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By Warren Fernandez

SYNOPSIS

United States Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth took centre stage at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. But his assertive calls for countries in the Indo-Pacific region to ramp up their military spending in the face of a "gathering and imminent" threat from China raised more doubts about the US commitment to, and strategy for, enhancing peace and stability in the region.

COMMENTARY

The mood music seemed incongruous. On stage, the United States Secretary of Defence Pete Hagseth was thumping his chest, declaring how the United States was rebuilding its military, restoring a warrior ethos and re-establishing deterrence.

Warning darkly of a gathering threat to the region, he said: "There's no reason to sugarcoat it. The threat China poses is real. And it could be imminent." China, he added, sought to assert hegemonic control over its neighbours, harasses them, steals their technology, and attacks critical infrastructure. It was training and rehearsing for the "real deal", to be ready and able to seize Taiwan.

It could have been a Make America Great Again rally in the American heartlands.

But here we were in the ballroom of the Shangri-La hotel in Singapore on May 31, for the annual dialogue of defence ministers and national security chiefs.

How "incredibly fortunate" the world was, Mr Hegseth gushed, to have in Mr Trump a leader who was both "a peace seeker and a strong leader".

Then came the clanger: a maladroitness invoking of Singapore's founding Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Like Lee, the US President was also a pragmatist, ready to challenge old ways, and "grounded in common sense and the national interests", he said.

That did not go down well.

In the stillness of the vast ballroom, I was reminded of the immortal words of Don McLean's 1970s hit song, American Pie: "Bye-bye, Miss American Pie. Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry. And them good ol' boys were drinkin' whisky and rye, singin' this will be the day that I die."

The lyrics of the plaintive masterpiece, which bemoan the loss of innocence and simpler times, resonated. It was indeed in a totally different setting the day the music died.

That morning, as the tune in my head faded away, three things dawned on me:

American soft power in the region was being dissipated, a much-touted geopolitical deal between the US and China was just so much pie in the sky, and the pivot to the Indo-Pacific as the primary theatre for superpower rivalry was now all the more likely.

For all Hegseth's assertions of American hard power, amid long recitations of new military doctrines and plans, you could not help but sense the drifting away of soft power, that adept wielding of influence to get others to do what you want because they want to.

For all the niceties about respecting their cultures and not preaching to them, the US Defence Secretary seemed instead to be pressing his audience to act because they had to.

Indeed, as my much-admired Harvard professor, the recently departed Professor Joseph Nye, who coined the term, wrote in the final paragraph of his last essay in May in Monocle magazine: "Donald Trump clearly does not understand soft power", undercutting it by his recent actions. "China values soft power and stands ready to fill the vacuum that Trump is creating."

Nye embodied soft power. He was thoughtful, chose his words with care, often spoke rather softly, but was always worth listening to. Those last words packed a punch, and deliberately so.

End of an American Dream

Yet, it might also be said, if indeed China values soft power, it would do well to ponder why Hegseth's words resonated with so many in his audience. He did not have to offer much evidence of China's supposed "aggressive actions" or say why he thought the threat posed was "gathering" and "imminent". His remarks were taken as fact in much of the world's media, with China cast as the villain.

Beijing opted, as is its prerogative, not to field its own defence chief in response, leaving it to lower-level officials to bristle at Hegseth's "groundless accusations".

Their quietly angry response, in and out of the SLD conference hall, also made plain that Hegseth's speech might just have put to rest the prospects of a "big, beautiful deal" being struck with China, which had been bandied about in the early days of the Trump 2.0 administration.

The talk then was about a new multipolar world, with the US, China, and Russia working together to stave off direct, possibly nuclear, confrontations, and each being left to manage affairs in their respective regional spheres. In exchange for access to markets in China for American firms and Chinese investments in the US, Trump might signal that he would neither support nor encourage any moves towards independence in Taiwan, the ultimate prize for Beijing.

That grand bargain seems dead now. After the roller coaster ride of events over the past few months, it is hard to imagine Beijing having much confidence that any agreement, whether on trade or Taiwan, could be assured, given the many twists and turns in Washington's policy positions.

Soon after the Geneva truce on tariffs in May came restrictions on chips and technology, aggressive revoking of student visas, and the SLD speech. Hegseth's sidestepping of a question on these by saying his remit extends only to tanks and not trade, perhaps reflects the fallacy in thinking that this complex relationship could be nurtured without seeing it in its totality.

So, while markets and the world would certainly welcome the latest news of a "very good" call between President Trump and President Xi Jinping – at the former's request, as Xinhua news agency took pains to point out – the agreement to keep talking on a new trade deal, a round of which is expected to kick off in London today, is likely to be just that, more talks about talks to keep the relationship going. That's not to be sniffed at, of course, but hardly much to cheer about.

More's the pity since the two men and countries do have shared interests. Neither Trump nor Xi wants a conflict or to be the leader who "loses Taiwan". Both would prefer to keep ties on an even keel so that they might focus on boosting their economies.

The asymmetry lies here: while few doubt Beijing's resolve to wield force over Taiwan if it needs to, many are less sure if Trump will be inclined to do so, despite Hegseth's assertions that the US will not allow Taiwan to be invaded under Trump's watch.

Relax, some wits say, have a margarita along with the Taco, since Trump always chickens out. Others add, rather unkindly, that recent events show that America's wannabe emperor has no clothes, and all the sound and fury often signifies little of consequence. Yet, those who have to live with the implications of any clash over Taiwan cannot afford to be so cavalier or sanguine.

Much of the uncertainty stems from the internal contradictions within Trump's administration, and perhaps even in his own mind.

He insists on American supremacy, both globally and militarily, as well as over key industrial sectors. The pivoters and prioritisers on his team want to focus more on China as a “peer rival”, with the Indo-Pacific as the primary theatre where this contest will play out, as Hegseth made plain. Then there are the diehard MAGA champions – they, understandably, want fewer foreign adventures and more focus on the pressing challenges at home, rebuilding manufacturing, creating jobs, and boosting living standards for American workers.

President Trump seems to embrace all three, and flits from one priority to the other, seemingly oblivious to how some of his actions on one front might run counter to delivering on the others. The result is political confusion and policy drift, at home and abroad. In the process, alas, bye-bye, American pie...

Call to Arms

But the day the music died also signalled a troubling shift away from the post-World War II bargain in the region, which saw countries like Japan forswearing having a massive military, and one with nuclear weapons at that. Instead, the US has played a useful role as a largely benign, stabilising force in the region, providing security cover and deterring countries from military build-ups or adventures.

Given his sense of a looming threat, Hegseth challenged Asian countries to emulate European countries by raising defence spending to 5 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product.

Hardly anyone comes close at the moment, with most Asian countries now spending around or under 1 per cent of GDP on defence. India (2.3), South Korea (2.6) and Singapore (2.8) are outliers, according to published data. Having watched the frenzied efforts by European leaders to fill a military void left by American vacillation over Ukraine, Asia’s leaders know that their challenges would be multiplied manifold should a similar scenario play out in Asia.

Such a major ramping up of defence spending would trigger anxieties within the region and generate its own destabilising dynamic. As doubts arise about the reliability of the US security umbrella, some will see little choice but to reach for the nuclear option, undoing years of efforts to curb proliferation.

Mishaps and Misunderstandings

History has shown that conflicts often arise not by design or ill intent, but through mishaps and misunderstandings.

Indeed, in an essay on the Psychological Risks of War Between the United States and China, Dr Eugen Koh notes: “Dialogue between the two countries during peacetime that seeks to establish a mutual, deeper appreciation of each other’s motivations and differences in cultural and communication styles, will help to avoid the accumulation of misunderstandings and missteps that set the scene for crisis to occur.

“Such a dialogue will not only help to reduce the risk of a crisis occurring but also aid

its de-escalation should it happen,” he wrote in the New England Journal of Public Policy.

So, perhaps the good folks behind the SLD should have a rethink on how to promote more dialogue and less grandstanding at future events, both in public and private, online and offline. Fostering trust seems increasingly crucial if the looming threats in the region are to be managed and mitigated.

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