEAMLEI operates in two levels, through a commanders’ forum and an operational level working group. Both levels meet annually, with each member country co-hosting with the United States. The commanders’ forum is conducted in formal conference setting, whereas the operational working group meets in the form of field training exercise and table-top exercise. The work of SEAMLEI supports a rules-based order in accordance with international law, and promotes greater maritime domain awareness, transparency, cooperation, and information sharing between countries. Such cooperation is especially important in the maritime context, where transnational crimes are not bounded by physical borders.
III. ADVANTAGES OF PROMOTING INFORMATION-SHARING BETWEEN THE SEAMLEI AND THE ADMM-PLUS EWG ON MS

6. The seas of the Southeast Asian region are critical and important sea lanes of communication (SLOC) since they border the Pacific and Indian Oceans and are major arteries of communication and international commerce. The seas, which cover about 80% of the region, dominate the economic lifelines of the surrounding countries. Today, more than half of the world’s annual merchant tonnages traverse Southeast Asian waters. Piracy and armed robbery threats in this strategic SLOC have attracted much attention from states depending on these waters for international trade and free movement of goods. In addition, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) overfishing and foreign fishing are depleting fish stocks in the ASEAN region, causing concerns and conflict among ASEAN Member States. Many of the developing states in the region are depending on the fish stock for their peoples’ livelihood along the coastal areas, whereas, several states whose fish export contribute to their economies are also expressing concern over the issues of IUU.

7. Against this backdrop, wider information-sharing is identified as one of the three key objectives of the ADMM-Plus EWG on MS. An information-sharing between the SEAMLEI and the ADMM-Plus EWG on MS therefore may offer the following advantages:

   a. Building the capacity for increased domain awareness, information exchange and in certain circumstances operational coordination and cooperation; and

   b. Building stronger capability to respond to the multitude of security challenges which threaten the economic well-being of countries that depend on the ocean for trade and resources. These security challenges include illegal/IUU fishing, piracy, and drug and people smuggling.

IV. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

8. Further discussion on promoting information-sharing between the SEAMLEI and the ADMM-Plus EWG on MS may also take the following into considerations:

   a. At the moment, only six ASEAN Member States are part of the SEAMLEI. Even though the objective of the SEAMLEI is to include all of ASEAN Member States, the expansion of membership may take some time;

   b. On the nature of the institutions, the SEAMLEI is a forum for law enforcement agencies while the ADMM-Plus is part of the ASEAN defence sector; and

   c. For SEAMLEI, the United States has always been the only key player to drive the forum forward since the beginning.