

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Volodymyr Zelensky at Shangri-La: Strategising Candid Multilateralism

By Alan Chong

SYNOPSIS

The 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue was remarkable for drawing attention to the power of multilateralism in promoting dialogue that draws together the links between an interconnected global and Asian security equation. At the same time, by serving as a platform for candid exchanges about threats to national sovereignty and territorial integrity, it drives home the point that participating states are no longer bystanders in international relations. The violation of these for any state will have security implications for others.

COMMENTARY

The twenty-first edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue, held from 31 May to 2 June 2024 in Singapore, was memorable for being a bellwether not only for Asian tensions but also global ones.

Sino-US fractures were on full display, with Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun warning that separatist forces were eroding peaceful relations across the Taiwan Straits.

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin was mostly tight-lipped about the productivity of his bilateral meeting with his Chinese counterpart. Indonesia's Defence Minister and President-elect, Prabowo Subianto, made explicit his country's peace plan for the Gaza Strip, including the framework of a two-state solution and Indonesia's willingness to provide peacekeeping and humanitarian relief forces as part of that solution.

In fact, this round of the Shangri-La Dialogue reiterated the primacy of statehood and territorial integrity, even when Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Junior

referenced Chinese predatory actions in the South China Sea without naming the Asian power.

What probably captured the headlines was Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's surprise visit to address the final day of the dialogue. His remarks were unambiguously crafted to draw the link between the security of sovereign states and the Shangri-La Dialogue's long-established focus on the scale of threats to Asia's security.

The Interconnectedness of Global Security

Multilateralism, as embodied by participating states of the Shangri-La Dialogue, is very much tethered to their ability to sound sirens when they are confronted by dire threats. As Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen put it, the dialogue serves its purpose if the very basic idea of communication is practised.

State representatives candidly say what they believe is just. Their governments may disagree with one another, but this is what prevents an escalation toward worsening tensions or a preventable escalation into armed hostilities.

Zelensky's pitch was simply to remind Asian governments that a neighbouring state's use of brute force compromised his country's sovereignty. This resonated with the purpose of the Shangri-La Dialogue.

In his remarks at the press conference that followed his speech, the Ukrainian leader refused to be drawn into commenting directly on China's policy towards Taiwan or Taipei's international status but insisted that in general, every state is entitled to protect its territorial integrity. That spoke volumes in terms of reminding all attendees that a rules-based order was under siege worldwide.

Pleading the Common Cause, Wooing the Bystander

Another prominent feature of Zelensky's mission at the Shangri-La Dialogue was to publicise the need for Asia to attend the upcoming Ukraine Peace Conference hosted by Switzerland later this month. This seemed simple and polite enough until Zelensky drew attention to how some Asian states, as well as non-Asian ones, were being pressured by Russia to boycott the Switzerland meeting.

To attend is to signal that states that valued sovereignty, self-determination, and territorial integrity would stand with Ukraine in discussing the terms for a just and restorative peace that respects Kyiv's original borders.

Zelensky also challenged Asian states to stand up against intimidation as an undesirable practice in international relations. In this vein, he suggested that China was supplying arms to Russia to fight Ukraine based on his access to intelligence sources from the West and from his own country. However, he clarified that some of this aid to the Russian war effort was inadvertent as it arose from slippages in the monitoring of technology exports.

He called on all states present at the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue to help end the Russia-Ukraine war by denying Moscow warfighting material. In tandem, he

highlighted the dramatic scenes of humanitarian suffering in his country, making the point, in true Shangri-La spirit, that diplomatic frankness was crucial to thwarting war or cutting off the “oxygen” that fuels conflicts.

Predictably, the Chinese delegation clarified that China sided neither with Ukraine nor Russia in their conflict and was only on the side of peace and dialogue.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue, there are no more bystanders; Zelensky’s presence – complete with his trademark military green vest and combat slacks – and thinly veiled remarks about securing territorial integrity, are telling Asian powers, as well as their friends from the EU, US and Australia, that Asian security matters are also connected to global security parameters.

Singapore’s defence minister chimed in, stating that the world cannot afford a third polarising geopolitical conflict. In these senses, Zelensky’s visit has delivered an indubitable word punch.

Asian states and the great powers are witnessing an open call to avoid a disastrous future security disorder. If frank words and thinly veiled warnings amount to a testy multilateralism, then it would have served its purpose if it retards or ends a war.

Dr Alan Chong is a Senior Fellow in the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798