

# Defence Diplomacy and ASEAN Community Integration: Opportunities and Challenges

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## Abstract

Defence diplomacy is one of diplomatic tools used for strengthening relationships among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). With the ASEAN Vision 2020 aiming to further strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful ASEAN community, the role of defence diplomacy becomes more significant. High degree of socio-cultural and political and diversities among ASEAN member states also makes the ASEAN Community integration challenging. Investigating on contributions of defence diplomacy practiced among ASEAN nations shall lead to better understanding on defence diplomacy performed by each nation's military sector. This article presents results of an explorative study on practices of defence diplomacy in ASEAN countries, focusing on Thailand as a case study. A method of documentary research and interviews with key informants in Thailand's defence sector were carried out. Study result shows that there are several important aspects related to the opportunities and challenges of implementing defence diplomacy to support ASEAN Community integration. Findings in this study significantly not only enhance readers' perception on defence diplomacy but also illustrate this kind of diplomacy as an effective geopolitical tool for ASEAN community integration as well as provide ways to improve political and diplomatic relationships among ASEAN nations.



การทูตฝ่ายทหารและการรวมตัวกันของประชาคมอาเซียน : โอกาสและความท้าทาย การทูตฝ่ายทหารเป็นเครื่องมือหนึ่งที่ใช้ในการเสริมสร้างความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศในสมาคมอาเซียน และเนื่องจากที่วิสัยทัศน์อาเซียน 2020 ได้มุ่งหวังให้มีการสร้างพื้นฐานที่เข้มแข็งเพื่อให้ประชาคมอาเซียนมีความมั่นคงและความสงบสุข ทำให้การทูตฝ่ายทหารมีความสำคัญมากยิ่งขึ้น ความหลากหลายทางสังคมและการเมืองของรัฐสมาชิกอาเซียนทำให้การรวมตัวกันเป็นประชาคมอาเซียนมีความท้าทายมากยิ่งขึ้น การศึกษาถึงประโยชน์และผลกระทบของการทูตฝ่ายทหารที่ดำเนินการโดยประเทศต่างๆ ในอาเซียนจะทำให้เกิดความรู้ความเข้าใจในบทบาทของการทูตฝ่ายทหารมากยิ่งขึ้น บทความนี้ได้นำเสนอผลการศึกษาเชิงสำรวจเกี่ยวกับกิจกรรมด้านการทูตฝ่ายทหารที่มีการดำเนินการระหว่างประเทศในอาเซียน และมีการทูตฝ่ายทหารของไทยเป็นกรณีศึกษา โดยเครื่องมือในการศึกษาได้แก่ เทคนิคการสำรวจเอกสารและการสัมภาษณ์บุคคลสำคัญด้านการทูตฝ่ายทหาร ผลการศึกษาพบว่า มีหลายแง่มุมที่เป็นโอกาสและอุปสรรคของการดำเนินงานด้านการทูตฝ่ายทหารในการสนับสนุนการรวมตัวกันเป็นประชาคมอาเซียน ผลที่ได้จากการศึกษานี้มีความสำคัญทั้งในด้านการเสริมสร้างความรู้ความเข้าใจแก่ผู้ที่สนใจศึกษาในด้านการทูตฝ่ายทหารและการแสดงให้เห็นว่า นอกจากการทูตฝ่ายทหารจะเป็นเครื่องมือด้านภูมิรัฐศาสตร์ที่มีประสิทธิภาพสำหรับการรวมตัวกันของประชาคมอาเซียนแล้ว ยังเป็นวิธีการสำหรับการเสริมสร้างความสัมพันธ์ทางการเมืองและการทูตระหว่างประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียนด้วย

**Keywords:** ASEAN community, Defence diplomacy, Regional integration, Thailand

## Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established by in 1967 mainly to foster regional peace and security. From its establishment, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has very much relied on international diplomacy (Ewing-Chow and Hsien-Li, 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 by 2020. In 2007, the ASEAN Charter (2008) was signed to accelerate the formation of the ASEAN Community by 2015. Formation of ASEAN Community is driven by three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), each of which has its own blueprints containing action programs and relevant driving mechanisms for

supporting ASEAN Community Integration by 2015 and beyond. 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, 2009).

Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy are important instruments in conflict prevention. In the area of defence and regional political consultations, ASEAN Defence Officials have been involved in the ASEAN security dialogue including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), and ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meetings (ADSOM). Implementation of such defence diplomacy practices stated in APSC blueprint envisages the three key characteristics: a rules-based community of shared values and norms; a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared

responsibility for comprehensive security; and a dynamic and outward-looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world (APSC Fact Sheet, 2013). This article examines previous and ongoing activities of defence diplomacy implemented among ASEAN countries, in reference to the APSC Blueprint, of which the three characteristics are reviewed how they are inter-related and mutually reinforcing, and whether they are pursued in a balanced and consistent manner. Besides the prospective opportunity and benefits of more unified and secured ASEAN, challenges that need to be overcome, in order to achieve favorable outcome of ASEAN community integration, are also identified.

## Purposes

This article intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of implementation of defence diplomacy as an important tool to support the ASEAN community integration process. It is expected that the study on contribution of defence diplomacy for this regional integration would raise greater attention of the public whether the defence sector is performing responsively in such changes.

## Benefit of Research

It is perceived that a comprehensive study of challenges and opportunities of implementing defence diplomacy, through published documents and archival records, shall enhance readers' perception and illustrate the underlying mechanism that makes defence diplomacy an effective geopolitical tool for ASEAN community integration. Furthermore, understanding existing regional security and political barriers shall provide insight of possible remedies and improvement of

political and diplomatic relationships among ASEAN nations.

## Research Process

This study was largely carried out by means of the documentary research technique. In order to compensate restrictions of secondary data collection, interviews with key defence diplomacy practitioners in Thailand's military institutions allows the researcher to attain deeper insights of actual practices, at operational level, and prospective cooperation, at policy level, of the defence diplomacy approaches employed by Thailand. The interviews took place from April to June 2016. Nine officers from the Ministry of Defence, the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, and the Royal Thai Army, were interviewed. All officers have more than 10 years experiences in defence diplomacy and they hold high positions, at management and policy levels, which directly deal with international relations and defence diplomacy in ASEAN contexts. Two officers are at policy level (rank Generals), four officers are at high management level (rank Senior Colonels), and three from Middle management level (rank Colonels). All interviewees were informed that their personal data and opinions would be kept confidential in order to ensure their full participation and open opinion expression. To ensure reliability of data analysis, theoretical aspects of defence diplomacy and other theorem of international relations have been used as references of this research.

## Study Results

From a study through documentary research and interviews with key informants, the perspectives of defence diplomacy are described as follows.



### Definition and Application of Defence

**Diplomacy** The term “Defence diplomacy” was first used by the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence (MOD, 2000) as a means of consolidating a series of cooperative military activities. Muthanna (2011) views defence diplomacy as constructing sustainable cooperative relationships, which builds trust and facilitating conflict prevention; introduces transparency into defence relations; builds and reinforces perceptions of common interests; changes the mind-set of partners; and introduces cooperation in other areas. Similarly, Tan and Singh (2012) describe defence diplomacy 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. According to Winger (2014), defence diplomacy is a nonviolent use of military forces through activities to further a country’s international agenda. Activities such as officer exchanges, ship visits, training missions, and joint military exercises have all been denoted as practices of defence diplomacy. Manowong et al

(2017) has studied and summarized various types of diplomacy and its applications as shown in Figure 1. In this illustration, defence diplomacy is described as a means for a country to further its national agenda and seek cooperation with defence agencies in another country. (See Figure 1).

### Defence Diplomacy and Regional Integration

Defence diplomacy, regarded as nonviolent use of military forces, is generally seen as one of the tools in the conduct of a country’s diplomacy and international agenda. Historically, bilateralism has remained the fundamental choice of ASEAN states in terms of defence cooperation, in spite of longstanding debates over the role and value of multilateralism (Tao, 2015). ASEAN leaders then believed that bilateral cooperation was more advantageous than other forms of multilateral military cooperation. Indonesia attempted the multilateralism approach, suggesting a ‘joint council’ for defense cooperation and joint military exercises among ASEAN states but the ASEAN Summit’s consensus refuse to institutionalize security considerations within ASEAN, which would change ASEAN from its status as a socio-economic organization (Frost, 1980). ASEAN policy-makers continued to reject the idea of multilateral security and defence cooperation and declared that ASEAN ‘had nothing to do with military cooperation’ (Acharya, 1990). However, the end of the Cold War has changed intra-ASEAN defense relations, which underwent a noticeable adjustment. ASEAN leaders began to ‘think the unthinkable’: a multilateral ASEAN security framework. The “ASEAN Defense Community” and the ASEAN military arrangement were suggested by Malaysia and Indonesia. Until present, there have been successive establishments of multilateral mechanisms.

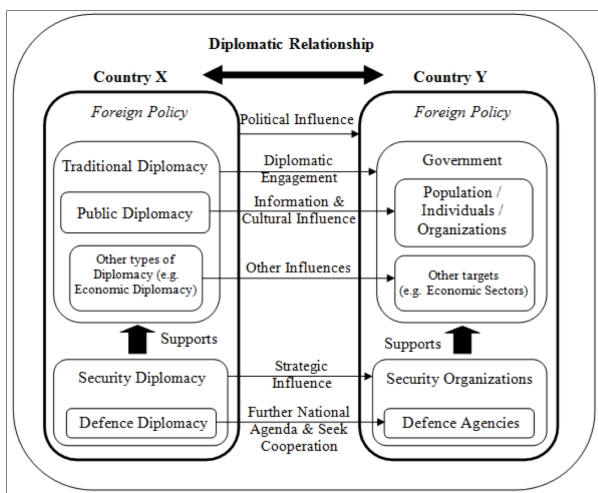


Figure 1 Types and Applications of Diplomacy  
Source: Manowong et al., 2017

Concerning ASEAN's idea of Regional Integration, Singaporean scholars consider that ASEAN as a regional grouping has been successful in reducing and minimizing regional conflicts particularly inter-state conflicts among ASEAN members (SIIA, 2007). The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) provides a venue for multilateral and bilateral dialogue and cooperation including the networking and exchange of information relating to defense policy and publication of defense white papers. Thailand and Malaysia also exhibit their strong collaboration, such as military-to-military cooperation in Exchange of Information, Transparency in Defense and Military Affairs, Joint Exercise and Training, Defence Technology, and Defence Industry (Saicheua, 2012). Such collaborations are significant actions within the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC).

**The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint** The APSC Blueprint indicates that the APSC has its genesis of over four decades of close co-operation and solidarity. The ASEAN Heads of States/Governments envisioned a concert of Southeast Asian nations, outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies. The APSC Blueprint is guided by the ASEAN Charter, which contains the principles and purposes. The APSC Blueprint builds on the ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action, which is a principled document, laying out the activities needed to realize the objectives of the APSC. This is an important reference in continuing political and security cooperation. The APSC Blueprint provides a roadmap and timetable to establish the APSC by 2015 and shall also have the flexibility to continue programs/activities beyond 2015 in order to retain its

significance and have an enduring quality (APSC Blueprint, 2009).

According to the APSC Blueprint, the APSC pillar shall be a means by which ASEAN Member States can pursue closer interaction and cooperation to forge shared norms and create common mechanisms to achieve ASEAN's goals and objectives in the political and security fields. In this regard, it promotes the process of ASEAN integration and community building. At the same time, in the interest of preserving and enhancing peace and stability in the region, the APSC seeks to strengthen the mutually beneficial relations between ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners and friends. It is aimed that cooperation in political development will bring to maturity the political elements and institutions in ASEAN, towards which the sense of inter-state solidarity on political systems, culture and history will be better fostered. Such inter-state solidarity can be achieved further through the shaping and sharing of norms.

In the APSC sphere, the only defence body is the ASEAN Defence Ministers meeting (ADMM), which was created in 2006 (ASEAN, 2014). Rather than coordinating security policies or framing joint initiatives, the meeting serves as a forum to enhance transparency and build confidence. Some cooperation taken place in the field of non-traditional security includes humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts. As similarly emphasized by the ASEAN Secretariat (2008), 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”. In addition, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) was established aiming to engage ASEAN with its Dialogue Partners in cooperation on defence and security matters.

## Data Analysis

Considering Thailand’s implementation of defence diplomacy in ASEAN Community Integration, it was found that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has performed an important role on the realization of the integrating ASEAN Community. In the advancement of Thailand towards the realization of an ASEAN Community in 2015, the Ministry of Defence has been a primary organization in the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) in two distinctive dimensions: firstly, to serve as a domestic cooperative organization in carrying out government policies to prepare Thailand towards the realization of an ASEAN Community, and secondly, to serve as an organization to cooperate with international agencies to integrate Thailand and other ASEAN Member States into the ASEAN Community.

Interviews with key persons in Thailand military sector have revealed significant viewpoints. For instance, the interviewees who work at policy level indicated that: “...Thailand’s defence diplomacy activities are very important to the process of ASEAN community integration as it greatly facilitates creating trust between ASEAN countries, strengthening the existing relationships which lead to accelerating implementation of security problem resolution...” “...Thailand’s defence diplomacy plays a significant role in exploring new areas of defence cooperation and strengthening the existing cooperation, bilaterally or multilaterally, and also

helps to effectively analyze requirements of both sides which help reduce suspiciousness between defence sectors in ASEAN countries...” “...Thailand’s defence diplomacy is a primary tool for Thai Armed Forces in strengthening security cooperation between ASEAN countries, as it is a coordinating mechanism for establishing cooperative frameworks for operational level...” “...there is a need to carefully analyze strategic impacts of international security problems so that ASEAN countries can work together at strategic level in order to alleviate and eventually solve such problems for a more secure ASEAN community...” From the interview results, it can be seen that the interviewees have similar views on importance of Thailand’s defence diplomacy and its influence on the process of ASEAN Community Integration. That is, Thailand’s defence diplomacy activities greatly facilitate creating trust between ASEAN countries, strengthening the existing relationships which lead to accelerating implementation of security problem resolution. It was also strongly agreed that Thailand’s defence diplomacy practices have complied with the government policy and effectively supported the three pillars of ASEAN Community but, however, Thailand’s defence diplomacy have not yet practiced at its best capacity and appropriate level. It was also commonly agreed that ASEAN community integration still faces major obstacles, which hinder effective implementation of defence diplomacy, such as internal security problems, domestic laws, borderline, minorities, gap of people’s incomes, lacking of trust, overlapping maritime territory, and separatist movement. Furthermore, it was pointed out that ineffective ASEAN measures of sovereignty noninterference and consensus decision making, lack of unity for



solving problems in the South China Sea, skepticisms on each other, historical conflicts, economic imbalance, and unstable politics within a country can significantly hinder the achievement of ASEAN community integration.

Based on comprehensive literature reviews and documental investigation, there are important aspects related to the opportunities and challenges of implementing defence diplomacy practices in supporting ASEAN Community Integration. Major opportunities and challenges, resulted from implementing defence diplomacy as a supporting tool for ASEAN Community Integration (See Figure 2).

**Opportunities** Several mechanisms created to support and facilitate ASEAN Community Integration have provided ranges of opportunities.

Among ASEAN Member States, ASEAN Community Integration policy has led the MODs have been involved with activities on every level, whether it is at the Ministerial level, Senior Officials' Meeting, and the Working Group level. As for the level of Armed Forces Headquarters and Armed Services, there are also continuous and extensive participation in activities. For instance, there are ASEAN Chief of Defence Forces Informal Meeting (ACDFIM), ASEAN Chief of Services meetings, the ASEAN Military Intelligence Informal Meeting (AMIIM), and the ASEAN Military Operations Information Meeting (AMOIM). Concerning the international dimension, an important element is the cooperation with international organizations. Continuous participation between MODs of ASEAN

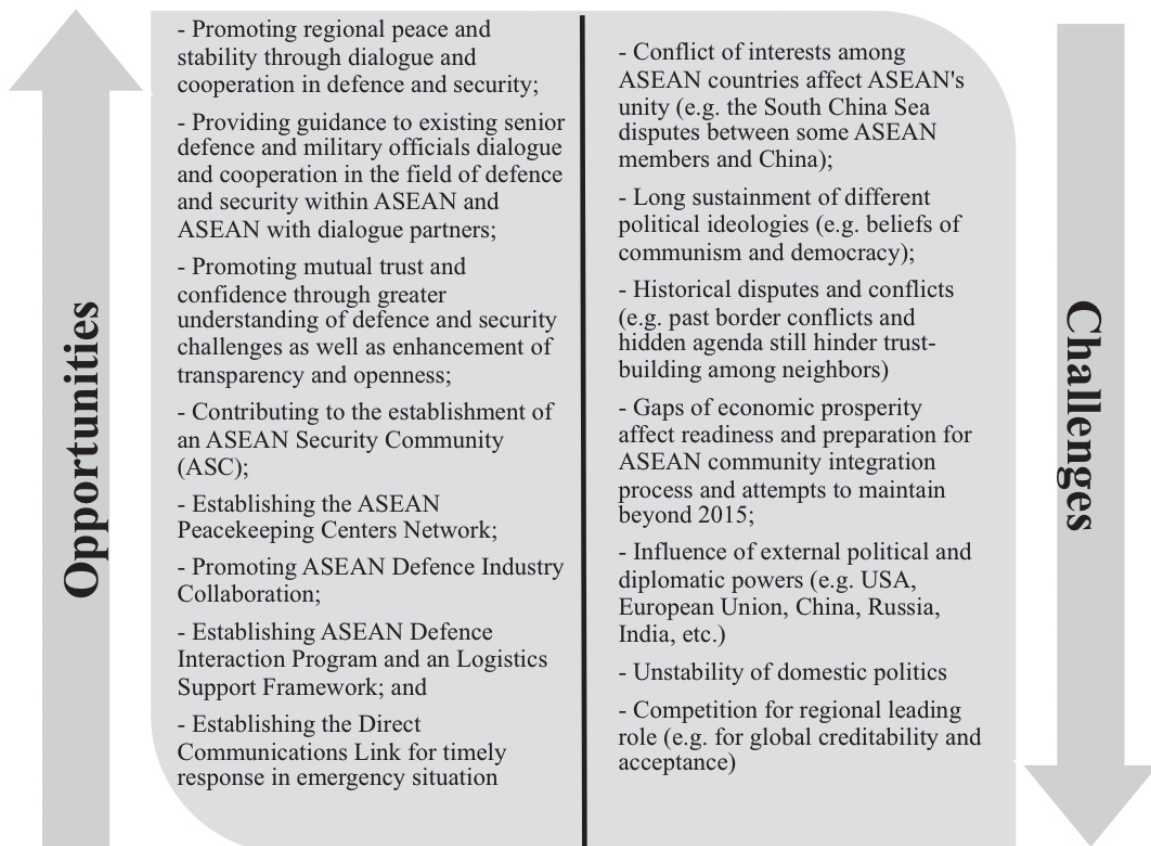


Figure 2 : Summary of major opportunities and challenges of defence diplomacy implementation for ASEAN Community Integration

Source: Originally created by the authors for this article



Member States in preparing towards an ASEAN Community on every level and in every aspect is considered significant. The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) mechanism has created several important activities. The ADMM is the highest defence consultative and cooperative mechanism in ASEAN, aiming to promote mutual trust and confidence through greater understanding of defence/security challenges as well as enhancement of transparency and openness (ASEAN, 2014).

Similarly, considering ASEAN's cooperation with non-regional countries, the ASEAN militaries also have cooperation with eight dialogue partners which are Global and Regional Powers, namely Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States of America. The cooperation is under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) mechanisms. This cooperation is to jointly build military capacity, enhance security and stability in ASEAN and regions beyond ASEAN. The ADMM-Plus has evolved into an effective platform for practical cooperation among the participating countries' defence establishments. Currently, cooperation under ADMM-Plus covers six areas including Military Medicine (MM), Maritime Security (MS), Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA), and Counter Terrorism (CT). Each area is co-chaired by an ASEAN Member Country and a Dialogue Partner. Meetings and exercises are organized accordingly by co-chairs during the chairmanship period. The success of ASEAN regional integration will depend on how these opportunities could affect the ASEAN's prospective security and quality of life of people in the region.

**Challenges** There are several noticeable

challenges along the process of ASEAN Community Integration, which has existed up to end of 2015, and could probably still exist in years to come. 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. There have been attempts to address this issue in ASEAN meetings in order to protest against China, as a member of ASEAN-Plus, but the consensus solution is not yet achieved. Besides, as ASEAN countries have been governed by different political systems and ideologies, e.g. communism and democracy, coupled by historical disputes and conflicts along borders, have significantly affected the process of trust-building. Altogether, as there are still influences of external political and diplomatic powers from non-ASEAN states, as well as competition for regional leading role among ASEAN states, cooperation on some issues could not be fully achieved. Moreover, in order to ensure the success in implementing the APSC Blueprint, as ASEAN Member States are required to integrate the programs and activities of the Blueprint into their respective national development plans. Such implementations certainly need financial resources.

As there are existing gaps of economic prosperity among ASEAN countries, affect readiness and preparation for ASEAN community integration process and sustainment beyond 2015 could be significantly affected.

## Conclusion

One of the aims and purposes of ASEAN Community is to promote regional peace and



stability. In addition, by means of defence diplomacy, ASEAN countries seek to maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organizations and states with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for closer cooperation among themselves. Achievement of multilateral cooperation, as aimed by ASEAN Community Integration plan, can be accelerated by several forms of bilateral defence cooperation among ASEAN states including border security arrangements, intelligence sharing, joint military exercise/training, and also defence industry cooperation. In light of the changing security context, ASEAN has therefore promoted multilateral defence cooperation through gradual, institutionalized approaches, such as the ADMM. In order to guide the ADMM cooperation process, the ADMM Work Programs have been consistently adopted, incorporating four areas: strengthening regional defence and security cooperation; enhancing existing practical cooperation and developing possible cooperation; promoting enhanced ties with Dialogue Partners; and shaping and sharing of norms. Concept papers, cooperation on the issues of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief has been progressing significantly in the ADMM. Several joint/combined exercises have been conducted through ADMM mechanisms. The ACDFIM, AMIIM, and AMOIM meetings are organized to enhance practical cooperation among defence forces.

As such, 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, the cooperation with international organizations and Ministry of Defence

of other nations, on every level and in every aspect, largely through the ADMM mechanisms, is an important for preparing towards an ASEAN Community Integration. Recognizing the strong interconnections among political, economic and social realities, the APSC pillar thoroughly acknowledges the principle of comprehensive security, and commits to address the broad political, economic, social and cultural aspects of building an ASEAN Community successfully with desired objectives and prospective opportunities. However, in reality, the challenges of the political, economic and social diversity among ASEAN Member States because there are still several gaps existing among ASEAN countries that prevent fully integrated community in the expected timeline, and further hinder the future success of ASEAN Community integration. In conclusion, this article explores implementation of defence diplomacy as a political tool of foreign relations to carry out activities created by action plans of the APSC Blueprint. It also highlights major opportunities and challenges observed through defence diplomacy practices, which have been mainly conducted by ASEAN countries' Ministry of Defence and its organizations, including the Armed Forces Headquarters and Armed Services. Despite numbers of opportunities for successful integration of ASEAN Community with support of APSC elements, the existing challenges could significantly hinder and decelerate desired pace of full integration process and create difficulty in maintaining status of current integrated cooperation. However, as the ASEAN Community is in its early stage, and as defence diplomacy is believed to be an effective means to create trusts among ASEAN nations, there is still way to improve the situation. Significant gaps,



such as economic and development gaps, need to 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 support of the APSC. Eliminating the hindering factors would strengthen efforts in maintaining respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty and unity of ASEAN Member States, and promote the development of norms that enhance ASEAN defence and security cooperation.

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