

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.

No. 051/2024 dated 23 May 2024

A View of the World from Shangri-La

See Seng Tan

SYNOPSIS

The upcoming Shangri-La Dialogue will not lack serious security concerns to discuss – the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, the slugfest in Ukraine, and the latest South China Sea imbroglio, among others.

COMMENTARY

At the end of May, the brahmins and viziers of the defence and military world will gather in Singapore for the 21st edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue, Asia's premier defence forum. In the comfort of the Shangri-La Hotel's plush conference halls, defence chiefs, senior military brass and prominent policy wonks will debate the major contemporary strategic challenges and the steps taken (or not taken) by the international community to address them.

Few would disagree over what the hot-button issues are. According to [an authoritative annual survey](#) published last month by Singapore's ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, nearly 2,000 respondents – from academia, think-tanks, the private sector, civil society, and media – polled across the 10 Southeast Asian countries identified what they felt were the top three geopolitical concerns. It is highly likely that those same three issues will animate the bulk of the deliberations at the Shangri-La Dialogue.



The 20th Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 2023. The upcoming Shangri-La Dialogue in May will likely address pressing security issues, such as the Israel-Hamas war and tensions in the South China Sea. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Israel-Hamas War

Top of the list will be the Israel-Hamas conflict raging in Gaza and its perceived impact around the world. The widespread concern over the escalating conflict and the displacement of 1.7 million people in Gaza is not Asia's alone. Multilateral organisations ranging from the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to the BRICS group have roundly condemned Israel's military response to the 7 October surprise attack by Hamas and, along with that, the relative support of Western governments for Israel's actions.

That said, the Global South's reactions to the conflict are not all the same. For example, Iran's readiness to label Israel as a "terrorist" state contrasts markedly with India's more reserved stance, which itself differs from China and Russia's penchant for laying the blame for Israel's conduct on the United States (whose qualified criticism of the Netanyahu government will not prevent Washington's new US\$1 billion arms sale to Israel).

Among Southeast Asians, the growing discontent of their Muslim constituents deeply affected by the war in Gaza, as well as the conflict's potential for triggering the rise of militancy within their region, are of foremost concern. Any of these nuanced positions are likely to surface at the Dialogue, even as participants raise a collective call for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian action.

Russia-Ukraine War

Another pressing issue will be the Russia-Ukraine war, now two years running with no end in sight. The West's inconsistent support for Ukraine, fuelled by the protracted nature of the conflict and Ukraine's inability to deliver on the former's expectations, has doubtless hurt Kyiv's defensive efforts. While Asian reactions to the conflict have been muted for the most part, widespread worry has set in following trade disruptions caused by the conflict, adversely affecting energy and food prices. Combined with the Israel-Hamas conflict and other challenges like China's economic slowdown, the region's overstrained supply chains are not going to be relieved anytime soon.

It was also two years ago when Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue virtually, invoking Singapore's founding leader Lee Kuan Yew to urge the international community to protect "small fish" and "shrimp" from larger predators. The upcoming Dialogue will entertain a renewed call by the West to support and resource Ukraine's fight for survival. Yet the shadow of growing fatigue among Kyiv's allies and pressure from Russia's friends like China for a negotiated settlement to the war will overhang the meeting.

South China Sea

The Dialogue would be remiss if the South China Sea is excluded from its deliberations. China's strong reactions to the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral partnership and the recently concluded Balikatan bilateral exercise between the Philippines and the US – the largest ever in its history – were part of the latest testy exchange stoking the US-China rivalry.

The Balikatan exercise, which also involved Australian and French participation, included [a test of the Philippine and US forces' ability to secure the Batanes](#), a strategic island group only about 200 km away from Taiwan. The Dialogue's opening act on 31 May will feature a keynote address by Philippine president Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. Any reference on the part of Mr Marcos to the South China Sea – particularly the simmering tensions over the Second Thomas Shoal – and his rejection of Beijing's claim about a 2016 agreement allegedly struck with Manila over access to the South China Sea islands is likely to invite pushback from the Chinese, who had previously accused Manila and Washington of joining forces against Beijing.

The Dialogue will also get to hear from the new Chinese defence minister, Dong Jun, a former PLA Navy chief with previous leadership experience in the Southern Theatre Command, whose jurisdiction includes the South China Sea. Given Beijing's sweeping purge of China's top military brass – including Dong's predecessor as defence minister, Li Shangfu – the survival and sustainability of China's senior military leadership and the potential negative impact that rapid leadership turnovers could have on the PLA's warfighting capability – or worse, on the Chinese military (or elements within it) in encouraging reckless and provocative conduct that could spark conflict – will doubtless be of interest if not concern.

Trump 2.0?

Lastly, it would not surprise anyone if the Dialogue were haunted by the prospect of Donald Trump returning to the White House in 2025. Campaigning while battling four criminal cases against him, Mr Trump has taken [a hardline position on the US policy in Gaza](#) and flipflopped on Ukraine, long blaming the latter for his political woes. However, he recently [expressed support for Ukraine's survival](#), right before the US Senate approved nearly US\$61 billion in aid for Ukraine. Furthermore, despite professing "love" for Chinese president Xi Jinping back in early 2020, Trump now promises that if he were to regain the US presidency this November, he would [stack his administration with hardcore China hawks](#).

Whatever happens at the upcoming Shangri-La Dialogue, the next one in 2025 could prove a whole lot more interesting.

See Seng TAN is the president and chief executive of *International Students Inc* in the United States, and concurrently research adviser for the *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies* and senior associate at the *Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences* at *Nanyang Technological University*.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg