



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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The Illusions of Shangri-La

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Cover Photographs:

Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. delivers the keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, May 31, 2024. Source: IISS

China's Defence Minister Admiral Dong Jun speaks at Plenary Session 5 at the Shangri-La Dialogue, June 02, 2024. Source: IISS

Indonesia's Defence Minister and President-elect delivers a special address at the Shangri-La Dialogue, June 01, 2024.

Source: IISS

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by
Lalit Kapur

In his keynote address at the 21st IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on May 31, President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines likened the mythical Shangri-La to the continuing dream of an international community that lives in peace, upholds the rule of law, and enables all nations to thrive in pursuit of their respective aspirations¹. But if his utopian vision is an illusion, then it is not the only one witnessed at the 2024 edition of this event, where the Western presence seemed to overshadow Asians. India was entirely absent from the proceedings, with no mention being made either of its determined pushback against China's aggression in the Himalayas.

The Shangri-La Dialogue brings together heads of government, defence ministers, high-level security officials and representatives of the media and the think tank community in Singapore for what is billed as the Asia's premier defence summit. Its agenda has over the years evolved into a predictable pattern: a keynote delivered by the head of a regional government, seven plenary sessions at which the panellists are of ministerial or higher rank (and predominantly defence ministers), and six special sessions where the panellists are senior security officials. Defence Ministers from the US and China get a plenary session to themselves; the others speak in panels of three or four.

As US-China strategic competition has escalated, Shangri-La has increasingly become a US versus China forum, with European leaders joining the mix to play bit parts, and Western representatives tending to outnumber Asian counterparts.

The backdrop for this year's gathering at the Shangri-La Dialogue was defined by wars in Ukraine and Gaza, continuing Houthi strikes against shipping in the Red Sea, the continuing standoff between India and China in Ladakh, and continued tensions in the Asia-Pacific due to China's intransigence over its revisionist claims. Amongst those who spoke at the 21st dialogue were four heads of government (two each from Southeast Asia and Europe), 16 defence ministers (nine from Asia, six from the West including Australia and New Zealand, and one from the US), and a host of senior military officers/diplomats.

¹ Keynote Address of President Ferdinand R Marcos Jr. for the 21st IISS-Shangri-La Dialogue, May 31, 2024, <https://pco.gov.ph/presidential-speech/keynote-address-of-president-ferdinand-r-marcos-jr-for-the-21st-iiss-shangri-la-dialogue/>

The plenaries were about US strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, crisis management amidst rising competition, building cooperative security in the Asia-Pacific, cross-regional security order challenges, China's approach to global security, connecting Indian Ocean and Pacific Security, and re-imagining solutions for global peace and regional stability.

The special sessions encompassed deterrence and reassurance in the Asia-Pacific; defence cooperation and small state security; Myanmar; maritime law enforcement and capacity building; AI, cyber defence and future warfare; and coordinating global humanitarian operations.

A special address by Indonesia's Defence Minister and President-elect, Prabowo Subianto, rounded off the agenda.

President Marcos' keynote was marked for the contrasts he drew between the actions of his country in limiting its maritime zone claims to what was sanctioned by UNCLOS and had been subjected to scrutiny by the world's leading jurists, and those of 'another' that sought to propagate excessive and baseless claims through force, intimidation and deception. Among the realities of the Indo-Pacific he identified were that the agency of nations comprising the region is under challenge, US-China strategic rivalry is constraining the choices of regional states, and ASEAN unity and centrality is challenged. Noting that the sovereign equality of all states must remain sacrosanct, ASEAN and ASEAN-led processes must remain central, and the rule of law and integrity of multilateralism must prevail, he said that the economic security of East Asia depended on the freedom of navigation and unimpeded passage in the South and East China Seas. He observed that though the region could not afford any future for the South China Sea other than as a sea of peace, stability and prosperity, this vision was distant due to illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive actions that continued to violate the sovereignty, rights and jurisdiction of the Philippines. Nevertheless, he maintained that his country remained committed to managing the situation through dialogue and diplomacy. The conflict between his evident turn towards the US to balance China's assertions and his continued commitment to ASEAN processes was striking.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's address was intended to reassure US strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific. He made four points: that dialogue to maintain regional peace and stability is a necessity, not a reward; that a new convergence is evident around nearly all aspects of security in the Indo-Pacific, with the hub-and-spokes structure of the past being replaced by a set of overlapping and complementary initiatives and institutions; that the common

sense of purpose driving these initiatives is impelled by shared and enduring values, including respect for sovereignty and international law, free flow of commerce and ideas, freedom of the seas and the skies, and the peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue; and finally, that the US can be secure only if Asia is secure, and safeguarding the security and prosperity of the region remains the core organising principle of US national security policy. The downplaying of the China challenge in the region, and the evident and massive diversion of US focus and funding towards Ukraine and Gaza, were inconvenient realities that were glossed over.

China's Defence Minister Admiral Dong Jun spoke on his country's approach to global security, describing five Chinese characteristics and providing five prescriptions. China, he said, valued peace and harmony. It was committed to pursuing common security. It was also committed to equality and mutual respect. Another commitment was openness and inclusiveness. But China was also committed to safeguarding its core interests, and this included maintaining the one-China principle and ensuring Taiwan did not declare independence. The PLA would take resolute action to curb Taiwan independence and make sure that such a plot does not succeed. His prescriptions included protecting the legitimate security interests of all countries, building a more just and equitable international order, giving full play to the regional security architecture, advancing open and substantive defence cooperation, setting an example through maritime security cooperation, and strengthening security governance in emerging areas.

On the South China Sea, he noted that it remained a stable and peaceful region despite a 'certain country' having broken bilateral agreements and its own promises, made premeditated provocations and created false scenarios to mislead the public, ignored the overall interests of the region and violated the ASEAN Charter by allowing an outside country to deploy a mid-range missile system. He highlighted that there was a limit to China's restraint in the face of such provocations. He came in for some tough questioning about the perceptible gap between his words and China's actions; his response was to obfuscate and avoid a meaningful reply.

Two other speakers aroused interest. Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo Subianto noted that geopolitical tensions and conflict as well as ongoing incidents gave rise to disillusionment among many countries, especially in the Global South. The only way ahead was through dialogue and cooperation. Addressing the ongoing situation in Rafah, Gaza, he noted that resolution of the crisis necessitated mutual respect for the rights and concerns of all parties. He called for a just solution that preserved not only the rights of Israel to exist,

but also the rights of the Palestinian people to have their own state, living in peace.

On Ukraine, Prabowo reiterated the plan he had presented last year: of a ceasefire at the present position, withdrawal of troops by each side to a depth of 15 Km from the ceasefire line to create a De-Militarised Zone (DMZ), induction of a UN monitoring force into the DMZ, and the conduct of a referendum under UN auspices to ascertain the wishes of the majority in disputed areas. Prabowo did not touch upon regional issues in his special address.

Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, on the other hand, lamented that diplomacy had degraded, leaving only disappointment behind. His focus was on getting Asians (and the world) to rally behind the forthcoming Global Peace Summit and show their commitment to peace – by isolating Russia and ensuring its defeat in the ongoing war.

The geographical illusion stood out in stark prominence. The Shangri-La security conclave is largely about socialising Western defence interests and engaging Southeast Asia, and a large European (and American) contingent was present. The entire region between Europe and Southeast Asia did not figure in the agenda. The India-China border, where over 100,000 soldiers have been involved in a face-off that is now entering its fifth year, did not come up for discussion. Nor did the Indian Ocean, even though a plenary session was dedicated to connecting Indian Ocean and Pacific security. The Indian Ocean representative on that panel was from the Maldives. India's absence was notable.

The substantial European presence, including from Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden and the EU, was apparently designed convey the impression that the problems of Europe and Asia are inter-linked. The only takers for this proposition, however, were from the Western bloc, encompassing the US, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

Singapore's Defence Minister carefully observed that NATO countries had shown great determination in this year's Munich Security Conference to support Ukraine to defend its sovereignty, while noting the uncertainty of continuing support and achievable outcomes as the conflict drags on. He asked, "But what ought and can we do?" In Asian eyes, Ukraine, Gaza and China's assertions in the Indo-Pacific remain three separate and distinct issues.

Two abiding impressions can be drawn from this year's Shangri-La dialogue.

First, there is an effort to downplay the level of great power tension in the region. Last year, the US and Chinese defence ministers did not find time to meet. This year, they met for over an hour, and the readouts from both sides, while divergent, indicated that they agreed continued dialogue was necessary (even if it was past, rather than to, each other). Ciu Tankai, a former Chinese Vice Minister and veteran diplomat, was careful to position the South China Sea issue as a regional law and order problem, rather than a threat to regional security.

Second, that the Southeast Asian countries are conscious that their agency in dealing with regional and global problems is severely limited. Nevertheless, their convening power remains – and it is this convening power they wish to enhance, for whatever purpose it may serve. Their perspective does not span security issues across Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

To conclude, the Shangri-La dialogue of 2024 was mostly an attempt to downplay US-China tensions and connect Southeast Asian security issues to those of Europe, largely in disregard of regional realities and sensibilities. Whether Europe and Asia can actually do anything of note for each other on security and regional stability issues remains entirely questionable.



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