

The Manama Dialogue – Sherpa Meetings

Since 2004 the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) has held annually the Manama Dialogue in the Kingdom of Bahrain, bringing together heads of state, prime ministers, foreign and defence ministers, national security advisers and armed forces chiefs, strategists and commentators from over 20 countries to engage in high-level international defence diplomacy on regional security issues. The Dialogue is recognised as the key inter-governmental regional security summit and an essential part of the regional security infrastructure.

The IISS is committed to improving the quality of preparations for the Manama Dialogue process and to strengthening its ethos. That ethos is based on the Manama Dialogue tradition of frank exchange and sharp debate, leading to more regular communication and more effective multilateral defence diplomacy.

To that end, starting in early 2012, the IISS will hold two Sherpa meetings in preparation for the December 2012 Manama Dialogue. These Sherpa meetings will involve senior government officials from those states who normally participate in the Manama Dialogue. Sherpa delegations would normally comprise three senior officials, typically drawn from the states' foreign ministry, ministry of defence, and/or the uniformed military and national security establishments. The IISS will limit total participation in each Sherpa meeting to some 65 individuals from some 20 states.

The IISS Manama Dialogue Sherpa meetings will serve three goals.

- First, to strengthen the Manama Dialogue community by convening the senior officials from participating states who have high-level responsibility for foreign and security policy. Senior official interaction at the Sherpa meetings will help to build support for effective ministerial engagement at the Summit.
- Second, to engage in substantive discussion on the regional security issues that need to be addressed in a multilateral fashion by the key states engaged. These issues can be taken up more formally, and with greater preparation, at the Manama Dialogue in the bilateral and multilateral private meetings that take place.
- Third, to provide for the IISS, as convener of the Manama Dialogue, ideas as to the issues that should be addressed in the Manama Dialogue summit including in the smaller, off-the-record special sessions. The Sherpa meetings should give every participating state a sense that they have contributed to the agenda deliberations in advance of the Dialogue.

The Manama Dialogue Sherpa meetings will be entirely off the record, with participation limited to government officials and key IISS senior staff involved in the Manama Dialogue process. The IISS, in its effort to improve the quality of intergovernmental engagement at the Manama Dialogue, will work with all key participating states to ensure the deliberations of the Sherpa meetings remain responsive to government needs.