



# Shangri-La Dialogue Shows How International Cooperation is Going Back to Basics

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*By Sarah Teo and Jane Chan*

### SYNOPSIS

*The evidence across conversations at the 23rd Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) suggests that the question is not so much about whether multilateralism will endure, but how it is evolving. Ultimately, in an increasingly fragmented world, the priority must be to develop practical and timely responses to shared challenges.*

### COMMENTARY

"I'm sorry to say this here. Less Shangri-La, more ships, more subs," quipped [United States Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth](#) at the 23rd Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) held last weekend in Singapore. It was a pointed remark to make at a forum dedicated to multilateral defence diplomacy, and it bluntly captured a fundamental question for countries.

As the foundations of the post-Cold War order become less secure, states must navigate a world marked by sharper competition and greater fragmentation. If security is once again more about military capability, what role remains for [cooperation among states](#)?

While there is broad agreement that the old certainties are fading, there is far less clarity about what will replace them. Recent events have only reinforced this sense of uncertainty. Attacks on commercial shipping in and around the Strait of Hormuz, and the continued disruption of freedom of passage, have exposed the limits of an international order founded on established rules and norms, while raising difficult questions about the willingness and ability of states to uphold them.

The evidence across conversations at the SLD suggests that the question is not so much about whether multilateralism will endure, but how it is evolving.

## **Flexible Multilateralism**

Multilateralism is going “back to basics”, putting more emphasis on what cooperation can practically deliver in a more contested international environment.

Rather than focusing on broader ambitions to shape international order through wider agreement and formal institutions, countries are directing more attention to specific issues and workable solutions. Cooperation is being reconfigured into more flexible and issue-specific groupings that often operate alongside, rather than through, traditional international institutions.

At the World Economic Forum’s Summer Davos meeting in June 2025, Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong spoke of “[flexible multilateralism](#)”. The objective, he said, is not to create a patchwork of competing rules, but to establish “building blocks” for cooperation that can gradually attract broader participation.

States have long worked in smaller, purpose-built configurations to advance common objectives, when consensus across the broader community is difficult to achieve, or because effective solutions depend on action by a limited group of states.

[Southeast Asia](#) has had some success with functional cooperative mechanisms, for example, in the practical management of safety and security in regional waters. The Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP), which has been in place since 2008, brings together the four littoral states - Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand - in a coordinated effort to safeguard one of the world’s most critical maritime corridors.

The Trilateral Cooperative Agreement, modelled after MSP, was initiated by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines in 2017 to manage the scourge of maritime crime in the Sulu and Celebes Sea.

Such pragmatic arrangements are increasingly central to the practice of international cooperation. Many of today’s new and emerging challenges transcend geographical regions and do not fit nicely within existing institutions and rules.

## **Shared Vulnerabilities Drive Cooperation**

Fittingly, a notable latest example of this form of cooperation was launched at this year’s SLD by Singapore’s Minister for Defence Chan Chun Sing and 16 of his counterparts: the “[Guiding Principles for Underwater Infrastructure Defence Exchanges](#)” (GUIDE) framework.

The initiative itself emerged from conversations at last year’s dialogue, according to Mr Chan. The importance of submarine communication cables, energy cables and oil and gas pipelines is well known. They criss-cross the world as lifelines to critical services on land such as power, communication and financial services.

Yet, because most of this critical underwater infrastructure (CUI) lie outside of countries’ territorial waters, the responsibility for their protection is unclear and the legal tools to enforce rules and prosecute wrongdoing are limited.

Indeed, Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles noted at the SLD that the scale and frequency of attacks against subsea critical infrastructure over the past 18 months has been "historically unprecedented".

Countries that share similar concerns about the security of CUI have therefore come together to find practical ways of addressing this shared vulnerability. With GUIDE, they laid out a broad understanding of principles and potential areas where defence establishments might realistically work together.

### **Multilateralism's Road Ahead**

Such arrangements will inevitably raise questions of inclusivity and legitimacy, as they often involve limited membership and involve decision making that may affect states outside the process. However, in today's more contested international environment, the imperative is to begin with what is feasible.

Not every challenge requires a universal solution from the outset; in many cases, effective cooperation could and should start small, before being scaled up into broader and more inclusive frameworks over time. For instance, while GUIDE currently involves 17 countries, it remains open to participation by others who may wish to join later.

At the same time, these smaller and more flexible frameworks should not be seen as substitutes for existing multilateral institutions, but as complements to them. When designed appropriately, they can help reinforce the legitimacy and effectiveness of the broader multilateral system, by demonstrating tangible results and sustaining momentum where larger frameworks may be slower to deliver.

Ultimately, in an increasingly fragmented world, the priority must be to develop practical and timely responses to shared challenges.

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