

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE 2022 AND THE FUTURE OF ASIA

*The 19th Shangri-La Dialogue was held against the backdrop of geopolitical competition between the United States and China. While Washington and Beijing made clear that the region is a core priority for both of them, **BENJAMIN HO** argues that there was less agreement on what the rules of international order ought to be like and how to reconcile the fundamental interests of the two sides.*



Lloyd Austin and Wei Fenghe across the table from each other at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2022. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

The 19th round of the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue (10–12 June 2022), which was reconvened in Singapore after a two-year hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic, drew more than 500 official delegations from 59 countries. The meeting witnessed robust discussions by defence planners and leaders regarding their respective visions of international order and how global cooperation ought to be achieved. In providing a much-needed sketch and update on the military dynamics in the region, the discussions signalled that the future of Asia would be

closely linked to how geopolitical competition between the United States and China pan out. Three main themes stood out from the dialogue: preserving the rules-based order, China's interests, and the future of Asia and regional cooperation.

Preserving the Rules-based Order

The importance of adhering to a rules-based order was clearly fleshed out on the first day of the event by US defense secretary Lloyd Austin. Calling the Russian invasion of Ukraine a “reckless war of choice” undertaken by President Vladimir Putin, Secretary Austin emphasised the need for an order “rooted in rules and respect” to prevent international conflict and ensure that the Indo-Pacific region remains free of coercion and assertive, belligerent behaviour. In this respect, the actions of China in the past few years loomed large in his speech, particularly with regard to Beijing's territorial ambitions and tensions over Taiwan.

Secretary Austin left no doubt that the United States would continue to maintain a strong presence in the region, including investing some US\$6.1 billion in the US Pacific Deterrence Initiative and maintaining its ongoing military relationships. Overall, he sought to project an American defence posture that was consistent and in continuity with the past, given America's long-standing interests in the region. The emphasis on regional and international partnerships — as opposed to American unilateralism — was a crucial component of Austin's speech. It was noticeably carried in his reference to the “Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness”, an initiative unveiled by the Quad powers at their Tokyo summit in May 2022. Secretary Austin characterised the initiative as “harness[ing] together regional information that will help [the Quad, alongside countries across the region including those of Southeast Asia] build a common operating picture and work together to tackle illegal fishing and other grey-zone activities.”

China's Interests Come to the Forefront

At his second Shangri-La Dialogue, China's defense minister General Wei Fenghe sought to defend his country's regional and international interests as legitimate. General Wei was less enamoured than Secretary Austin of discussing the intricacies and obligations of what a rules-based order ought to entail. Instead, he chose to focus his attention on China's interests. While the general did not explicitly mention the United States by name in his criticisms, there was little doubt that most of his references had Washington's actions in mind, particularly with regard to how they are being perceived in China. He said these actions were in sharp contrast to China's political actions and political objectives, in which a win-win outcome would be preferred. As he succinctly put it, “it's good for you, it's good for us, it's good for everyone” (你好, 我好, 大家更美好 [ni hao, wo hao, dajia geng meihao]). In a marked departure from Secretary Austin's reference to the region as the “Indo-Pacific”, General Wei used the term “Asia-Pacific”, while reassuring his audience that China was inherently peaceful and harmonious as these attributes were in the “genes” (基因 [jiyin]) of Chinese civilisation.

Explicit in his demands on the Taiwan issue, Wei designated it as China's internal problem, calling Taiwan a “province of China” and stressing that unification would be inevitable as it reflects the will and ambition of *all* Chinese people. Addressing himself

to those within and outside Taiwan who pursue independence objectives, General Wei admonished them “not to even think about it” (休想 [xiuxiang]), dismissing such thoughts as “delusional” (妄想 [wangxiang]). On the South China Sea issue, he sought to lay the blame for increased tensions on the hegemonic intentions of extra-regional countries and their efforts to militarise the region. He added that China was the greatest benefactor of the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and that it was not in Beijing’s interests to have this freedom curtailed.

The Future of Asia and Regional Cooperation

Notwithstanding the focus on great power competition between the United States and China during the dialogue, the future of Asia does not hinge solely on what happens between both Washington and Beijing. Indonesian defence minister Prabowo Subianto reminded us that “your enemy is not my enemy”, reflecting the regional position that countries in the region have their respective political prerogatives and diplomatic objectives, and are not locked into taking binary positions on the US-China strategic competition. Likewise, Malaysian defence minister Hishammuddin Hussein alluded to the “ASEAN way, which is far more than just leaders holding hands in photos”, while Singapore’s defence minister Ng Eng Hen reminded the audience that the core Asian security issues are not about “a contest between democracies and autocracies.”

As most of the world starts to reopen and resume economic and diplomatic activity, as evidenced by the convening of the Shangri-La Dialogue, the question of what a post-pandemic future would look like behoves leaders and policy-makers to carefully consider what their critical interests are, and the extent to which the pandemic has affected the geopolitical configuration of the international order. In Asia, at least, the need to achieve an expansive and inclusive regional architecture is even more important than before if the region is to arrive at a balance of influence instead of being beholden to the political objectives of any single big power. Beyond the US-China strategic competition, issues such as the acquisition of nuclear weapons (especially by North Korea), climate change and food security would also test the cohesiveness and competency of states in forging a working consensus on what a post-pandemic order might be. In this respect, the future of the region is likely to be characterised by greater contestation and debate, not just over *what* the rules of international order ought to be, but also *which* countries should be allowed to write the rules.

Benjamin HO is an Assistant Professor in the China Programme of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, and the Deputy Coordinator of the MSc in International Relations Programme, both at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He attended the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue as an observer.